

# COUCH CLASS: MARC NEWSON'S EXTRAORDINARY FURNITURE LANDS IN GSTAAD

Few individuals have occupied the territory shared by design and art with the conviction and originality of Marc Newson, for whom the discipline of industrial design presents a rich and endlessly renewable opportunity to explore new ways of thinking about form and function, materials and production. Over the past thirty years, the Australian-born designer has applied his distinctive vision and boundless technical acumen to everything from watches and footwear to concept cars and aircraft interiors. “In the age of the specialist,” writes author and journalist Nick Foulkes, “he is one of the last polymaths.” Newson has worked with high-end and mass-market brands alike, and has joined creative forces with industry titans such as Jonathan Ive, former chief design officer at Apple, for whom he helped craft the distinc-

tive profile of the Apple Watch. Central to his practice is the making of innovative limited-edition furniture.

This pursuit sprang initially from Newson's training as a jeweler – for his thesis project at Sydney University, he presented a chair as an item of jewelry because it was “worn” close to the body – and his innovative approaches to form, color, and texture all originate from a jeweler's embrace of imaginative detail. He also continues to use furniture as a platform for experimentation with new materials and production techniques. From the iconic *Lockheed Lounge* (1986) – constructed from sections of aluminum riveted together over a carved foam interior in a striking fusion of the mechanical and the organic – to 2006's *Extruded Tables* and *Voronoi Shelf*, all of which were carved from single blocks of Carrara marble, Newson has

made the element of unprecedented surprise a hallmark.

This February, Gagosian will exhibit a group of Newson's chairs, lounges, desks, and tables from 2017 and 2019 at Switzerland's Gstaad Airport, an appropriate site given his extensive work in transportation and aerospace. Gagosian has exhibited Newson previously, in its New York, Hong Kong, and London locations, and this presentation will remind viewers just how singular his vision is. His work emulating the unity and flow of natural forms, Newson also finds inspiration in errant scientific and rarified technologies. His is not a practice that aims to refine through reduction, but instead one for which unexpected and hybrid influences lead the way; it is contemporary precisely in its elision of the programmatic

and the doctrinaire. Newson also relishes the risks inherent in working with delicate materials and make-or-break processes.

Gagosian's presentation in Gstaad includes four cast-glass chairs made in 2017. Produced using a vast kiln at a factory in a remote Czech village, they are comprised of pairs of hollow quarter-spheres, each richly colored upper half resting on a cloudy, translucent base that reflects and refracts its hue. Exquisite objects in their own right, these distinctive seats offer a further reminder of Newson's immersion in craft, and hint at broader narratives of historical research and timeless beauty. The chairs also possess a biomorphic quality in their suggestion of eyes or sea creatures. While relatively simple in terms of final shape, they are nonetheless the results of extraordinarily time-consuming production, with each piece spending up to six months in the kiln. “It takes three months to heat up to the right temperature and then it takes another three months for the thing to cool down,” Newson explains. “They're then cut and finished by hand. They're deeply, deeply labor-intensive.” The making is a slow, transformative process that he characterizes as “pure alchemy.”

Also on view in Gstaad are works from the 2017 *Murrina* series, each in a different format: a console, a desk, and a low table. Manufactured in accordance with a classical Venetian glass-making technique – one that involves heating and fusing glass rods before slicing them to reveal patterned cross sections, refiring the resultant sheet, and then slumping it over a mold – these pieces combine sleek outer surfaces with vivid internal coloration, again suggesting biological inspiration in their resemblance to cellular structures. The low table in particular was also inspired by Italian architect Carlo Scarpa's glass dishes of the 1930s and 1940s. In emulating such small objects at a vastly inflated scale, Newson aims to underscore the peculiar qualities of the material, as well as the unpredictability of its treatment.



Marc Newson, Cloisonné Blue Chair, 2017, cloisonné enamel and copper, 26 1/8 x 40 1/4 x 37 1/4 inches (66.5 x 102.1 x 94.6 cm) © Marc Newson

Finally, six further pieces in Gagosian's space are united by Newson's use of Chinese cloisonné, an intricate enameling technique that originated in the Mediterranean some three thousand years ago before spreading to China around the fourteenth century. Involving the application of wire to create partitions, or cloisons, into which enamel is introduced, the technique demands precise, meticulous craftsmanship in order to avoid the potentially disastrous effects of temperature variation. Constructed by hand and fired in a custom-made oversize kiln in a factory outside Beijing, Newson's copper chairs, lounges, and desks boast distinctive patterns – from interpretations of traditional Chinese floral motifs to his signature amoebic “orgone” design – that reveal his wide-ranging aesthetic interests and love of striking color.

Newson was careful, however, not to make the cloisonné works' forms too dominant, instead working toward a harmony between object and surface

that allows each vital component to retain its individual impact. This led him to employ an algorithm, developed at the designer's London studio by his associate Nicolas Register, which generates forms that approximate the subtle irregularities of nature. Newson then reverse engineered these precisely rendered structures to arrive at objects that were possible to physically create. This way of conceiving of and making concrete an idea is characteristic of Newson. As he admits to Foulkes, “I am my own worst taskmaster because I set myself seemingly impossible projects, complex technical things that I know will be really challenging and have probably never been done before. But that's what makes it worthwhile for me. I certainly don't want to do things that have been done.”

*Gagosian will present a group of pieces by Marc Newson at the Gstaad Airport, Switzerland, 13 February – 20 March, 2020.*

Installation view, Marc Newson, Gagosian, West 21st Street, New York, January 17–February 20, 2019. Artwork © Marc Newson

