

Mathias Bengtsson

Mathias Bengtsson has always described himself as a furniture designer but his works are closer to bespoke sculptures than utilitarian objects. His practice begins with "the promise of technology" – the desire to push the limits of what is possible to generate new forms and ideas. In the words of one critic, each of Bengtsson's projects is a "quest to redefine the boundaries of design" – to create objects unlike any that have existed before. Bengtsson's approach is entirely exploratory and research-oriented. Extrapolating from his modernist predecessors' habit of adapting breakthroughs in research in the field of transportation, Bengtsson often finds inspiration in Formula One. In this field, innovations are geared strictly to heightening performance, rather than to lowering unit costs or providing embellishment. However, as Bengtsson remarks, "though my work is frequently kicked off by the high-end technologies pioneered by the automotive and aerospace industries, what interests me most isn't just what new technology can achieve; often it's the mistakes that are left in. Most designers believe that mistakes are something to be eliminated, though to me, they're often a chance to utilise technology to create something completely unique."

Bengtsson first became known for his extraordinarily complex chairs, each painstakingly constructed from hundreds of thin, laser-cut 'slices' stacked to resemble geological strata. Since then he has gained acclaim for both his research into new ways of employing materials like plywood and aluminium, and into pioneering use of unorthodox ones like carbon fibre. Though Bengtsson's works are often organic in form, his philosophy is distinct from that of (say) Ross Lovegrove. In contrast to Lovegrove's baroque novelties, Bengtsson continues Scandinavian modernism via new means. Indeed one of his first exhibited works was a homage to Vernor Panton remade as a labour-intensive one-off. From this moment onwards, there has been a deliberate tension in Bengtsson's work between manufacturing processes and craft-like hand-construction; and between the synthetic and the natural. His creative process most frequently begins with drawings and three-dimensional models, rather than the virtual space of the computer screen. For example the 'slice' works, which first brought Bengtsson to attention, were initially drawn on paper, later modelled in clay, then finally laser-cut from panels and constructed by hand. He only proceeds to refine his ideas on computer at a late stage, working with a variety of specialists across the world to fabricate each work. Indeed Bengtsson's practice is certainly best seen as being oriented around 'squeezing power from materials' by researching their properties rather than creating indulgent, computer-dependent forms. As design critic Bradley Quinn has remarked, the forms that Bengtsson creates are "constructed with the same adeptness an architect would employ to create a topological map of the landscape". Such forms appear to defy gravity, or else make solid matter – whether carbon fibre, resin, aluminium or plastic – appear liquid or in flux.