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From the outside, it looks like Art Plural Gallery in Armenian Street has transformed its ground floor into a furniture showroom. But step inside and it is an altogether different story, as these static objects seemingly come to life.

The chairs' impossibly high backrests seem to flutter, the ends of a bench twist and turn like tangled noodles, tendrils emerge from wooden frames, a chair appears to have collapsed while another's seat explodes in a fibrous mess on the ground. In this mischievous, playful world of artist-designer Pablo Reinoso, you're forgiven for asking: Is it art? Or is it for my dining room?

In today's age of trendy crossovers between the worlds of art and design, the respected Argentina-born Frenchman's works would seem a perfect fit. Except that 57-year-old Reinoso doesn't think much about the idea of designers doing art.

"There have been many who make this mistake. One hundred per cent of designers who were nowhere near the arts before... and suddenly they see this territory where they can be free from their customer, the consumer, the marketing people — an open space where they're told: 'You can be an artist.' And then they do s\*\*t!" he laughed. "It's not only about: 'I put up a chair, put something inside it and play with it.' It's something more than that. It's about

presenting your own language."

While many of the 15 works in his first solo show in the region have a functional value (including a model prototype of a bench that loops over itself in the shape of the infinity symbol, for which there are already talks about commissioning this artwork), he insists that the initial impact of these objects should be on an artistic level.

But he also wears another hat: Reinoso is very much active in the realm of commercial design — from perfume and makeup products for Givenchy and Loewe to "proper" furniture for Domeau & Peres; from bamboo lighting fixtures for Yamagiwa to cellar boxes, buckets and an entire bar for Veuve Clicquot and Belvedere; from hotel designs in Uruguay to a whole slew of trophies, balls and marketing collaterals for the French football Ligue 1.

As a young boy in Buenos Aires, Reinoso knew that he wanted to be an artist. By the time he was 13, he had set his sights on sculpture, and created works two years later. He took up architecture but dropped it when he moved to France.

"Nowadays, you have

From below: Argentina-born Frenchman Pablo Reinoso; one of Reinoso's many benches — Spaghetti Bale.

Opposite: *Cadre*, on exhibit at Art Plural Gallery in Armenian Street.



industrial design, graphic design — but when I was 20, design schools didn't even exist," he recalled, even as he pointed out that the whole idea of it has been around for ages. "For me, the first designs in the world were the terracotta warriors from Xi'an. All the heads were customised differently but everything else was the same — it was the first mass production of an object." The distinction between art and design was something that struck him early on in his creative career.

"I immediately understood that when you do a sculpture, you do it for yourself. When you design a house, it's for somebody else. If a client asks you for a house for two kids, a couple, two cars and a dog, with a swimming pool — and you make one with no parking space and with two lofts ... maybe your project is fantastic but you're out of the subject. When I do a lipstick, it's a lipstick. When I do a bottle

of something, it's a bottle of something. There are many designers that are 'out of the subject' because they want to make 'art'. They're not respecting the function."

The issue of function, Reinoso pointed out, can be evident in the famous (and ostentatious) Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, which was designed by acclaimed architect Frank Gehry.

Commissioned to liven up the dreary industrial city and bring in tourism, it was a structure that helped boost Bilbao's image. But as an actual museum building, Reinoso gives it a "zero".

"You don't have straight walls, the floor levels don't work. Nobody cared about the function inside and, in fact, when they built the building, the collection wasn't there yet. I prefer museums that might look more classic but function very well as a museum housing art," he said.

As an artist, however, Reinoso frees himself from the constraints of any demand except his own.

The way he approaches his furniture sculpture, he said, is similar to the way the late French artist Yves Klein created works revolving around one specific colour — his very own patented shade called International Yves Klein Blue.

Instead of a specific shade of colour, however, Reinoso played with a specific design. In the early 2000s, he took on Chair No 14, a seminal product design created in the 1850s by the German cabinet maker, Michael Thonet.

He said: "I took out the function and





Banco Orillero (left) and Cadre de Vie (bottom).

Opposite: Spider Bench.

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— PABLO REINOSO



played with the chairs and its metaphors.”

Reinoso explored the possibilities of a Thonet chair’s design, creating “ready-to-wear chairs” that took the form of shoes, hats and skirts, “ready-to-eat” ones covered in dough, and literal “musical chairs” that incorporated guitars and bongos. He collaborated with Spanish choreographer Blanca Li, whose works include Daft Punk’s *Around The World*, for an amusing video piece of Li trying to use a number of Reinoso’s unusual chair creations.

“Then I started to receive calls from people who asked if they could buy my Thonet works for their houses,” he shrugged.

Not wanting to be tied

down, he explored other, more anonymous, possibilities — and eventually latched on to those ubiquitous public-garden benches. Out of this came his Spaghetti Bench series, actual benches that are continued in creeping, tendril-like extensions.

It was while working on this new series of works that Reinoso, who firmly kept the lines of art and design separate, was faced with an amusing piece of irony — people could and did actually sit on his art.

“It works as a bench from one end to another, but at the edges, it becomes free of this function. And I thought: ‘Oh, I made a mistake.’ People began asking if it’s a bench or an art piece. To which I just said I played with the boundaries.”

He compared it to travelling smoothly between two distinct places.

“It’s like having a ‘clean’ passport. I get a visa whenever I go back and forth, I’m very polite and don’t commit any crimes. If I’m here in Singapore, okay, no drugs are allowed, but in South America perhaps it is [*different*]. I respect both [*perspectives*] — but that doesn’t mean I don’t think about it,” Reinoso quipped. ■

This article first appeared in TODAY newspaper.