

# WHITEHOT MAGAZINE™

*Marcel Wanders*



*Marcel Wanders, photo by Robert Dupree*

Marcel Wanders

At Friedman Benda

By **KURT McVEY**, MAR. 2016

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“When I talk about dreams, I talk about daydreams,” says the acclaimed Dutch designer Marcel Wanders from the back office of Friedman Benda, the Chelsea gallery that is currently showcasing his first proper solo art exhibition, *Portraits*. The walls of the exhibition space, which have been painted a dark shade of bluish-purple, serve as an evocative and slightly intimidating backdrop for a collection of exquisitely rendered art objects, sculptures, and video works that when articulated as a whole, gives the impression of a well-to-do and highly imaginative ten-year-old’s bedroom sprung to life once the comforting glow of the nightlight goes out.

“This work comes from a different source,” says Wanders, who is best known for his inventive “Knotted Chair” (1996), which he can’t seem to escape, much like the author Chuck Palahniuk, who’s epitaph will most assuredly read, “Author of *Fight Club*.” Similarly, Wanders can’t seem to avoid a sort of bad boy persona stemming from the fact that he was famously expelled from The Eindhoven School of Industrial Design in the Netherlands when he was an aspiring design student. “I, in my own primitive way, wanted to experiment and find out what I cared about,” says the tall, delightfully cocky, silver-haired Dutchman, who in a previous interview described himself as an anarchist when it comes to education. “They [Eindhoven] were a modernistic Bauhaus school. I was of a generation that was more mental. I wanted to investigate; I didn’t care if the end result was good or bad.”



*Marcel Wanders, photo by Robert Dupree*

Perhaps this is a clue as to why Wanders is now interested in stepping definitively into the art arena, where presumably, perfectionism is an afterthought and experimentation is encouraged. In 2008, Wanders spearheaded the interior design of The Mondrian Hotel in South Beach, Miami, which he later came to disavow after it fell into disrepair, going as far as to call his ultimate vision, “stillborn” in his monumental 2014 retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam titled, *Pinned Up: 25 Years of Design*. This isn’t to say that Wanders’ work in *Portraits* isn’t tiptop as far as materials, construction and overall execution goes, but there are elements, often jarring, that speak to a long dormant desire to create imperfect objects, witnessed primarily in his “One Minute Sculptures” series, essentially amorphous, 12”, hand made, partially recognizable, glazed ceramic globules modeled after 3D sketches of lost pets. The fact remains that these intentionally childish, free form works are safely buoyed by truly handsome works of design, leading one to believe that Wanders and his gallery seem to be having their cake and eating it too.

This is by no means a criminal offense, as the worlds of art and design have forever been cross-pollinating, now more so than ever it appears. This is most likely due to the fact that in 2016, a high percentage of new fine art (mostly non-functional luxury items) has hit an unfortunate glass ceiling of commercial viability and true cultural resonance in an oversaturated contemporary market coupled with the reality that, despite ongoing innovation in design, a chair simply remains a chair, and should a design immerge transcendent, such an anomaly would be terribly expensive to produce en masse.



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“I don’t want to discuss what art is or what design is,” says Wanders. “People make boxes which are too small for me anyhow. I have my own box and I sit in it. I need the podium, because I need the world to look at my work in a different way.” This also includes a new audience complete with a whole new type of attention and of course, overall greater exposure. This makes sense from a career perspective, of course, but Wanders seems to be teasing at a more intimate compulsion to operate within a show ground where he can tackle more adult themes; a safe space, you could say, where he can explore the darker side of his subconscious. “Design to me is a positive, giving, loving, trusting energy and I send that out into the world. I’ve been doing that for twenty years and I can say, I love what I’ve done, but looking back I realized, it’s not completely me.”

Wanders seems to be looking upon his work in the design world, objects and spaces devoid of anger, fear or doubt, the way a Jonas brother might look back at his internment at The Disney Channel, referring to much of his past work as a “caricature” or “the type of stuff you’d find on the back of a cornflake box.” Wanders insists here that he’s not trying to “bitch out” his design work, or place more importance on his art, just that twenty-five years of creation without sharing the full spectrum of human emotion has left him feeling, well, dishonest. “My self-image is not inflated, but it’s not realistic,” admits Wanders. “If I Google myself, I want to see something that I recognize. All of us, we forget that. We all want to

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advocate for ourselves online. If you're an artist, and you're honest with yourself, you cannot just stop there. You have to push yourself to be more complete."



*Marcel Wanders, photo by Robert Dupree*

This idea of a skewed self-image is best represented in his "Dysmorphophobia" series, comprised of three large-scale mirrors with beveled, unruly frames that touch on both body image issues and our collective obsession with personal branding via social media, often at the expense of curating one's true inner self. These themes are further explored in Wanders' "Athanasius" series-three video works that depict dead flower pedals arranged and animated to create unique, nightmare visages that recall Frank the bunny from *Donnie Darko* (2001) merged with the haunting work of Belgian painter Johan Van Mllum.

The most triumphant work in *Portraits*, however, is undoubtedly "Tempter," an oversized, intricately detailed Unicorn rocking horse made of bronze and rubber. This slightly S&M influenced monstrosity greets you upon entering the gallery space, literally tempting you to climb aboard, usually a "no-no" in a gallery space but often welcomed on a design floor.

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Looming on a custom printed rug produced in conjunction with Wanders' celebrated design firm *Moooi* (which features razor sharp images of thorns and poisonous flowers), "Tempter" represents an ancient dialogue that continues to intrigue the fifty-two year-old artist after all these years; that of the tumultuous and often volatile relationship between power and beauty and the illusion of their independence from one another. "The horse is a symbol of the child having a dreamy movement, traveling around the world with a big sword. But it goes nowhere," says the artist. "To make it heavy, strong and powerful, it keeps you tied to your own illusion of opportunities, of us being the hero."



*Marcel Wanders, photo by Robert Dupree*

Despite all this, Wanders insists that he's far from a tormented soul, but that he simply enjoys the conscious active process of exploring the nether reaches of his psyche through creation, all in a sandbox, a bedroom, a gallery space seemingly devoid of parental supervision, for better or worse, where one's mind is left to its own dangerous devices, where everyday

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objects grow and distort, not so unlike our sense of self as busy grownups in a digitally interconnected age. Once we realize there isn't a monster under the bed or in the closet, we

search for it within ourselves instead. *Portraits*, the exhibition, which runs until April 9<sup>th</sup>, is a glowing endorsement of art galleries in general, as it sees Wanders leap courageously from under the safety of the covers (an immensely successful design career), to peak into the deepest, darkest shadows of his most wild, curious, and perennially youthful heart. **WM**

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