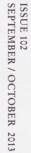ITALO ZUCCHELLI
FRANCISCO COSTA

SURFACE

Ideas in Design

STUDIO VISIT Paul Cocksedge

This London-based designer unveils "Capture," his first-ever solo exhibit, at New York's Friedman Benda gallery.

INTERVIEW BY NONIE NIESEWAND

Tell me about your studio.

It's in Hackney, East London, not far from where I grew up, in Haringey. It's a strange area, with beauty alongside poverty and a burgeoning art scene, all set in an industrial situation. The studio was a cabinetmakers' workshop. We moved here in 2004. Today there are at most 10 people working in it. I've kept the division of the spaces, with the workshop, the office, and my room. In the workshop, we manufacture on site and fulfill shop orders, make models, and do lots of research and development. Some projects are developed off site in a foundry or glass studio. Surrounded by computers and lots of storage to archive projects, my business partner, Joana Pinho, and the studio manager, Sybil Caines, run the office. Then there's my room. Its contents constantly change. At the moment, there's a huge wall of old hi-fi speakers, once buried in a dump, which I'll bring back to life via my portable Vamp Bluetooth speaker during the London Design Festival this September. All around me are experiments.

You chose "Capture" as the title for your show at Friedman Benda. Why?

I wanted to see if I could make light become a material in a physical sense. Light is intangible, so I "capture" it and try to package it. Light doesn't really belong to anyone. It has no borders; it escapes and changes energy. The feeling it gives is a beautiful thing. Two big pieces in the show explore the physicality of light. The first one, "Capture," is a hand-spun aluminum dome that holds warm white light in a glowing sphere hovering overhead. The other, "White Light," is a room within the gallery. It's all white except for a mosaic of light, in many colors, covering the ceiling. It slowly dims and fades into a pure white light that replicates sunlight indoors. The third big piece is a cantilevered table, "Poise." It weighs half a ton, but it began with a piece of paper. I love the shape that paper makes when set on its side, kind of curling over, with a flap at the end. To replicate that weightless fold for a table, I took a thick piece of metal and rolled it to the point where it became unstable. Usually, when I embark on a piece, I start with the idea that it won't work. Then I persist.

It's been more than four years from your initial concept to now. What took so long?

Getting exactly the right kind of white light from the sun at midday. The LEDs I use can give very flat and cold light, like mobile-phone screens.

Why Friedman Benda?

I didn't rush into the art world. When I met Marc Benda — one of the founders of the gallery, along with Barry Friedman — I knew he was the guy I wanted to work with. No compromises. If he likes the idea, he'll follow it.

Does this show signal a change in your career from designer to artist?

They're different disciplines, but similar processes. Sometimes they blur. I think an artist is much closer to — and a bit more honest toward — creativity. Painting is about that person's individual take on the process. Designers do chairs, lamps, tables, things that other people use. Ultimately design is always about people. Lots of artists consider design, though — take Yves Klein and Méret Oppenheim. And designers often move into performance art or conceptual art — look at [the lighting designer] Ingo Maurer, whom I know and admire.

What are your goals for the show?

Weightlessness is very important to me. This nothingness, this void of pure light, is deceptive. The ceiling in "White Light" must weigh about three quarters of a ton. It was a challenge to make it appear to effortlessly hover overhead. It's intangible, the opposite of overdoing things. Color in my work has a purpose, but it's not a decorative pattern. It's all about the precision that goes with understanding the science of pure white light.

How important is it for you to keep up with technological advances?

A lot of new design is pure technology just for the sake of it. Ideas, thinking, reasoning — this is what lies behind good design. Often, styling outperforms technology. Pieces that rely entirely upon technology can become a bit passé. You have to have a bit of romance, a narrative. Otherwise, in three or four years, chances are that time has dated the work.

What's your creative process?

I think there is a lot of security in having a process. I'm aware, however, of the need to generate ideas. Technicalities must not spoil original thinking. There's a danger in knowing too much. I try to remain open, to see how a project evolves and inspires me. Most of all, I enjoy a blank piece of paper.