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JORIS LAARMAN

Joris Laarman in his studio at the Hembrug terrain just outside of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Photo: Maison Rowena.

Megavoxel Round Table 5 mm (2023), created with neodymium, 3D-printed polyamide, and stainless steel.
In the background, a MX3D stainless steel 3D print. Photo: Maison Rowena.

Prototype for Ply Loop Chair (2024), made of oak, walnut veneer, and thermoset bioresin. Photo: Maison Rowena.

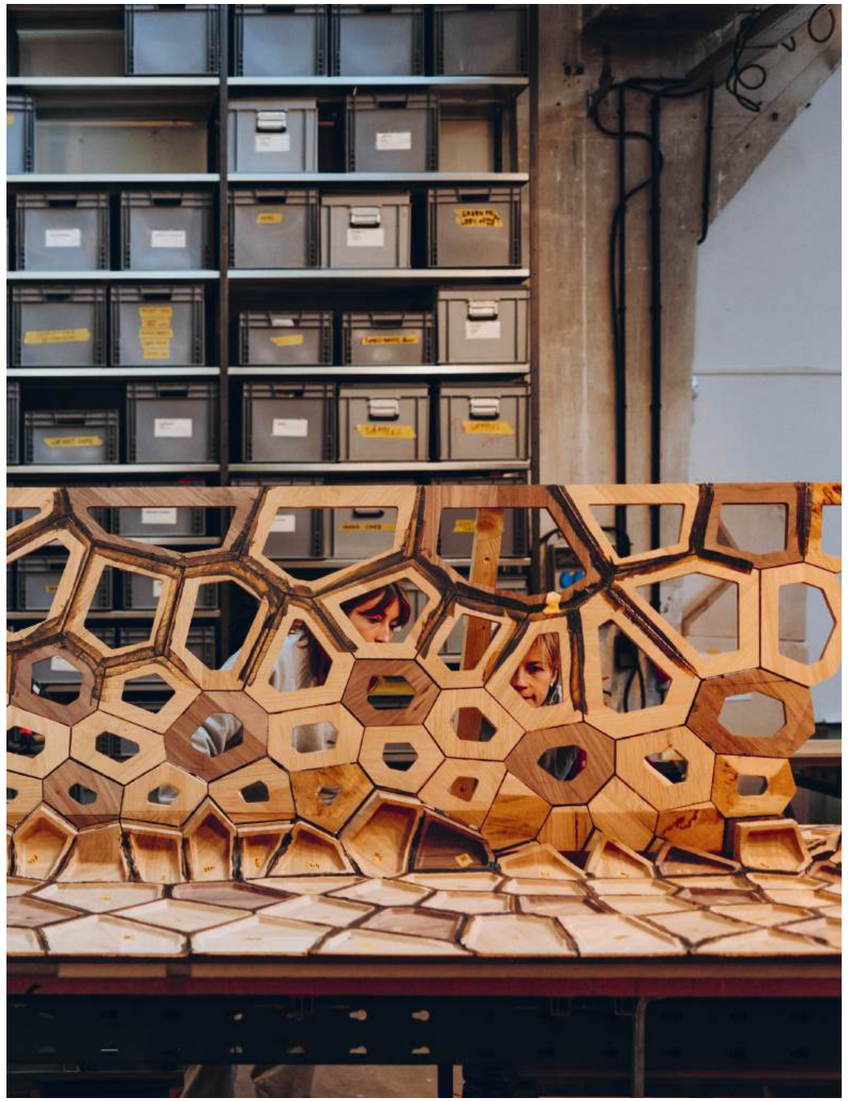
Designer and artist Joris Laarman's all-encompassing practice is informed by a strong urgency for change

BY CHEYENNE WEHREN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAISON ROWENA

The industrial Hembrug terrain is only a thirty-minute bike ride from the bustling city of Amsterdam. Over the past few years, the former military site has been transformed into a tranquil green environment and cultural hub. There, Dutch designer and artist Joris Laarman's Lab has found its ideal home. He previously occupied spaces in Utrecht, Rotterdam, and Amsterdam; none of them gave him the freedom and space needed for his all-encompassing practice as the Hembrug terrain offers. "We're not your typical design studio. We like to make things ourselves and produce everything in-house, which takes space and people," explains Laarman. "We bought the building two years ago in a bad state. We've renovated it, and it's still in the process of transformation. But this is the first time we owned our own building and can do whatever what we want here."

In Laarman's world, art, design, and technology meet. He first garnered international attention in 2003 while a student at the renowned Design Academy in Eindhoven. Studying at the height of Droog—an influential design movement in Dutch Design that favors soberness, conceptual thinking, and a touch of humor—Laarman became interested in conceptual design but questioned the lack of ornament, creating his much talked about *Heatwave* (2003), a radiator in the shape of a Rococo-esque swirl. In 2004, together with his partner Anita Star, Laarman founded Joris Laarman Lab. He refers to his space and practice as a laboratory—a conscious decision reflecting the research, experimentation, and production that are core to his work. Laarman has brought together a multidisciplinary team for which collaboration is key. "We have carpenters, computer engineers, mechanical engineers, all-round craftspeople, an architect, a blacksmith. We're all dependent on each other," he shares. "I see it as an example of how a society works. Some are with their hands, whereas others are good with their brains, and together, we create."

Fundamental to Laarman's work is his use of cutting-edge technologies. "My time at the Design Academy really opened my eyes to this. There's a connecting element between different times, different eras, and how they develop. It's mostly driven by new technologies and how cultures adapt themselves to these new technologies. That really got me going," shares Laarman. The designer and artist makes use of CNC milling, laser cutting, 3D printing, and robotics—and that's what is available in-house. "In terms of technology, we work with anything, because we collaborate a lot. It's really boundless," Laarman shares. One of his latest interest lies with augmented reality: "We're currently working with a group of students from the Technical University of Delft on a sculpture that is made through augmented reality. It's fascinating to see." With augmented reality, a 3D space can be designed that incorporates actual surroundings, guided by a hologram that indicates the object to be created. "Then, by hand, you can make that work. It's a bit like Michelangelo, who stated that the sculpture is already in the marble, you just have to chisel it out of the block," says Laarman. "But now, you can literally see the sculpture in your block already, which opens all kinds of new possibilities to work on as a team. One person can start on one end and one on the other, and you'll match each other exactly at the right place."



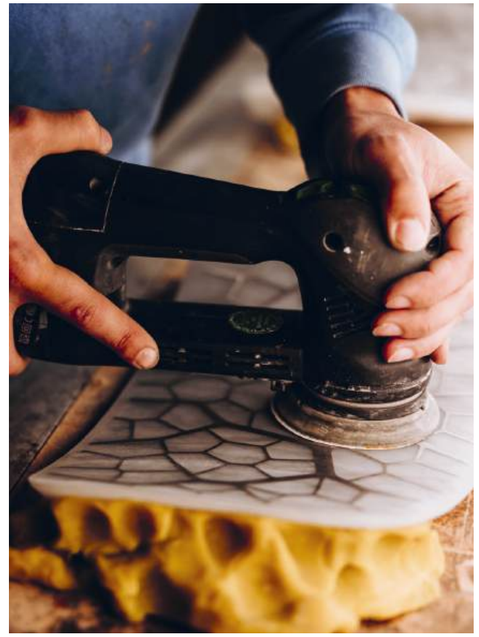
Laarman's team at work on the *Maker Table (Voronoi)* (2014, oak/walnut). Photo: Maison Rowena.

Laarman and his team working on the oak and walnut *Maker Table (Voronoi)* (2014). Photo: Maison Rowena.

Forest Table (2011), made with aluminum, steel, and resin. Photo: Maison Rowena.

While he has his eyes on the future, Laarman remains cognizant of the past, highlighting the importance art of craft. "It's about finding the right balance between new technologies and what is valuable from the past, such as craft, or even humanity, and merging them together," he shares. "As an artist, you want to connect with something you've made, and you want others to also connect with your work. To me, that's why craftsmanship is so important."

With his work, Laarman always aims to push the boundaries of what's possible. "We're always trying to make something out-of-the-box, something different or useful, larger or more sculptural, and we try to push the boundaries of what's possible to create with technology," he explains. For the past few years, the Lab's focus has been on environmental issues. But not in a dreary, cardboard cliché manner, but rather by merging the highly sculptural with environmental conscious materials. Laarman and his team create objects that speak to these challenges while merging them with their knowledge of the design and art worlds as well as technological developments. He cites the destruction caused by wildfires in Australia some years ago as a turning point: "We had been there just the year before, traveling from Melbourne to Sydney while exhibiting at the NGV triennial. It all burned down; this whole natural place was gone. That was the moment I could not ignore that field anymore. We needed to do something with the network we had built over time and use it to create something meaningful—an inspiring future for the environment."



Laarman's team working on a detail of *Forest Dining Chair* (2023). Photo: Maison Rowena.

Laarman's vision is deeply informed by an urgency for change, exemplified by his *Symbio Bench* (2023). Created for Chatsworth House, the design reflects the concept of Symbioscene, a term coined by Australian environmentalist Glenn Albrecht and a core aspect of ecological thinking. It indicates a future era focused on the interconnectedness of life and all living things following the Anthroposcene—a future era where culture, nature, and technology merge together. "I like to create a parallel universe, an array of possible futures through my work," Laarman shares. The benches were created with local masons using local natural stone as well as recycled concrete. The grooves in which the mosses grow on a material called mosscrete, create graphic patterns across its surfaces. "Since the industrial period we've been trying to get rid of nature. We need to invite nature back in and create more biodiversity to keep it all from collapsing. The bench is symbolic for a lot of things that we do and what should be done in the future."

Laarman's lab has also been delving into the world of biodegradable. Laarman cites the lack of transparency in many materials claiming to be biodegradable as a source of confusion, many materials claiming to be biodegradable when in essence, they are not. "There are a few materials out there that are extremely interesting. We're working with a material called Plantics, a 100% biodegradable, non-toxic, thermoset resin created in the Netherlands. When heat-cured, it could maintain its consistency over a century; if put in water, it will slowly disintegrate, similar to tropical wood," explains Laarman. The material is used in his *Ply Loop Chair* (2024), a swooping dynamic design that sits between chair and sculpture. It is crafted from plywood, which enjoys a long history in design, though unfortunately not an ecologically friendly one as glue is used to adhere the layers. "We want to change that glue, not just the material but also the aesthetics of what you can do with it. Through digital design tools, we've been able to create double-curved objects," shares Laarman. "It's a combination of carpentry, craftsmanship, digitally informed design, and natural materials." Laarman has become a shareholder in Plantics and harbors hope for its significant impact on other industries. It would not be Laarman's first foray outside the artworld and into other areas of production: Laarman is one of the cofounders of MX3D, a company focused on large-scale 3D metal printing. The technique came forth out of the creation of Laarman's *Dragon Bench* (2014) but now contributes to printing parts for the nuclear energy industry, the automotive sector, and even lunar exploration.

While Laarman's current focus lies on environmental issues, he refuses to be pigeonholed. If asked in five years about the direction of his work, his focus may have shifted entirely. Nevertheless, he will always remain driven by his vision and quest for a better future. During the process of ideation, experimentation, and creation, he continuously challenges himself with the question, "What would the future look like if we take this idea very seriously?" To Laarman, that's the most exciting way of working.

Joris Laarman Lab is represented by TEFAF exhibitor Friedman Benda.

Views of Laarman's studio. Photo: Maison Rowena.

Views of Laarman's studio. Photo: Maison Rowena.

The making of *Ply Loop Chair* (2024) out of walnut and oak veneer/bioresin. Photo: Maison Rowena.