



Sitting pretty: the Cut Out Sofa and the Beggars' Bench

Ever the trendsetters

Mattia Bonetti and David Gill are preparing to show a new collection of furniture in New York and London. Caroline Phillips takes a peek

David Gill is a rare fellow indeed: tomorrow's man. His style dictates new trends, in the view of Alexander Payne, director of the 20th-21st century design department at auctioneers Phillips. Gill is also a creative visionary and style guru, according to art advisor and private dealer Dominique Levy, who is former international director of private sales at Christie's. Call him what you will, Gill has the reputation for being a man who doesn't so much sniff the Zeitgeist as make it.

He specialises in 20th century decorative art in his eponymous London gallery and is principally associated with Jean-Michel Frank, Eileen Gray and Charlotte Perriand, the revolutionary furniture designers of the 1920s and 1930s. But he's also a patron and promoter of new talent. His clients include museum curators, the Saatchis, Madonna and Elton John.

Gill has worked with artists Elizabeth Garouste and Mattia Bonetti since they designed a new collection for his gallery while they were showing at the Avant Premiere 20th century design exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1998. Garouste & Bonetti produced objects, furniture and interiors that were playful, frivolous and often ironically kitsch. They pushed the limits of style and taste, frequently creating baroque, childlike, surreal or fairy-tale works: theirs were the Christian Lacroix chairs with branches that sprouted from round backs and egg-shaped cabinets with spindly gold feet.

Garouste & Bonetti ended their 20-year working partnership in 2000 and Bonetti was keen to express his new-found artistic freedom. So Gill had an idea: he commissioned Bonetti to design a new collection of 21 pieces for a furniture exhibition. It took two years from concept to execution. "I worked closely with Mattia, suggesting changes to drawings, selecting craftsmen and overseeing the execution and interpretation of the pieces," says Gill. The Lühring Augustine Gallery in New York will present "Mattia Bonetti, A Collaboration with David Gill".

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Bonetti appeared at the beginning of the 1980s: a time of economic calamity and artistic crisis

gallery has ever held a contemporary furniture show," remarks Dorothy Berwin, managing director of InFilm Productions, who lives in New York and collects Bonetti, Marc Newson, Martin Zekely, Prouve, Adnet and Perriand. "The exhibition will cause a stir because Bonetti's work is cutting-edge and combines the qualities of traditional craftsmanship with visionary views."

"I imagine this exhibition will set a new trend in the art market," adds Payne. "We'll see more and more contemporary galleries show-

ing 20th-21st century design." (The show transfers to David Gill's Gallery in London in June.)

Garouste & Bonetti appeared at the beginning of the 1980s: a time of economic calamity and artistic crisis for the avant-garde, an era of over-used functionalism and dull modernism. Their work was fresh, imaginative, protean and anti-bourgeois. Now Bonetti's style has evolved. "Since he's been designing alone, Bonetti has produced unique and innovative work," comments Payne, who is also series editor of *Series Design*, books on up-and-coming contemporary designers. "He has grown from the modern Barbarian style of the mid-1980s to create sublime designs which will be recognised as important works in the history of contemporary design."

"Mattia's solo furniture is highly individual, recognisable and original," comments interior decorator David Milnaric, who owns two of his pieces. "It's glamorous, beautifully made and mixes easily with old pieces in old rooms or in contemporary settings."

"His new work is sensuous, beautiful and timeless," adds Levy, who also collects him.

In the Lühring Augustine Gallery exhibits, Bonetti has fused functional furniture, sculpture and modern geometric art. The forms and materials are avant-garde and futuristic. The pieces are made in limited editions of eight. One of the exhibition pieces is the Fakir Cabinet. In the shape of a traditional cupboard, the Fakir Cabinet is fashioned innovatively from stain-

less steel and covered with 9,000 polished aluminium "nails", cylinders all of different diameters, creating an illusion of movement.

Equally playful is the stainless steel Strata Cabinet, a work which is skilfully constructed of different layers of stainless steel squares, one on top of the other. "Its magic lies partly in the squares being placed in such a way that the observer can see through the holes into the cabinet," comments Gill.

The technically brilliant Beggars' Bench is made entirely of bronze. The bench frame is gilded bronze and the torn "sack-cloth" that forms the seat ("Incredibly, it is cast as a whole piece without welding," remarks Gill) is fashioned from bronze cast in lost wax - a technique that brings definition to the surface, making the material as sharp and textured as sculpture.

In contrast, Pucci, Russian Constructivists and geometry come to mind with the inventive Cut Out Sofa, a multi-coloured leather sofa of haute couture craftsmanship with a cut-out back that looks like a painting. Some pieces are like leaves, others geometric forms.

The Polyhedral Chest is a sculptural, geometrical, yet functional piece that looks like a vast stainless steel crystal formation. Locating and opening its drawers is hilariously like working out Rubik's Cube.

Next is Frame Chest, an orange leather, bow-fronted chest of drawers which floats in a stainless steel frame. Think architecture, geometry and juxtaposition of warm and cool materials in a combination

of contradictions and oppos-

Then there's Man's Best Friend, a bronze sculpture of a spotty dog which is actually a light: it shimmers through his rest-patinated skin. He stands on bronze grass flowers and, quirkily, has balls, an incomplete penis, while Muse, a monumental, classical figure made of black resin which looks like stone or marble, carries three enormous phallic neon tubes and looks like a replacement for the Statue of Liberty.

It seems that Bonetti invented a look entirely his own. "Ron Arad was the innovator in the 1980s, Marc Newson has been a big player since the 1990s," Bonetti is one of the men of now, a really significant designer with unique vocabulary of his own, concludes Payne. Bonetti is of the adventurous pieces for sophisticated who are tired of minimalism and life in a neutral world. This is furniture as fine art, and the works cost five figures. Collectors and collectors have already been snapping them up. At that rate, all the commissions will be sold and there won't be a London exhibition.

DETAILS

Exhibitions: Mattia Bonetti, A Collaboration with David Gill, March 27-April 24, Lühring Augustine Gallery, New York
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In London: June 9-July 13
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