

MILAN DESIGN WEEK 2008 by Jacquelyn Davis

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This last spring, Milan Design Week 2008—which is mainly centered on the Salone Internazionale del Mobile—raised the bar in comparison to previous art and design fairs, attracting close to 350,000 visitors. Divided primarily between Zona Tortona, Rho Fiera, and gallerias in the center of town, the exhibits ranged from classic and contemporary furniture and lighting, to politically aware and no-nonsense gear, to the more extravagant and experimental. As is always the case at these large, commercially driven affairs, picking one's way through an endless array of fashionable ephemera, culinary knickknacks, and bathroom eccentricities can be a bit of a chore. So one could easily empathize with the younger crowd that gravitated toward Zona Tortona and Milan's smaller, more casual venues.

Renowned for his *Wink Chair*, *Kick Table*, and the recent *Dodo Recliner*, Osaka-born Toshiyuki Kita's "Natura e Tecnologia" exhibit introduced his latest line of eco-friendly objects made with traditional Japanese woods, like *Cryptomeria japonica* and *Paulownia* shade trees, beautiful woodland species now threatened by ongoing development. Pieces such as the *Tronco Chair* and the *Sakura* coffee table are a tribute to naturally derived materials, persuading us to avert further extinction by highlighting their remarkable functional beauty and durability.

This ecological theme was picked up elsewhere at Salone. Dutch designer Jack Brandsma of SpareSpace fame converted empty, underused spaces into fully functioning workspaces. And in one of the most go-green exhibits on offer, Droog (i.e. "Dry") Design's "A Touch of Green," one was treated to Martín Azúa's *Plaited Fence* of plastic shopping bags, Jens Praet's *One Day Paper Waste* cabinet, Tobias Rockenfeld's recycled toy *Creatures*, Tejo Remy's reused clothing *Rag Chair*, and—among others—SMAQ's *Cozy Chair*, part lounge chair and part radiator.

Not to ignore the glamorous surroundings entirely, Royal Tichelaar Makkum, one of the Netherlands' most famous ceramic companies, presented "Pyramids of Makkum," a collaborative endeavor with well-known designers inspired by those Delftware "flower pyramids" that once graced seventeenth-century aristocratic homes. For this purpose, Alexander van Slobbe incorpo-

rates elements from a woman's dressing table, its "pile of quotations" referencing such items from the history of furniture as Gerrit Rietveld, Dutch Modernism, the Orson+Bodil boutique, as well as the sinister hand of the silk trade. Hella Jongerius uses straps and other commercial supports to keep her tilted creation together, which can be hung from the wall if required. Studio Job's pyramid comprised stacked household objects, while Jurgen Bey's tower of ceramic vessels used for storing and spilling stories are covering with snippets of high culture.

Leaning to the more experimental side of Salone is principal Droog designer Richard Hutten's punk-humorous "no sign of design" furniture. This was much in evidence at both his solo "Layers" show and his "Green House" installation (powered by Gispen) of endlessly adaptable magnetized plastic "leaves," encouraging interactive play. One of his more provocative pieces is *Book Table*, consisting of large hardback books glued together in an off-kilter fashion (perhaps commenting on the book's increasing use as visual furniture) and glazed over with a transparent surface layer, supposedly to protect them from the very thing they are made of. Another masterpiece is Hutten's *Muybridge Chair*, combining 53 MDF slabs lasered to the shape of the designer getting up from a seated position, which inverts rising and settling down, even time and space, in one session.

Lebesque, a Dutch family business supporting artisans for over a century, displayed works of designers from Eindhoven, Amsterdamse Meubelwakschool, and elsewhere, some shown internationally for the first time. Reminding our ever-crowded generation that a man's castle is still his dungeon, these designs tackle

(SPREAD LEFT TO RIGHT) HELLA JONGERIUS, ROYAL TICHELAAR MAKKUM WARE DISPLAYED AT "PYRAMIDS OF MAKKUM," MILAN DESIGN WEEK 2008. REBECCA WIJSBEEK, *FRAMED*, DETAIL. KITA'S *TRONCO CHAIR*, RICHARD HUTTEN, *BOOK TABLE*. SEBASTIAN BRAJKOVIC, *CONSANGUINEOUS FURNITURE*, DETAIL. MILAN DESIGN WEEK 2008.



standard habitable spaces to accommodate a more fluid domesticity. One of the new Lebesque designers is Sebastian Brajkovic, whose *Consanguineous Furniture*, interlinked by fine luminescent horsehair embroidery, investigates the places where one action stops and another begins, in this case how a rug becomes a lamp and then an easy chair before reverting back to a rug. Colleague Rebecca Wijsbeek's *Framed* uses 3-D laser technology to enfold a white fabric mobile, patterned like a Baroque mirror frame, around a simple light bulb, neatly combining the past and the present in one fell swoop.

Exemplifying the theme of *beni* and *tsuya* (rouge-and-blush), the "Shapes of Japanese Style" exhibit at Arte Giaponne featured Toshihito Okura's *MIST* lighting, comprised of a floating moiré of clear polycarbonate sheets against a checker-patterned mirror; Ikkou Itabashi's *North/South Polar Glass* light table and partition made from recycled glass, emphasizing the universal abundance of silicon, the second most common element after oxygen and the principal ingredient of glass; and Ayako Yahagi's *Fusuma* modeled on four Japanese sliding doors, here rearranged into 24 different patterns to fit one's changing moods.

Sound archives also made an appearance at Salone, such as Dornbracht Culture Projects' "Noises for Ritual Architecture," offering new

sonic landscapes for what the "occupied" bathroom really means. The conclusion is reached that people do not so much use lavatories as actively inhabit or introject them, highlighting a general ignorance in our lives about the role such places habitually play. The three sound collages were *MEM* ("a tribute to the Muses of song, memory, and meditation"), *TARA LOGIC* ("focusing on the parameters of activity/exertion, strength and movement"), and *ELEMENTAL SPA* ("an analogy for passing through the various stages of cleansing").

One of Salone's more important functions is to provide a platform for emerging talents. Close to a dozen international art and design schools came together this time, including Burg Giebichenstein University of Art and Design Halle (Germany), Domus Academy (Italy), Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design (Sweden), Strate Collège Designers (France), Unitec New Zealand School of Design, and University College Falmouth (U.K.). The assigned forum in Milan, "That's Design!," thus brought a lot of youthful ingenuity to the table, and no more so than with student works from RISD's Department of Furniture Design, such as Phillip Mann's *Clepsydra* dispenser (a parody of an ancient Roman water clock, emphasizing the theft of time), Sonia Baltodano's *Time Compression* (three rows of three coffee cups that morph into an ellipse and then a collapsed line), and Henrik Soderstrom's expandable *Family Tree Chandelier* (comprised of branching, tear-shaped photographic pendants).

While the Hong Kong Design Center's "Creative Hong Kong in Milan" combined a wealth of in-house designers, design consultants, entrepreneurs, overseas designers, brands and systems, as well as sketches by the ever-fashionable Vivienne Tam, Zaha Hadid, and Jimmy Choo, Konstfack's "Functional Design for a Dysfunctional World," curated by Renée Padt, argues that the future of design relates to the future of function itself, and thus inevitably to refuse and the recycled. On the one hand, Jenny Bergström's *Case Study: Fear of Global Warming* looks like ordinary pastel wallpaper patterns, but on second glance reveals itself to be statistical graphs representing rising global temperatures. *Turn Off the Light* presents melted plastic casts shaped by the heat of a standard light bulb, encouraging us to seek low-energy alternatives. Thus we are brought to the bottom line of a future design of refuse and refusal that, along lines Walter Benjamin already forecasts as the whether or not of aura, breaks or recycles through the past we can no longer warm up to but with which we self-destructively seek to re-fuse.