

Maarten Baas: The red-hot Dutch furniture-maker's burning ambition

Maarten Baas found fame by torching some of the 20th century's most important design works. Now celebrities and collectors are scrambling to snap up his artfully scorched creations. Marcus Fairs meets a red-hot Dutch furniture-maker. Portraits by David Levene

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First take your chair. Marinate liberally in petrol and apply blowtorch. Glaze with epoxy, garnish with steep price tag and place in New York gallery until sold.

Maarten Baas is a designer who has discovered an incendiary recipe for success: his Smoke range of burnt furniture, which he developed while still a student, has made him one of the hottest properties on the international design scene.

Yet the Dutch wunderkind, who is just 29, is also a designer who hasn't actually designed anything. Through the act of burning existing furniture - or gluing junk-shop finds into teetering bookshelves or moulding chairs and tables from clay, as in his more recent works - Baas's methodology is more akin to that of a craftsman or an artist.

"Sometimes magazines ask if they can have my sketches and prototype drawings," he says. "Well actually, this is the sketch, the prototype and the end product," he adds with a grin, tapping the surface of his seven-legged Clay dining table - which, as the name suggests, is made out of hand-formed synthetic clay and which resembles a huge black spider.

We meet on a warm morning in Miami, where the glamorous Design Miami fair is in full swing. Here, limited-edition designer furniture is presented as art and sold for big-ticket prices. Baas is one of the headline acts: costing between \$2,000 and \$20,000, his Smoke and Clay designs have been flying out of the gallery.

He is surprisingly bright-eyed, given that he spent much of the previous night hopping from party to party in a chauffeur-driven limousine, sipping Krug and hanging out with stars including the rapper Kanye West (who avidly collects Baas's work) and the singer Beyoncé along the way.

"Yeah, it's nice," he says sheepishly, spluttering a nervy laugh and steering the conversation away from celebrities and dollars. "I like that my work is appreciated. For me that is more important than if it's sold or not. If it sells, it's good, because then I have money to make more things."

At a time when designers are increasingly permitted to look and act like rock stars, Baas seems totally unaffected by the hoopla surrounding his work. Boyish and unpretentious, he still dresses like a student - his black-canvas jeans and hooded sweat-top making no concessions to either the climate or the glamour of Miami.

He still drives the same beaten-up Mercedes van around his home town of Eindhoven and still works in the same draughty lock-up on a tatty industrial estate. Unlike most other big-name designers, he hand-makes his pieces himself - though he is often aided now by a team of eight assistants - rather than having them mass-produced by large furniture brands in Italy, the Netherlands or America.

"The most important thing for me is to work with a nice group of people," he says, with homely Calvinist modesty. "That's more important for (omega) me than money or design result or whatever. I don't want to have a big factory where everyone has boring jobs." He adds: "Of course you could find a way to mass-produce [my pieces] but then I know that the chairs would not be as good as they are now, so I prefer to do it myself."

Baas shot to international attention in 2003 when his flame-grilled Baroque Chair was exhibited in Milan during the city's mammoth furniture fair. The striking piece - a second-hand smoking chair upholstered in black and burnt to a crisp - was the sensation of the show. To many observers, it seemed to be more than just a piece of furniture, instead serving as a metaphor for the state of the world.

"I was amazed," recalls Gareth Williams, curator of contemporary furniture at the Victoria & Albert Museum. "I first saw it while Saddam Hussein's palaces [in Baghdad] were being bombed. This chair looked like a piece of bourgeois neo-rococo kitsch that could have been dragged out of the wreckage."

"It just really stuck in my mind," remembers Murray Moss, owner of the influential Moss design store in New York and now a champion of Baas's work. "It's exceptional for someone so young to produce something that's so clear, so beautiful, so laden with content. And he actually created a new technique for producing something."

The son of a pastor and a teacher, Baas grew up in rural Holland. His liberal parents encouraged his creativity and the family home soon became a laboratory for his ideas. "When I was 14 or so I started making furniture for my own room, and for the whole house eventually," he says. "But my parents were not design freaks. We had quite old furniture and we were allowed to jump on it and do whatever. Sometimes I played at friends' houses where they had really expensive chairs and sofas that you had to be careful with - and that was a totally new way of thinking for me. So maybe that's why I chose to burn pieces of furniture."

He later studied at the famous Design Academy Eindhoven, but the experience was not a happy one for Baas. "I had quite some trouble with my teachers," he recalls, saying they tried to force him to produce slick, polished designs. "I really had to convince them to let me do what I wanted to do. But it was not easy." (omega)

"Smoke was a rebellion against his teachers," says his friend, the designer Bertjan Pot. "Not rebelling as in, set the world on fire, but a rebellion against slick design; letting things be imperfect."

Baas developed his charring technique in his spare time, away from the hassle of college. Despite the simplicity of the idea, it took months of experimentation. Working with Pot, Baas would spend weekends setting fire to flea-market finds on his balcony without success, almost burning the wooden house down in the process.

"It didn't look too promising," Pot admits. "We'd go to the thrift shop and buy furniture - we even bought plastic furniture which ended up in a puddle of melted plastic. The wooden stuff would either get completely burnt or it would be too fragile, or if you sat on it you got covered in soot. I was quite surprised when I saw Maarten's graduation show a few months later and it worked."

The secret lay in delicately scorching wooden furniture with a blowtorch, which creates a deeply charred surface resembling blackened tree bark. When this is done, Baas seals the furniture with layers of clear epoxy lacquer.

Rather than a purely aesthetic exercise, Baas saw Smoke as a way of exploring the notion of beauty. Today, consumer goods such as furniture are considered worthless once they become worn or damaged, but Baas wanted to see if an object could be made more beautiful by partially destroying it. "In nature nothing is smooth or symmetrical, but everybody considers nature beautiful," he says. "So why, when you have a piece of furniture, do you want to keep it pristine?"

Fortunately for Baas, Smoke came along just as design tastemakers were getting bored of the bland, mass-produced modernist look and instead seeking out more expressive designers. Smoke also coincided with the explosion of interest in limited-edition, hand-made furniture, which was beginning to attract the interest of wealthy collectors.

To a large degree, Baas owes his success to Murray Moss, who took the designer under his wing and offered him a solo show at his prestigious New York showroom - an unprecedented gesture of faith in such a young designer.

The show, *Where There's Smoke*, caused a sensation when it opened in May 2004. At the suggestion of Moss, Baas had burned 25 of the most important design works of the 20th century, including pieces by Gaudi, Eames, Rietveld and Tejo Remy, who was one of Baas's teachers at Eindhoven. Each blackened piece bore a stamped metal plaque with Baas's signature.

It was a seminal moment. "It was so iconoclastic," says the V& A's Gareth Williams. "It seemed to draw a line under all those [20th century] design movements." "We burnt his education," says Moss. "All the things that were

important and influential to him - we burnt them." Moss adds that taking a blowtorch to these classics was not a nihilistic gesture but a creative one: "He takes something and he caresses it with his hands, with flame. He alters it chemically so it is recognisable in its original form but is also reborn as a work of his."

Following the show, Baas found himself inundated with ever-more elaborate burning requests. He smoked a collection of antiques - including a grandfather clock and a commode - for Holland's Groningen Museum; he smoked a staircase at an Amsterdam hairdressers; he smoked an entire panelled timber wall at the home of the Milanese architect Fabio Novembre.

There was a danger, though, that Baas would become a prisoner of Smoke's success. "Maarten was very afraid," Moss confides. "Rarely does a career begin so powerfully and he was concerned that he would always be labelled as 'the burning guy'. I think it was agony [for him]."

Baas followed up Smoke with two fairly well-received ranges, both of which reinvent found objects: his Hey Chair... series of bookshelves consists of second-hand furniture reassembled into sculptural piles; while his Treasure chairs are made from MDF off-cuts salvaged from a furniture factory.

But Baas finally banished his own doubts for good last year, when he presented a new collection of work at the Milan Furniture Fair. Called Clay, the series featured wobbly-legged armchairs, side tables and shelving made of hand-moulded synthetic clay painted in Noddy colours.

Again, Moss was bowled over. "I looked at Clay and I thought, 'Oh my God, it's such an interesting idea. There's a total, immediate clarity of thought. It's a life study - he actually takes the idea of a chair and with his hands makes an iconic chair.'"

At the Moss show at Design Miami, wealthy buyers were scrambling to buy the Clay pieces and the giant black dining table sold within minutes of the gallery opening for \$34,000 - a record for a Baas piece.

As usual, though, Baas's explanation for Clay is more modest than the claims of many pundits offering opinions of his work. "It is really a simple and intuitive thing. I started squeezing and squeezing the clay until I got a chair. It's a lot of fun." Does he view what he does as art, or craft, or design? "I never really worry about that. I just make what I want and leave it to others to categorise. Call it whatever you want."

Shortly after we met in Miami, Baas presented an entirely new collection at this year's Milan Furniture Fair. Called Sculpt, it featured a series of oversized, wobbly-shaped chairs, tables and cupboards made of wood and metal. Each piece is an accurately upscaled version of a tiny model Baas hand-carved, making for an Alice in Wonderland distortion of scale.

Showing in the basement of an apartment block in the Zona Tortona section of the Italian fair, Baas's exhibition featured blaring rock music, and Baas himself was leaping around, punching the air when I arrived. The reason? Murray Moss had just visited the show, and bought the entire collection.