

ROBERT WILSON SITS DOWN | TOP CURATORS SPEAK UP | THE MARKET LOOKS

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WHO SAYS ART HAS TO BE IN GOOD
TASTE? IN A MASSIVE ROTTERDAM
STUDIO, A DUTCH VISIONARY EXPLORES
DEVIAN ARCHITECTURE, FURNITURE
THAT ENCROACHES ON SCULPTURE'S
TERRITORY AND DESIGNS FOR
LIBERTINE LIVING. BY MARGHANNA JAMES
PORTRAIT BY LARD GUURMAN



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"I HAVE A LOT MORE IDEAS than I can possibly execute," declares Joep van Lieshout. Tall, with a piercing gaze and an eyebrow perpetually arched above frameless glasses, the creative force behind the art-design-architecture collective Audlet Van Lieshout (AVL) is an intimidating presence. The 44-year-old Netherlands-born van Lieshout is seated in a small rectangle of an office at his studio complex on the Rotterdam waterfront where I have come to meet him and try to understand his often outrageous work. His understated wool jacket and button-down ensemble is enlivened by colorful, slightly irreverent touches—a red bead necklace and a pair of wingrip shoes in vivid green suede.

"I have a lot more ideas than I can possibly execute," says Joep van Lieshout, seen at center in the black suit, in his studio. Far left: One of his assistants at work on the 31-foot-long Bikini Bar, 2006.

A few assistants work quietly at computers nearby, but most of the labor is happening downstairs, in the main studio, where the sculptures, architectural projects and furniture, all designed by van Lieshout, are produced. "I always start out doing drawings," he says, "and when I like something and the form keeps coming back to me—even if it's something ugly or a little bit deviant, my inner voice says I have to do it. So I say, 'Let's make it.'"

What does "deviant" look like? Since 1995, AVL has realized artworks that skirt the borders of good taste—designs for elaborate loofches; a vividly illustrated how-to manual on at-home pig slaughter; and legality: a handmade gun that sports brass knuckles. With every project, van Lieshout seems to confound distinctions between design and art, dwelling and sculpture.

Using wood, metal and the occasional shipping container but most frequently colored, molded fiberglass—"it stays beautiful for at least 100 years"—van Lieshout has created customized RV-like dwellings on wheels; small portable annexes, called clip-ons, that can be attached to existing structures (in 1997 one was added to the exterior of the Centraal Museum Utrecht); modular

badrooms, kitchen and living units; roomlike spaces in the forms of wombs, skulls and other bodily cavities, including the nearly 54-foot-long *Bar Rectum*, a saloon in the form of a human digestive tract painted bloodred; and ecoconscious composting toilets that could conceivably convert waste into fuel.

Many of these "conceptual sculptures," as he terms them, are meant to be used, while some others, such as a bomb- and weapon-making facility, are potentially functional but untested. And some—large-scale anatomical models of female and

male reproductive organs—are outside the realm of the practical altogether. In addition to building structures and furniture, "I also make sculptures and paintings about daily life," he tells me. "I don't like borders or morality."

A blustering, perhaps, but not when he's found a way to make the system simple for

him. Van Lieshout estimates that nearly half his projects are commissions for institutions—his work is in the collections of numerous museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, in New York; the Stedelijk Museum, in Amsterdam; and the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis—and for private clients, most of whom are European. AVL has also done office interiors for several businesses, including a Belgian fashion company and a Dutch insurance firm. Among the smaller-scale fiberglass pieces that can be commissioned from AVL are bathroom and kitchen units, starting at around \$70,000, and tables, which run \$20,000 and up.

Van Lieshout now has about 20 people working with him, but when he started out, in the 1980s, he was on his own. After studying at the Academy of Modern Art in Rotterdam and the Villa Arson, in Nice, and completing a residency at Ateliers 63, in Haarlem, "I was making these halfway forms, utilitarian objects that were also sculpture," he says. "What I was doing was not very popular." //



Clockwise from top: Prototype Plastic Chair, 2004; 3M Minimal Multi Mobile, 2002, and AVL Workskull, 2005; AVL Home Edition, 2005; Abdominal Exerciser Horizontal, 2004; End Club Chair, 2004; Clip-On, 1997, attached to a museum in Utrecht.

In the Studio: Joep van Lieshout

(continued from page 62) to allow the construction of an entire house, although admittedly a small one: Van Lieshout's own beach cottage is nearing completion and sometime this spring will be removed and installed, prefab style, in the dunes just outside Rotterdam.

From here I follow van Lieshout to the other end of the studio, where two artists are at work on the several-foot-long *Slave City* headquarters building, comprising womb- and penis-shaped forms. Nearby are models for the shopping mall, a baroque biomorphic structure—"I'm building two; one will be intact and the other will be falling down, like Babel," he tells me. "It's an allegory for the end of consumerism"—and the 25-story *Museum of Digestion*, inside which art is consumed, digested and spit out. "I'm thinking about unbuildable architecture now," van Lieshout says. "It's much more interesting than things that are possible."

But as always, the practical coexists with the imaginary in van Lieshout's world. He has also translated motifs from *Slave City* into furniture designs. The top of the low welded-steel Infrastructure table is a map of the system of underground cables, pipes and tunnels that run beneath the streets of *Slave City*. Created in an edition of 10 and priced at £18,000 (\$36,600), the tables were shown last October in London at the Carpenters Workshop Gallery along with some of AVL's Bad furniture—a small, black-steel end table and AVL's pared-down interpretation of a club chair (£8,000; \$16,000). Van Lieshout explains that "Bad is just a name we use. These pieces are really about reuniting designer, producer and client again." He adds that it's not meant to be fashionable furniture. "There are too many unnecessary details—the legs are a strange shape; there are curves that don't need to be there."

The London show did very well, he tells me. "Art furniture is selling like sandwiches. It's less risky for people to buy design than an artwork. If you spend a lot of money on a painting, you have to explain why it's so valuable. With furniture, people just say, 'Wow, that's a really nice table.'" And he's happy they think so. "Maybe I should make more tables," he says, adding that any profits go right back into making works. Which for this virtuoso means an endless array of projects, each one bigger or more ambitious than the last, always pushing his creativity a little further. He pauses and adds, "Well, I don't have an idea that I'm going in a particular direction. It's more gypsy style. In the end, I'm an artist." ☐

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Obsessions: Robert Wilson

(continued from page 82) Siebert notes. "Not just to accommodate new acquisitions but also to generally mix things up and make them new, keep them alive."

At the other end of the gallery, a wooden Donald Judd desk-and-chair set—the epitome of understated elegance—clashes with the nearby *Miss Blanche Chair*, 1988, cheekily constructed by the famed 20th-century Japanese designer Shiro Kuramata from acrylic resin decorated with red paper roses. The latter limited-edition work, like many of Wilson's own designs, is named after a character from a play (*A Streetcar Named Desire's* Blanche DuBois). Wilson acquired it privately in New York in 2001 for \$51,000—a steal, considering that an example of the same model went for \$86,000 in 1997 at a Christie's New York design auction and that another resides at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Given how much character each of Wilson's chairs possesses, one can't help but wonder which is his favorite. "Maybe the Rietveld or a little seat made for me by a four-year-old boy out of colored plastic straws," he says when asked, his own childlike sense of wonder in evidence. It's hard, though, to imagine a chair that could embody Robert Wilson: unique, provocative and never one to sit idle. ☐