

PIN UP

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Studio Formafantasma,
Luigi Caccia Dominioni,
Francesco Vezzoli,
and more...

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“Portaluppi had an obsession with details,”
says Bellavance-Lecompte.

The Fondazione Portaluppi is located at Via Morozzo della Rocca 5, a stone’s throw from the famous church of Santa Maria delle Grazie.

Visits can be arranged by appointment.

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“There is a small niche in one of the walls in his office.

It’s about twelve feet up in the air, so nobody can even see it, but it’s meticulously executed.”



Nicolas Bellavance-Lecompte and Jakub Zak of Oeuffice lounging in the library of the Fondazione Portaluppi. Prop styling for this shoot by Leandro Favalaro.

A perfect architectural image for Milan’s
haughty sense of stealth luxury.



Alessandro Agudio, *Kalenji*, (2012); Resin, wood, iron, 39 x 16 x 16 inches. Photograph by Alessandro Zambianchi. Courtesy of the artist and Gasconade, Milan.

BRIANZA ELEGANZA

Young Milanese artists look to design for inspiration

by Michele d’Aurizio



Riccardo Beretta, *Il mare III*, (2011–12); Hand inlaid wood with natural dyed veneers, Japanese ash, zebrano, copper; 25 x 94 x 2.5 inches. Photograph by Filippo Armellin. Courtesy of the artist.

I apologize for beginning with a personal anecdote, but it does have a certain relevance. When I was a child, my family used to set up our rather crowded nativity scene on an 80 x 80-inch milky-white coffee table by the Milanese manufacturer Cappellini. The highly elaborate ensemble often survived Christmas, and sometimes, blasphemously, stayed up well past the Easter holidays into the first flush of summer. I'm very grateful for my parents' laziness, though, because it afforded me a proper understanding of the meaning of design in the Italian home: a continuous, mischievous negation of an object's functionality coupled with the belief that holiness remains somewhere else, even if sometimes, with a bit of luck, it inhabits an object's surface.



Andrea Sala, *Antenna 0.2*, (2009); Iron and glaze; 40 x 34 x 29 inches. Photograph by Mario Di Paolo.
Courtesy of the artist and Federica Schiavo Gallery, Rome.

A number of emerging young Milanese artists root their practice in this tradition of Italian design. Having grown up in Brianza, an area of Milan's hinterland where many design companies have their headquarters, they conceive their artworks as bizarre hybrids of furniture and sculpture with just a veneer of functionality. References to the *chefs d'oeuvre* of local craftsmen and tributes to the ethos of local design masters abound, although they are frequently so circuitous, subtle, or muddled that they operate on a subconscious level — an instinctual approach to creation grounded in a sociocultural understanding of Italian design, not as a formal lexicon, but as a catalog of objects intended as status sym-



Andrea Sala, *Senza Titolo (Attraverso il cemento, il poliuretano)*, (2013); Cement, polyurethane, metallic plaster; 51 x 106 x 27.5 inches. Photograph by Andrea Rossetti. Courtesy of the artist.

bols. Consider the first solo exhibition by the Milanese artist Alessandro Agudio (b. 1982), entitled *Sleek Like a Slum*, and shown at the Gasconade project space in Milan in October 2012. It included four artworks, which the press release described thus: "*Kalenji*, a meticulously customized training board for climbing; *Lulù/Lula*, a flowerbox placed in front of a boiserie and completed with a shawl bearing the image of a woman's iris; *Lukas*, a divider paired with a flowerbox, also completed with a shawl; and *Tuning Tandem (Italia 2011)*, a pair of oddly shaped speakers which bear photographs of the artist's holidays." The installation was made to resemble the charming living room of a parvenu — an upstart dentist, according to the press notes — who has put into practice his pathetic ideas of "good taste" in interior decoration by surrounding himself with fake materials, an obliging color palette, tropical plants, and jungle music. Encompassing the four-stage escalation — from utility, to symbol, to personification, to totemization — in the fetishization of everyday objects, *Sleek Like a Slum* brilliantly encapsulated the process by which objects that start out as merely utilitarian things come to typify a specific social group, and thus achieve the status of lifestyle signifiers. In Agudio's installation, the objects' desperate attempt to look "right and proper" in their context, their prominent "sophistication" and passive "sex appeal" made of them silent ornaments parodying those status symbols whose driving force is their owners' personal lifestyle anxieties, thereby commenting on the aspirations and affectations of the Italian middle classes.

Indeed, in Agudio's artistic practice, surface appearance is the issue, to the point where



Alessandro Agudio, *Lukas*, (2012); Wood, laminated wood, Plexiglas, steel, silk, mold, plants; 33.5 x 7.5 x 75 inches, 9 x 9 x 43 inches.
Photograph by Alessandro Zambianchi. Courtesy of the artist and Gasconade, Milan.



Riccardo Beretta, *Birba* harpsichord, (2009–11); Hand inlaid wood with several natural dyed veneers, haliotis mother-of-pearl, zebrawood, Japanese ash, Spirito Santo, cypress, ebony, zebrano, cocobolo, mahogany, pine, galvanized brass; 35.5 x 85 x 35 inches. Photo by Vincenzo Caccia. Courtesy of the artist.

the rear of things is often left unfinished. This approach has much in common with that of the Memphis masters of *laminato*, Ettore Sottsass and Michele De Lucchi. But Agudio is not paying conscious homage, rather introducing a pedigreed quirk, engaging with the idea of laminate veneer because of the narrative behind it. “To this day, plastic laminates are a metaphor for vulgarity, poverty, and bad taste,” Barbara Radice wrote in her 1984 monograph on Memphis, the movement that “took plastic laminates and put them into the living room; it studied and explored their potential; it decorated them and glued them on tables, consoles, chairs, sofas, and couches, playing on their harsh, non-cultural qualities, their acid-black corners, their ultimately artificial look, and the dull uniformity of their surface, which is void of texture, void of depth, void of warmth.” But today, in the 2010s, these very characteristics have become entirely cultural, Agudio seems to be saying; they recount the fascination with seeming rather

than being, the layer of affectation and deceit that dominated the world of design, as well as Italian politics and society as a whole, in the last two decades of the 20th century. It was a time when the Milanese social scene was referred as “*Milano da bere*,” a period when Italy was ruled by corrupt politicians, yuppies, and T.V. starlets. Back then, I was watching television every day. And so was Alessandro.

In their movies, both Carlo Vanzina and Michelangelo Antonioni have extensively depicted the dwellings of the Milanese, thereby portraying a certain lifestyle through the lens of design: Vanzina’s *Yuppies* (1986), for example, is set against a backdrop of furnishings by the likes of Boffi and Poltrona Frau, while Antonioni’s *Eclipse* (1962) prominently features lamps by local design companies such as Arredoluce, Artemide, Flos, and Fontana Arte. But neither director ever turned his cameras towards the very area that is the cradle of so many design success stories: Brianza. The

first person to take me on an expedition there was in fact an artist, Andrea Sala (b. 1976), whose work blends the serious craftsmanship and deliberate playfulness found in the oeuvre of Milanese design icons such as Achille Castiglioni, Enzo Mari, or Bruno Munari, all three of whom worked closely with Brianza manufacturers. Andrea and I had imagined an exhibition project entitled *Brianza Velenosa* (“Poisonous Brianza”) after a line in *Una giornata uggiosa* (“A gloomy day”), a 1980s song by Lucio Battisti in which he dreams about running away from the region during a time when it was becoming its own administrative district. Andrea and I wished to depict Brianza as a “state of mind” in comparison to its political identity. The exhibition was to be structured in three layers, each a reading of the territory: firstly, a diagrammatic understanding of the landscape via a set of tools derived from Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour’s *Learning from Las Vegas*; secondly, a mapping of the techniques and manners of local artisans through collaborations with young artists who had a proven sensibility for handicraft; and thirdly, an inquiry into the no-doubt sinister implications of small-town mentality on furniture production, and vice versa. I have to say I don’t regret the fact that the exhibition never materialized, probably because I came to understand that Brianza’s landscape, with its catatonic sequence of warehouses and roundabouts, is not so quirky or telling after all, and that what we took to be the local culture’s sinister side is in fact identical in every other Italian provincial purlieu: esotericism, football hooliganism, and tax evasion. Moreover, I also understood that, while they are certainly skillful, the craftsmen working in the area are hardly the Einsteins of cabinetmaking their fathers and grandfathers were. Consequently, artists commissioning artworks from them end up behaving like fanatics fighting to save an endangered species: their art is not a hymn to virtuosity, but a humanitarian gesture in which they patronize a sort of cripple.

Attempting to read the work of artist Riccardo Beretta (b. 1982) within a similar conceptual frame would be rather reductive; however: his output is colorful, vital, uncommonly refined, and very diverse. Among his most recent pieces is *Donnerwetter*, which comprises a pair of functioning clavicytheriums (a type of vertical harpsichord) and was presented in a solo show at Milan’s ZERO gallery in 2012. Beretta designed and engineered the

two instruments in collaboration with artisans from Brianza using different types of wood (including Japanese ash, black limba, lignum vitae, mahogany, maple, pine, and poplar) that were worked using ancient carpentry techniques. Beretta’s “language” is inlay, applied to the surface of his objects like the grace notes in a harpsichord score, constantly dangling between proficiency and frivolousness. In a 2010 group show at the Villa Necchi Campiglio — a sumptuous villa in the heart of Milan that was built by Piero Portaluppi for wealthy industrialists in 1932–35 — Beretta exhibited *Portoro*, a pair of plywood planks casually leant against a tree in the garden whose inlay mimicked the vein of *Portoro* marble, a material much in evidence in the villa’s interiors. Once



Dario Guccio, *Integrity #01 and Integrity #02*, (2013); Styrofoam, resin cement, airbrush; 55 x 14 x 14 inches. Photograph by Alessandro Zambianchi. Courtesy of the artist and Gasconade, Milan.

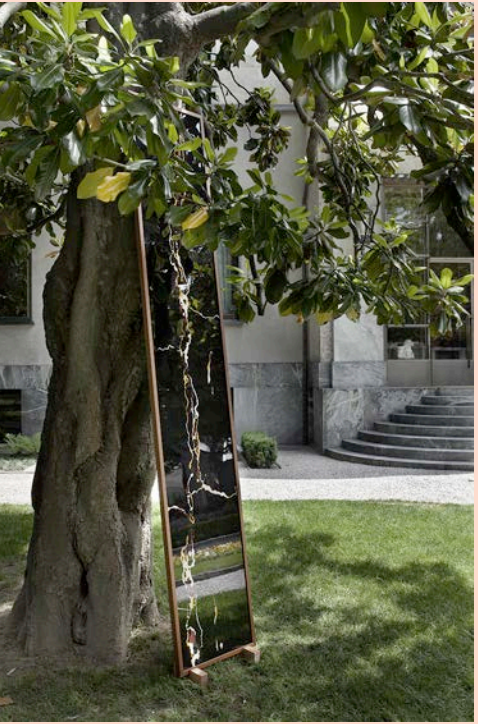
again it was a question of surfaces, Portoro seeming to elude objecthood and become a mere representation, a camp nod towards the Necchi Campiglios’ affluence and refinement, for example. In doing so, it met the requirements and expectations of a work of art and thus of a status symbol — a reading reinforced by the fact that it would have made a wonderful over-the-top coke tray.

For the youngest generation of Milanese artists, the dialectic between objects and their representation is always embedded in the surface of things. The *Integrity* series by Dario Guccio (b. 1988) comprises vaguely architectionic objects covered in a layer of grainy cement so that they resemble building fragments. But while their bulk and appearance suggest heaviness and gravity, they are actually made from very lightweight Styrofoam. Even though they were derived from strategies used in Minimalist sculpture, they seem to be destined for a domestic environment, camouflaging themselves within this context, seeking no confrontation with the viewer, lurking on the sidelines, and offering only whimsy if and when interaction is required.

If all the aforementioned artworks were placed together in a single living room, I dare say they would engender a scenario close to the one suggested by Andrea Branzi in his 1984 essay *The Hot House*. Freed from the precepts of functionalism, “hot house” objects seek to establish a cultural and affective bond with their users, and so are able to disclose their own “emotional value.” Taking for granted the kind of empathy a work of art can arouse just by being “itself,” these pieces are extremely empathetic even by simply turning the viewer into a user. Indeed they do not demand contemplation, but rather dispersion into somebody’s everyday life. No matter if some of them turn round and bite the hands that feed them by holding up an accusatory mirror to their owners’ lifestyles — they bring art closer to life. They come in the wake of certain avant-garde exhibitions in the 1960s which attempted to blend gallery and domestic space — such as *Arte Abitabile*, a 1966 group show by proto-Arte Povera artists Piero Gilardi, Gianni Piacentino, and Michelangelo Pistoletto at the Galleria Sperone in Turin — and determined the notion of “environment” as it was later developed by the Radical Architecture and New Design movements. In 1972, on the occasion of the MoMA exhibition *Italy: the New Domestic*

Landscape, critic Giulio Carlo Argan noted that Italian design appeared to have assimilated the premises of Arte Povera; 40 years later in Milan, art seems to be taking its revenge.

While we were driving around Brianza, Riccardo Beretta talked to me about an ongoing project of his: entitled *Fondamenti per un’Ikea africana* (“Foundations for an African Ikea”), it is a slideshow in which pictures



Riccardo Beretta, *Portoro*, (2010); Hand inlaid wood on marine plywood; 118 x 21 x 1.3 inches. Photograph by Jacopo Menzani. Courtesy of the artist.

taken by Sottsass during trips to Africa and Asia are mixed with images of furniture realized by the famed Art Nouveau cabinetmaker Carlo Bugatti. It is this same exoticism that he is instilling into the artworks he creates with the craftsmen of Brianza in his series *I don’t want to live a life of episodes and fragments* (2011), in which phases in the manufacture of his pieces are photographed in a ghost-like, otherworldly manner. For Riccardo, Brianza is indeed a “state of mind,” an arcadia of creativity where signs read, “Yes, we can do it!”, and new challenges are taken on every day — and so it will be, forever and ever.

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