Light Offence

THE DESIGNS OF ERWIN HAUER STUDIOS

Erwin Hauer is often described as extraordinary but little known, and maybe that appeals to him. But the impact and awareness of the Austrian sculptor’s perforated and modular structures were hovering way too close to the obscurity section for comfort. With a recent publication describing his works and a new venture, Erwin Hauer Studios, which reissues some of his classic designs using new digital technology and production means, it seems mesmerizing walls are rightly back in favour.

Text by Emma Firmin

In his introduction to CONTINUA: Architectural Screens and Walls (Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), the Austrian-born sculptor Erwin Hauer describes how ‘Potential infinity and how to contend with it has continued to provide an ever-inspiring challenge and has remained the playground for my imagination.’ The beauty of the images in the book resurfaces interest in the work of the sculptor, whose sculptural screens and walls were exploited to such architectural effect during the 1950s and 60s. While his biomorphic forms may have been lost in the modern landscape, it seems that the 80-year-old artist has lost none of his desire to explore the future potential of his creativity. Under the name Erwin Hauer Studios, the sculptor has formed a partnership with Enrique Rosado. Gregory Spiggle and Christine Ingraham to reissue and redefine a selection of his 1950s architectural screens using contemporary digital technology and production methods.

Whether acting as a light-diffusing ceiling, load-bearing wall or space divider, Hauer’s creations have a ‘repetitive continuity’ and solid grace, which makes their modular qualities even more suited for a production and material update. It would also be churlish not to mention that such clean continuous surfaces have once again become fashionable. The studio launched the first four designs in production earlier this year, at New York’s International Contemporary Furniture Fair (ICFF). Design 110 is a screen or room divider that features two parallel grids with staggered and offset openings, which can be used either horizontally or vertically; Design 201 is a variation of Design 1 (1950), a complex design that emphasizes the interaction between the screen and light. In the book, Hauer describes the way ‘The complex screen transforms the light so completely that the wall appears to radiate far more light than would pass through a flat plane with comparable holes punched through’, but it is the way this ‘front-lit sculptural landscape pales in comparison with the back-lit screen’, which continues to make it dramatic and intriguing. Design 306 is a bas-relief modification of Design 6 (1956) without the perforations for the passage of light. The original design had come after a request from an architect for a luminous wall to face a congregation in a place of worship, and Hauer describes its inception as a totally spontaneous idea, something that he is still unable to trace the lineage of. Design 212 is the one new design. Consisting of parallel patterns of off-set circles, when viewed front-on the cut-out circles on the front plane frames the cruciform connectors on the back, and the design is clearly a continuation of the sculptor’s exploration of light, form and pattern.

The studio, whose new collaborators seem to be the personification of the idea of an interdisciplinary team, will also be installing a 25ft-high indoor/outdoor limestone bas-relief version of Design 306 later this year, in a new residential high-rise within Manhattan’s Rockefeller Centre. And on the back of the renewed interest in Hauer, the sculptor was reconnected with Knoll, a company that he had collaborated with in the 1960s. The rekindling of that relationship saw Erwin Hauer Studios digitally remastering two Hauer screens in wood composite for Knoll’s main showroom show at NeoCon 2006. If Hauer has any sense of irony, I think he can afford a wry smile at the way he has been re-embraced, and given that in his words ‘Infinity is not really for mortals, after all’ it seems he has always had a firm grip on reality and the fickle business of adulation. #

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