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DEPARTURES

FALL 2014

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Rubinstein, Dan. "Oki Sato: Less is More – More or Less," Departures. Fall 2014

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Oki Sato at the 2012
Milan Furniture Fair, sitting
on a marble bathroom
bench that he designed
using transparent tiles
by Italian glass-mosaic-
maker Bisazza

oki sato

LESS IS MORE—MORE OR LESS

Collaborating with everyone from Walt Disney to Louis Vuitton, architect Oki Sato, founder of the Japanese firm Nendo, is the man of the moment—just don't try getting to know him. BY DAN RUBINSTEIN

Rows of undulating bookshelves filled a serene space in Tokyo's Shibuya district, each featuring small caramel-colored books devoted to educating customers on the details of what makes a latte different from a cappuccino. There were nine titles in all, with each shade of brown corresponding to a drink that visitors could claim in exchange, and part of the books' covers could be removed and inserted into a portable plastic cup to change its color. All-white examples of Emeco's classic aluminum Navy chair were scattered throughout. It could have been another one of the city's forward-thinking concept stores—it was, however, a pop-up shop called Starbucks Espresso Journey, created in 2012 by the Toronto-born Oki Sato's Japanese design firm, Nendo. "You couldn't even tell it was a Starbucks," says Gregg Buchbinder, chairman of Emeco. "It was so pared down."

That's an excellent way to describe most of the 37-year-old Sato's work, which ranges from interiors, architecture and furniture to tabletop and personal accessories to fashion—but don't simply disregard it as minimalism. "It feels that way, but in the context of his ideas and what he puts into it...he's reducing things in a way to make things even better," says Buchbinder, who last spring added Sato to his company's roster of design royalty who have created instant icons with their chairs for Emeco, including Philippe Starck, Konstantin Grcic and Jean Nouvel. "Sato's focus is on the intrinsic appeal of something," says Buchbinder. "He is meticulous about removing anything that's in excess."

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"Minimal" might be the wrong word to describe Nendo. "Prolific" would be more accurate. Since establishing his office in 2002, Sato has shown a near-uncanny level of quality for someone who can create dozens of well-considered products and stores each year for an incredibly diverse list of the industry's most demanding clients, including Kartell, Walt Disney, Louis Vuitton, Cappellini, Issey Miyake, Tod's and Puma. It's a range of collaborators that defies categorization by medium, yes, but also by price—one can have access to Sato's designs whether in the form of a Starbucks coffee mug or a Baccarat crystal goblet or a new retail space.

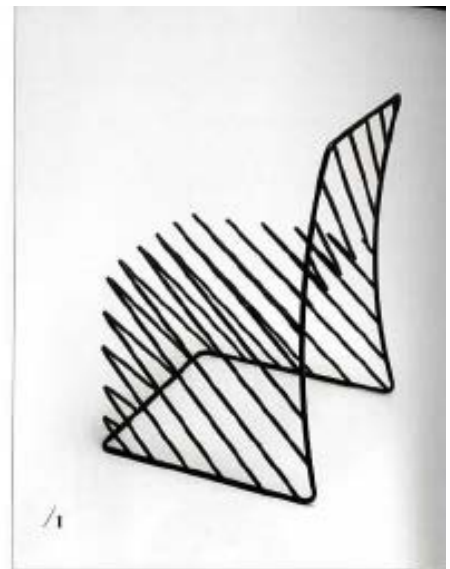
After all, *nendo* is Japanese for "modeling clay," and the comparison is apt. "Nendo means like Play-Doh, like that kids would play with," said Sato in a 2013 interview. "That's exactly the way I want to work as a designer—to be flexible and changing like Play-Doh changes color, shapes, sizes, to have that flexibility in designing." Sato's collaborators also credit his success to the sheer speed at which he works. Nearly all his projects begin with a simple sketch. "Even while in conversation, he pulls out his pen and you can see what he's thinking. He's very, very fast. The only person who works as fast as he does is Starck," Buchbinder says.

While he gets help from his studio, Sato is always hands-on. For Emeco, Sato designed the Su collection. (*Su*, fittingly enough, means "plain" or "unadorned" in Japanese.) Not only do the stools come in a variety of unusual material combinations—including one type of seat made from reclaimed wood and another from an ecological form of concrete—but their design also hides the line's greatest innovation. To improve the ease of DIY assembly, Sato designed the Su to be put together using a single screw hidden underneath that can be twisted with a coin. "It's a simple stool, but it's actually very complex," says Buchbinder. "You can tell a lot about the product when you look at the invisible things. When you turn it over, you realize the passion in every single minute detail."

But what makes Sato such a rising star isn't just his ability to crank out endless new products. It's the intangible character he injects into his work that has captured the attention of the museum world as well. Sato's pieces have been collected in institutions the world over, including London's Victoria & Albert Museum and Paris's Centre Pompidou. "There's a sense of playfulness in his work," says Cynthia Trope, associate curator of product design and decorative arts at New York's Cooper-Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, who has acquired three Nendo works. "He combines Japanese and Scandinavian forms in interesting ways."

If you haven't heard of Sato by now, it's by design. Buchbinder recalls Sato's diffidence, demonstrated by how he hid inside Emeco's booth for hours at a time during the 2014 Milan Furniture Fair. "He is so understated. It's so pleasant to work with someone who is so modest and appreciative," Buchbinder says. "He doesn't have a rock-star attitude." Whether this stems from his shyness or a cultivated elusiveness is subject to interpretation. When quizzed on-camera during an earlier event about what people should know about him personally, Sato demurred, in the maddening manner that typifies the stereotype of the mysterious creative genius. "I shouldn't exist. I'm like air or water. There's not much for you to know about me. It's not really interesting. I'm afraid," he said. "It should be the objects that should be doing all the talking." He may well be right. •

1 A chair from the Thin Black Lines collection, 2010. 2 Nendo worked with the Swedish clothing brand Goo for the "Spaced Dipped Shirts" installation, 2014. 3 Camper Together Eclipse sunglasses, a collaboration with Spanish shoe brand Camper, 2014. 4 The rotating-glass shelf designed for lighting company Laveit, 2013. 5 Block vases from Nendo's TN collection, 2012. 6 Fold shelves created for Japanese furniture maker Condo House, 2013. 7 Colored-Pencil tables, 2013. 8 The Starbucks Espresso Journey pop-up store. 9 The Karakusa-Play collection for porcelain maker Ger-eron, 2013. 10 Cabbage chair, 2008. 11 Sekitei chair for Cappellini, 2011. 12 A Su stool for chair company Emeco, 2014.





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