

arts

Designs for loving

Even in the toughest times, design should be about more than function, the ebullient Ron Arad tells *Tom Dyckhoff*

Ron Arad is vigorously defending the excesses of consumerism. "Three days ago a chair by Eileen Gray was sold for £19 million. Doing better than Picasso," he says. "The crunch hasn't had an impact on me. I'm not going to start making design for the recession. I think it's going to be very boring if someone issues an order to do recession-correct pieces."

Arad, the most famous product designer working in Britain today, and, until this summer, the lauded Professor of Design Products at the Royal College of Art is not exactly what you'd call "recession correct". He's renowned, rightly or wrongly (wrongly, he'd say), as the father of "design art", in which lavishly designed pieces of furniture with a "concept" are displayed alongside Tracey Emin at art fairs and sell for more than Picassos. Design art is a phenomenon that now represents, alongside ballooning house prices and bankers bonuses, all the folly of the pre-recessionary world. Arad's work sells at auction for hundreds of thousands of pounds. Last summer, before the world changed, he was even signed by a swanky West End gallery, Timothy Taylor, where his name sits alongside Andy Warhol, Diane Arbus and Bridget Riley. An exhibition of his new work opens there later this month.

Arad is unapologetic. "I do not make design art. Most of the stuff you see in these design ghettos is tedious and boring, like chairs with five legs." But you show chairs like rarified objects in white-walled galleries and sell them for considerably more than a song.

"It's about the quality. It's up to the art world to be smart enough to tell the difference between interesting and not interesting. Anyway, I'm not bothered that I... do things that are very, very expensive, that most people can't afford. You can consume them without purchasing them, like art. I never thought: 'Ooh, maybe today I'll buy a Henry Moore.' Design art's a redundant term, anyway. People don't say 'photography art'."

He despises labels. He despises, indeed, anything that ties him down. He makes neither design, nor art, but sort of both. Sometimes he makes one-offs that sell for squillions, sometimes mass-produced chairs, such as the Tom Vac in 1999, that sell for — well, a bit less. What's important, he says, is his freedom to "define himself. Let no one tell you what you should or shouldn't do."

Arad was born in Tel Aviv in 1951 into a defiantly artsy, communist family. His mother, a Bulgarian-born painter and photographer, was brought to Israel as a child. His father, a sculptor, and, at 92, still a photographer, was born in Russia, grew up in Vienna, and, on the toss of a coin, ended up in a Palestinian commune, rather than fighting Franco in Spain.

Arad's free and easy childhood had its drawbacks. "I wasn't given the chance of being a belligerent rebel teenager like all my other friends." He made up for it. After art school in Jerusalem, he ran off to London in 1973 to escape military service. "London was just nearer than Greenwich Village. It was exotic." A year later he enrolled in the Architectural Association, the illustrious private architecture college in London. "It just had the best parties. It was the



epitome of pluralism. They had Trotskyist architects. They had Peter Cook. They had Rem Koolhaas. And me, reluctant to even join the profession. I just got away with it."

He didn't design anything so useful as buildings. "I designed an island and a stadium and a prison in Soho. Important stuff! If you'd actually built something you'd have had to apologise." When he emerged, five years later, he embarked on another folly — a nine-to-five job in an architect's office. He didn't last long. "It's very difficult to work for other people, and it's especially difficult to work for other people after lunch, so one lunchtime I just didn't come back."

Arad is a Peter Pan. He may be married with grown-up daughters, but he lollops round his North London studio like a toddler; even at the swankiest affairs, I've never seen him out of baggy clothes — albeit designer baggy — topped by his trademark floppy cap, as if he hasn't quite graduated from babygro. He can be petulant, like a kid told to tidy his room, and has a perpetual sheepish grin on his face as if he's just been up to something naughty. He has styled himself as a jovial loner.

On the plus side, it's made him stunningly entrepreneurial. When he began his career in the Thatcher years, Britain was deep in another recession. But, a year after walking out of his job, in 1981, he and his business partner, Caroline Thorman, opened One-Off, a studio-cum-shop in a Covent Garden then still cool and edgy. It sold his roughly hewn *objets* such as the *Rover Chair*, cobbled from old Rover car seats, and *Concrete Stereo*, a turntable built into a concrete block, chipped away to reveal the aggregate and reinforcing rods. Critics saw in it references to punk, to war, to the decline of civilisation, to Beirut. "I just thought it looked pretty."

With fellow 1980s enfants terribles Tom Dixon and Nigel Coates, Arad created the kind of "punk baroque" industrial style that defined the decade's edgier aspirational interior design — the look of the yuppie's loft apartment. He made furniture — such as the bestselling curly-wurly metal *Bookworm* shelves, on which he can probably dine out for the rest of his life, or *Well-Tempered Chair*, with its ballooning upholstery in sharp steel, which looked as if it might do you harm — designed to be looked at and appreciated for its witty allusions more than to actually be sat in.

Arad was running with ideas that he'd grown up with, pioneered by conceptual architects and designers such as Archigram or Ettore Sottsass and conceptual artists such as Donald Judd or Dan Flavin, who transformed the banal world of objects into "art". Function hadn't been lost. It's just that form had become equally important. And it coincided with nearly 30 years of consumer boom, during which one's individualism was increasingly defined by the objects one bought.

What saves Arad from pretension is both humour and functionality. His work is witty, but not in that annoying, eager Philippe Starck way. "I make things, irresponsible things, that give pleasure." He speaks almost mystically about the design process. "I'm curious. I'm curious to see things. I start things and I don't know how they're going to turn out. I have an idea, why don't I do this or that and the next thing, it's there."

If Paul Klee took a line for a

walk, Arad takes a shelf for a stroll. The product takes on a life of its own, a will to form. They revel in their materialism, and materiality — the steel screams steel, the plastic plastic, the bulging, greedy, voluptuous forms shout excess, the joy of stuff. It's libertarian, hovering between capitalist and communist. It usually does the job, too. At his best Arad can find delight and novelty in the most hackneyed or banal. Take *Pizza Cobra*, a coiled spiral that you can twist and shape from flat "pizza" to poised "cobra". "A light just sits there all day waiting to be a light. Why not make its off time as useful, make it beautiful, functional, even when it's not a light — it can be a paperweight!"

Some critics think design should return to sackcloth and ashes, back to function, usefulness. Arad snorts. "The world doesn't need another chair. No. But the world doesn't need another love song. We've seen in the grey days of the Eastern Bloc where there was one type of ash-tray, one chair, one table. Culture begins where necessity ends. If you're hungry you'll eat anything. If you're less hungry you'll put spices on it, look at your cookbooks, think about the wine to go with it. If you need a shelf you'll put a plank up. If you're past that need you'll talk about style. If you're drowning you shout 'Help!'. If you have more time you say: 'Help me if you can I'm feeling down'. That's what we do. I don't pretend I'm solving the world's problems. But I do solve problems. This chair stacks beautifully. Take a spoon. What can you do that's genuinely new?" He rushes off to get a spoon he's just designed. He places it on the table. It balances on the base of its bowl, its shaft poised in the air, he spins it round and round. He beams like a child. "I think this is solving a problem. You know how difficult it is to scrape a spoon off a table? Now that there is a solution, you can understand what the problem was."

"I'm curious. I'm curious to see things. I start things and I don't know how they're going to turn out"

His latest work, though, might prove trickier. He is returning to architecture. He never quite left it. He's dabbled ever since leaving the AA, designing, say, the foyer of the Tel Aviv Opera House. In May, though, he completes his first building — the Holon Museum of Design in Israel, two concrete boxes wrapped in voluptuous ribbons of rich red rusting steel. In September a shopping arcade, whose plaited steel nods to Victorian, opens in Liège, Belgium. There are villas and concert halls on the drawing board. This return is not without its problems. There is a lot more compromise in architecture. More dull stuff, such as drainpipes. Less freedom. "I don't like it, no. Who can enjoy all that arguing? But I have a way of ignoring it. I just walk away. Sometimes you win. Sometimes you lose."

Arad might become out of step with the new world, his voluptuous designs ill-suited to parsimonious times. But he'll defend his creative freedom. It's served him well so far. "I always relied on my voice. If everything gets stripped down to nothing, I've still got that." He points. "My pencil." Should the recession really bite, should the phone stop ringing, I can just imagine him walking out one lunchtime, and never coming back.

Ron Arad: New Works is at the Timothy Taylor Gallery, W1 (020-7409 3344; www.timothytaylorgallery.com), from April 8 to May 9

Left, Ron Arad, the Peter Pan of design — "It's very difficult to work for other people"; right, Arad's *Bodyguard* (solid), 2008, at Timothy Taylor

