

Designer Chris Schanck Creates Art Out of Things Others Leave Behind

The local creative is now showing his work in a solo show at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City.

By Paris Giles
Photographs by Josh Scott
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Chris Schanck in his Detroit studio. His solo exhibition, *Chris Schanck: Off-World*, opened at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City on Feb. 12.

Furniture designer Chris Schanck says the process by which he creates his color-rich and deliberately imperfect pieces is “pretty dialed in.” It starts with a simple base upon which various materials — some industrial and some discarded — are sculpted, and then the work is covered with aluminum foil and sealed with a resin. “It’s the form language of the work that is constantly changing,” Schanck says.

Last fall, Schanck loaned a handful of his pieces to the [Bottega Veneta pop-up in Corktown](#). The Bottega team reached out to him, and then-creative director and designer Daniel Lee toured the designer’s Detroit studio. Schanck also connected with the brand’s interior architect. “We talked about how to use the work, why to use the work, who else we could use in there — and ways of activating the space,” he says. “Not all of that happened, but it was, I think, still a good conversation. And it seemed like it’d be something positive, which I think it was.”

A native Texan, Schanck started not in furniture design but in fine arts. It was while studying for his master’s in fine arts at Central Saint Martins in London that a shift happened. “I questioned the path I was on for the first time in my life,” he says. “I was making fine arts objects that sort of started to comment about design and architecture, but from a total spectator point of view. I felt like I was on the sidelines, and I wanted to be in the game — not a spectator.”



Studio assistant Danielle Keys prepping a cabinet for its final resin application.



Master finishers Shopna and Rahela in the studio applying finishing touches to a commissioned mirror frame.

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He stepped away for a while, and in 2009, he enrolled in the Cranbrook Academy of Art design program. Schanck had no prior experience with furniture design but says, “That education was instrumental in figuring out what kind of furniture designer I was going to be.” After Cranbrook, he moved to Detroit and into a home near Hamtramck and set up a studio in a former corner store.

So, what has Detroit taught him about design? “That’s a hell of a question,” he says. Early on, his use of found materials and foil was a practical choice, born of limited means, and Detroit is nothing if not conducive to a can-do spirit. “But it was more the culture and the attitude that I’ve found inspirational,” he says. Schanck spent about 14 years between London and New York. “It’s a very different scene; it’s competitive.” Moving here, he discovered artists who’d been at it for decades and “a whole community of makers who had survived and thrived within their areas. ... People were making for the sake of making, for placemaking and for sharing.” He hired and collaborated with folks from the neighborhood and built a little community of his own.

Two summers ago, Schanck spent a couple of days with a basket-maker in Ireland, a septuagenarian who was carrying on a centuries-old practice but still finding ways to innovate. “It was the first time I felt like I was in the presence of a true master. He asked me, ‘How do you connect to the material where you live?’ And I didn’t have a good answer.”

Back in Detroit, he pondered the question, and it helped him notice things that were once glossed over, like the piles of “junk” that inevitably show up every spring on curbs around the city. Pessimistically, maybe those heaps represent eviction, or perhaps they symbolize upward mobility and making way for a new, better future. Either way, Schanck says, there are stories in those materials and “people behind those things.”