

ANTTI TUOMI

STILL COMBINING

(15 COLLAPSIBLE FURNITURE)

Still Combining is a furniture exhibition at the *Lokal+* gallery based on *Combines*, the dining set presented by Antti Tuomi at the 2018 Milan Furniture Fair. While some of the pieces are much like those exhibited in Milan, others have travelled quite far from their initial origins. However, all the furniture pieces are collapsible.

The English word “combines” refers to the possibilities of variation inspired by the system, as much as to the connections between natural and synthetic materials. All the furniture shown at this exhibition was designed, developed and manufactured between September 2019 and August 2020, except for the *Combines* stool and *Crossbow* dining table, which are updated versions of earlier models.

ANTTI TUOMI SELF-INTERVIEW (SUMMER 2020)

TELL US ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND. YOU GRADUATED FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF FURNITURE DESIGN AT THE LAHTI INSTITUTE OF DESIGN AND FINE ARTS IN 2011. NOW, ALMOST TEN YEARS LATER, YOU ARE ORGANISING AN EXHIBITION AT THE *LOKAL+* GALLERY. WHAT HAS HAPPENED IN THE MEANTIME?

After graduating, I took a step back from furniture design. I didn't see myself in an office job sitting at a computer doing technical drawings of furniture designed by someone else. At the same time, I lacked the confidence or readiness to set up my own design office. During my studies, I had worked as a tennis coach, and at the time of writing my thesis, I once again became involved in coaching, so much so that soon after graduating, I worked full-time with tennis.

Nevertheless, design was never far from my thoughts. In 2013 and 2014, I developed the armchair I had originally designed for my thesis. Additionally, I collaborated with my spouse Anna Lampinen, who is also a designer, and researched new ways of applying the Japanese shibori technique to upholstery fabrics. These projects and a few spatial design assignments kept me active in the design field.

Eventually, I decided to apply for a spot at the SaloneSatellite stand for young designers at the Milan Fair. My booth in the spring of 2016 was comprised largely of unfinished projects from my student years. Ever since then, I have dedicated myself to developing my furniture line. In the spring of 2017, I was granted funding for product development by both the Asko Foundation and the Furniture Foundation. The support of the foundations enabled me to continue my work.

YOU WERE IN MILAN AGAIN IN 2018, WHEN YOU FIRST INTRODUCED THE *COMBINES* PRODUCT FAMILY, WHICH WOULD LATER BECOME THE BASIS FOR *STILL COMBINING*. WHERE DID YOU GET THE IDEA FOR *COMBINES*?

My interest in assembled structures grew with the 2016 fair. At the time, I sent two almost three-meter-high pallets full of furniture and construction materials to the fair. Two years later, because the structures were collapsible, I was able to fit the same amount of material onto only one pallet.

The idea behind the *Combines* furniture was born just before the 2016 fair. As I was installing seat belts in the metal frame of the AT1 armchair, I began considering alternative ways of utilising different straps as structural elements. I designed the first version of the table with the 2017 FDS Awards competition proposal in mind. It was based on this proposal that the first 1:1 model was later constructed, which used elastic seat belts to reinforce the structure of the table.

HOW DID THE EXHIBITION PROJECT BEGIN AND WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

It was launched in the autumn of 2019 with a grant received from the Finnish Cultural Foundation, Uusimaa Regional fund (Suomen Kulttuurirahaston Uudenmaan Rahasto) in the spring of the same year. Simply put, the project is essentially about exploring different ideas based on the *Combines* furniture.

All the exhibition pieces are collapsible, and with the exception of rim screw mechanisms, assembling the furniture requires no screws whatsoever. Naturally, screws have been used to attach the stretcher, or apron structure to the furniture surface, but they do not need to be touched when the furniture is being assembled.

There are two main categories of assembling mechanisms used in the exhibition series: rim screw mechanisms and wedge-tightened structures. Additionally, the series also features other experimental mechanisms.

COULD YOU DESCRIBE THE DESIGN
PROCESS THAT LED UP TO THE EXHIBITION?

Perhaps I could start by highlighting the importance of Martino Gamper's 2007 "100 chairs in 100 Days in 100 Ways" project as a major source of inspiration for my own work. Gamper designed and modified a hundred new chairs over a hundred days from unwanted chairs he had gathered from friends and the streets of London. What I find inspiring in Gamper's project is the time constraint and uninhibited collage-like use of available materials. Gamper describes his work as "the process of personal action that leads towards making rather than hesitating" (martinogamper.com). This is the mentality I have tried to adopt in my own work as well.

I started the design process in September 2019 by going through my sketchbook for ideas, the most interesting of which became the backbone of the project. These ideas were then made into 1:1 models and further developed at my studio. During this time, many entirely new ideas also emerged, some of which have been developed on a very tight schedule. All this work has been done collaboratively with Anna, whose contribution is central to the project. I should also mention that building the exhibition furniture has been a joint effort of local wood, metal, and upholstery partners. All the pieces have either been constructed by them or in close collaboration with them.

THE EXHIBITION
PIECES ARE QUITE
MINIMALISTIC. HOW
CONSCIOUS OF A
CHOICE HAS THIS
BEEN?

The simplified form language is the sum of many things. The idea has been to leave room for the elements holding the structures together and for the selected materials. Perhaps the aesthetic of the exhibition has also been influenced by my interest in the visual arts. During the project, I looked to the works of, among others, Mark Rothko and Donald Judd for inspiration. Indeed, the name *Combines* is, in fact, borrowed from Robert Rauschenberg, who is renowned for his "three-dimensional paintings", which he called *Combines*.

Almost all the first 1:1 models and structural experiments were carried out with manual machines at my studio in Helsinki. The aim was to design structures whose functionality was easy to test and examine on a tight schedule, without outside help. In the end, these rather limited studio conditions actually had a positive effect on the form language.

AS YOU MENTIONED, COLLAPSIBILITY IS A FACTOR THAT UNITES ALL THE PIECES. COULD YOU ELABORATE ON THIS?

It all started with the furniture I presented in Milan, which featured a ratchet cargo strap as a supporting element. After the fair, I began exploring alternative tightening mechanisms, because achieving structural strength with a ratchet strap was unnecessarily cumbersome for some users. After all, the key evaluation criterion for the mechanism is usability.

So, the main issue was how to achieve the necessary tension with minimal effort. I experimented with different methods by modifying the three-legged *Combines* stool, which I presented a new prototype of at the 2018 Helsinki Design Week. This prototype was a crucial step towards the rim screw mechanism we see today. Not only is the rim screw ergonomically superior, it is also possible to install in the middle of the structure. This allows for the pressure enforced on the structure to be distributed more evenly, ultimately resulting in increased stability and, simply put, better quality furniture.

The fact that the structures have undergone two and a half years of product development only adds to their success story. This period has allowed for proper testing, confirming that the mechanisms and structures both really do work. For example, the *Combines* bench has been in home use for over two years now. During this time, the straps have not needed any tightening whatsoever. All in all, these experiences have served as the perfect basis for designing and building the exhibition pieces.

IS THERE ANY IDEOLOGY OR PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THE CONCEPT OF COLLAPSIBILITY?

Not as such, no. The project has been more about exploring intuitive non-commercial ways of working and creating a new kind of “language of expression”. In this sense, it has also been a way for me to distance myself from the aesthetics of traditional flat-pack furniture.

Looking back, my involvement with sports has certainly had an impact on my work and how I express myself as a designer today. The structures I am most interested in use tension, elasticity, or movement, all of which are key features in both sports and the *Still Combining* furniture alike.

Using dynamic and interchangeable parts simplifies maintenance and makes it easy to alter the appearance of the product in a variety of ways. Ultimately, the experience itself of assembling the furniture is also of great importance, because positive experiences reinforce the emotional bond that is formed between the user and object.