

# CRAFTS





In his own collection of *mingei* objects, Naoto Fukusawa jokes he may have picked up a few fakes in Beijing flea markets

MINGEI: ANOTHER KIND OF ART, p.75



When filled with hot coffee the sand surface of the cup becomes warm to the touch conjuring comforting thoughts of beach holidays

DUBAI DESIGN WEEK, p.78

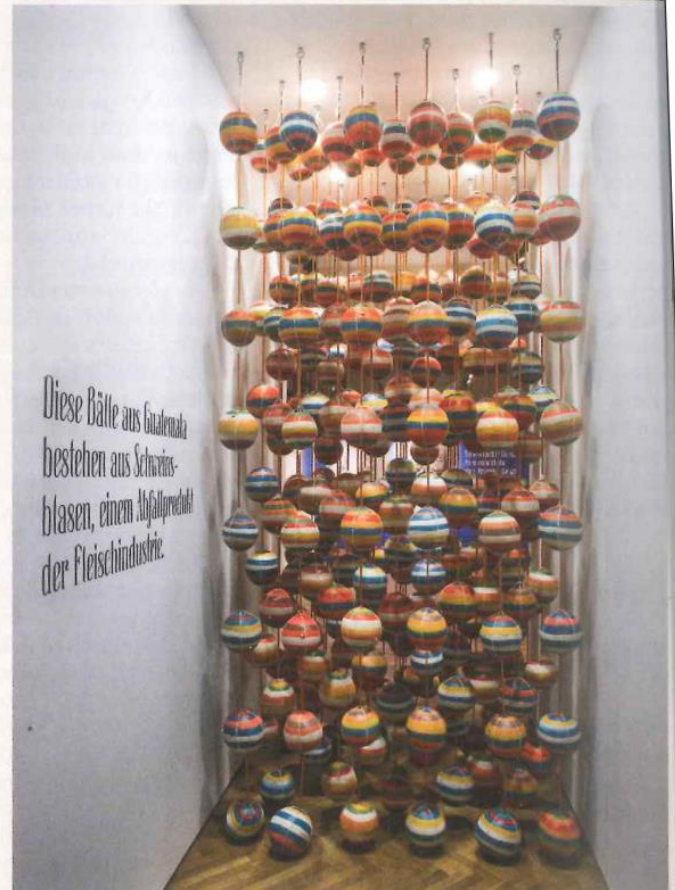


vertical script used for labels, and a B-for-beauty logo formed from a snake twisted around the branch of a rose bush is even a little gothic. Embracing exuberant decoration, S&W stray far from the austere modernist formats that retain a hold on graphic design.

Parts of the show seem simplistic, even for a general audience. We are invited to indicate aesthetic preferences for landscape photos, colours, shapes and smells by dropping a paper coin into a slot. Presented with a real Mondrian and a fake version, can we spot which is genuine? Most can, and there are favoured colours and shapes, though nothing like unanimity, thankfully, so it isn't clear how far these general tendencies take us. 'Beauty is not inherent in any of the pieces in this exhibition,' the designers say somewhat disarmingly. If it is all a matter of context and taste shaped by personal experience, then pluralism must rule, as of course it does. Our eyes have evolved to admire pattern – demonstrated, in a stunning pre-historical display, by the symmetrical shaping of early stone tools – and to crave visual information. Complexity of form is deeply satisfying to us.

The designer-curators tend to over-egg the argument. A long line of exquisite glasses from history culminates in a plastic cup (c.2018) as though that's all we drink from now. Having established that brown is the ugliest colour, they despair over a set of brown, box-like buildings. They marshal airport photos with the same selectivity to indict a boring similarity of design. In a series of before-and-after pictures, deathly skyscrapers supplant lovely indigenous buildings. Brightly spangled interventions in the cityscape receive their approval and local maverick architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser takes a bow, but gaudy gestures like his refurbished incineration plant in Vienna, completed in 1992, appeal so much because of their rarity. At the nearby Hundertwasser Museum, a model of a grassy village development looks better suited for hobbits.

In one of the centrepieces, a 'sensory room' designed with the co-operation of Swarovski, a citrus smell and coloured mist meant to 'create an optimal beauty



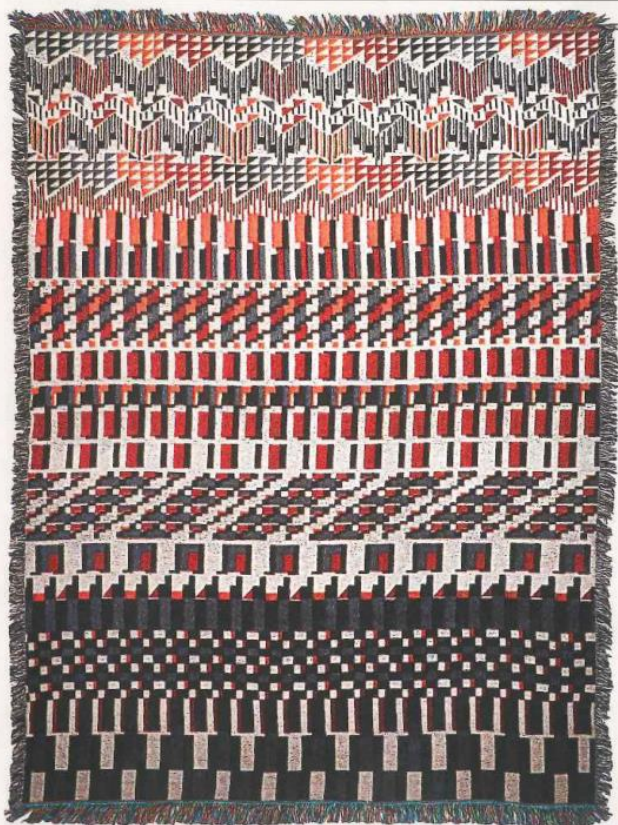
Diese Bälle aus Guatemala bestehen aus Schweinsblasen, einem Abfallprodukt der Fleischindustrie.

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experience' left me underwhelmed. In a nearby chapel-like room lit by the American artist James Turrell, where a song called *Heart* by Darkside issues from a regal stack of speakers, I stumbled into a fully immersive 'beauty' experience. After two listens I couldn't resist returning for a third. The music didn't sound so spellbinding back at home, suggesting its allure had been down to the designers' artful framing.

What isn't in dispute is their exceptional shared eye. 'The Beauty Archive', their selection of 123 exhibits from MAK's collection, is a highlight, stretching from 36 delicately coloured 19th-century Qing dynasty vases to a Viennese ladies' *secrétaire* from 1951 decorated with a rapturously Arcadian tableau. S&W's admission that they 'only cared about their formal qualities' is an audacious blow against pleasure-denying explainers and contextualisers. I imagine

From left to right: *Beauty* exhibition logo; Oswald Haerdtl, *Ladies' Secrétaire*, 1951; Sagmeister & Walsh, painted balls made from pigs' bladders, 2018



Above: carpet by Ishraq Zraikat. Below: KRAY Studio, Crystal Tables

## Dual aspect design

Dubai Design Week

Dubai Design District  
12-17 November 2018

Reviewed by Caroline Roux

Downtown Design, which celebrated its sixth edition in Dubai in November, is at first sight a furniture trade fair in a big tent, the sort of spangly, soulless event that makes my heart sink. But happily it turned out to have an edge, in a well-curated section called Downtown Editions that threw the spotlight on work by young designers from the UAE region.

When I say young, this wasn't the puppyish enthusiasm of those straight out of college, showing off an optimistic but perhaps untried degree show project. Many of the designers here have enjoyed an international education and, having studied and possibly worked in major cities like New York or London, have returned to the UAE, cross-pollinating ideas developed abroad with their own regional sensibility.

At times, the results of this dual identity are quite literally manifest,

as in the Ramel cups made by The Foundry. These icily chic products – tiny coffee cups with little triangular handles – are slip-cast ceramic with a white, high-gloss glazed interior, and an exterior sprayed with a custom-developed sand coating (ramel means sand). Their Jordanian designer, Hamza Omari, who studied in Vancouver, says that their shape is influenced by the traditional Bedouin way of holding the cup in all five fingers, while the handle has been added for the convenience of Westerners. When filled with hot coffee, the sand surface becomes warm to touch, conjuring comforting thoughts of beach holidays.

The development period for this small product was six months, the time it took to find the right sand. Its composition had to be suitable for the spraying process – too much iron ore, for example, would cause problems when subjected to heat. The best sand was eventually found in an area of the desert called Al Mamour, making this a product completely embedded in the local geography.

Rita Kettaneh hadn't stunted on the development of her Crystal Tables, either – or her education. She first took an engineering degree at the American University in Beirut, followed by an MSC in Entrepreneurship at UCL in London. But it was a brief workshop in product and furniture design that set her on her current course, and she now runs KRAY Studio back in her native Beirut, designing furniture and accessories made to order in local workshops.

You could see her engineering background in the tables' precise bases, made from copper-plated steel tubing bent into geometric forms to create crisp delineations of triangles and tetrahedra. Finished with dainty triangular and rectangular tops in live-edge acrylic, each table is a hefty \$330, the result of the hand-made production which is the

only option she chooses to keep local.

The French designer Myrtille Ronteix had taken the notion of regionalism one step further, working with Emirati craftswomen to reinvigorate the traditional use of palm leaves which, when densely woven, can be strong enough to make trays, rugs and even doors and furniture. She had been part of a scheme run by Tashkeel, a Dubai-based organisation that encourages creative practice among artists and designers with their local community. (Having been based in the United Arab Emirates for five years, Ronteix was eligible to participate in spite of her French nationality.) She loosened up the centuries-old process to create a more open weave that lets light through, and used this to construct the central core of a large pendant lamp. Secured inside a contemporary aluminium casing, with brass rods and a big black horsehair tassel as a lamp pull, there's a lot going on in the Insight Out light and its desire to bring together a local product with international style. It would be good to see her concentrating exclusively on the gentle, natural – and remarkably contemporary – qualities of the woven work in the future.

But the meeting of West and East did make more meaningful matches. Ishraq Zraikat's woven cotton throws and blankets even had a touch of Prada about them. It turned out that Zraikat had studied weaving at a fashion school in Milan, after qualifying as an architect in Jordan, and isn't averse to exploring the world of vintage patterns and textiles, which she obsessively collects. Images of old fabric designs and colours are then digitally captured and subtly manipulated. In one instance, she had snatched a swatch from a rug by the Bauhaus weaver Gunta Stölzl and merged it into a classic kelim design. The outcome resembled Atari graphics from the 1970s.

Also borrowing from material, though in physical form, is Soukaina Aziz El Idrissi, whose woven plastic upcycles builders' bags and the like into a dramatically beautiful new material that she has so far used for screen and wall hangings. She learned her skills at Central St Martin's, but why stay in London when she could return to Casablanca, where her participation as co-founder of the anti-pollution NGO Zero Zebel is perhaps more urgent, and exciting.

These practitioners might have had the 'benefit' of a Western education, but it feels like the energy of their home cities is what infuses their work with real meaning and relevance.

Caroline Roux is acting editor of 'Crafts'

