



Isaac Arms

Sheet steel with wooden slats

Wood and steel came together for Isaac Arms at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where he got his MFA. His first training had been in woodworking, but sculpture classes exposed him to metal and then a workshop at Anderson Ranch with Jim and Melanie Cole gave him the skills and the impetus to design furniture out of steel. His first pieces were all steel, but he soon realized that for the user, “steel is often harsh, cold, and hard. I wanted to bring the warmth and tactile quality of wood” to pieces made predominantly of metal. The result was a group of benches made of sheet steel with slatted wooden seats that combine sculptural power with inviting functionality.

Arms, now living in Bozeman, Montana, designs on the computer using a CAD-like program. All the angles for the steel parts are automatically calculated and he sends a computer file to a metal shop with a CNC laser cutter. In return he gets a stack of perfectly cut parts in 1/8-inch sheet steel, which he welds together. The welding, grinding, and sanding, he says, “is not too enjoyable. It’s a messy process, and really loud. But it goes quick. A day and a half or two days and it’s done.”

To bring an element of the unpredictable to the symmetrical designs, Arms cuts the seat slats in random widths. Despite their bulk, the benches are relatively light, weighing about 120 pounds apiece. That’s a lot of presence per pound.



right, with detail above:
Slump with Slats (2005)
Isaac Arms
Steel, cherry; 64 inches
x 17 inches x 17 inches.
Photo: Bill Lemke