



FIELD OF DREAMS

"I want to create a chair that my mind wants to sit in, not that my body wants to sit in," is a mantra for Mike Brady (left) and Matt Olson of RO/LU.

AT THE CENTER of the sky-lit, white-walled workspace belonging to design and art studio RO/LU is a welded-wire mesh form of a man on all fours. It takes a moment to realize this is a table. Next to it is a chair also fashioned from the geometric open weave, which bestows a kinetic effect on the pieces. As you move around the furnishings, they seem to shape-shift, suggesting an instability that's reflected in their tongue-tangling name: *Surfaces on Which Your Setting and Sitting Will be Uncertain*. Both the grid motif and the title are nods to two of RO/LU's Italian design heroes: the former to '60s radical architecture firm Superstudio and the latter to the late Ettore Sottsass, the founder of design group Memphis, who was known for toggling between architecture, artistic works and products. Like Sottsass, RO/LU's founders Matt Olson and

INTERIOR ALCHEMY
**VARSITY
 AESTHETICS**

The Minnesota-based studio RO/LU is challenging the categories of art, furniture and contemporary design.

BY JEN RENZI
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Mike Brady have an unusually vast creative purview that makes a sport of eradicating traditional boundaries. The new wire pieces, as with much of their work, transcend functionality. "We hope they will make people think about trust, and what it means to let go of gravity at that last second when you sit down," says Olson. "It activates a heightened awareness—you're open, you're not sure what's happening. For us, that's our furniture's ultimate function."

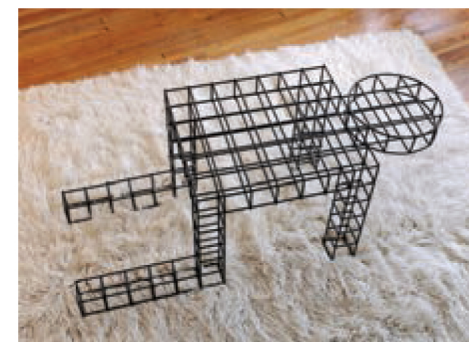
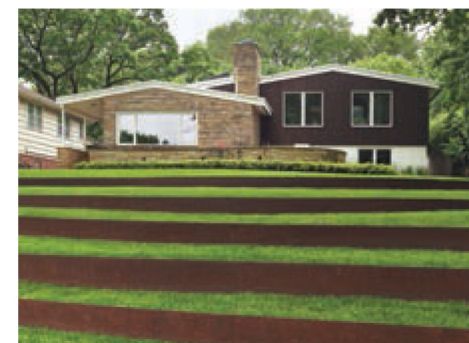
Nerve-racking chairs were not the main event when Olson, 46, and Brady, 41, set up shop in 2003 in their hometown of Minneapolis/St. Paul. Their specialty was minimalist residential landscaping projects; think sculptural concrete planters and grass terraces traced by low steel walls that undulate like a Richard Serra-esque topographic map. Gradually, RO/LU's vision expanded to include everything from

performance-based artwork to limited-edition furniture. A unifying trademark of their work is the fusion of aggressively mundane materials with highfalutin cultural references—an attempt to reconcile their love of often-impenetrable art theory with an equally strong desire to connect with a broad audience. Despite RO/LU's genre-bending work, they have been successful at resonating with everyone from suburban Minneapolis homeowners to the clientele of the annual fair DesignMiami, where last year they showed sculptural seating based on works by conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner. This month sees a trio of RO/LU exhibitions: A collaborative performance piece debuts at Lower East Side art destination Jack Hanley Gallery at the same time that two furniture shows open at Chicago's Volume Gallery and Patrick Parrish's brand-new New York gallery (formerly modernist mecca Mondo Cane), which will feature the wire pieces.

"What makes RO/LU so interesting is that they straddle the tide line between art and design," says Parrish. "That line is constantly moving, and they seem to always be just ahead of it, helping to create the zeitgeist." Parrish not only chose RO/LU as the inaugural show for his new Tribeca digs, he also had the studio design a 30-foot-long cantilevering shelving unit and desk made of Masonite for the space. Some will recognize the inspiration of *Raum 19*, a seminal 1968 installation by German artist and Joseph Beuys disciple Imi Knoebel. "The way Matt and Mike are able to tame complex art historical theories and bring them to life in a 3-D manner through design is quite remarkable to me," says Parrish.

For RO/LU, design is less a craft than an excuse to ponder deep thoughts, wrangle them to manageable size and then express them in tangible terms. Accordingly, ergonomics and factory manufacturing are not overriding concerns when it comes to furnishings like an origami-style chair in crude plywood or a bookcase with zigzagging shelves. Although RO/LU would no doubt bristle at the label "art furniture," that's probably the most succinct way to describe pieces like a soil-filled Plexiglas chair that pays tribute to Donald Judd and a giant swing set they installed in one of the Netherlands' oldest cathedrals, Grote Kerk Den Haag, in 2012. "[Dutch architect] Gerrit Rietveld once said something like, 'I want to create a chair that my mind wants to sit in, not that my body wants to sit in.' That's become a mantra for us," says Olson.

Such an unorthodox approach might be a holdover from their days on the Midwestern punk rock scene, which is where Olson and Brady first met. They were friends for years before partnering professionally: Both worked briefly in advertising and lived in the same northeast Minneapolis duplex, and both are married to women named Amy. One day, Brady, who holds a degree from St. Paul's College of Visual Arts, took on what he swore would be his last sideline landscaping gig while pursuing an art career. Olson, meanwhile, was taking a year off, a decision that gave his father much agita. "I was telling Mike about my dad's concern, and he jokingly asked, 'Do you want to



WIRE ACT From top: An example of RO/LU's landscape design; Olson's dog, Mojo, with prototypes in the RO/LU studio; RO/LU's "Praying Table," which will be on show at Patrick Parrish.

work with me on this project?" To his surprise, I said yes." The pair founded RO/LU (the moniker is adapted from their mothers' maiden names, Rosenlof and Lucas) as an umbrella for their work in varied media.

At first, the two did everything together, but they divvied up duties as RO/LU grew increasingly successful. While both still conceptualize projects, Brady now handles fabrication in the studio's northeast Minneapolis wood shop and warehouse, while Olson is RO/LU's de facto spokesman and pundit, overseeing the studio's blog. "Mike has always been more a maker-doer and I more of a researcher.... I don't get my hands dirty; that's Mike's job," jokes the voluble Olson, a big bear hug of a man to Brady's quiet craftsman. Although the company itself remains small—ranging from three to six, depending on the workload—an extended family of collaborators is often enlisted as

sounding boards and co-creators, including designer Sammie Warren, artist David Horvitz and photographer Alec Soth, whose work they referenced for a diorama that was recently acquired by Minneapolis's Walker Art Center.

While the studio's output has diversified, landscape remains an important part of the practice. Their founding principle was to channel "the first wave of modern design that was about accessibility and improving life," says Olson. "We love the challenge of a small budget." (Their landscape projects now range from \$10,000—half the price of one of their seven-tiered bookcases—to six figures.) Working with plants is also largely about giving in to natural forces beyond the artists' control. Says Olson, "The final product is constantly changing and in flux," whether native flowers that bloom and die or Cor-Ten steel retaining walls that rust into a lush patina.

Terrestrial elements often wend their way into RO/LU's more conceptual efforts. In fall 2011, Brady and Olson executed *Here There, There Here*, a piece loosely inspired by Walter De Maria's 1977 installation *The Lightning Field* that involved laying a two-mile-long strip of white felt in Joshua Tree, California, as part of artist Andrea Zittel's art collective High Desert Test Sites. "I noticed that while we were installing the piece, locals were comfortable asking us about it," explains Brady.

"But when we were finished, and we weren't sweaty and carrying hammers, people seemed nervous." Their takeaway was that their work is fundamentally ephemeral. "Art is alive for a minute while it's being made," says Olson. "We care about the end result, of course, but we are perhaps more interested in things that happen around it and lead up to it."

That epiphany fueled a subsequent residency at the Walker in summer 2012. Among the works the pair conceived was a series of outdoor galleries in the institution's grassy back lot on which to display 25 reproductions from its permanent collection; museumgoers could grab a hammer and help re-create Yoko Ono's *War is Over! (If You Want It)* and Richard Serra's *Prop*. "It was one part performance, one part 'making exercise,'" Olson says. "Really a chance to talk to people about really huge ideas"—such as the notion of museums as mausoleums, the impact of the Internet on our understanding of history and the question of how an artwork evolves over time. The last concept informs RO/LU's new piece for Jack Hanley Gallery, a group show with composer Alexis Georgopoulos and filmmaker Paul Clipson. Olson and Brady designed 40 modular pieces in raw pine that will be arranged every morning by a group of friends and artists, including photographer Thomas Dozol and musician Michael Stipe. Visitors are then invited to rearrange the objects so the exhibit is ever evolving.

It's just one of their category-defying efforts, part of a puzzle that the pair is no rush to solve. "I think the question is, are RO/LU's pieces design or are they art?" says Parrish. "It's interesting to see the dichotomy that arises with these pieces that are neither one or the other. They really are their own thing." ●