

AMBRA MEDDA

Have a Nespresso with the co-founder of Design Miami/Basel.

PHOTOGRAPHERS: MARTIEN MULDER, RAINER HOSCH
ASSISTANT: GOKAY SARIOZ
PRODUCTION: NATASHA STANGLMAYR
HAIR + MAKE UP: FATIME OLIVE
INTERVIEW: ALISA ANH



N: You are co-founder and director of the Design Miami / Basel which has become since its launch in 2005 internationally recognized as the most prestigious and innovative design fair of its kind. One of your main tasks in running the show is to curate design. Do you have any golden rules for recognizing good design?

Ambra Medda: I think that the criteria depend on the object in and of itself. Some pieces have a stronger emphasis on form, or functionality, or aesthetics,

and these aspects need to be considered individually. Every time I look at something I try and forget everything else I've seen before and approach it in a very fresh way. I would say that a piece of good design is "endless"; you never tire of looking at it. At the same time, it is also an emblem of its time and history. Essentially, good design carries a balance between form and functionality. For instance with the designer Gio Ponti, you instinctively feel that his is the work of a genius and that his approach to designing a chair or a church is the same. In the same way, Zaha Hadid can design a tea set or a car factory and it carries that same equilibrium. Ron Arad is great too, although totally different: he isn't primarily concerned with the day-to-day use of the work. His works are to be investigated and appreciated on a completely different level. With good design the expression of the designer is evident in the object, regardless of whether it is functional or beautiful or both.

N: This element of the sublime sounds like a definition of good art as well. What is the art of design?

Ambra Medda: In fact, it's becoming more and more difficult to draw the line between design and art — it's exciting that we can't classify things. It means that we're really in the middle of an experimental and transitional phase. For example: with artists whose point of departure for a work is function, is what they make art or design? I think it's "both", as well as "neither-nor" and that's great. It stimulates questions and discourse on what is design and what is art. I like the fact that there is no answer. At the same time, while many are intimidated by art and feel they must be very informed in order to appreciate it, design is more accessible, because people recognize it. (You sit in a chair every day!) Yet exactly for this reason, design is often taken for granted.





“I would say that the popularization of design benefits us all in that design is certainly more accessible, and people are more able now to acquire very functional, very good design at an affordable price. Ultimately, I think that this makes people’s lives better.”

N: What is the relationship between technology and design?

Ambra Medda: The effect technology has on design is one aspect that excites us most within the industry because of the innovation in materials and technologies that allow designers to do things they could never have done, not even 10 years ago. We now have designers, for instance, realising pieces that they have drawn in the air with electric wands. It’s pretty unbelievable!

N: In the 1980s design was something for the elite few. Today it is almost a mass movement. Does this bother you?

Ambra Medda: I would say that the popularization of design benefits us all in that design is certainly more accessible, and people are more able now to acquire very functional, very good design at an affordable price. Ultimately, I think that this makes people’s lives better, so – by all means – it’s a great thing! And no worries – there will always be an elite side to design where a one-off piece or limited edition differentiates itself from something that has been produced in the millions.

One aim of Design Miami is to provide a forum for important and extraordinary design without being pretentious. I recall at the last Design Miami I overheard two older women commenting on the fair enthusiastically: “So this is what people mean when they talk about design!” I went up and thanked them, and they went on to tell me how much they were looking forward to learning more about design. Putting together Design Miami was worth it just for that!

N: Don’t you think that design has also become a label and a term that is often misused?

Ambra Medda: Oh, there is a lot of bad design, indeed; but there is bad everything: you can find examples of good and bad art, movies... Things that are overexposed are tiring. For people used to design, what is good and what is not good hits us and lets us down faster. For people with a lesser understanding of design, it takes longer to realize this. We established Design Miami to make people look at design in a different way, to open up to them a new world and discourse. And just as design is not just a label, I would hate for Design Miami to be misinterpreted as being “just” a fair, because we seek to go beyond that – by packing into it a culture of design and bringing people together to discuss a subject that has never been represented like this before. We want to stimulate and promote the creation of design by presenting our “Designer of the Future” and “Designer of the Year” Awards. By doing this we hope to support young cutting edge designers and recognize and collaborate with established designers/ architects/ artists who push the envelope of design.

N: There are very many design hotels these days. Do you have a favourite that manages to balance design sensibility with design pretension?

Ambra Medda: What comes immediately to mind is the Hotel Puerta America in Madrid. I think that it is also a perfect demonstration of the internal shift in the discourse surrounding design. Tourism has been uplifted by design attractions: nowadays people actually go to a city to stay in a particular hotel instead of vice versa. Design is not just a matter of functionality; it has changed our lives and our behaviour.



“So people are investing more in their homes, creating their own little museums. And whether the museum is filled by pieces from Ikea or Barry Friedman – as long as you appreciate it and you love it, I think that it’s a positive thing.”

N: There is a trend to professionalize the private sphere. The kitchen is becoming a personal gastronomy, the home bar a lounge, the living room is now the media room and the coffee lover a barista. What do you think about this?

Ambra Medda: I think this trend is indicative of our times; it’s part of history. Technology and lifestyle let us and expect us to do more at home. For instance instead of going to the cinema I can rent a DVD and watch it on my widescreen television, and it’s just as good or better. So people are investing more in their homes, creating their own little museums. And whether the museum is filled by pieces from Ikea or Barry Friedman – as long as you appreciate it and you love it, I think that it’s a positive thing.

But one thing I do lament is the trend in kitchen design, which touts sophistication at the expense of family life. The whole idea of a block in the middle of the kitchen surrounded by stools where everyone just eats and runs shatters the ritual of sitting around the table and sharing a moment and a meal. I personally do not come from a traditional family – my mom doesn’t cook and I wasn’t raised with a sense of traditional etiquette – but there is something very personal and valuable that is violated by this trend in kitchen design, which I see as born in America. And many Europeans embrace this shift away from the ritual as something modern. I see it as backwards.

N: You are actually a trained expert in the Chinese language and Asian art. Does this area of expertise still figure into your plans for the future?

Ambra Medda: I will definitely be at the 2006 Biennial in Shanghai. And in fact, by the time of the publication of this magazine, I will have returned from a trip to China to test the water for eventually bringing the design fair to the East. It doesn’t necessarily have to be China, it could be Dubai, Japan, or the like. It’s just a start, and I am looking forward to investigating the possibilities. This is one of my favourite parts of my job: the research into new designers, new forums. It’s exciting and rewarding.

N: You are a native Italian – Sardinian, to be precise. The southern Europeans always knew how to enjoy life, especially their coffee. Is there a personal coffee ritual that you have brought with you from your homeland?

Ambra Medda: I am Italian, so coffee is sacred. Me, my sister and mother are all serious coffee drinkers in my family! One thing that I do carry with me is a ritual I experienced as a child: In the mornings my mom wouldn’t say much, but she would have her mocca. The image of my mom sitting at the breakfast table with her mocca, and the smell of coffee filling the kitchen is a memory that will live within me forever.

N: Last, but not least: What is definitely not your cup of coffee?

Ambra Medda: I personally hate it when you have a cappuccino, and they soak it with flavoured syrup and sprinkle chocolate or cinnamon all over the froth. I love the flavours; I just don’t want them imposed on my coffee. Best of all I like my coffee short and black. (But I will definitely give the anise-flavoured Nespresso a try!) ☺

