

Re-Issue Re-Imagine Re-Make:

Bert Loeschner's Re-interpretations of the Fibreglass Rocking Chair by Charles and Ray Eames

by Elisabeth Darby (Sotheby's Institute of Art, London, 2020)

Icons of twentieth century furniture occupy a prominent position in the contemporary interior and design landscape. Although often conceived decades ago, many have remained in production, while others are brought back into the marketplace on a regular basis. Several of these iconic works have also been the subject of re-interpretation by designers, artists and other creatives. These re-imaginings constitute a notable aspect of design practice in the new millennium, just as appropriation and remix are integral themes in contemporary art. Re-Issue Re-Imagine Re-Make: Appropriation in Contemporary

Furniture Design engages with a selection of case studies to provide an in-depth consideration of this phenomenon. It is a measure of the widespread nature of this practice that many more examples could have been included, one of which is the designer and artist Bert Loeschner's re-interpretation of Charles and Ray Eames's fibreglass RAR (Rocking Armchair Rod base) chair of 1950. Loeschner's whimsical and anthropomorphic re-working of the Monobloc (the ubiquitous white plastic chair) are discussed in the book; his manipulation of the RAR chair offers further perspectives on the practice of re-imagining and re-making.



Bert Loeschner, Dudes, 2012.

The fibreglass armchair by the Eameses marked a radical revision of the chair form; no longer constructed from a separate seat, back and arms, it fused these elements into one continuous shell shape. Their proposal was first seen at the International Competition for Low Cost Furniture Design organised by the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1948 where they were awarded 2nd prize for seating. Their plan was to make the shell in steel, but this proved too expensive for mass production whereupon the Eameses turned their attention to glass reinforced polyester (GRP) or fibreglass. This was a relatively new material for furniture but one which permitted shell forms to be moulded with ease and, moreover, offered the possibility of colour without upholstery and an attractive textural modulation of surface. Examples were manufactured by Zenith Plastics for the Herman Miller Company in time for MoMA's first Good Design Exhibition, staged in conjunction with the Merchandise Mart in Chicago in January 1950. The chairs were initially produced in greige (a mixture of grey and beige), elephant grey, and parchment. Additional colours followed shortly afterwards as did a choice of bases and the possibility of upholstered versions.

In its organic, curving forms, the fibreglass armchair encapsulated the post-war mood which sought a less dogmatic strain of modernism to the strict geometry of the 1920s, and offered a lighter alternative to the heavily upholstered furniture that featured in most interiors of the period. Although the Eameses' design was a pioneering example of the shell shape, they were pre-empted in this novel approach to form by Eero Saarinen whose Womb chair was produced by Knoll from 1948. In developing this armchair, Saarinen and Knoll were assisted by a boatbuilder with experience of working with fibreglass, an indication of the newness of the material for furniture. However, in Saarinen's iteration, the plastic shell of the armchair was disguised by upholstery; the Eameses exposed the material, its colours and subtle texture.

The fibreglass side and armchairs were produced by the Herman Miller Company but in 1957 the newly formed Swiss company Vitra secured a licence to manufacture Eames furniture, an arrangement which ceased in 1984. Since then the Herman Miller Company has produced the design for the USA and Far East, while Vitra holds the licence for Europe and the Middle East.

Vitra ceased production of the fibreglass chair in 1993 for environmental reasons. It was re-launched as the Eames Plastic Chair in 1998 in polypropylene, a more planet-friendly plastic and the one used by the Herman Miller Company. However, in 2008 Vitra re-introduced the fibreglass version (Eames Fibreglass Chair) using a safer manufacturing process and one which also permitted the shell to be fully recyclable. The search for more environmentally friendly materials is a policy which many companies have adopted in recent years in relation to their iconic designs; Anna Castelli-Ferrieri's Componibili for Kartell (1967) is now available in a bioplastic which is 100% biodegradable, for example. In the pioneering days of plastic furniture of the 1950s and 1960s, the environmental impact of the material was largely unknown and was outweighed by the exciting new possibilities in terms of shapes and colours it offered.

At the same time as re-introducing fibreglass, Vitra brought back some of the original colours of the chair, including seafoam green. This is an example of companies reverting to what might be considered more 'authentic' versions of their icons, a practice which is not unique to Vitra. As discussed in Re-Issue Re-Imagine Re-Make, Cassina's limited editions of the Grand Confort (1928) by Le Corbusier, Charlotte Perriand and Pierre Jeanneret (Le Corbusier Exemple personnel and Perriand Exemple personnel of 2018) use colours in their frames and cushions derived from early versions of the armchair.

The re-imagining and re-making of design icons takes various forms and is undertaken for a variety of reasons. The re-interpretation may involve changes to form or function or material transformation (which may be for environmental reasons). Designers, artists and others can be motivated to undertake these interventions because these familiar images variously inspire, challenge, raise questions and prompt reflection; they can act as vehicles for the exploration of ideas or political social or cultural commentary. Design icons provide the impetus for original and authentic new works, a process which at the same time reinforces their iconicity. The works of Charles and Ray Eames, notably their Lounge chair and ottoman of 1958, and the Wire chair of 1951, have been subject to many such re-interpretations. So too has their fibreglass armchair, perhaps most famously by their friend the cartoonist Saul Steinberg who drew a cat and a female nude onto the seats shortly after the design was launched. Bert Loeschner's experimentations with the fibreglass armchair in 2016 involved not only actually making the plastic shells himself (rather than merely utilising existing ones) but also re-purposing the design. This level of intervention distinguishes his re-imagining and re-making but also highlights how new meaning is ascribed to design icons through this process, particularly when seen in consort with his earlier work with the Monobloc.



Bert Loeschner, Rocking Armchair Relation, 2016. Photographer: Lisa Rastl.

Rocking Armchair Relation (Loeschner's RAR) consists of two fibreglass chairs on oak rockers which are extended into a seesaw for the home. Although empty, the viewer immediately imagines two friends chatting companionably while rocking back and forth. Like Dudes in the Monobloc series, Loeschner highlights the human dimension of furniture, the close proximity of the body to chairs in particular. He also plays with the idea of inside/outside and public/private space since the Eameses' chair is primarily used in the interior and one normally expects to find a seesaw in an outdoor environment. As an interesting aside, in 2019 the fashion designer Virgil Abloh re-purposed two Wire chairs by the Eameses into a seesaw for his vision of the home in 2035 for Vitra. However, whereas Abloh's seesaw has a stabilising base, Loeschner's has none. His rockers correspond to those in the Eameses' chair but in their lengthening, they heighten the thrill – and also the potential danger – of rocking in a seesaw.



Bert Loeschner, Salmon chair and Seafoam chair from Rocking Armchair Relation, 2016.

Loeschner made all the components for his RAR himself, including the shells, metal and wooden bases, and shock mounts. The exception is the screws, although he de-galvanised these. The chairs replicate the originals except that the steel struts are thicker to ensure stability and for aesthetic reasons. The shells are re-makes of two early colours (red and seafoam). These required extensive experimentation to achieve an 'original retro vintage style', so that the chairs looked like ones from the 1950s which had been subjected to the effects of light; thus the original red has faded to a salmon colour over time. Loeschner's painstaking research is mirrored in the endeavours of the Eameses who also undertook extensive experimentation to obtain exactly the desired colour in the originals.



Bert Loeschner, Rocking Armchair Relation, 2016: colour and texture trial.

Made after the Monobloc re-interpretations, Bert Loeschner sees this re-working of the Eameses' chair as a logical progression in his work. Both armchairs used plastic and were intended for mass production but, whereas the Monobloc is regarded in many quarters as cheap and nasty (an 'unloved piece spread around the world' as Loeschner describes it), the RAR has become a design icon. Its retail price is substantially more than that of the Monobloc, and it also has a secondary market value: examples which date from the early years of production, with original hardware, in rare colours, and with the rope edging to the shells that was used for a brief period only, can fetch over £1000. By painstakingly re-creating what appears to be a vintage piece, Loeschner draws attention to the crucial question of authenticity for the secondary market: the rocking form almost suggests the back and forth motion of the debate: is it genuine? is it a fake? The choice of chair is significant in this respect as the market for mid-century modern design is currently strong.

The work is an original conception and is not intended to deceive. Rather, its intention is to question which objects are deemed worthy of faking, and to reflect on the challenging concepts of originals and copies in the context of mass-produced design and company re-issues of icons in different materials. The discourse Rocking Armchair Relation prompts would not be as potent had Loeschner chosen to use a Vitra fibreglass re-issue rather than to make the whole chair himself. Loeschner thus hints at the status and value we ascribe to iconic furniture designs, issues which are also explored in his Rocking Chair Representative. This shows a flattened fibreglass RAR chair in its packaging hung from a steel hook on a wall. The object is hung by means of a punched euro hole which has been modified into the shape of a black cloud (which subsequently became an important logo for the designer). The packaging and the display method allude to the industrial production and retailing of design – it suggests the chair is available to be taken off the peg and purchased by the consumer.



Bert Loeschner, Rocking Chair Representative, 2016.

Positioned in front of this, however, is an empty Arne Jacobsen Series 7™ chair (another icon and one of the case studies in Re-Issue Re-Imagine Re-Make). This chair awaits an occupant to sit and contemplate the image which not only evokes the retail experience, but also a landscape painting with sun and cloud. Since the 1980s design icons have often acted as status symbols and indicators of taste within an interior; they are occasionally perceived more as works of art to be admired than functional items to be used, as Loeschner suggests in this scenario. Here the RAR chair is displayed as 'representative' of a useful object which is now quite expensive (over £500) and beyond the reach of the mass market (the Eameses' intended audience). It contrasts dramatically with our perception of the Monobloc as primarily an inexpensive and utilitarian item.

In his re-imagining and re-making of the Monobloc chair and the RAR chair by Charles and Ray Eames, Bert Loeschner highlights materials, process and function but, in addition to these visual and formal alterations, his work also serves to articulate the narrative and critical potential of objects. These re-interpretations underscore - but also question and challenge - the reverence with which icons of design are valued in contemporary culture.

Elisabeth Darby, 2020