



INTERNATIONAL DESIGN FOR THE HOME

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Foreword by Susan Yelavich

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WHAT'S THE DISH ON DESIGN?

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Dish / *n* 1: a more or less concave vessel from which its contents, often food, are held and/or served 2: something that is favored 3: (slang) an attractive woman.

When Julie Müller Stahl first wrote me of her plans for *Dish*, she included the definition above. My immediate reaction was that the dictionary had missed something. Namely, “dish” as dirt, gossip, or storytelling, as in, “What’s the dish on her?” And, on examining the work, I was struck by how many of the designers were, in fact, engaged in some form of narrative. Dishing it up, as it were.

Of course, the story of recent industrial design has been the thawing of the object. Cold functionality

has been eschewed in favor of the pull of emotion. The great anxiety about the increasingly expendable nature of the things in our lives (particularly those things digital) sent designers to the attic—the attic of design above the space of modernism—looking for ideas that would make their work as desirable as heirlooms past. One could argue that a Pandora’s box of design was opened in service of a faceless binary code. However that may be, the dish is...the story took another turn.

The new millennium has embraced the sensuality of craft and materials on their own terms—not to sex up the cell phone, the laptop, or the flat screen TV, all of which have, at least temporarily, found their forms. We have moved from the personalization of information tools and toys to simply personalization. In some cases, the user can customize and alter the product, as with Matali Crasset’s modular furniture and Ayse Birsel’s Resolve office system; in others, the persona privileged is the designer herself, as in Laurene Leon Boym’s Aphrodite and Diana rugs and Ana Mir’s Chocolate Nipples.

With the tether of functionality loosened, but not untied, the designer is now also a curator, investigating the particular nature of furnishings whose rich history had long been ignored. What distinguishes the current appetite for the past from the much-maligned excursions of 1980s postmodernism is a sense of humor and absence of grandiosity. Where the previous generation looked to the authority of classicism, this one is drawn

to the subversive swing of the stylistic pendulum: the baroque, the mannered, and the vernacular. Nicolette Brunklaus's lamp shades draw freely from these idioms, as do Monica Nicoletti's Place Holders, cardboard boxes that become furniture by virtue of the "antique" images printed on them. While Brunklaus and Nicoletti play a game of inside out, Louise Campbell resolves the split identity between the reference and the object with her *Between Two Chairs*, transforming chairs into gargantuan handkerchiefs of lace. The merger of image and form takes on the surrealism of dreams in Sophie Demenge's *Poulpa* stool, whose legs reflect the arms of an octopus. Jessica Corr's *Sir Donkey John Doe* pillow was inspired by the futuristic scenarios of biotechnology, cushions of donkey heads are marked by random mutations built into the manufacturing process, itself a kind of cloning. Clearly, the not-so-unreal prospect of human replication has triggered another wave of ambivalence toward the machine and the machined in popular culture and, in turn, fueled the fires of the new iconoclasm in design.

Underneath the narratives and the critiques, underneath the tongue-in-cheek, pleasure of the pretty offered by all of these objects, lie more profound possibilities: the potency of beauty and prospect of a revitalized role for ornament. Beauty demands a physical response, a heightened sense of self in relationship to the object of desire, as with Inga Sempé's

unabashedly romantic *Grande Plissée Lampe* and Dögg Gudmundsdóttir's graceful *Wing chair*. Ornament is a code, a pattern, that unlocked yields beauty. Ornament need only be a fragile red thread running through a textile by Sarah Unruh. The strength of the attraction exerted by such a delicate gesture underscores how deeply we crave new optical intelligence.

To wit, beauty does not flow from a focus group, nor does invention. It comes from the confidence and craft of the designer. Likewise, the satisfaction we find in these pieces comes from discernment, not comparison-shopping. That the home should be the arena for these forays into personal narratives should not be surprising. This is the place where objects are rescued from commodity by dint of possession. Once possessed, a plate becomes the platform for *Dish*.

Susan Yelavich served as a juror and consultant for Dish. She is an independent curator who writes about design and architecture. Yelavich is the author of Contemporary World Interiors (forthcoming in 2005), Profile: Pentagram Design (2004), Design for Life (1997), and The Edge of the Millennium (1993). She co-curated the 2003 National Design Triennial at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum. She is a Fellow of the American Academy in Rome.