

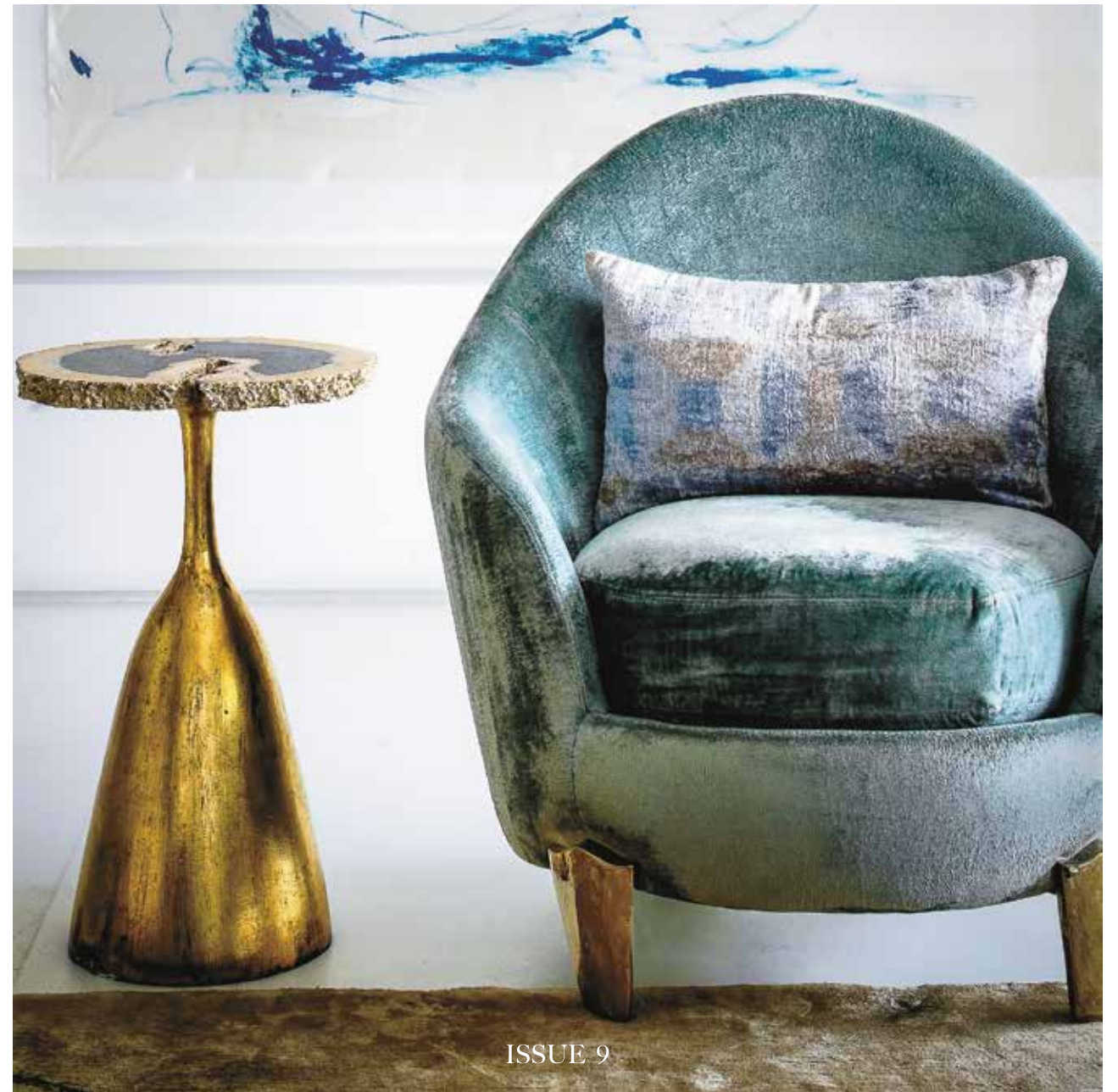
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# Nina Cho

Text / Shonquis Moreno

**D**etroit, once the beacon of US industry, has in recent years more regularly made headlines with news of its urban and social decline: a yearly contender for the country's highest crime rate, surging urban vacancy and unemployment rates, and the site of the biggest municipal bankruptcy in US history. Motor City has transmission trouble.

In 2015, however, there was a wellspring of hope when the former car capital became the first US city ever designated as a UNESCO City of Design. With a longstanding design legacy — it was here that Ray and Charles Eames launched their studio — the city is beginning to find its feet again, thanks in part to emerging talents like Nina Cho. An alumna of nearby Cranbrook Academy of Art, Cho chose to stay in Detroit following graduation to take advantage of the city's wealth of production facilities and its radically inexpensive studio and living spaces, and to get involved in the growing design community.

Cho was born in California while her Korean father was completing his PhD at Stanford University, but the family returned to South Korea a few years later. There, Cho pursued painting until she developed a fascination for three-dimensional structures and the space around them. 'I started to explore the relationship at all scales between bodies and furniture, fashion, objects and architecture,' Cho recalls. At Hongik University in Seoul, her studies united craft and design, woodworking and furniture. Influenced by professor and celebrated designer Byunghoon Choi, she took a personal, intuitive approach to her work. 'I practised creating design as a way to talk about my thoughts, and this led me to think profoundly about my intentions,' she says.

'I became less interested in practical problem solving and decided that I would rather use design to motivate people to interact with products in fresh and inventive ways.'

It was following graduation from Hongik that Cho moved to Michigan to study 3D Design at Cranbrook, known as a progressive school with a broadly interdisciplinary practice where instruction takes place through the critique of self-initiated projects, reading groups and lectures. There are no credits or assignments and students must be highly self-motivated. 'I started to build my career while I was at school,' says Cho. 'I operated my studio space just like a professional independent designer.'

Cho's designs mine the traditional Korean aesthetic of emptiness, according to which the unpainted surface is just as important as the painted, the void just as important as the object itself. 'I will keep practising the beauty of the void and pursuing ideas of lightness and reduction in my work,' Cho says. 'An empty space invites air, spirit and its surroundings into itself, poetically.'

Thin-gauge sheet metal exemplifies this approach with its crisp, clean lines that emphatically frame both the positive and negative space around it. Her folded metal coffee table creases the room around it, while its reflective surfaces engage the object in a relationship with its surroundings.

The bent-metal furniture and objects Cho's studio creates — tables, seating, storage, mirrors — are so minimal that one could be forgiven for mistaking them for sculpture. It's young designers like Cho who are giving a new face to design in Detroit.

Young designers like Nina Cho are giving a new face to design in Detroit. Image by Matthew Tait