

EDITOR'S PICK

KOREAN CONTEMPORARY DESIGN AT EDWARD TYLER NAHEM

For its first design-focused foray, the New York fine art gallery is presenting a show of recent work by four of South Korea's most important contemporary designers — a quartet of creatives whose work celebrates the purity of natural forms and materials.

by Meredith Mendelsohn

FEBRUARY 2014



SHOPPABLE STORY



Given the growing fluidity between art and design, and the increasing appreciation for craftsmanship and integrity of materials, it's not surprising that South Korea has emerged as a hotbed of contemporary design. Korea, after all, has a long, rich history of the decorative arts, and many of the ancient traditions and techniques — lacquer, glazing, carving — that may have seemed too labor-intensive in the shadow of industrialization have been embraced and revived in the 21st century. But it's not just about producing exquisitely handmade objects. "What's essential is that the artists are focused on the purity of the material and form," says Janis Gardner Cecil, director of New York's Edward Tyler Nahem Gallery, which opens "Korean Contemporary Design," its first-ever design exhibition, on February 26. (The show runs at the 57th Street gallery through April 4.)

Items on display in the forthcoming show include: Bahk Jong Sun's **Tranquil A**, in white oak. Opposite: **From the Glitter**, by Kang Myung Sun, 2012, in mother of pearl-inlaid lacquerwork. Previous page: Bae Se Hwa's bentwood **Steam 11** chair, 2012. All images courtesy of the Edward Tyler Nahem gallery

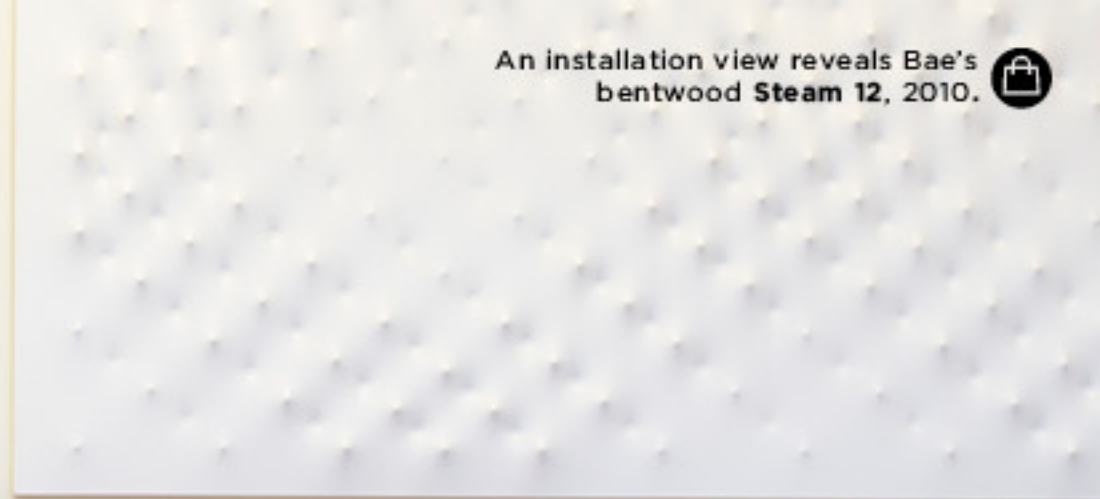
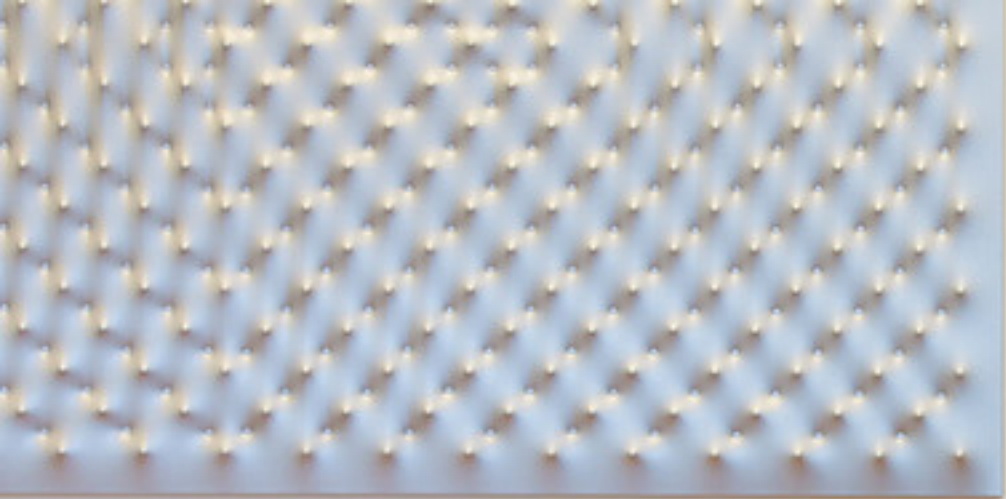




Spotlighting the work of four of South Korea's design superstars — Kang Myung Sun, Bae Se Hwa, Bahk Jong Sun and Lee Hun Chung — the show is somewhat of a departure for the gallery, which in the past has focused primarily on modern and contemporary American and European fine art. But it also makes sense: Despite being functional, even decorative at times, these pieces are boldly abstract in a very modern way, and it's easy to see how they would appeal to an edgier set. "Works by these artists have been acquired by a number of the most influential and well-known collectors of modern and contemporary art," says Cecil.

To create the Coralliform Coffee Table, 2012, Kang inlaid wood with mother-of-pearl, finishing it with glass panels that serve as the tabletop.

An installation view reveals Bae's
bentwood **Steam 12**, 2010.





And while it's not obvious that the designs all come from one particular culture or geographic locale, they do all share one particular influence. "They are all looking at their work through a deep appreciation and understanding of nature, which is a tradition in Korea," says Cecil. This is not to say that these designers are referencing landscape or botanical imagery but rather that they have reduced nature to the most fundamental geometric or biomorphic forms, or referenced it through texture or surface.



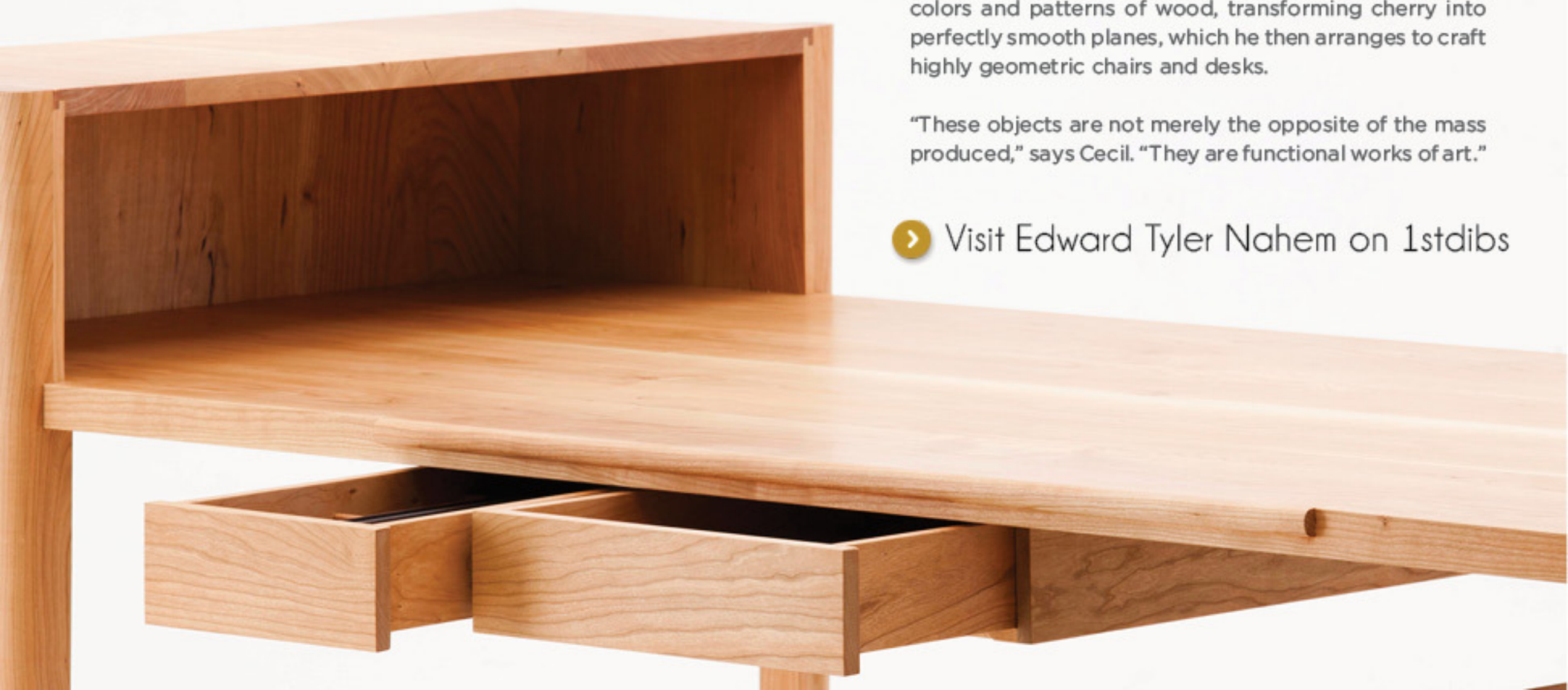
Lee Hun Chung's **Double Macaroon Stool**, 2012, in painterly brown and green glazes, defies definition as either furniture or art.



Lee Hun Chun, for example, makes ceramic stools (each a unique piece) in organic shapes with earthy green, blue and brown glazes. The luminous depth of the glazes — achieved through an ancient firing method — evokes the way sunlight illuminates the tropical sea or a mossy lake. Kang Myung Sun, meanwhile, uses a traditional Korean lacquering process — which is notoriously time-consuming — and mother-of-pearl inlay to create elegant cabinetry and furniture. The exoticism and glamour of Art Deco comes to mind, as does the sea, but Kang's use of bold lines brings a graphic freshness to the work.

 Lee's Mushroom stools, 2012, are each uniquely glazed. Left: Kang's *From the Glitter* chair inlaid with mother-of-pearl, 2012, has an Art Deco air about it.

Bahk's Trans 13 003 desk, 2013, celebrates the inherent beauty of wood, even as it elevates the material to a higher plane.



Bae Se Hwa's walnut benches seem so mathematically perfect, meanwhile, it's hard to believe he crafted them by hand. Merging the organic with the modernist grid, he steams and bends bands of the wood and then arranges them to form wavelike patterns. And Bahk Jong Sun draws attention to the beauty of the colors and patterns of wood, transforming cherry into perfectly smooth planes, which he then arranges to craft highly geometric chairs and desks.

"These objects are not merely the opposite of the mass produced," says Cecil. "They are functional works of art."

[➤ Visit Edward Tyler Nahem on 1stdibs](#)