



Left:
Concreta chair, 2009,
wood, fabric, rope,
31½ x 27½ x 17¾ in.

Below left:
Cintura shelf, 2009,
wood, leather belts,
62½ x 35 x 29¼ in.



Quiet Riot

STORY BY
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Soft-spoken and serene, the Brazilian designer Rodrigo Almeida is sitting at the living room table in his São Paulo apartment surrounded by a cacophony of his own furniture: a stool made from stacked plastic laundry baskets, backpacks or industrial canvas turned into shelving, and tables with latticed tops in a riot of primary colors. A throne-shaped sofa against the far wall appears to consist only of the thick folds of a reflective sneaker fabric. Seated on a bright blue chair featuring deeply latticed surfaces that bite into the flesh, prohibiting lengthy idleness, the 34-year-old announces, without a hint of heresy in his voice: “It’s more important to create sensation than form.”

Almeida, whose work deftly and unself-consciously confounds design, art and craft, never attended design school. He represents a generation that follows the Campana brothers, who helped return Brazilian design to the limelight after four decades of the country’s so-called Lost Generation. Aurélia Lanson, director of Fat Galerie in Paris, where Almeida had a solo show in May, was struck by the originality of the structures and materials he uses. “He has a great ability to master forms and colors,” she says. “Above all, he’s very mature and totally free from the design of his generation.” Born outside São Paulo to Bahian

parents, Almeida remembers observing architectural space early on and, at home, having the freedom “to modify things.” But design school held no interest for him: “I’m more anarchic,” he explains. “For me, design is a visual art and as such very difficult to teach, because it touches every artist in a distinct way.”

Instead, Almeida learns by handling diverse materials frequently and with an open mind as to their uses, while poring over artisanal techniques and theory. “I really study the subject,” he says. “I have discipline.” He also has an assistant woodworker, but Almeida always finishes his pieces himself, believing that handwork gives the objects greater authenticity. This means that he favors flexible materials that are easy to cut, paste and nail. He has made a chair from paper and a storage unit with cubbyholes that open when the pockets of its multicolored backpacks are unzipped; the Cintura shelf is corseted with men’s leather belts. This penchant for readily malleable materials that he takes completely out of context—shoe uppers become a sofa, construction rope or even beef tripe become a seat, business attire serves as a shelf—helps him to forge, assemble and compose much more easily. Almeida’s mash-up of materials, textures and color, however, belies the great clarity of line and form in his pieces.

The riot of color, the asymmetry, the natural materials resourcefully remixed with ordinary but decontextualized objects are all deeply Brazilian, but they also recall the Memphis-era Italian design of the 1980s. “I’m influenced by Italian design because Brazil and Italy are very emotive cultures; both of them work between the popular and the sophisticated,” Almeida explains. “But in Brazil, pop is based on popular culture—not brands making style, but people.” Making ethnic references to primitive African and indigenous objects, he will sometimes sample and remix his own heritage in objects like the Mehinaku table, which was inspired by the baskets, garments and jewelry made from a mixture of wool and palm tree straw by a tribe of the same name. “His work distinguishes itself thanks to his capacity to absorb all the different cultures from his country and his city—African, Brazilian, Indian,” observes Lanson. “He makes them his and brings out pieces full of sense, vitality and emotion.”

Almeida studies the craftsmen he works with closely but admits that he will often later subvert their rules. At times, he is more craftsman than designer, sewing, molding or working with wood, but he is, seamlessly, both. He designs some of his prototypes, like the Backpack shelf, quickly. Others, like the Africa chair, take years to “ripen.” He usually takes prototypes home to live with them, experiencing them in a personal setting and modifying them more often than not. Prototypes represent a work in progress for Almeida instead of a product ready for manufacture. It is very important, he insists, to maintain this degree of intimacy with an object. So what will happen later this year, when the designer begins to produce pieces in greater numbers? So far, his audience has consisted primarily of collectors—he’s exhibited, in addition to Fat Galerie, at Contrasts Gallery in Shanghai and Habitart in Porto Alegre, Brazil. It seems unlikely, though one doesn’t know quite why, that the “art,” the artistry and the artisanal quality of his work will suffer: “For me, art is not a technique. In the same way that a chair can be functional, a painting can be, as well.” Almeida smiles softly. “I don’t see a difference between art and design.” ✦

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Right:
Sequin side table,
2009, wood, paper,
leather 17¾ x 17¾ in.

Bottom:
Africa chair, 2009,
wood, rope, 31½ x
19¾ x 23½ in.



Almeida’s mash-up of materials, textures and color belies the great clarity of line and form in his pieces.

