

out of the shadows

It's been years since Larry Weinberg and Andy Lin's treasure trove of modern furniture has had a moment in the spotlight

text: craig kellogg photography: eric laignel





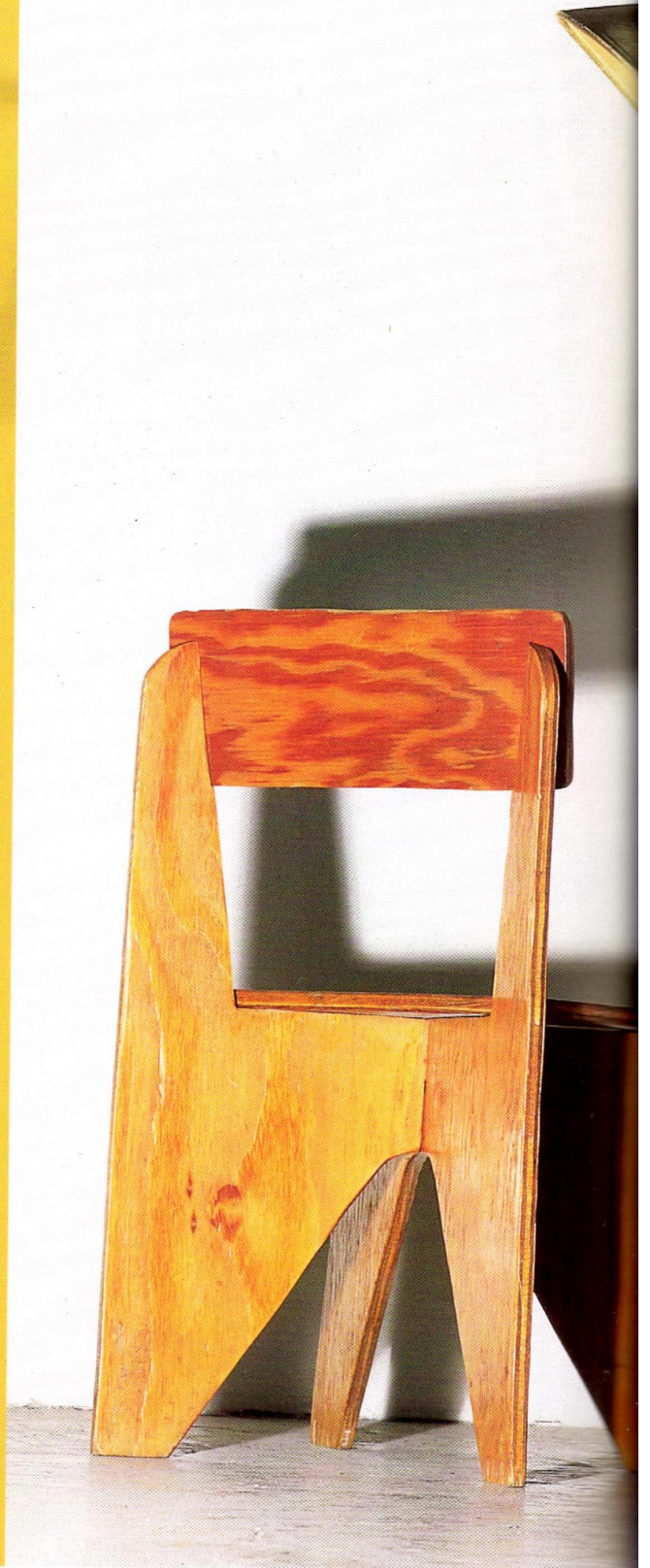
Those Santiago Calatrava curves. That hint of Vladimir Kagan *Star Trek* futurism. To the untrained eye, the Plastispray chair might look utterly ruined, its sprayed-on plastic pad aged into an alligatored mess with more than just a few chunks missing. But Larry Weinberg, a furniture dealer, historian, and curator, and his former business partner, Andy Lin, know that this relic is actually an unrestored prototype of a Guy Rothstein design, circa 1951, for the Equipment and Furniture Company. Displayed on the concrete floor of Weinberg and Lin's warehouse space in Long Island City, New York, the Plastispray is exhibit A among artifacts that bear witness to modernism's underappreciated "organic" movement—and part of a breathtaking collection that the pair have quietly assembled over the last 15 years.

Back in the 1980's, as a newcomer to the business, Weinberg spent many nights sleeping on piles of moving blankets in the back of his van. ("I don't recommend it.") His late 20s were an endless road trip, as he picked through the homes of dead professors, artists, and engineers on Long Island and the auction houses of New Jersey and Maryland in search of gently used George Nelson benches and Isamu Noguchi tables to resell at Fifty/50, the New York gallery owned by an in-law, Mark Isaacson. It was around 1990 that grunge-era hipsters started rediscovering the mid-century furniture that their parents in the suburbs—who grew up with the stuff—were trying to forget. "When my father and stepmother married," Weinberg recalls, "they threw out all her Herman Miller furniture without a second thought."

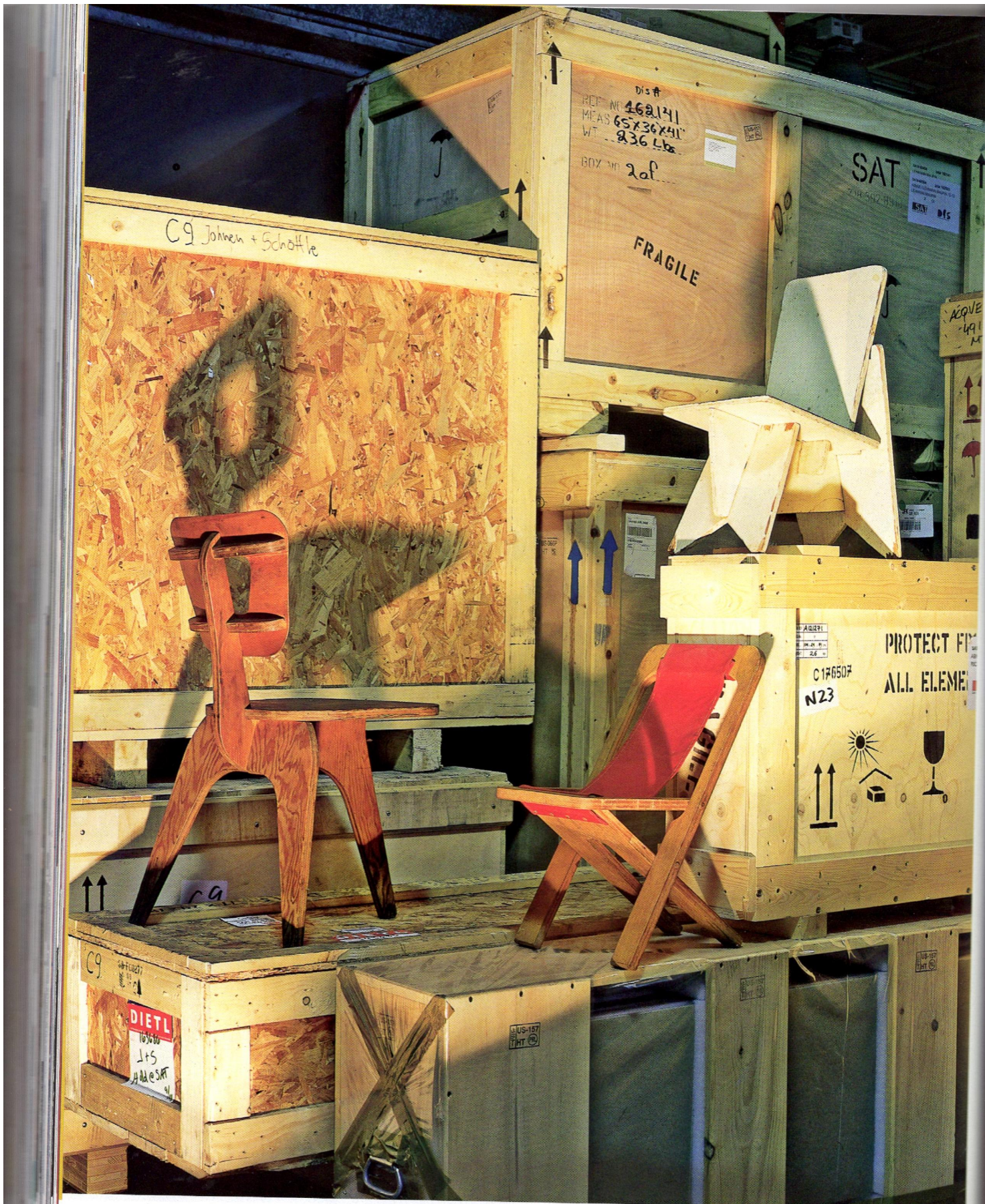
The Internet was still something in a basement in California, so there was no eBay and certainly no 1stdibs.com. Nothing was referred to as "Eames-era," that online coinage for anything fab from the '50s. On a lucky day, Weinberg could still buy something for \$25 at a tag sale. "You never knew what you were going to step in," he says. He was basically still a scavenger, flipping unrestored pieces for a quick buck, when he started at New York's 26th Street flea market in 1991. If he wasn't sleeping in the van, he was loading and unloading it at odd hours. On market mornings, he left home at 2:00 AM. →

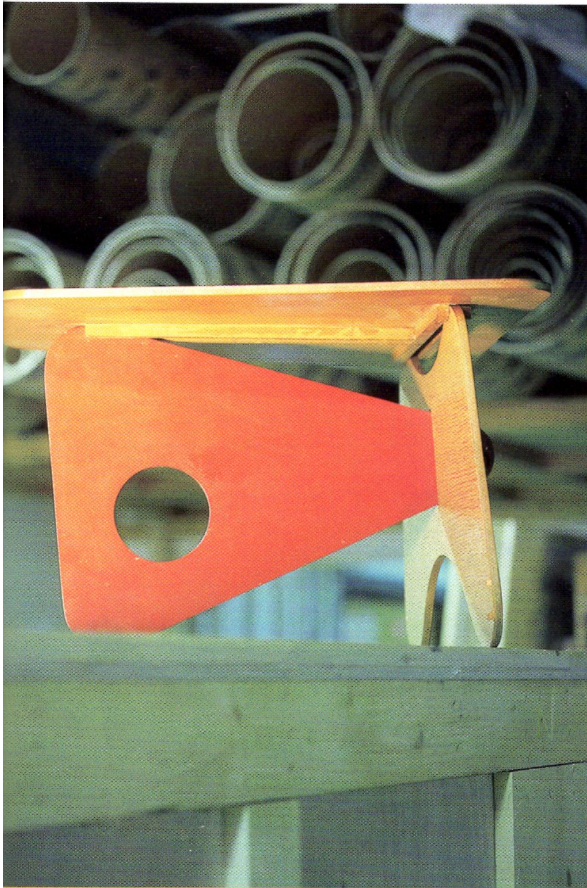
Previous spread: Vintage furniture dealers Larry Weinberg and Andy Lin survey their prize possessions at Sale Art SAT in Long Island City, New York.

This spread: A plywood child's chair, circa 1945, sits alongside Oscar Stonorov and Willo Von Moltke's full-size mahogany chair, featured in the Museum of Modern Art's 1941 "Organic Design in Home Furnishings." Bill Lam Workshop designed the gooseneck lamp in tubular steel and birch in 1950.





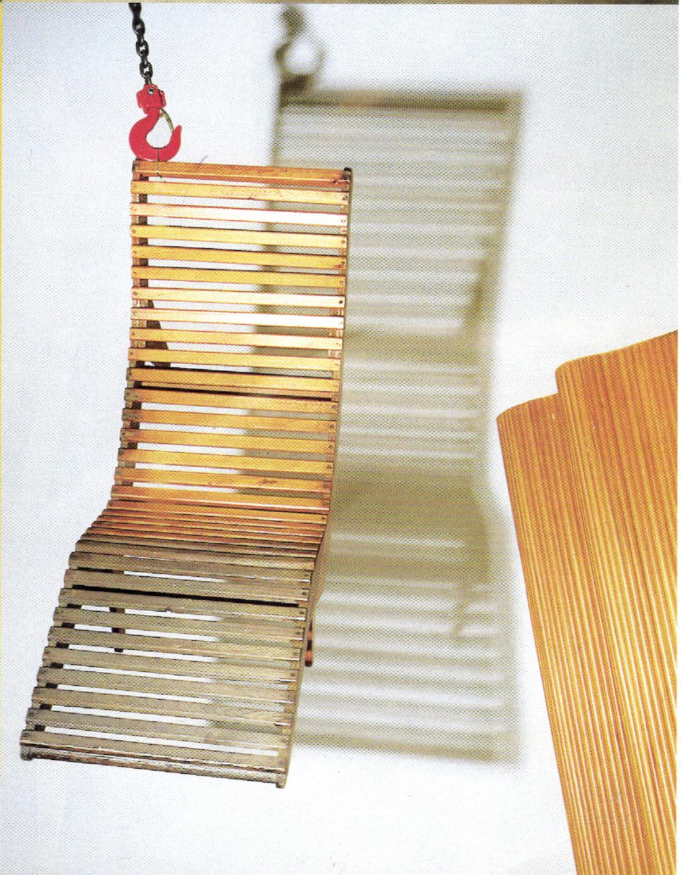




Around that time, he met Lin, whose background was in advertising and Americana, and they opened the Lin/Weinberg Gallery in 1994. The storefront was a little museum, with the partners poring over dusty annuals and magazines, then reattaching designer names and histories to the merchandise. "You couldn't see Larry and Andy behind the books stacked on their desks," says Forms of Design owner Amy Lau, who was then Lin/Weinberg's director. She helped to arrange the main floor with conversational clusters of restored pieces, while the basement remained a flea-market jumble. "Stuff would accumulate at alarming rates," Weinberg acknowledges. People who wanted to settle their mother's →

Opposite: An unsigned plywood chair, circa 1952, in the style of Arthur Collani, and a birch-plywood chair with a canvas sling seat, circa 1948, face each other, while a painted plywood demountable chair from the 1940's sits above.

Top, from left: Dan Cooper's extremely rare demountable Butterfly side table in painted plywood appeared in MoMA's 1943 "Useful Objects in Wartime under \$10." Angelo Testa's printed fabrics date to the early 1950's. **Bottom:** This chaise, with its plywood frame and birch slats, was made according to a design in Klaus Grabe's *Build Your Own Modern Furniture*, published in 1954.







A Clifford Pascoe screen, circa 1948, anchors a grouping of pieces that also includes a Henry Glass demountable sling chair prototype, circa 1942, sitting on a cocktail table in the manner of Grabe; a storage unit designed by Carl Koch, also in about 1948; and a freeform Jens Risom table, probably a store fixture from 1950. Across the concrete floor, a Joseph Carriero folding cocktail table, circa 1951, and an Edgar Bartolucci cocktail table, circa 1952, both stand on their own. Attributed to Ralph Rapson, a cocktail table, circa 1951, supports a single chair by Norman Cherner's design team at Plycraft. The pair of prototype nesting chairs are by Glass, circa 1943; they sit on a table that Stonorov and Von Moltke contributed to MoMA's "Organic Design" show.





estate would call; the pickers would drive by. "I never got to Europe, because there wasn't a week when we couldn't spend all of our money right here," Weinberg notes. He and Lin bought not only designs documented in the reference books but also unrealized prototypes and other oddities. The partners made the decision not to cash in on new production pieces or reeditions.

Interest in rarities by Charles and Ray Eames peaked first. Then Lin/Weinberg began focusing on Kagan as well as George Nakashima, Jens Risom, and Hans Wegner. Dunbar Furniture had originally manufactured Edward Wormley's highly crafted designs for the rich, and the rich started →

Opposite: A Frank Lloyd Wright mahogany chair, circa 1948, perches on Cherner's end tables from about a year earlier. They, in turn, are stacked on a silvered-walnut cabinet that Stonorov and Von Moltke created for "Organic Design."

Top: Irving Szabo designed these string chairs in approximately 1952. **Bottom, from left:** A Gerald Luss desk, circa 1952, combines tubular steel, walnut, and resin laminate; a G.A. Scott lamp, circa 1955, is copper; and a Sol Bloom stool, circa 1954, features wrought-iron legs and an iron-mesh seat. Guy Rothstein's extremely rare Plastispray chair, in steel with a sprayed-plastic cushion, dates to about 1951.



warming to them again. "The galleries were still serving a highly educational function," Weinberg says. Downtown dealers pushed modernism via blue-chip in-store exhibitions. Wormley, for example, was the subject of a landmark show at Lin/Weinberg in 1997.

What Weinberg obviously loves most of all, though, is the "organic" movement's mass-produced designs in inexpensive materials, avatars of mid-century progressive ideals. The pieces represent "a fresh start, a new type of design for a better society," he explains. Instead, ironically, a planned exhibition on the subject represented the end for Lin/Weinberg. First, the lights went out after September 11. Then, when the economy soured and Internet shopping took off, Lin/Weinberg was not online. The gallery moved to a smaller venue before closing in 2005, putting Weinberg's dreams for showing his Plastispray chair, Norman Cherner end tables, and various unsigned pieces on hiatus.

Which brings us back to the warehouse space at Safe Art SAT, an unassuming brick low-rise. Inside, past another customer's 6-foot-high jumble of plywood crates with "Rosenquist" and "Albers" scrawled across them in black marker, is the 800-square-foot plywood storage unit where the Lin/Weinberg mother lode is stacked in four towering tiers. Weinberg points out pieces by Cherner, Paul László, Frank Lloyd Wright. Some of the names are less familiar. A birch-and-fiberboard storage unit by Techbuilt Houses architect Carl Koch was a late 1940's design for his parents' home in Massachusetts. The contribution from Edgar Bartolucci, father of design journalist Marisa, is not his famous rocker, she points out, but a less familiar cocktail table topped in fiberboard stenciled in four different patterns.

Since there's no real "decorator" market for pieces from this collection, Weinberg has no plan to sell them at the stall that he and 2Michaels principals Joan and Jayne Michaels operate at Center44. The best 30 examples, which date from 1941 to the early '50's, could go to a museum some day. If ever offered at auction, the most historically interesting items run the risk of being overlooked in today's name-driven vintage market—which, of course, Weinberg had a hand in creating. Then again, as every vintage-design dealer knows only too well, from yesterday's trash springs tomorrow's treasure. —

*Cherner's birch hanging cabinets appear in this configuration in his book *Make Your Own Modern Furniture*, 1951.*

