



Pics: Allan Wexler



Facing Page Left Pratt Desk 2012, aluminium, chair, paint, commissioned by Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York

Facing Page Right Plein Air Studio 2016, wood, canvas, hardware, drawing tools

Top Left I Want to Become Architecture 2002, wood, drywall, paint, 108 x 66 x 36 inches (274.3 x 167.6 x 91.4 cm)

Middle Left Interchange 2008, chairs, wood, paint, hardware, wax, 35 x 70 x 42 inches (88.9 x 177.8 x 106.7 cm)

Bottom Left Co-Exist 2009, wood, paint, wax, 35 x 64 x 20 inches (88.9 x 162.6 x 50.8 cm)

feel when the work is good; the viewers project themselves into the work. An empty chair can be occupied emotionally and intellectually. The audience or viewer fills in the gaps and projects him/herself into the work. If the work is engaging - the imagination of the participant becomes active," he says.

Wexler's practice also operates at the crossroads of architecture and art. His landscape interventions titled 'Staircase', almost 30 years after its making, found its way into the woods only to disintegrate with the passage of time. "The staircase is a theme I have returned to many times. It is a theme that myth and biblical creation stories are made of; the physical need to raise oneself up into the sky and the metaphysical need to attain enlightenment. With our attempts at transcending gravity, we return to the earth and decay. Icarus flew too close to the sun and his wings melted," he says.

His works explore human activity and the built environment, as they isolate, elevate, and monumentalize our daily rituals: dining, sleeping, and bathing. Ordinary activities are turned into theatre by dissolving the boundaries between the fine arts and the applied arts, between furniture design, architecture and theatrical performance, between sculpture and interactive exhibition design and between the practice and the research of architecture. At the core of his work is experimentation with what we think we know: his work confronts us with our lack of knowledge of even the simplest aspects of our daily lives.

At the NYCxDESIGN 2018 Awards which honour outstanding products and projects in categories that span major areas of design, from architecture to interiors, products to accessories and craft to technology, Wexler spoke at the symposium titled 'Intermeddling: At the Edge of Art and Design.' "The talk for Intermeddling can be summed up by my calling card which helps to describe my overall work. It is a kind of introduction and summary of 45 years of my work in this space between art and architecture," he states.

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IS IT ART? IS IT DESIGN? IS IT ENDURANCE?

*A participant at NYCxDESIGN, Allan Wexler works at the intersection of art and design, using everyday objects as props to convey a message. Jemila MacEwan, on the other hand, conducts interdisciplinary experiments as a way to understand what it is to be human. Devyani Jayakar of mondo*arc india | STIR explores their unconventional approaches as well as the underlying nuances.*

NYCxDESIGN, New York City's annual celebration of design attracted designers in droves from across the globe in May this year, showcasing over a dozen design disciplines. Amongst the participants were Allan Wexler and Jemila McEwan, whose works stood out an intersection of art, design and even architecture.

ALLAN WEXLER

Wexler's calling cards are, well...different. They give answers - numbered ones at that, to typical questions he may be asked at a cocktail party. They also maintain that he is 'an architect in an artist's body'. With such an introduction to the man, expect as much thought and innovation to have gone into his work as well.

Of course, Wexler is a qualified architect. Except that he doesn't design buildings. His

portfolio consists of installations, sculptures, and two-dimensional works that explore the physical and human nature of architecture. With his interest in the intersection of art and design Wexler seeks to examine and define the difference between design created by artists versus that created by architects and designers. He transforms everyday objects, which are available and known to us all - chairs, utensils, buckets, into works of art that have become synonymous with his oeuvre. "Can a painting of a chair also have the function of a chair? Can I sit on my painting?" are the kind of questions Wexler asks himself. Incorporating a sound understanding of the principles of gravity, stability, and movement as the basis of architecture, some of his works appear to be in defiance of the tried and tested - such as his complex

installation of the floating 'Pratt Desk', at the Pratt Institute in New York. Other works such as his 'Coffee Seeks Its Own Level' require the interaction of four people and are based on scientific principles learned in high school; more specifically, 'water seeks its own level'. Combining an element of quirky fun with science, four coffee cups are interconnected through tubing. If one person alone lifts his cup, coffee overflows the other three cups. All four people need to coordinate their actions and lift simultaneously. However, Wexler doesn't consider people's interaction as an integral component of his designed works. Do people become products as they interact with the completed works? "I often don't need to have people physically interact with my work or to use it in a kind of useful or functional way. I



a taming, 2018
Pics: Jemila Macewan

JEMILA MACEWAN

Digging a hole. A really big one. Think crater. Or walking across New York in a bodysuit with long fronds of grass waving out around it. For Jemila MacEwan, exploring the act, its physical demands, as well as the participation of viewers, is all part of her interdisciplinary experiments as a way to understand what it is to be human. MacEwan readily concedes that moving from Scotland to Australia as a child has shaped her sensibilities. "I think the best gift I received as a child was to be allowed to see the world from multiple perspectives. I had no trouble accepting contradictory explanations of the world. I'm not sure if this is an attribute of the flexibility of a young mind but it was definitely indicative of the person I was becoming. Being displaced from my birth country gave me an untethered relationship to the world and cultivated the non-possessive relationship to inhabiting the landscape that is present in all my work," she says. Mac Ewan believes that the perceived division of art and design is commonly framed by describing it is a matter of intention. "I disagree with this argument on some level, as it supposes that the creator has the sole responsibility of assigning the interpretive framework by which the work must be seen. I believe recognising this

intersection has more to do with perception, and we should not feel limited by whether something has been labelled art or design in our interpretation or experience of it. I find the most useful frameworks are the ones that inspire the most curiosity." MacEwan even wore a rather special bodysuit, to record the reactions evoked by passers-by who interacted with it. Her creation straddled a physical, tangible space between art and product. A six-hour durational performance with 29 black and white digital photos shown as a 10-minute slide show depicts MacEwan on a north-south transect of Manhattan Island by foot and rail, wearing a fine mesh bodysuit from which long blades of maiden grass extended. "The grass acted as a conduit for touch, like whiskers or antennae. They conducted vibrations to and from my body, filling the space between my environment and me. My vision was restricted by pinhole goggles to limit my dependence on sight. My other senses - hearing, smell and taste - remained unimpaired. I was accompanied by a photographer who documented the six-hour journey," she says. Garnering strange looks from passers-by was par for the course. A little more conservative, an installation titled 'Holes for Talking/Wall for Kissing' is



made from six woollen sweaters of different colours (knitted by her mother and worn by her father), driftwood and sisal rope. Of variable dimensions, it is a continuous blanket-like form, perforated by what had once been neck holes. "These sweaters are sacred to me. They are not props; they are not mundane in my understanding. I have witnessed the love that was worked through them in the making and the wearing. They were living, performing and transforming every day," says MacEwan. "The sweaters are liberated of their practical duties and shown as a single entity, each sweater sewn into the next, a record of a continuum of time, labour, and intimacy." MacEwan's recent work titled 'Human Meteorite' is said to be both, land art and an endurance performance. A huge crater, which she personally dug in the ground, she researched the physics of meteorites before starting. "I wanted to know what size the crater would be if my mass was condensed into the density of a meteorite and I hit the earth at terminal velocity. The answer had too many variables to be a useful guide, so I abandoned the theory," she says. "It made far more sense that the work was a measure of itself. I worked to the limits of each day, and each day those limits were

different. These limits included: daylight hours, saturation of the soil from rain, the physical stamina of my body and my own mental and emotional limits. Each limit surprised me with its immobility, and yet the following day the boundaries of those limits had shifted again. The scale of the crater is a record of those limits." For NYCxDESIGN 2018, MacEwan spoke about her personal journey through this very performative work. During the presentation, she showed images of the process as well as excerpts from the 'live' video broadcasts she had made during the project. She spoke about the limits she faced, what she came to understand about the nature of the impact, and the way the piece transformed her and her audience. www.jemilamacewan.com Pushing the conventional boundaries of what constitutes 'art', Wexler and MacEwan are redefining the ways in which viewers perceive and understand their works. Some clearly avant-garde and experimental, others debatably crossing the boundary into product, their work is certainly not a pretty picture on the wall. Often compelling a palpable reaction from the viewer, the static quality of conventional art is subverted and transformed into a dynamic force. www.nycxdesign.com



Top Left It holds us all, 2017
Top Right Maiden grass voyage, 2013
Bottom Left Under the Glacier, 2016
Bottom Right Wake, 2018
Above Holes for talking: Walls for kissing, 2012