



CHICAGO'S NEW

acquisition

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Zoë Ryan, the first Neville Bryan Curator of Design at the AIC, aims to elevate the status of modern design

MOST OF US expect little more than bills from the mail. But Zoë Ryan arrives at her office to find some of the most important works in the history of design, waiting in packages for her to unwrap. “We’ve had many acquisition meetings since I arrived last year,” says Ryan, the first Neville Bryan Curator of Design at the Art Institute of Chicago. “But it’s only been recently that the actual objects have started coming in. It’s very exciting.

A package will arrive and out pops Tokujin Yoshioka’s Honey-pop Chair and oh, it’s just glorious.”

Ryan, who works closely with Joseph Rosa, the John H. Bryan Curator of the recently overhauled Architecture and Design Department, is poised to make the Chicago institution as much a destination for design as it is currently

for impressionism. “Chicago has an extremely rich history of design and architecture,” says Ryan, who most recently held the senior curatorial position at the Van Alen Institute, a public art and architecture non-profit in New York. “There’s an audience here that’s extremely engaged in design and architecture issues. We want to leverage that energy—and build on the city’s legacy.”

Prior to Rosa’s 2005 appointment, the museum’s architecture department had a primarily regional focus—and lacked modern design altogether. As the department expands its architecture offerings to achieve a more international scope, Ryan will pick up where the museum’s Decorative Arts collection leaves off, acquiring works from the 1950’s to the present such that the department can tell a complete, linear story of the history of design. Right now, she’s focused on recent designs—for practical reasons: The

Below right: Graphic Thought Facility's design of Tord Boontje's monograph. Also shown, the British firm's environmental design for London's Design Museum.

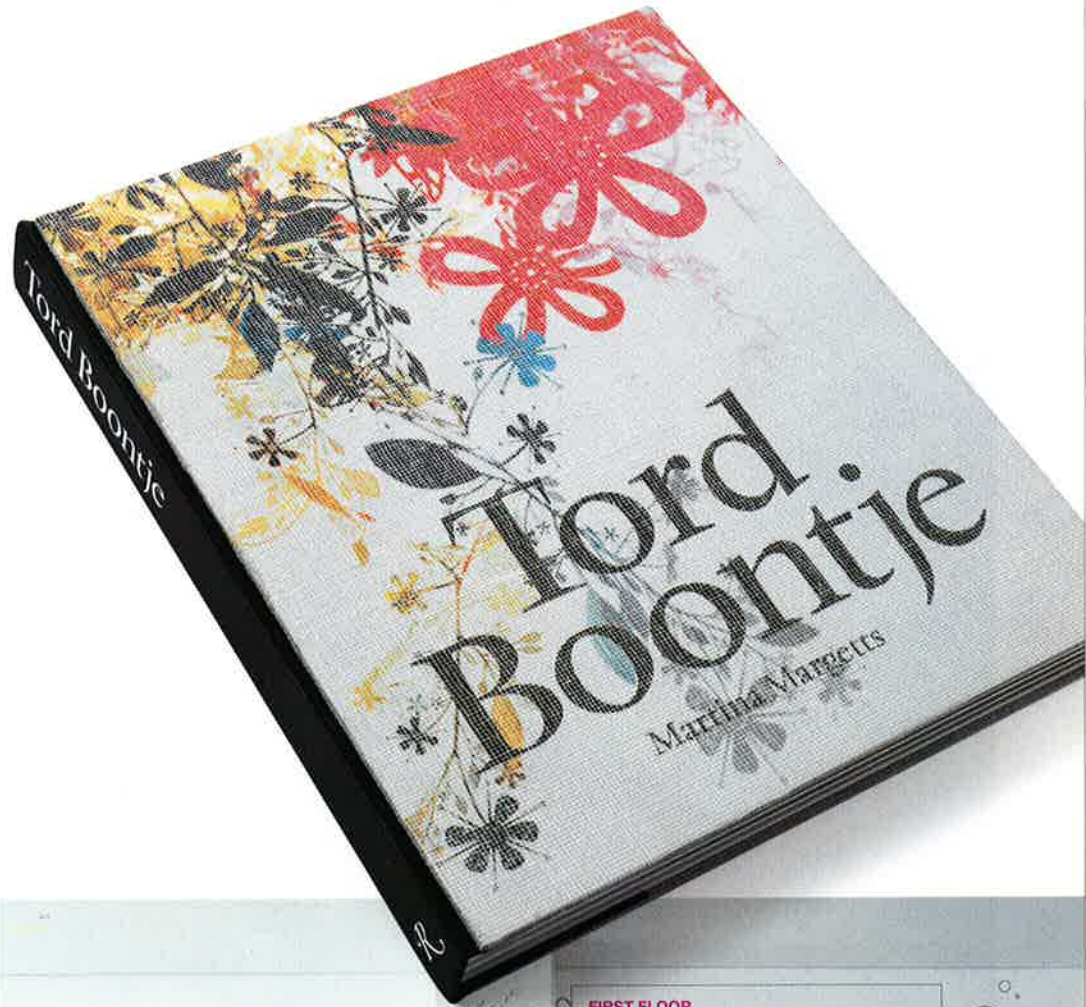


most upscale, limited-edition pieces will soon be unaffordable or unavailable.

But Ryan, who's also held curatorial roles at London's V&A and New York's MOMA, is equally interested in affordable works. "Expensive design is not synonymous with good design," she says. "We've brought works into the collection that cost under \$100. And we include them because we believe them to be very inventive and smart solutions to daily life." She points to the fun, affordable Algues structures by the Bouroullec Brothers for Vitra, which clip together to form wall hangings. Other new acquisitions include Ingo Maurer's homage to Thomas Alva Edison, *Wo bist Du, Edison?...* (Where are you, Edison?); Marcel Wanders' *Influenza* vase, part of his *Snotty Vase* series inspired by sneezes and nasal diseases; Konstantin Grcic's geometric *Chair_One*; and Hella Jongerius' *Felt Stool*.

When i4 Design caught up with her, Ryan was preparing to open the museum's first-ever graphic design show (March 27 to August 17), featuring the work of British firm Graphic Thought Facility, which will also design the exhibition. "Graphic design hasn't been exhibited at the museum before," says Ryan. "We've had numerous conversations about how it will be perceived on the walls and how it should be displayed—whether on the same terms as art in vitrines, for example, or framed. For me, it's important that we reflect the nature of the work and express our thinking about it through the exhibition design." Inspired by the glass-fronted bulletin boards commonly found in English village halls—and typically cluttered with flyers—the display cases, designed by Graphic Thought Facility specifically for this show, will provide the "frame" museum-goers expect from capital-M Museum works. But the informal approach to hanging the work within the cases will challenge those exalted notions.

Ryan has still more curatorial firsts up her sleeve. In summer 2009—to coincide with the launch of the museum's new wing—she and Rosa will open the first Art Institute exhibition



The Algues structures by the Bouroullec Brothers for Vitra, recently acquired for the Art Institute's new collection of modern design.

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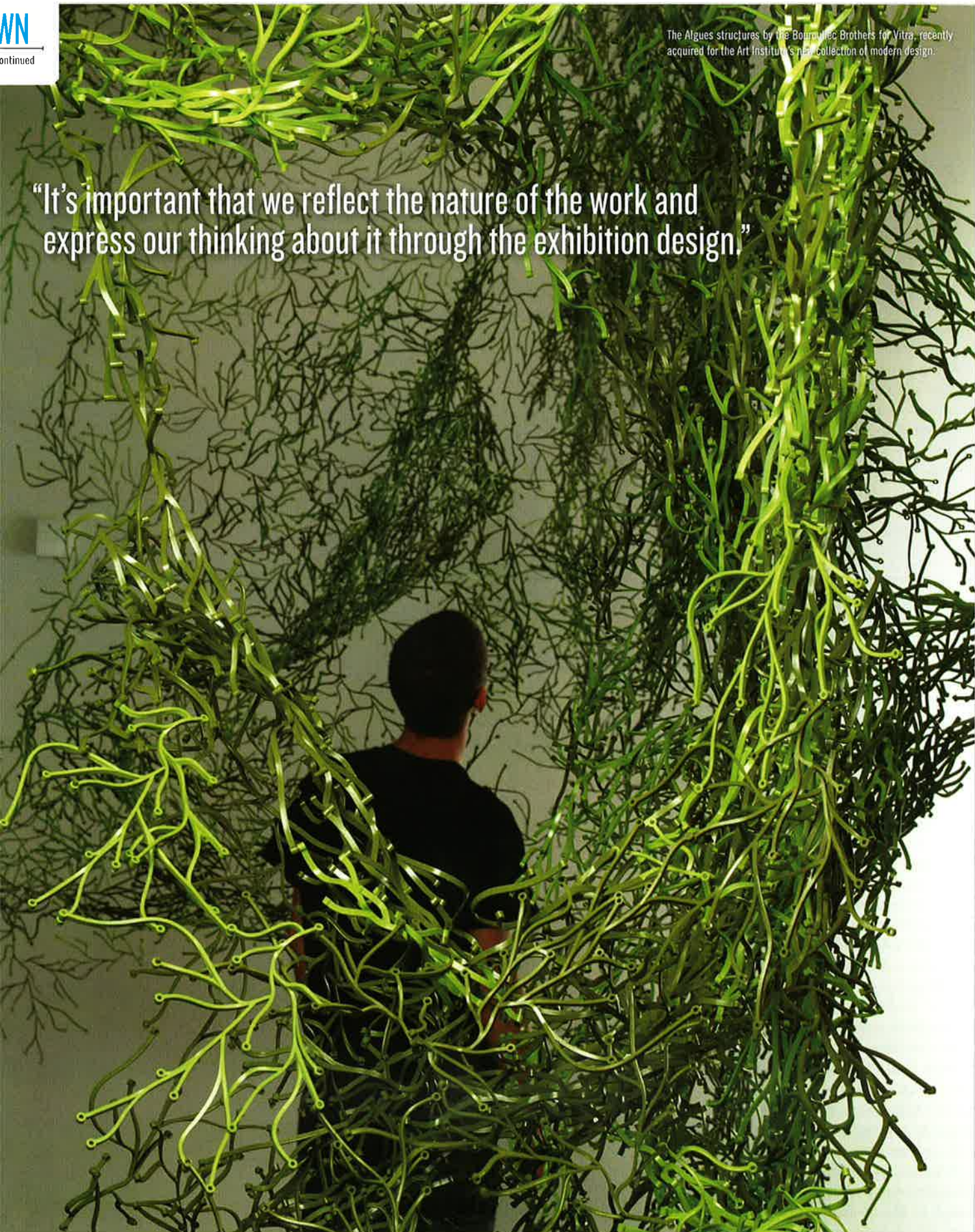


PHOTO CREDIT: ©PAUL TAHON

Right: Konstantin Grcic's geometric Chair One and Tokujin Yoshioka's Honey-pop Chair, both recent acquisitions for the Art Institute's collection.



to bring together architecture and design in a large-scale venue, unveiling new acquisitions and additional pieces on loan. The exhibition will examine disciplinary crosscurrents—not to mention tensions—that have emerged as practitioners increasingly reinterpret and appropriate the technologies and idioms from one design discipline to another.

“One of the questions I’ve become interested in through the curatorial process has been: What is driving interdisciplinary approaches to architecture and design?” says Ryan. “Is there a blurring of the boundaries or is there a friction between them—one that’s creating an exchange of ideas and practices? I’d like to open up the dialogue and show to what extent these cross-



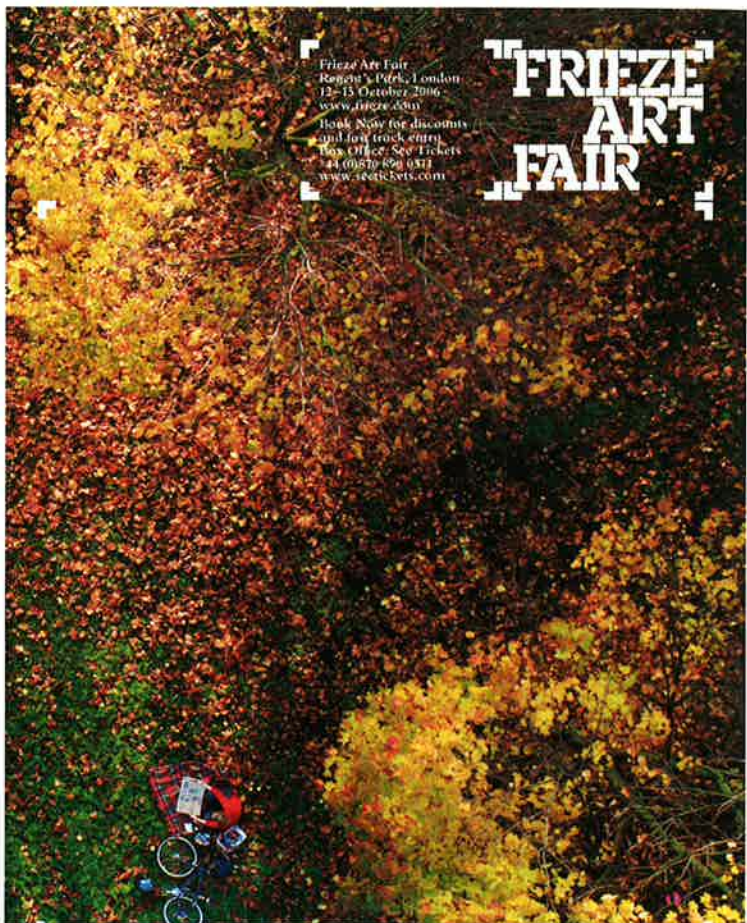
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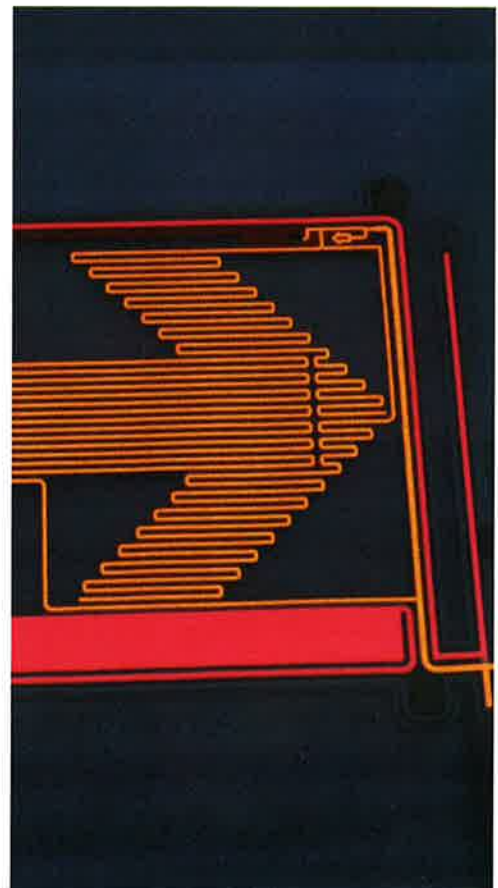
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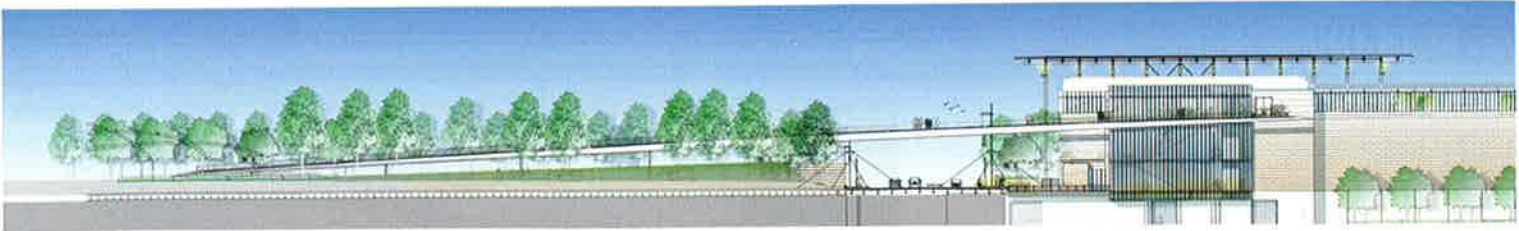
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Above: Graphic Thought Facility's identity design for the Frieze Art Fair. Below, the firm's "electro-luminescent graphics" for a 2000 exhibition at London's Science Museum.

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Above: A rendering of the 620-foot Nichols Bridgeway at the Art Institute, which will create a fluid circulation pattern between Millennium Park and the new museum wing which will house the architecture and design acquisitions.

currents are creating new methods, approaches and ideologies.”

Once assembled, this modern design collection will offer a sense of context few other design collections can boast—thanks to its home in the Art Institute, whose encyclopedic collection of art begins at B.C. and extends to the present day. “What this means is that you can walk through the museum and see that the works in the design collection have a history,” says Ryan. “You can see the ways that design and art have evolved—and

the fact that art and design have in fact always influenced one another.”

Ryan’s mission for the department is equally far reaching: She aims to leverage the Art Institute’s wide, captive audience to elevate the status of modern design—not merely within the museum but in the public consciousness at large. “This is an opportunity to make it known that the disciplines of architecture and design are as important in telling the story of our culture as any other discipline the museum explores.” **14**



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