



A BEAUTIFUL MIND

Maarten Baas: Designer of the Year 2009
& Clear Issue 34 cover designer

interview : katharina horstmann



Maarten Baas belongs to a select group of young designers who have refused the modernist role of the designer as a problem-solver in favor of self-expression. At 31, the alumnus of The Design Academy in Eindhoven, The Netherlands, is the youngest designer receiving the Designer of the Year Award, initiated by Design Miami/, December's limited edition design fair.

The Dutch designer first made a name for himself as a pyromaniac with his 2002 graduation project, *Smoke*, in which he literally set fire to old chairs and tables before coating them in an epoxy resin to preserve the charred remains. By burning existing furniture and stripping away ornament, Baas diminished the hands-off preciousness of design, causing quite a stir in the design world.

His collections *Clay* and *Sculpt* carry *Smoke*'s idea of functional imperfection further. The *Clay* pieces, for instance, are constructed by hand, without moulds, from industrial clay pressed around very simple metal armatures. They're painted in bold colors, giving the impression of being the result of a playschool class, and, on a large scale, they look delusively unstable, yet are surprisingly solid. *Sculpt* furniture pieces are based on quick sketches, which were then enlarged and literally translated into finished items on a monumental yet cartoonish scale. The cupboard, for example, appears to be carved from solid lumber, but is actually made of steel that has been finished with walnut veneer, enabling people—like with most of Baas' work—to decode its prehistory and how the piece was made simply by looking at its form.

This interest in play with preconceptions led Baas to his more recent project, *Real Time*, which he presented during this year's Salone Internazionale del Mobile in Milan. He made different movies dealing with the passing of time, creating 24 hours' worth of high definition film that can function as a clock.

Maarten Baas—Designer of the Year 2009—how does that feel? How have you been approached?

It was in April or May when I called Ambra [Medda, director of Design Miami] for some reason and all of a sudden she started saying: 'We think you mean a lot for designers, for young designers ...' and she went on and on and I thought: 'This is a nice monologue to listen to' [laughs]. And then she asked me: 'Would you be interested in being the designer of the year?' —and I replied: 'Well, that's not a question!'

But has it always been that easy? When you studied at The Design Academy in Eindhoven you were said to be given a hard time by your teachers? Or was it the other way around?

Oh yeah, one or the other [laughs]. Indeed, I had some hard times at school. I think it mainly changed when I went to Milan for an exchange term. It was a kind of turning point. When I came back, I opened up my eyes a little bit more and started to believe more in what I was doing, independently from other opinions. Also, there was a kind of status quo with my teachers like, 'Maarten is not changeable anymore, so leave him.'



My graduation project, *Smoke*, was not supported that much by my teachers either. They let me pass the exams but in the process after that when selections were made for exhibitions, my teachers didn't propose my pieces. They were not so keen on showing *Smoke*, but the director of the school, Li Edelkoort, was totally in love with it from the very beginning. She actually overruled them all.

Considering *Smoke* and the following pieces *Clay* and *Sculpt*: On first sight it seems easy to make a connection between them ... and then it totally went wild [laughs]. There isn't any connection. The first three collections have a kind of a clear line, that's true. Actually I think that everything I make, the only connection they have, or at least one connection they have, is that they are all from me. They are all a kind of extension of my personality. I cannot really tell about myself and I think nobody can tell about himself. I mean, what kind of person are you? What did you want to say? The engine that keeps me going is my really strong will to make it. So it doesn't really make sense to keep on being in one style. Then I wouldn't feel the urge anymore to explore that field. Within my activities, I like to touch as much as I think is interesting.

But indeed, looking back, in the beginning I thought it's kind of a nice line—but I was never doing it consciously. You could say *Smoke* and *Clay*, they're kind of the opposite. You could almost say that first you burn things that were already there, like burning a field to clean it

and to plant something new. Then the collection *Clay* would be the new plant and *Sculpt* a kind of mature version. So, yes, I thought, that's a funny line, but then there was *The Chankley Bore* and the *Plastic Chair in Wood* and they had [nothing] to do with each other. And then I gave up trying to find lines ... I never really went for a certain direction.

**“Lately, I like the theatrical element of design.”
—Maarten Baas**

Please tell us about your plans for Design Miami/.

I want to present my previous work, and on top of that I will show new work. I'm working on a range of new cabinets right now, which will be roughly welded in steel.

Lately, I like the theatrical element of design. I liked also very much the *Telling Tales* exhibition at the V&A. Its approach is really up-to-date with what's happening in design right now: Telling stories through an object and creating a kind of atmosphere. I also move with my clock pieces in a kind of theatre world. Have you seen my show in Milan? I worked with a live actor there. So what I want to do in Miami is to work with a live performance, so that if there are still people doubting whether or not I make design, especially those people will be confused: Is this theatre?



... or set design?

I don't do it on purpose, but I can be a pain in the ass for those people who categorize [laughs]. I don't really want to give things a name, explanation or description.

Could you tell us a bit more about the cabinet?

It is an abstract object. There are a few legs on both sides, a leg here, and a leg there, and also on the back there is a kind of leg. So it's a kind of creature, and you hardly see that it is a cabinet. There is no door handle or anything. You push the door and it clicks open. It's just an absurd shape.

As I said before, it's hard to find a line in my work. If my projects

have something in common, then [it is] that they are all from me and that all of them carry a kind of curiosity within themselves – like the objects in *Cabinets of Curiosity*. When people [go] traveling, they [bring] all kind of objects back; the only link between them [is] that all of them [are] interesting items. I think this is a fitting approach to looking at my work, and I want to bring that element to the exhibition in Miami, creating a surreal atmosphere with live actors like I used for my clock project *Real Time*. A little bit of this, a little bit of that – together they create ...

... Maarten's world?
Yeah.

Opposite (from left): *Smoke Cabinet*, *Clay Fan*, *Sculpt Dining Chair* in stainless steel, *Clay Bookshelf*. This page: *Sweeperclock*, part of the *Real Time* series (2009), photograph by Ricardo da Costa.