

A world in Smoke and Clay

By **Alice Rawsthorn** / International Herald Tribune

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EINDHOVEN, the Netherlands: Taking pride of place beneath one of Andy Warhol's drag queen portraits in the Rose Bar at the swanky new Gramercy Park Hotel in Manhattan is a very big pool table. The first thing you notice is the color of the felt - a brazenly seductive bordello red - and then you realize that all of the wood has been burnt.

The charred pool table was made for the Gramercy Park's owner, Ian Schrager, by the young Dutch designer Maarten Baas as part of his Smoke series of burnt furniture. He began Smoke four years ago as his graduation project at the Design Academy Eindhoven, and has been setting furniture on fire ever since.

Smoke established Baas, 28, at the forefront of the fashionable expressionist design style. In the backlash against the blandness of globalization, designers are striving to create emotionally expressive objects that are rich in meaning. By artfully burning existing furniture, Baas questions our perceptions of the beauty and value of objects in mediagenic pieces that also score socio-political points for reflecting the violence of our time.

He has ticked the same boxes with the new projects he has made since Smoke, such as the surreally naïve Clay furniture, which was a hit of this year's Milan Furniture Fair. "Maarten is a very exciting young designer," observed Schrager, who ordered some 200 Smoke chairs for the Gramercy Park's rooms, as well as the pool table. "His work is powerful and idiosyncratic. We'd have bought even more, if only he'd had enough time to make it."

No sooner had Baas - and the crew of nine designers working in his studio - completed Schrager's order than they started work on other commissions for Smoke, Clay and special pieces to be exhibited at next month's Design Miami contemporary design fair in Florida. Occupying a corner of an old Brabantia trash can plant in an Eindhoven suburb, the studio looks like a cartoon factory with a VW camper hoisted up on a platform to create an office. One longhaired designer brandishes a blowtorch to burn a flea market chair into a \$10,000 Smoke number, while another does Tai Chi Chuan exercises in the parking lot.

It looks like cheerful chaos, but each tool is diligently labeled, and the production cycle carefully planned. "They're a nice crew, and it's important to me to work in a natural and relaxed way with people I like," said Baas. "This studio might not look efficient, but it is." That's how Baas has been able to make the most of belonging to the first generation of designers, who can earn a living by selling the furniture they make

themselves to the growing market of collectors, who contact them, not through a gallery, but by Googling their Web sites.

A speed-reading of Baas's four-year career paints a rosy picture of success. Studying at a prestigious design school + an instantly famous graduation project = commissions from important patrons like Schrager and Murray Moss, the influential New York gallerist who is to exhibit his work at Design Miami. But the reality was tougher, especially in the early years.

The son of a Protestant pastor and an elementary school teacher, Baas was brought up in rural Holland and, after toying with music and theater, decided to study product design at Eindhoven. "You're supposed to study there for four years, but it took me six," he recalled. "It was a really hard time. I almost stopped after a year, but a friend from high school dragged me through. Then I failed the course a couple of times."

He persevered, and graduated in 2002. Li Edelkoort, the academy's director, bought a Smoke chair from his degree show. "I was thinking about why we want things to stay the same," said Baas. "Why do we buy things and don't touch them? Why do we think symmetry and smoothness are beautiful? And what would happen if we do the opposite of what we ought to do with furniture - if we burnt it?"

Smoke was the hit of the Eindhoven exhibition at the 2003 Milan Furniture Fair. Commissions rolled in, and the designer Marcel Wanders offered to mass-manufacture it through his company, Moooi. Baas opened a studio in the Brabantia factory, and Moss invited him to create a special Smoke collection by burning reproductions of 20th-century design icons, including Ettore Sottsass' Carlton cabinet and the Campana brothers' Favela chair.

The Smoke project has continued to evolve, often with people choosing objects to be burnt by Baas and his crew. In 2005, he unveiled the Treasure chairs made from off-cuts of wood - "assembled quickly and intuitively as a child might build a chair" - and the Hey, chair ... collages of objects like shelves, coat racks, chairs, lights and vases.

For Clay, Baas created furniture by molding industrial clay into nervily delicate shapes, painted in bold colors. Gawky and ungainly, the pieces look strange and unstable, but are deceptively robust. "The idea came to me quickly and intuitively six weeks before the Milan Furniture Fair," he recalled. "We were all claying like crazy, and went on claying until the truck arrived."

Like all of his work, Clay seems clumsy and child-like at first sight. Baas is unusual in working by hand, not to refine a particular skill, but as a means of communication. Other expressionist designers, like Studio Job in Antwerp and Jaime Hayon in Barcelona, use symbolism to imbue their work with meaning, but Baas achieves the same objective by enabling people to decipher the pre-history of his objects and how they were made simply by looking at their shape and structure.

His furniture and way of working have the same seemingly naïve, cartoonish charm as his studio. "I don't have a strategy," said Baas. "I just think: 'Hey. This or that should be nice to make.' Then I find a way to make it and develop the technique as much as possible, like I did with burning."