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Southern Exposure



From High Point, North Carolina, Jerry Helling is quietly pioneering not-your-grandma's kind of American furniture BY TIMOTHY JACK WARD

Mainstream Americans are oddly conservative when it comes to interior design. While we boldly surf each new wave of innovative technology and fly the flag of new creativity, we wuss out when we furnish our homes — retrenching to nostalgia as if pining for a rootedness most of us likely never had in the first place. The domain of pineapple wreaths and bunny-shaped plant holders.

Yet in Europe, presumably the source of the collective memory of ancestry we seek to recreate in our homes, people hoot for the latest plastic armchair the way we snop up our newest Nikes.

The annual furniture fairs in Milan, Cologne, and Paris are the pop culture equivalent to the Super Bowl.

And so we barroom that American furniture design and production, centered in High Point, NC, is so very clummy and slow. The cutting edge constitutes just a sliver of what is actually designed, produced, and sold in the U.S. Innovative designers and retailers work the trenches in an uphill battle to introduce new design to the marketplace, but not until serious talent and resources are committed in High Point will real change occur in the mass market. As always in

America, it takes pioneers to lead the revolution.

Enter one such pioneer. Jerry Helling was born in Colorado, studied cinema at USC and has lived in High Point since 1987. A lanky guy who favors jeans and a suede jacket and shies from attention, Helling has rebranded the Design or "contract" division of Bernhardt Furniture, a fourth generation family-owned producer of wood traditional and "transitional" furniture. (A unique High Point vocabulary has evolved: "transitional" means "modern, or innovative, but we don't want to scare you off by saying so," "contract" means "stuff for offices or hotels, but if you're brave enough you can put it in your house.")

"The trick is to elevate design without alienating," says Helling, who has elevated design at Bernhardt by means of a virtual wagon train of fellow pioneers, many of whom Helling has quietly groomed long before >>



Frederick Starr, leader Jerry Helling, sits nearby in his role as long-time active designer to the Bernhardt stable. Opposite: Teen Brava's Maxwell Top Chair and Jeffrey Bernstein's Balance table and chairs.





Smaller living: Helling collaborates with some of the most creative minds working in design today. Clockwise from above: Fabien Baron's B.5 occasional table, Mark Baro's Laurel bench, Baro's B.2 chair, Patrick Nagard's Dory sofa, Winzetti's bench, and Dory chair.

> name-recognition. The Bernhardt team roster includes Ross Lovegrove (London), Fabien Baron (New York), Christian Biecher (Paris), Jeffrey Bennett (New York), Ely Oaklandoff (Geneva), Michael Vanderby (San Francisco), Christopher Cocone (Los Angeles), Patrick Norguet (Paris), Philippe Cramer (Geneva), Jhane Barnes (New York), Tyler Brice (Zurich), and Bang Design (Sydney). Helling developed the Ross

Lovegrove chair that is likely the first American home furnishing made of magnesium. Lovegrove's aluminum prototype weighed in at 35 pounds; to lighten it up, Helling consulted NASA engineers and scoured worldwide until he found a Missouri auto parts manufacturer willing to retrofit from manifold covers to armchairs. The result was named best-of-the-year by *Time*, and sells like \$495 hotcakes at MoMA.

Mathematician and Coty Award winning menswear designer Jhane Barnes caught Helling's eye with her disciplined, computer-generated fractal geometry-inspired textile designs, which are produced digitally in small mills in Japan. At her home, the two collaborated on an austere, even cerebral

line of spare furniture designs. They also developed a textiles collection — which Barnes has bought back and rebranded, herself — that embodies the spirit of her innovative fashion.

Helling is clearly fond of his collaborators. When he recently introduced the soft-spoken Parisian Christian Biecher's Vers lounge and tables during New York's International Contemporary Furniture Fair, the two retreated for dinner at Mercer Kitchen, and huddled in conversation about family and France while reviewing the new collection — which includes a fabric and leather sofa with chrome legs that retails for \$2500. Helling described it as "substantial — not anorexic — modern," and ordered dessert.

He lapsed graphic design-

STUNNED SILENCE

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er Fabien Baron, recently creative director of French Vogue and designer for Ian Schrager, Calvin Klein, and Issey Miyake. The seven-piece collection for Bernhardt is unmistakably Baron's take on the spirit of lean minimalism. The future? Helling puts his

budgets, not to mention his neck, on the line in support of risk-taking and innovation. The Philippe Starck protégé Patrick Jouin, who will this fall unveil Alain Ducasse's next restaurant venture in Las Vegas, is Helling's most recent rising star designer. And at the 2005 ICFF in New York, Helling will devote the entire Bernhardt booth to show student work from the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. Already underway, a Bernhardt-sponsored interdisciplinary curriculum there tasks students to a "real-time, real-market" furniture design that Bernhardt will put into production and market, Helling says.

"The American market is a sad state of affairs," Helling laments. "I have no idea why we're so damn conservative!" But collection by collection, Helling is indeed pioneering what he describes as "the vanguard that celebrates innovation, in a modern marriage of art and commerce."