

## Compositions of opposition

Nicole Swengley

*The challenge for the Miami/Basel Designers of the Future was to create a marriage of concrete and wool.*

Not for nothing is Design Miami / Basel known for its commitment to experimental design. New forms, new technologies, new processes, new object-types and new design philosophies are sheltered within its embrace of limited-edition design - both contemporary and historic - at biannual fairs and forums held at Basel, Switzerland, in June and Miami, US, in December. But the brief for work commissioned from this year's winners of the Design Miami/ Basel Designer of the Future award might have perplexed even the most avant-garde creatives. It stipulates the use of two diametrically opposed materials - concrete and wool - in the development of a new object or installation, along with a short film revealing the designer's creative process. The designs and videos will be unveiled at the Basel fair next week.

Why concrete and wool? "We're eager to see how the designers will work with two materials that contrast so completely - hard versus soft, technology versus craft, organic versus inorganic, neutral versus colourful," says Ambra Medda, director and co-founder of Design Miami/Basel. "Concrete is a neutral material that can be adapted in various ways. It links in with the brutalist architecture of the Market Hall [Markhaller] - the envelope for the show. Wool relates to the tradition of craft. We wanted to bring in a textile but in its loosest of forms. The brief provides a common thread for very different approaches from emerging talent - young designers who we feel will leave their mark on the history of design by taking an individual approach and creating meaningful work."

Martino Gamper

Italian-born Martino Gamper is no stranger to controversy. Last year at Design Miami/ Basel he deconstructed vintage Gio Ponti chairs, using the raw materials to create his own designs in front of a live audience. Yet the Designers of the Future brief slightly disconcerted him. "I was surprised," he says at his studio in Hackney, east London. "I was happy with the concrete but puzzled how to introduce wool. I didn't believe the two materials could be combined and felt the hard-soft aspect was a false premise." Nor was he ecstatic about the video. "I feel it's intrusive and I'm not sure we should document every little moment - it becomes a bit like YouTube.

"The term Designers of the Future creates a pressure to meet people's expectations," he says. "The important emphasis for me is on the future - I want people to think about that. A lot of my work relates to particular spaces (his Royal College of Art degree show was based on room-corners framing a space) so I decided to create an environment rather than one object." One element of this is a wool rug bearing the words "Expected to be or happen at a time still to come" - a phrase that amalgamates dictionary definitions of the word "future". "I thought about using Futura but modified a more dynamic typeface instead," jokes Gamper. Then, having chosen the rug's thread, pile, colour and technique, Gamper e-mailed the design to a carpet dealer in Milan, who forwarded it to Nepal for hand-knotting.

The rug's colour - three shades of grey -relates to the other element, a terrazzo table. "I wasn't trying to reinvent concrete but create a different finish by adding texture and colour," he explains. "Two years ago I cast a football table in concrete. It needed very heavy moulds which were eventually discarded. So I decided to make low terrazzo tables, 1.2m square, to reduce weight and wastage."

After hand sketching the table he viewed it from different angles on a computer and worked out exact measurements. It is encased in brass, with a sunken, interior grid into which coloured terrazzo mixes are cast. "The table itself acts as the mould," Gamper explains. An Italian flooring company is making the piece, which he will hand finish.

Has he met the brief? "I've used the stipulated materials," Gamper replies. "I think they would have preferred a combination of the materials but I felt this was too craft-orientated and not

looking towards the future. I didn't want to force the marriage but perhaps I limited myself in a way."

Max Lamb

On hearing the brief Lamb, who flits between his London studio and Lausanne, Switzerland, where he is teaching on the industrial design course at Ecal (University of Art & Design, Lausanne), was "excited by the unknown".

"I've never explored concrete or felt [wool], in any depth so I began from scratch," he says. "Experimentation with materials and the exploration of associated processes is my typical approach to new projects. Once I've got the material in my hand, my heart takes over - but never completely. My work is always quite logical and develops through research and physical experimentation."

Lamb is a pragmatic designer who has created numerous chairs and stools using various materials and processes for his ongoing project, Exercises in Seating, begun in 2006. "I always begin with a raw material and experiment with methods of process," he says. So he researched commercially available types of concrete and wool then "decided to treat the materials separately but manipulate them in a way that would produce a coherent exhibition".

"I remembered visiting a Manchester felt factory as a student and being impressed by the technical wool felt. The properties of this high-density felt 'resemble wood rather than soft wool. It's incredibly strong and can be cut and machined like wood. I researched the numerous compositions available and experimented with different thicknesses and densities. With these in hand, my design began to evolve.

"Concrete's properties and purposes are widely documented but it's hard to find a unique way of using the material that doesn't begin with an aesthetic concept," observes Lamb. "This is not how I work because I like the design to bear the signature of the process and for the process and material to dictate the form of a design. "Then I discovered AAC - autoclaved aerated concrete - which is up to 60 per cent lighter than traditional concrete. The foamed concrete is pre-cast into slabs, offers excellent insulation and is quick to install. I found some blocks at my local builder's merchant and was amazed by their lightness and how easily they can be cut and carved. So I decided to find a novel way of using AAC for furniture."

Having discovered that the high-density technical wool felt and low-density aerated concrete were virtually identical in weight, insulation properties and machinability, Lamb is using the materials separately to create a similar object - a stool.

The concrete is hand-turned on a woodworking lathe using traditional tools. Each 45cm tall stool is different due to the handwork involved or, as Lamb puts it, "the rotational aspect of the process places its signature firmly on the stools". The felt discs used by Lamb are mounted on industrial machinery, such as rotational polishing spindles, but he has laminated seven 50mm discs together to create 35cm tall stools.

Has he met the brief? "I've explored both materials in an experimental but logical way to develop two collections of stools - quiet objects that are more a celebration of the two materials than my own design sensibilities," says Lamb.

Unlike Gamper, he welcomed the video requirement. "Since working on Exercises in Seating, I've recorded the making of each of my projects," he says. "My work is as much about communicating my explorations as about the exploration itself. The communication process lets people into a secret and, hopefully, captivates them."

Julia Lohmann

German-born, London-based Lohmann says she thrives on challenges and welcomed a brief that would "make me do something I wouldn't normally tackle". Her previous work has probed the threshold between natural and man-made worlds so she began her research by photographing moss and lichens growing on concrete. "I wanted to understand the material,

see how it behaved and embrace its flaws by making them desirable," she says. "The first person I called was an old school friend now working for a concrete advisory firm in Germany. When he told me how they try to make concrete perfect I realised I wanted to do the opposite."

Lohmann's concrete table has a deliberately cracked surface through which vestiges of moss- and lichen-coloured felt-wool "grow". The cracked concrete adheres to a felt surface contained within four metal legs. "I want to change the perception of concrete being rigid, hard and heavy by making the cracked concrete very thin and wrapping it around the felt-wool surface so it becomes the most flexible part of the design," she says.

Lohmann is using Flow Stone, a very smooth, hard concrete normally used to create kitchen worktops, and has asked its German manufacturer, Dyckerhoff, to supply the table's final mould. Large pieces of handmade felt, meanwhile, were supplied by felt-maker Liz Clay, whom Lohmann located via the UK's Crafts Council.

The designer began experimenting by casting the concrete, cracking it and using the felt surface to hold the cracked concrete together. "The bendiness and flexibility of the felt-wool makes the concrete perform in new ways," she explains. "Breaking the concrete - normally considered destructive - becomes part of the creative process. And a material that's considered strong becomes weak and has to rely on the strength of the wool."

Initially the moss-like felt was "cast into the concrete because I wanted it to be inside, not on top", says Lohmann. "But it didn't look good so I began cutting, folding then glueing it into the open cracks. I wanted to give the concrete surface a softer look as the cracks were too harsh on their own."

Lohmann has unarguably met the brief but how will end-users react? "I think people will be intrigued," she says. "Concrete has an image problem because everyone thinks of grey 1960s tower blocks but I'm trying to give it a new language." As for the video, Lohmann has found a Mexican documentary maker to record her creative journey "because it must look professional".

Kram/Weisshaar

The multi-disciplinary work of Munich-based Clemens Weisshaar and his collaborator, Ohio-born, Stockholm-based Reed Kram, hovers between architecture, retail design, product development and media design. Undaunted by the brief, Weisshaar's reaction was simply "10 weeks to go".

The creative spark for their design - stool and table typologies in unusual geometric shapes, each of which comprises two interlocking components - came "from the heart, as always", says Weisshaar. They developed the concept in a hands-on way, linking digital and physical processes during design and production by adding a customised computer application to five-axis robotic milling machines.

"We go back and forth between the computer and physical models - a bit like a conversation," he explains. "The computer programme is like a dynamic blueprint. At the press of a button the geometry for the casting mould is generated and passed on to numerically controlled machines. The final pieces are rotationally moulded using coloured, self-compacting, fibre-reinforced concrete. As concrete is a metaphor for modernity so we are using post-industrial techniques to materialise our concept.

"We have used parametric drawings and generative software before, specifically in our Breeding Tables project," says Weisshaar. "This new project, Vendôme, is not just technology for technology's sake but, rather, about the human touch when dealing with technology."

Six of the 99 pieces comprising Vendôme will be shown as an installation at Design Miami/Basel, with each vertical edge banded by commercially available, orange woollen string fixed, floor to ceiling, as a frame around each object. This 400m length of string is the only

woollen element, so has the design duo met the brief? "That's for others to decide," says Weisshaar. "We like to look at the whole process of producing a design and that includes the presentation."

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