

ALL AT ONCE

Jonathan Muecke goes Lampens

In his pursuit of developing refined forms that explore notions of positive and negative space as well as positional relationships to structures, and with a strong inner desire to imbue functionality into objects that directly relate to people or to other objects, Jonathan Muecke has evolved a design practice that does away with the standard divisions between design, art, and architecture.

TEXT Sam Steverlynck



American designer Jonathan Muecke is an architect by training and followed an internship at the office of Herzog & de Meuron prior to his design studies. Known for simple yet inscrutable designs that are often very sculptural, he explores physical phenomena like mass, gravity, and light. Having spent a week in the brutalist Villa Van Wassenhove by Belgian architect Juliaan Lampens, he has responded to the setting through a series of works. The new pieces are presented at the iconic villa itself, as well as at MANIERA and Jan Mot gallery in Brussels. DAMN° decided to have a chat.

DAMN°: In your work, you seem to challenge readability and traditional paradigms of what a table or lamp should look like. Is that a consequence of what you call the Open Object, a notion that recurs in your practice?
Jonathan Muecke: I want to have a flexible way of thinking. Open Object was a term I used most

in the past, though I still use it now and again as a kind of reinforcement of that early idea. It's about the object being something beyond the object. It has to do with its relationship with other things, whether that's another object or a person. In a way, it's about making an object that has a certain potential and is not fixed.

DAMN°: One could keep wondering what the function of some of your objects is, like Horizontal Shape or MVS. What is the intended use of a piece like Mass, for example?

JM: All of these pieces have a functionality. You might think they are abstract but they're also very precise about what they do. Mass was a way to make a centre that is massive, as alluded to in the title. You could imagine it standing next to a large, weighty object. It's a means of challenging that with a much smaller mass while maintaining the same sort of presence. I wasn't thinking about it being a vessel but rather having a void on the inside. It's not a container. It gets out of its own way.

Jonathan Muecke
Photo: Chris Mottalini

◀ from left to right:

ARC S, 2016
Single arc lamp
Aluminium and LED
Edition of 16 + 1 prototype + 2 AP
H 32 x L 79 x W 14 cm

ARC D, 2016
Double arc lamp
Aluminium and LED
Edition of 16 + 1 prototype + 2 AP
H 64 x L 79 x W 14 cm

LWC, 2016
Low Wooden Chair
Douglas fir, painted
Edition of 24 + 1 prototype + 2 AP
H 66 x L 61 x W 61 cm

Photos courtesy of MANIERA

◀ Villa Van Wassenhove,
by Juliaan Lampens
Photo: Jan Kempenaers

from left to right:

DL, 2013
Decentralized Light
Aluminium and LED
Edition of 16 + 2 AP
38.5 x 38 x H 38.5 inches

HS, 2013
Horizontal Shape
Stainless Steel
Serial edition
Diameter 23.5 inches

MVS, 2013
Miami Vertical Shape
Painted aluminium
Edition of 3 + 2 AP
79 x H 33 inches

Photos courtesy of Volume Gallery



DAMN°: The same goes for Decentralised Light. Its title indicates its function, but how does it work?

JM: It makes light with an LED that aims downwards. The light is decentralised. There's no light in the centre. It defines a volume but there is nothing, a kind of absence.

DAMN°: So it would seem that you want to include physical phenomena like light or voids in your work?

JM: Yes, but in a more direct way. I don't want to be so elusive. All of these things have a presence that is measurable. It's not so much about ideas as it is about objects and space. I don't want to just say it is an idea. Of course ideas are important, but they can only go

so far. The material aspect of these objects is crucial. They have to abide by the same rules as other objects. They have to understand gravity, structure, colour, and light. There are a lot of criteria by which to understand objects. These things are universal and are also explored by architects, sculptors, etc.

DAMN°: Like Anish Kapoor exploring a void?

JM: Yes...but I don't know if I would use that as a reference. I think he is able to isolate a variation of an object and somehow exploit it. Rather than doing that, I try to equalise all the characteristics. If you make the material the same as the shape, the scale, and the colour, then you have an object that's in balance, which I find more effective in some cases.

DAMN°: You just completed a residency at a brutalist house by Belgian architect Juliaan Lampens and produced some new pieces as a result. How did that go?

JM: I studied architecture and have known Lampens' work for a while. I like it a lot. So when Amaryllis Jacobs from MANIERA proposed that I do a show and a residency there, I was very excited. I developed new work for the house that can also exist outside of the house. Lampens has a generosity and open-endedness that I really appreciate. For me, it feels very normal to consider objects as being a duality between the architecture and potential objects.

DAMN°: Lampens is an architect but he also made stools, which one could compare with some of your pieces, as they don't immediately reveal their function either.

JM: I like those stools very much. They are beautiful and relevant. As I was going to be making furniture for the house, I had to be a bit ambivalent about them. I could not make a contemporary version of the stools. I had to consider them though. Lampens also made daybeds, built-in tables, and a desk for the villa. They possess a potential that was transferable in a nice way to the objects I proposed.

DAMN°: Can you tell us something more about the five pieces you made for the MANIERA07 series following your residency?

JM: I created a new reference to the Decentralised Light. There are lights of two different heights, a single one and a double one. The lamp casts light downwards and low. Its shape is like an arc with three legs. If the structure were a straight line, it would not be stable. This shape gives it an ambiguous direction. You can't tell if it's concave or convex.



from left to right:

VE, 2013; Vertical Expander
D, 2009; Disk
CS, 2013; Coiled Stool
LT, 2011; Low Table
CSS, 2010; Copper Step Stool
F, 2010; Field

Images courtesy of Jonathan Muecke



LWC,2016
Low Wooden Chair
Douglas fir
Edition of 24 + 1 prototype + 2 AP
H 66 x L 61 x W 61 cm
Courtesy of MANIERA

Presentation image
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DAMN°: Besides showcasing your new pieces at the Lampens house, you are also showing them at MANIERA and at Jan Mot Gallery, where your lamps will be presented next to Lampens' daybeds in a kind of scenography, with sound works by Joachim Koester and Stefan Pedersen. Your work thrives at the crossroads between art, design, and architecture...

JM: In the United States, I always show my work in a design gallery, which has certain limitations. Here in Europe, it's interesting for me to present objects in architectural surrounds, like at the Lampens villa, and also to parallel that in an art gallery. In both cases, you develop a context. That's why I like having different shows at the same time. It goes back to the idea of the Open Object. It is kind of all at once at the same time. Like an electron cloud. •



jonathanmuecke.com

The new objects by Jonathan Muecke are on show at Villa Van Wassenhove, Sint-Martens-Latem, Belgium, 03+04 September 2016, and at MANIERA, Brussels, 09 September - 08 October 2016. maniera.be

Sometimes when you blink you may see trees, with works by Jonathan Muecke, Juliaan Lampens, Joachim Koester and Stefan A. Pedersen, is at Jan Mot gallery, Brussels, 09 September - 08 October 2016. janmot.com