

## Brecht Wright Gander on Max Lamb

By Brecht Wright Gander for Metropolis Magazine, July 2021

You may have seen [the video](#) of Max Lamb at the beach: the day is sopping, the sky is a unified cloud, and dusky waves scroll midscreen as the designer digs in the sand. His motions flicker in lapsed time as he uses a shovel to flatten a mound. He incises a pattern in the mound and pours in a silver liquid. Then he briefly disappears. When he reappears, he digs again until a triangular lattice emerges. Three legs taper down from the corners, gleaming dully. Behold [Pewter Stool](#) (2006), made in a way that Max Lamb, and nobody but Max Lamb, makes. Why not? It seems to have taken less than an afternoon and required little to no traditional skill. *Pewter Stool* revises the hackneyed complaint against Modern art: “but I could do that” into a revelatory affirmation: “I *could* do that!”



Lamb’s practice braids together poetic primitivism and didactic documentation. He has made production into performance, process into product, and opened a portal between DIY hobbyists and high-design professionals. It should not be surprising then that the extensive project descriptions he writes to accompany his designs often resemble DIY guidance: “The 1kg pewter ingots, made by Geoff at Carn Metals in Pendeen, took about 10- 15 minutes to melt at 236°C in two of my Mum’s old stainless-steel saucepans,” reads a typical extract. His video documentation is at pains to appear unstaged – he carries on preparatory conversations onscreen, people stop by and watch him work, the weather at the beach will be precisely what weather should not look like on the beach on Instagram, and he generally avoids the fussy styling of typical social media fare. In an extended exposition on an electroformed copper stool he describes the specific way working a wax pattern in his bathtub versus working it in his sink helps to define the final form. Lamb’s earnestness is meticulously refined and more complex than a simple ethical impulse towards “transparency.” Performative making blends alienation from and immersion in craft – just as writers must be both sensitive to and removed from the experiences they wish to vivify in word.



In *Wood, Stone*, Lamb’s third solo show at New York’s Salon 94, he again uses mono-material palettes and highly compressed production processes to create a tight narrative focus. A seating series in Western Red Cedar names each piece after the dimension of the single boards used to construct it – *6 x 8" Chair* is made from a 6’ x 8” board. He allows no

offcuts – the mate to every extracted cut is redeployed such that every dimensional inch is preserved. Economy has always been instinctive for Lamb, so working during the pandemic, when materials could only be obtained locally and sparingly, provided challenges almost tailor suited to his talents. One cannot help but appreciate the timeliness of his program – as lumber prices have gone up hundreds of percentages, much of the industrialized world is suddenly awake to a need to treat wood as a precious material. Few, however, are likely to achieve results as lovely and lyrically underworked as Lamb.



By iterating and reiterating, Lamb's series become etudes — opportunities to explore the range of inflections available within a prescribed form. The real riddle Lamb seems to have solved however, aside from how to make a chair from a single board, is how to be a professional neophyte, continually experiencing and sharing the excitement of fresh discovery. This is by no means lost on Lamb: “[...] discovering really. That is what I do,” he says. His graduation show at Royal College of the Arts, *Exercises in Seating*, has been the template for his improbable career – a trick he has managed by never ceasing to be a student. If the pleasure of Lamb's work lies in this sense of discovery, a potential limitation may be that Lamb seems disinclined to move beyond a first handshake with any given process. Instead, after a brief introduction, he is more likely to shift modes. Craft is typified by specialization and brutal, tenacious struggle towards mastery, while Lamb's work reflects the opposite: the mastery of aestheticized amateurism. Yes, he hammered away at stones to make *Boulder Chair* – but a trained mason might say he's barely begun – that's the challenge and proposition he makes. His chairs often look just chairlike enough to be figuratively identifiable. “It is about how little can I do to a material and yet change it to the point you know exactly what it does,” he says.



Knowing when to stop is surely one of Lamb's greatest strengths. In his latest wooden works, bandsaw marks are not sanded away. In his stone works, crenelated textures and tool markings are likewise preserved. His designs often convey the hurried, in-process beauty of construction sites – when the bones and sinew of a building are uncovered, the internal systems only partially in place, and the sculptural mystery and legible ingenuity of making is available to wonder. There is also something *speedy* about his work – it has the pulse of the internet – bringing to craft – long characterized as stodgy and slow – the

perceived thrill of digital velocity (see Glenn Adamson’s article [Warp Factors: Craft at High Speed](#) for more on this). “I can work [...] with speed and spontaneity, and this speed is embodied by the final pieces,” Lamb says of his long-running polystyrene seating series. Interestingly, the textures he creates on his foam chairs are strikingly similar to those on his stone chairs, as though trading a hot wire cutter for an advanced CNC waterjet machinery were just a matter of swiping left.



“Patience. Something I struggle with,” Lamb admits. But impatience has been good to him, and he has a knack for finding underexplored processes that suit his restless curiosity. The “Stone” portion of *Wood, Stone* includes *Feather and Wedge* (2021), a chair which is evidently hewn from a monolithic block of Tonalite Granite using the titular technique. Looking at it, one thinks the method might better have been called *Smash and Wedge*, but the entirely unfeatherlike qualities of the roughly worked rock, formed like a Tetris-styled illustration of a chair, rub nicely against the incongruous name. *Campione Chair* (2016) is more eccentric in form, with little doorways and simple geometries excavated from the craggy surface, summoning the voice of the architect-sculptor [Gonzalo Fonseca](#).



Although Lamb occasionally appropriates the language of Modernism when discussing his work – employing such tropes as the “honesty” of materials and the legibility of constructive methods – his angle of approach is less defined by dogma than by a lingering attention towards the pleasures of thinking through making. As global supply chains have been rattled fiercely by the pandemic, the production of things and the aspect of craft which invokes self-reliance and resourcefulness have all captured popular attention. Covid mask making may have been the most massive participation of Americans in craft since WWII production efforts. Lamb’s work adds a note of sweetness to the anxieties brewing around these topics. Limitations can be deeply inhibitive, but artists are also continually fashioning them into scaffolds for innovation. Just look at what Lamb can do with a single 6’x8” board, a single block of stone.