

ADAM OTLEWYSKI

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PART I

"People don't really look at anything for very long, but I love staring." He does, and often will. He'll stare at the corner of a table. He'll stare at inner lining of a lampshade. He'll stare at the pattern in a cut of wood. But right now, Adam Otlewski and I are at ABC Worldwide Stone in Brooklyn, and I have no idea what we're looking at.

Adam Otlewski, a custom furniture designer in New York City, has been sent on a mission, and has invited me along. A client has commissioned him to design a table with a top completely made of stone, and he has come here to ABC to see their selection. A door through the statue-filled lobby leads to a warehouse with endless rows of stone slabs from around the world

For Adam, a quest like this is routine. He works as a Senior Designer for a boutique interior design firm in Manhattan, and after three years with the company he is starting to make more time for his own work. He has scaled back his workload at the company, spending the rest of his week in his studio in Greenpoint.

The slabs at ABC are somewhat thin, maybe a crack over an inch, but are massive in scale. They lie about 4 feet high, and run nearly 10 feet long. The stone seems indestructible and immovable. I can't imagine how something like this is cut and shaped. I'm told would take at least six grown men to carry a slab up a flight of stairs, but all that I can think about is how the weight would easily kill me if it tipped over onto me.

Across the warehouse, I can see the tall and thin Adam, clad in all black with thick, dark glasses, his knit cap bobbing in and out of waves of marble and granite. I try to see what he sees. I try to stare.

Each slab is unique, with its own rhythm and color, like a cut of wood. Some are solid colors, like dark slabs of granite. Some are lavish marble, multicolored, almost tie-dye with exuberance. A few hang along the wall from cranes. What catches my eye are these two slabs hanging side by side, conjoined by a symmetrically bookmatched marble pattern flowing toward the middle like a Rorschach test. The stone is called Blue Louise: its rich blue and cream base rising up toward the brown swirls at the slab's upper fringes. I stared at Blue Louise for a long time, imagining a table of my own, before Adam joined me for a moment. "Wow," I uttered, dumbfounded, to which Adam responded, "I know. So tacky," and walked on. Apparently I have a lot to learn.

Later, after much deliberation, a discovery: "That's it! That's exactly it." Adam has found his slab. Otherwise a quiet, reserved man, Adam lights up when talking about his work. He gets excitable, energetic and enthusiastic. The slab of marble that caught his eye is mostly egg white, but with radiant blue and purple waves branching out like varicose veins. It's certainly haunting and totally sold out. Yet Adam is unfazed, I can already tell that he has heard this numerous times before. He asks the saleswoman when the next shipment will arrive from Italy, and asks for her card.

The walk to his studio takes us into the industrial end of Greenpoint, through the fleets of trucks and factory parking lots. As we talk about things big and small, Adam asks most of the questions. He asks me about my experience in design, little to non-existent, and exclusively as an observer, which he loves. He says seeing his world through my eyes will help him take a step back and re-evaluate his own process and work anew.

Raised in Northwest Indiana, Adam studied design at the University of Cincinnati before arriving in New York City after graduation. While he was educated in the schools of both contemporary and traditional design, Adam's penchant for design doesn't end there. As we walk from the stone yard to Adam's studio, passing through the cement and trucking company lots, Adam notes how they place functionality ahead of visual aesthetic. "Everything here was designed that way because it had to serve a purpose and work," he says. "That building is that tall because it has to be able to fit in their trucks, and their trucks are all that color so they can tell which ones are theirs in the lot. Everything in this design came out of functionality first. I love the industrial vernacular."

Under the Kosciuszko Bridge to Queens, we arrive at an isolated industrial office building where Adam stops and pulls out his keys. We've arrived at his studio: a large, windowless, metal door stuck in a brick wall between a loading zone and abandoned crates covered in early December snow. He pulls the door open and leads me through to the top flight, where we enter his space.

His studio is just as frigid as outside, and he runs over to the large, overhead, industrial heater and blasts it. The front half of the studio belongs to a video artist, and the small room in the back, far from the heater, shared with a toy designer, is the room where Adam works. He takes his jacket off, but leaves on his gloves and hat.





Adam's studio is dominated by an unfinished chair sitting atop his workstation. Nearly a dozen works around the studio are in various stages of development. Scraps of materials and tools line his busy workstation, all of which lead to the chair. Next to the lone window looking out to Manhattan is a large hanging circle of deer fur with the middle cut out. Behind his desk is a towering metal bookshelf filled with salvaged materials: wood, metal, cloth, Atari cartridges, Japanese manga pages, and whatever else he thinks can be useful, "I have no idea how I'm going to use some of these yet, but I keep them around because they keep me inspired."

His work usually starts in coffee shops as sketches. Next comes refining and refining, then refining the design some more. When the design is exactly what he needs it to be, he sends it to a fabricator who assembles the piece. Once assembled, Adam finishes the surfaces, and in the case of this chair, applies a French polish to the veneer and surrounding wood. Then off to an upholsterer to apply the cushions, cloth and leather.

Adam is particularly excited about his chair, the piece closest to completion in the studio. The chair stands as the first work in Adam's new approach to design. Only recently has it returned from the woodworker after a year of designs. "I kept drawing it over and over again, figuring out what I want it to be like," he tells me. The thrill he gets from seeing this piece realized after a year of designing is a gratification that complements the delight of creating pieces that only take a few days to assemble, like his light fixtures. The balance keeps Adam's mind limber, allows him to come up with designs both intricate and simple.

When I view his older work, I can't help but sense an anonymity behind the design. The designs have a visual aesthetic, and succeed in many ways, but lack a distinctive voice. Speaking on his old approach, Adam lays it out: "It's of a type of school of thought on furniture design that is really well done, and people do it. It's what's expected by clients a lot of times. It's something that's very aware of history, and it's done in the vein of furniture, and you just make small tweaks to things to give it its own little newness, but it looks like traditional [design]."

But now, as he takes time away from his day job and allots more for his own design, he feels he is on the brink of his next step as a designer. His work now is a culmination of his entire education and previous work, and he makes an intentional push, as he puts it, into the next design phase. His new approach incorporates his love for industrial, his admiration of traditional, and his unquenchable desire to create something truly new.

Adam has a deep love for furniture, and

because of that, and his commitment to his form, has developed a deep admiration and kinship with not only his contemporaries working in the field, but with the countless men and women who came before him. He feels the desire to honor those who came before him, not by simply mimicking their work, but by applying the inspiration their work creates into our modern world. As he says, "That's what I love about furniture, it's art that you use. It's almost more important to us because it has to help you. You have to feel good on it, in it. And I just want to make furniture that has that richness, but is relevant to today. Not just copying old stuff."

By the time he is telling me this, Adam is blowing a heat gun, the same he uses to dry glue, onto his gloved hands for warmth. We've been at his studio just over an hour. The winter weather forces him to be much more direct in his work at the studio, leaving him little time to work before he starts getting numb.

PART II

I see Adam two days later in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Since moving to New York, Adam has been coming to the Met almost weekly. Sometimes he stays for hours; sometimes 20 minutes. "I think constantly exposing yourself to the same work over time develops your eye," he says.

First he takes me to the European Period rooms. As we walk through decorated salons of 16th and 17th century Venice and Paris, rooms Adam has walked through countless times before, he is still shocked and inspired, but ever calm and collected. The rooms are lavishly decorated tableaux of chairs, dressers, lamps, and desks. It's easy to get a sense of cohesive design throughout the entire room.

Outside of a Parisian study we come across a dark marble cabinet of brass, pewter, and bronze. It is lavish, extraordinary, and looks to be impossibly heavy. Adam says nothing and squats right in front of the cabinet. I join him at his eye level, looking for whatever it is he is seeing, occasionally looking to him for some reaction I never get. All I get is Adam looking around at every piece of the cabinet, attempting to take it all in. After minutes, "What I'm really interested in is when we in the contemporary world look at this and automatically associate traditional splendor, and whatever that means. But what was like when they made this stuff? Somebody creatively came up with that. What would it be like if someone today made this piece of furniture?" A long pause. "That's sort of a lot, but this is what I think about all the time."

We meander across the wing to a 17th century Austrian bedroom. The bedroom is loud and heavy. The colors vary between the dark and the very dark. The bed is enormous, covered with thick, red comforters. The walls are drawn with ruby red flowers and dark mahogany columns leading up to the cherub-decorated ceiling, and again, we stand in silence, looking around the room. This time, I start to see what he sees a little more. Finally, again, after minutes: "They didn't have modern stuff, and all the wonderful things to appreciate about modern stuff. So now that we have both, what's next? What do we do? We can appreciate both, right?" After much thought, "But I'm also kind of sad that people don't do stuff like this today, in whatever way that means. Something that is this interesting or has this much personality, has this much character, that it's like it's fucking alive. I think people like the modern aesthetic because it's easy. It's clean, it's light and bright. Even though it's also very

sterile and there's no personality. Why don't people appreciate personality?" He stares at the cherubs, plump and floating overhead. "It's just one of my questions."

A group of young women walk behind us, looks at the room, snaps some photos, and moves on.

The door to Adam's apartment has a big sign on the front reading, "NOT AN EXIT". Even though this was most likely planted there by a landlord, and he probably couldn't remove it if he wanted to, I couldn't help but think that he really appreciates it being there. It's blunt and unexpected, but it's there for a reason. It provides a function, it states a fact, it needs to be there.

The entrance leads into his miniscule kitchen. Above the stove is one small piece of mirrored glass he intends to line the whole kitchen with. Past the kitchen the room is lined with a tall, wrapping bookshelf stuffed with thick art, design, and architecture books. Here again, furniture that could possibly tip over and kill me. Below the books is a work table with clay molds. His work light is an overhead-hanging lamp that he designed covered in the deer fur I saw at his studio. Even whiskey bottles and records have their designated spot on the giant shelf. As Adam shows me around, he half-heartedly attempts to take back some of the more critical things he said about modernist design, his hands in his pockets, maybe after a night of rumination on what he said the night before.

Adam uses his apartment as a place to be creative and as a resting nest. The balance of the two allows for both to exist together. He has not nominally made his apartment his office or studio, but has allowed both to enter his dynamic home. There is no cut off to any aspect of his life. He has allowed himself to create at all times. The next room has a large marble table sitting almost knee-high off the ground, right in the middle of the room. It is a dark marble stationed off-center on a red base, and upon it sit sketches, a laptop full of designs, and one of his lamps. All of the lamps in the apartment were designed by Adam, and some still in progress are brought here to examine how they look in a real home. An ivory couch he has designed sits facing his bedroom, which is tapered off with a brass rod and thick linen drape, separating the bedroom from the rest of the apartment. In a large poster over his bed, the SS Normandie sinks into the New York Harbor.

I sit in his chairs, and I sit on his couch. Not only are these beautifully designed, but also incredibly





comfortable. They make you feel good. They slow you down. They concentrate you. To experience his furniture and lamps is to experience Adam.

His designs honor traditional styles and combine them with new methods in a way only he could have done. They are entirely original, and rich in style. Each piece is something new, and unique, but clearly from the same singular, distinctive voice.

A glass desk lamp with a rough bronze finish display pink erasers that bring out a playful side of childhood, and place it in an industrial setting. A large ivory couch has the minimalist design of modern work, but the lusciousness of traditional furniture that envelops me in comfort as I sit in it. The work light of hanging deer fur brings a taste of the country into the urban metropolis. When I sit in his furniture, I feel everything we've talked about the past few days together; everything I have heard him say. I feel it all coming together, and I can only imagine where he is going.

Adam doesn't ask me questions about the furniture or the lights, but instead watches my reaction to them. He doesn't need to say anything. We just sit silently, and stare together.