



FRONTAL ILLUSIONISTS

A female foursome obscures the boundary between real and imagined.

words : katharina horstmann

A bending snake squeezes clay and creates a clothes hanger; a rat let loose on rolled-up wallpaper gnaws repetitive outlines, creating the final design; the motion-captured trajectory of a fly dancing around a lamp becomes the lampshade itself. The concept: wallpaper, hooks, lamps and other everyday objects designed by rats, dogs, snakes, rabbits and insects. And so, the creatures' own patterns and shapes were incorporated into these ordinary furnishings, with a result that was even more beautiful than expected. "Actually, we had hoped that what the animals did would be really hideous," admits Sofia Lagerkvist. "Sadly, however, all the things turned up to be quite nice."

Lagerkvist, Charlotte von der Lancken, Anna Lindgren and Katja Sävström met as students at the Konstfack—University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm. Together, they form the design collective Front. *Design by Animals*, their first joint project after launching their design studio in 2003, became a hit the subsequent year at Salone Satellite, the showcase for young designers held at Milan's furniture fair. Since then, the foursome has cultivated a true synergy, with each member involved in the design process from initial discussions and ideas to the final product.

Like most of Front's subsequent designs, the early *Design by Animals* series is rooted in an investigation of where the role of a designer starts and ends in the process of interpreting and manufacturing everyday objects—a process that is often influenced by random factors. Indeed, using wild animals to give form to their ideas was an attempt to enhance that randomness, and the question as to what represents a "good and useful" form was quickly turned upside down, demonstrating that the design process can be just as interesting as the final object itself.

This ongoing investigation led to what some might consider their most significant and groundbreaking work to date, *Sketch Furniture*, which was shown for the first time at Design Miami/ 2005 with Barry Friedman Gallery, New York. The idea for this project began with the simple question, "Why start 2D sketches when designing 3D products?", giving rise to a collection for which Front combined two digital techniques in order to materialize freehand sketches: Pen strokes in the air were recorded with motion capture and translated into 3D digital files, which by rapid prototyping were afterwards transformed into real pieces of furniture.

This approach to create illusions of magic by seemingly making use of illusionary techniques and the aesthetic language that comes with it also resulted in a collaboration with real magicians. Borrowing some of the technical insights of these experts, the foursome developed *Magic Collection*, a furniture series that consists of lampshades that appear to hover in the air; drawers that seem to fly away or cupboards that constantly change their surfaces.

"Inspired by nature and endowed by a rich fantasy, Front's use of latest technologies contains a persuasive potential for the future," says Vitra Design Museum director Alexander von Vegesack. "With their designs, they present a fresh and exciting outlook on our daily world."

In keeping with this fresh, contemporary spirit, Front is moving with equal ease in both the art and design worlds. Their designs range from mass-produced objects for the home to one-off pieces aimed at galleries—an approach for which Front was awarded the Designer of the Future prize at Design Miami/ Basel 2007. Often even their most experimental and fantastic ideas result in the development of actual products, which they recently demonstrated on a larger scale. During this year's Salone Internazionale del Mobile in Milan, they

showcased six different projects, including new pieces for Moroso, Skitsch, Moooi, Porro, Veuve Clicquot and Established & Sons, creating mass-produced objects with relatively naive aesthetics, as though imagined rather than real.

Established & Sons, for instance, presented an elaboration of Front's *Shade* series, a project introduced a year prior at Spazio Rossana Orlandi in Milan. Some might regard *Shade* as a progression of *Sketch Furniture*, as these objects, too, are materialized sketches. *Shade Mirror*, now in production, incorporates lines and shadings that appear hand-drawn, although, in fact, they are applied using an etching technique. The idea for their new collection for Moroso is similar, but with a twist. Front created illusions of three-dimensional surfaces by printing furniture upholstery with photorealistic imagery. The result is a soft bench that appears wooden, a draped sofa whose surface is completely flat and a pile of cushions without any actual cushions.

As Lagerkvist explains: "Design is produced more as an image than it is in reality. Objects you have never seen in real life you've seen so many times in magazines, but never for real. We're interested in the part the image plays in the process of making the piece."



Above: Front portrait. Opposite page, from left: *Soft Wood Sofa* for Moroso, part of Milan 2009 *Moment Collection*; detail from *Randomly Crystallized* for Swarovski Crystal Palace; *Glass Table* for Moooi; *Changing Cupboard* from *Found Collection*, Galerie Kreo; *Animal Thing Collection* for Moooi; *Design by Animals Fly Lamp*; *Svarka* from IKEA PS 2009 *Collection*; all images courtesy of Front.