

## On Serban Ionescu

Cezanne said that faces should be painted like objects, a quote which Serban Ionescu seems to have read backwards; he has spent the last five years creating objects like faces. Nikola E., Gaetano Pesce, Roberto Matta and company have already beaten a clearing in the colorful territory of absurd representational design. Ionescu has been expanding their encampment with notionally functional sculptures that look a bit like assembly line products of a factory that has been seized by children.

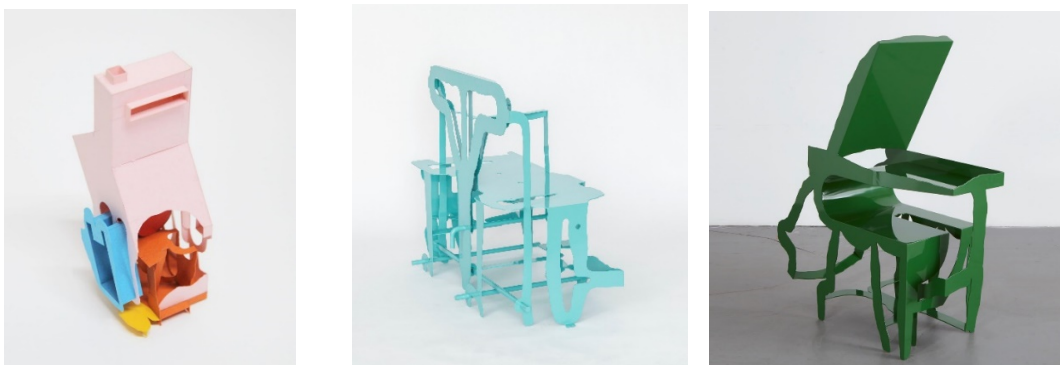


*Folk #7, 2018. Oila, 2018. EOS, 2019.*

Ionescu's signature style begins with a sketch on paper. "A drawing is just a drawing until you want it to be something else," he tells me. Translated into steel by way of CNC lasercutting, his linework is preserved with such precise and shivering nuance that the distance between drawn fantasy and made reality collapses at each ragged edge. While in architectural practice drawings lose currency at the rate their directives are enacted, in Ionescu's work the opposite is true; the final construction benefits from retaining as much as possible the character of draftsmanship. Chapel for an Apple, an architectural folly in Hudson, NY, looks like it was crayoned into reality.



Because flat planes form the basis of his material vocabulary, Ionescu's final pieces often look like his models – and his models, made in colored paper and hardboard – look remarkably like his final pieces, made in sheet metal and wood boards. The dimensionless quality of sheet metal and the boldness with which he colors it supports an uncanny sensation of unreality. Anxiety about border crossing between representation and source material may have worn off in the visual arts, but it is fast growing into a migraine for contemporary architecture. Due to the complexity of representing large-scale three-dimensional forms, architecture has come about a century late to the ontological reckoning that photography engendered in painting. Advances in digital modeling have now changed that.



*Study model. Chapel for an Apple 2020. Lacaria, 2018. Slipova, 2019.*

Collapse and border crossing are entwined in Ionescu's family history as well. "I was born in Communist Romania and I remember the revolution of 1989 – Ceausescu and his wife assassinated live on TV, bread lines, the laughter of my father as

communism fell, the sadness of my grandfather, my grandmother's kitchen, her hands, those memories seem almost like dreams these days." He immigrated to New York City at the age of ten but made trips back to post-soviet Romania in adulthood. It was during a 2015 trip that he saw, in The Museum of the Peasant in Bucharest, a collection of simple school chairs. Seen in photos it is clear they have an elegiac quality, as empty chairs often do – and as school chairs they signal not only the absence of a human presence but also of childhood. Ionescu's youth was also part of an irrecoverable history, an era which has passed so definitively that Francis Fukyama felt confident announcing its closure as the end of history itself. "A lot of things changed after that visit," Ionescu told me; his mature style soon followed.

Ideological collapse reaches even durable goods, the standard thickness of toilet paper, the feeling of home. There is a literal reshaping that takes place as the present applies its glaze to the past and there is a phenomenological reshaping that takes place as the ghosts which inhabit our things must adapt to their altered hosts. Ionescu's work seems to be caught in the middle of this process, falling down and finding the ground at once, seemingly subjected to a seismic gyration of the Z axis.



*Photo from the Museum of the Peasant. Folk Chairs, 2021.*

After graduating from Pratt's architecture program in 2007, Ionescu began working in a custom metal shop, managing projects alongside fellow artist J. McDonald among others. This exposure to the machinery of production became key to his sculptural vocabulary. It may also explain his affinity with Alexander Calder, who was a mechanical engineer before coming out as an artist. This comparison may not at first seem apt. Calder's late style aimed for the abstractly sublime, while Ionescu's sensibility veers towards the leering, teetering, and haywire. However, it is the moments of intersection in Calder's mobiles – when the rods join and clasp each other – that grounds his imagistic silhouettes in legible workmanship. These connections are where we see his engineer's mind thinking through and resolving constructive problems before flying off into image; they are the meeting places where the wings attach to the man. The relation between fast graphical impression and slower earthbound detail is likewise constantly shuffled in Ionescu's work; he precisely emphasizes constructive ligaments, makes them unmissable and cranks up the visual volume of connective hardware until it erupts and sprays out across his surfaces. There is a deliciousness to his screws. *Buttonhead* screws – never countersunk – the better to boldly announce themselves. Who knew that screws could be a vehicle for exuberance? They blister his pieces like anti-rhinestones, delighting in their own warrantless proliferation. Why such insistence on visible fasteners? Because we are never allowed to lose sight of the fact that these erratic and eruptive shapes were precisely *planned*, with all the forethought that mechanical construction implies. It is the bewildering combination of machined precision and impulsive gesture that grants the work its uniquely pleasurable potency.



*In Case of Emergency, 2020*

Some of Ionescu's most triumphant work has come when it appears to be in the throes of cathartic liberation from functionality. In *Peter Sellers*, 2018, a chair seems to be lifting off and multiplying, tumbling and metastasizing into an amoebic tapeworm all at once. There is a dangerousness about these writhing domesticities; their grins stretch a bit too broadly, their eye holes are terribly empty, their gestures seem to be animated by the psychopathic intensity of a George Condo. It is with the threat level ramped up that Ionescu can be at his most piercing. Above all from chairs we expect passivity – they are things to be used. In altering that quality, Ionescu makes chairs into things to confront. His pieces often both reference and implode standard furniture typologies – which may be read as resisting the conformity of Soviet production or as parodying the ceaselessly proliferating variety of American marketing, or both. Ionescu's work is largely made with industrial equipment which was once exclusively available at factory scale – laser cutters and heavy-duty break presses. This is thanks to a new phase of production that is churning into reality: mass customization. It is being explored by companies such as Nike and ushered along by CNC and additive manufacturing technologies which are making differentiation less antithetical to economies of scale. It is also augmenting the capabilities of the humble artist.



*Peter Sellers*, 2018. *Gene Wilder*, 2019.

All the pieces in *In Order of Appearance*, at Everyday Gallery in Antwerp until May 1, were created during the pandemic. While Ionescu's work has not visibly changed in response to this most recent historic upheaval, it is impossible not to note that many people have been spending far more time oppressing their homes' furniture with usage than ever before. Our chairs and tables and shelves are surely sick of us and if a rebellion is due, Ionescu's work seems primed to ignite it.



*The Artist with his Folk Chairs*