Wallpaper*

Joris Laarman is reimagining design's relationship with nature

The Dutch designer's exhibition at Friedman Benda in New York (until 24 July 2026) suggests a future in which furniture can provide a resting place for non-human life, too

By Malaika Byng

'Symbio' benches by Joris Laarman. (Image credit: Leonard Faüstle, courtesy of Friedman Benda and Joris Laarman Lab)

For his new exhibition at Friedman Benda (until 24 July 2026), Dutch designer Joris Laarman is offering two radical bodies of work that he cooked up in his laboratory in Amsterdam – a former munitions factory on the leafy ex-military peninsula of Zaandam, where he moved with his family three years ago.

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His boulder-like 'Symbio' benches are 3D-printed in recycled and carbon-capturing concrete, with recessed patterns embedded with a bio-active substrate that supports the growth of mosses and lichens. These, in turn, will provide habitats for insects, attracting bird life to a garden. Meanwhile, his 'Ply Loop' series of furniture swaps the toxic glues typically used in engineered wood with a new 100 per cent biodegradable resin, while pushing the form and aesthetic possibilities of plywood to the limits.

Joris Laarman: designing for humans and nature

'Ply Loop' shelf. (Image credit: Photography by Leonard Faüstle, courtesy of Friedman Benda and Joris Laarman Lab)

'Symbio' gives a nod to Australian eco-philosopher Glenn Albrecht's notion of the Symbiocene – an imagined age after the Anthropocene, in which humans and nature coexist in a state of reciprocity.

'It's the only way forward,' says Laarman. But aesthetics play a vital role in making the case to the consumer, he adds. 'If you want to compete with all the fancy colours and material technologies from the industrial era, you have to show the expressive

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possibilities of bio alternatives and create desire so that, when faced with a choice, people choose the regenerative option.’

'Symbio' benches. (Image credit: Leonard Faüstle, courtesy of Friedman Benda and Joris Laarman Lab)

This, he does in spades. Laarman’s benches are a poetic ode to a symbiotic future, their seemingly primordial forms bearing a reaction/diffusion pattern first studied by Alan Turing that occurs in nature from the interaction of two chemicals: one that is active and the other inhibiting. These patterns – which appear on fish, zebras, leopards and many plants – encapsulate the meeting of nature and technology in Laarman’s work.

His 'Ply Loop' series is much more complex in form, featuring improbable, computer-generated curves made possible in real life thanks to his use of tiny, laser-cut strips of plywood and a bio-based resin from Plantics, an Arnhem-based company where the designer is a partner. It is a thermoset resin, meaning it doesn’t dry out while Laarman and his team of craftspeople assemble each strip by hand – an insane jigsaw puzzle that takes many hours to complete. 'The resin is like the syrup in [staple Dutch treat] stroopwafel,’ he says of the material, made with waste from the sugar beet industry. It can be separated from the timber and reused at the end of the furniture’s lifespan.

Designing with science

Both series involved many years of research and collaboration with scientists and material innovation companies, with Laarman seeing them as a proof of concept for larger pieces in future. 'The gallery is the only platform that enables us to really invest in research and experimentation,’ he says. 'Showing with [Friedman Benda] is the earliest stepping stone to getting these ideas out into the world.

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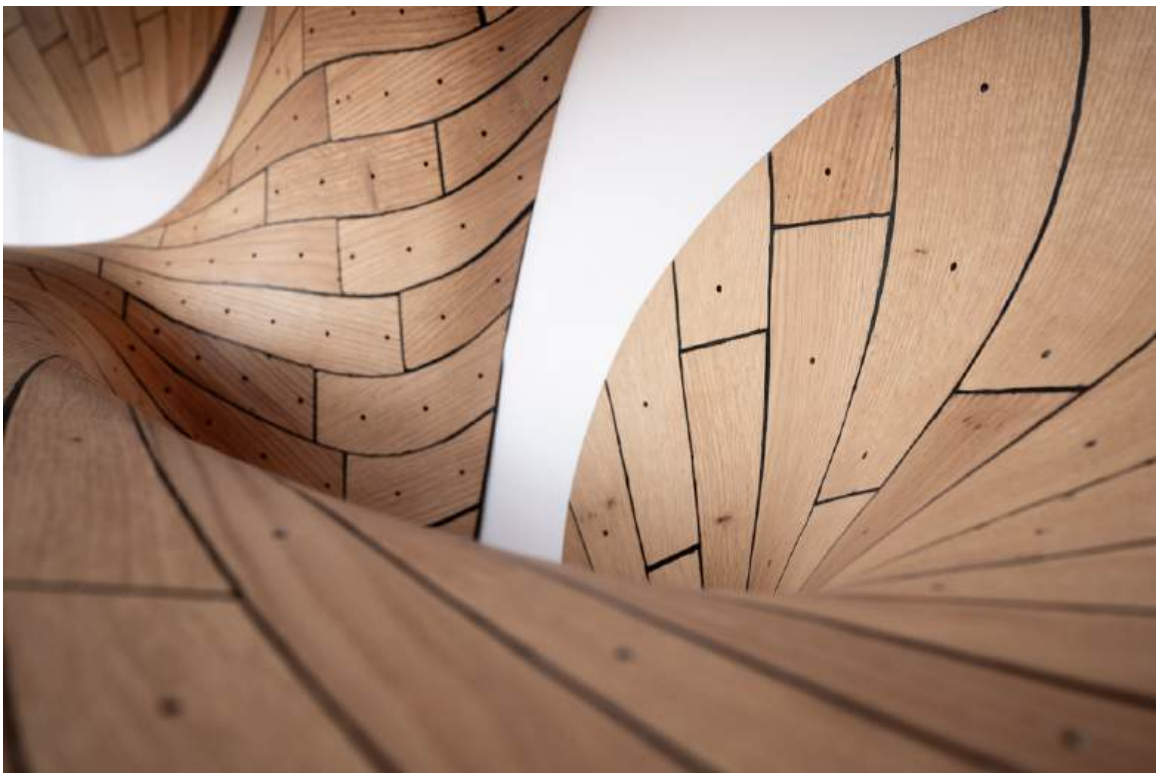

(Image credit: Photography by Leonard Faüstle, courtesy of Friedman Benda and Joris Laarman Lab)

'Ply Loop' bookcase. (Image credit: Photography by Leonard Faüstle, courtesy of Friedman Benda and Joris Laarman Lab)

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'Ply Loop'. (Image credit: Photography by Leonard Faüstle, courtesy of Friedman Benda and Joris Laarman Lab)

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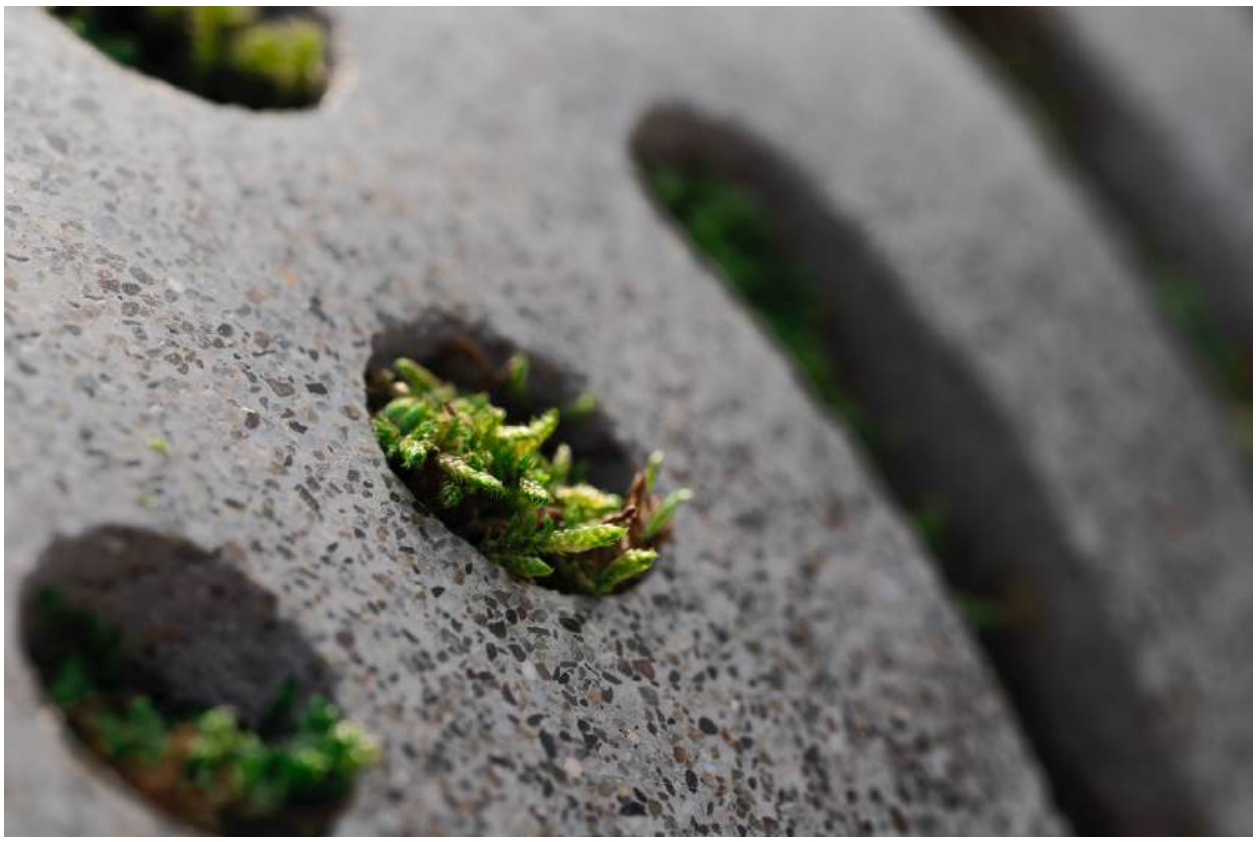

(Image credit: Leonard Faüstle, courtesy of Friedman Benda and Joris Laarman Lab)

One wall of the gallery will come to life with an animated projection of how Symbio could be applied to building façades, something Laarman is already exploring. He is particularly excited by the carbon-capturing concrete developments by companies such as Paebbl and Carstorcon.

‘For a long time, we’ve been talking about how we should build less, to protect the environment, but these could offer a 180-degree turn around,’ Laarman explains. ‘We could actually lock away more carbon than we emit as we build.’ If adopted at scale, such innovations would enable our cities to become carbon sinks. In the meantime, Laarman’s collections at Friedman Benda, which marry craft and computation to highly expressive effect, offer a tantalising glimpse of a regenerative future – one that we should all be striving to bring to fruition.

‘Joris Laarman: Symbio’, is at Friedman Benda in New York until 24 July 2026

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