

The designer Kim Sang Hoon in his Gangnam, Seoul, studio, surrounded by colorful prototypes of his painted foam furniture and pieces from his "Meteorite" series.

Three firms in rising design communities — Seoul, Moscow, Athens — that are both refuting and refining the local aesthetic.

THE RENEGADES

By Alice Newell-Hanson
Photographs by Jana Romanova

KIM SANG HOON, 40, began developing monolithic sofas and knobby end tables in foam three years ago in secret. Though he is earning acclaim as a furniture maker — he showed his paint-splattered foam seats at Design Miami last December — he's still working his day job at the manufacturing company that his family has run in Seoul for three generations, making polyurethane foam used in mattresses and pillows. Working after hours in his Gangnam studio, Kim, who trained in fine art and design at Michigan's Cranbrook Academy of Art,

altered the chemical composition of the company's foam to adjust its firmness, then used the material to create building-block-like sectionals with varying levels of rigidity: the seats soft like a cushion, the backs hard and supportive. "They didn't know I was using it to make my own artwork," Kim says of his family. "My father wanted me to run the company."

Kim is breaking with tradition in broader ways, too. Before he began crafting foam furniture, he built biomorphic stools and screens from stacks of polished ash, birch and walnut wood that he

precisely contoured using a CNC machine to evoke rolling waves or gusts of wind. Such undulating shapes complied with the naturalistic aesthetic of classical South Korean design, which, he says, often echoes the organic curves of the country's mountains and streams. In contrast, his foam works — with their pockmarked surfaces and straight lines — seem unearthly, even extraterrestrial. "I don't think about Korean tradition at the moment," he says. "I want to create new Korean traditions."



Kim Sang Hoon
SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA