



The Year of Arad

RON ARAD: NO DISCIPLINE

The title of Ron Arad's major solo show, *No Discipline*, at the Centre Pompidou is perfectly apt. Arad is famously fond of saying that for him 'there are no boundaries' between design, art and architecture. Certainly, the exhibition has no distinct divisions between the three areas of Arad's work, and for the man who makes an ambiguous fusion of materials, humour and technology every undertaking is fuelled by curiosity.

Text by Anna Sansom

In many ways, *No Discipline* is like a Greatest Hits, revealing how his design has evolved from the Rover chair, created from seats of Rover cars that he bought at a scrapyard, dismantled, upholstered and mounted, to the super glossy and beautifully formed Oh Void and Bodyguard pieces. The evolution has taken in classics such as the Before Summer chaise longue made from one piece of metal, the hand-painted New Orleans chairs, the Box in Four Movements, and his Tom Vacs - the first aluminium works he made through vacuum-forming. A reconstruction of the entrance hall to the Tel Aviv Opera, his first building, is a centrepiece, weaving from his limited edition design into the area where models and films of his architecture projects - such as the Design Museum in Holon, Jerusalem, and Hotel Swarovski Wattens in Austria - are presented. In a third space looking out onto the outdoor public exterior is Arad's industrially produced work, including PizzaKobra, made by iGuzzini, which won a Red Dot award this year. The LED-powered lamp can be positioned flat like a pizza and uncoil like a spiral or a cobra. Underlining the diverse projects is Arad's endlessly experimental, innovative spirit, his love for fluid shapes, and his enthusiasm for using new materials and technology.

DESIGN & SCULPTURE

The exhibition is taking place 21 years since Arad participated in the Pompidou Centre's exhibition on new, avant-garde trends at the end of the 20th century. The youngest exhibitor there, he presented a machine that destroyed people's chairs after being placed on a conveyor belt. 'The machine ended up going to the Vitra Design Museum as a sort of performing sculpture,' Arad, 57, recalls. Even then, when Arad was making his name with his studio One Off in Covent Garden, his work obscured the differences between design and sculpture. 'He has created his own market and niche, ever since he had his own shop and gallery with One Off,' says Martino Gamper, who was taught by Arad at the Royal College of Art in London, where Arad leads the Design Products masters' degree course. 'As a professor, tutor and mentor, he's been very influential, and in a sense challenges every one of his students to produce a kind of art and find their own category rather than fit into one of somebody else's. He's at the forefront of this art-design market.'



Previous spread, this page and facing page, left: **Ron Arad's exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, by courtesy of The Gallery Mourmans / photo: Erik & Petra Hesmerg**

Facing page, far right **Gomli, 2008**
© Marie Clérin / galerie DOWNTOWN
François Laffanour

Facing page (middel row): **Pizza Kobra**

Facing page, bottom **Design Museum in Holon, Israel, 2004**
Rendering by Ron Arad

Arad was born in Tel Aviv in 1951 and studied at the Architectural Association in London, where he still lives. Before opening One Off with his business partner Caroline Thorman, he quit a job as an architect one lunchtime, determined to make his career on its own terms. Together with Thorman, he founded Ron Arad Associates in Chalk Farm, London. It is former shed that Arad transformed into a split-level site with a wave-like PVC roof. What makes him so credible to many other designers is the fact that he has always stood on his own two feet. ‘Ron Arad is the prototypical “laboratory of design”, starting from the approach of craft (in metal), and building from this humble material and his humble workshop an expertise that could only be born out of many years of trial and error, and the building of hands-on knowledge,’ says Yves Béhar. ‘Many art/design practitioners are being told what to make from a gallery and market standpoint; Ron’s approach was always personal before it was professional. It so happens that the art-design market exploded at once, and he was the only one who actually was ready and mature to present a body of work with what time and perseverance provides the artist: integrity.’

Indeed, younger designers and architects often cite Arad’s transdisciplinary approach as motivating and inspirational. ‘Ron Arad is the designer who has been able to undo the complexes of a whole generation of creators, designers as well as architects, regarding the simplistic relationship of the adequacy of form and function by experimenting with materials to the benefit of form,’ says Didier Fiuza Faustino. ‘Transgression seeped out of all his proposals. There was a sort of animal power in his work that was totally new and jubilatory. I remember having put up his steel spiral shelf and it was an amazing, pure, physical, tactile and aesthetic experience. I was literally fighting with hell. It was a material that you had to tame. But I admit being less captivated today; perhaps the proposals have become too smooth, too elegant, too perfect, which for others might be a compliment.’

THE INVISIBLE SITTER

Although Arad is widely considered to be at the forefront of the art-design market, he hates the expression. He says, ‘I hate this word “design-art”, just as Cindy Sherman would hate photography-art. The art world should look at things as they are and be less chauvinistic. Twenty years ago, it didn’t accept that photography could be art. Now, 68 per cent of what you see in art fairs is photography.’ The art market





Thumbprint, 2007
© Friedman Benda

Facing page, top:
Even the Odd Balls, 2008
Made for Sotheby's exhibition
sale at Chatsworth Estate

Facing page, bottom:
**Timothy Taylor Gallery stand
at Frieze Art Fair 2008 designed
by Ron Arad and presenting
a selection of his works**
Photo: James Lander
Courtesy the artist and Timothy
Taylor Gallery, London

is being more receptive to his work, though. Arad is now represented by Timothy Taylor Gallery, an art gallery in London, in addition to The Gallery Mourmans in Maastricht, Galerie Downtown in Paris and Friedman Benda in New York. While Galerie Downtown (which also represents Jean Prouvé, Charlotte Perriand and Le Corbusier) positions Arad in the history of design, Timothy Taylor is showing him alongside artists such as Alex Katz, Bridget Riley and Mai-Thu Perret. 'Artists have been working in the field of modern design and functionality as part of their practice for a long time,' says Emma Dexter, director of exhibitions at Timothy Taylor. 'We thought it was interesting to support a designer who is infiltrating the arena of art.' Arad designed the gallery's stand at Frieze Art Fair in London last October and his first solo show is scheduled for March 2009.

One of the highlights will be a new, stainless steel piece similar to Gomli, which is included in his current show at Galerie Downtown. Positioned upright, Gomli is an abstract sculpture based on the human form. When someone sits down on it, it becomes a chaise longue that someone can recline on. The next version will have an outline of the human figure drawn into the design. The name was partly inspired by Arad's friend, Anthony Gormley, who is known for using his body as a model for all his sculptures. Gomli, however, is about one-size-fits-all. 'It's very interesting for me because it's to do with the invisible sitter,' Arad says. 'It should be comfortable for you and me, for Pavarotti and for Twiggy.' François Laffanour, owner of Galerie Downtown, finds the piece extraordinary, 'It's the same principle as At Your Own Risk. It keeps its balance upright and when you sit down it maintains the balance of the body.' Gomli follows on from Arad's Thumbprint. 'There we are really at the intersection between sculpture and the seat,' continues Laffanour. 'What I find important with Ron is that there is always this ambiguity: is it a sculpture or is it a seat? That's what makes all the magic of his work. He always has the will to make original, free things.'





Top, from left to right:
Hotel Swarovski Wattens, Austria
Flashbag for Notify, 2008

THE SILLY IDEA

Playfulness, humour and utilisation of technology to determine shape and gravity are typical of Arad, as is the element of surprise that defies expectations. Another piece that he has designed this year is Even the Odd Balls. Made for Sotheby's selling exhibition of outdoor sculptures at Chatsworth, the English country estate owned by the Duke of Devonshire, it comprises two shiny, curving chairs composed of lots of circular, three-dimensional shapes. One is the negative design of the other. 'It started with the idea of making two pieces, and then you think, "How do you do it?" It started with technology: spinning and then laser-cutting with the sintering machine,' explains Arad. 'It involved a huge amount of technological, numerical work. It's nice because it incorporates everything: the silly idea, the silly drawings, then the computer, the manufacturing and the artisans. There were 200 balls in each of the chairs and until the last minute they were identical.'

This year also sees Arad's first foray into fashion. He has designed a handbag, for Notify, the high-end jeans brand headquartered in Paris that has sponsored his exhibition at the Pompidou. The only requirement that Notify's artistic director, Maurice Ohayon, gave Arad was that the bag should cost no more than a pair of designer jeans. The result is the Flash Bag, a big, bold, black leather bag with a transparent plastic circle in its centre. The circle is covered with a film of liquid crystal that turns from opaque to transparent at the flip of a switch powered by an embedded battery. 'This technology of liquid crystal was used on glass and glazing,' informs Arad. 'The glass is a film that adheres to the glass. So why not glue it on softer materials? The idea is that you press a button and the bag becomes clear so you can see what's inside.' The Flash Bag, which seems ideal for security checks, is included in No Discipline, as are video renderings of Notify's showroom in Milan that Arad is designing. The renderings show a tree-like shape, that Arad refers to as an 'atrium sculpture', rising through the building. 'The building has a roof garden, and the idea is to do a structure that will steal and reflect the garden,' Arad says.

EXHIBITION AFTER-LIFE

The collaboration with Notify follows on from how Arad designed the Ripple + A-POC chair with his friend Issey Miyake, designed Yohji Yamamoto's Y flagship store in Roppongi Hills, Tokyo, and exhibited at Dolce & Gabbana's Metropol theatre in Milan two years ago. 'He is as flexible and rounded as one of his well-tempered chairs and he can flit from one discipline to another just as quickly as he can change one of his hats,' says Miyake in an interview with Romain Cole in the new book Ron Arad Architecture. The Centre Pompidou is the first leg of No Discipline's tour. It is travelling to the Museum of Modern Art in New York in June 2009 and to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 2010. While the Paris show relies on the centre's architecture, Arad is constructing a double looped, stainless steel structure for temporary use on MoMA's sixth floor. 'The structure at the MoMA will be designed for double purposes – for the life of the exhibition and for its life after the exhibition,' says Arad. 'It can be taken from the MoMA to a park or something. I want to design a structure with an after-life and I don't want anyone to sponsor it.' And this determined singularity of approach is what characterises Arad as a designer, artist and architect. #

Ron Arad. No Discipline is at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, until March 16 www.centrepompidou.fr
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