

THE

Story by STEPHEN TODD Photography by ANTOINE DOYEN



CLASH

India Mahdavi on colour, cartoons and her upcoming exhibition in Australia.

design

India Mahdavi
at her studio in
Paris in December.
Far left: The pink
interior of Sketch's
Gallery restaurant
in London took
Instagram
by storm.





Sketch's latest interior, by Mahdavi and artist Yinka Shonibare, features ochre-yellow hues.

INDIA MAHDABI spots me staring into the window of her Left Bank showroom and laughs at my evident perplexity: the furniture on display is made from pristine white marble, gleaming as a bleached coral reef. What happened to the designer *The New Yorker* not long ago dubbed a "virtuoso of colour"?

"Don't worry," she says with an enigmatic grin. "I'm still polyglot and polychrome." It's an aphorism Mahdavi has intoned often over the two decades we've known one another, a de facto motto and reference to her multilingual background and her way with hues that appear to exist on a parallel spectrum.

Since launching her studio in 2000, Mahdavi – who was born in Tehran and raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Heidelberg, Germany and the south of France before moving to Paris to study architecture – has designed the interiors of dozens of private residences in London, Paris and New York as well as Mumbai, The Hamptons, Big Sur, Siwa (Egypt) and Sydney. She's revamped the suites of Claridge's and several bars at The Connaught, both London landmarks; revitalised the exclusive Monte Carlo Beach Hotel; delivered delectable outlets for famed French confectionery maison Laduree in Geneva, Beverly Hills and Aoyama. An exclusive ski lodge at Courchevel, private jets, classic yachts, luxury fashion boutiques – there are few built environments to which Mahdavi has not been invited to apply her refined eye.

All with a bold insouciance that comes off as an assertive kind of whimsy – a style that has been vastly influential but infuriatingly inimitable. Her pink interior installed in 2014 for the ever-hip Gallery restaurant at Sketch in Mayfair was such a social media success – infamously, the most Instagrammed restaurant in London – that the owner

decided to extend the period of install to eight years instead of the usual two. Years later the term "Millennial pink" would be coined to describe what became the tone of the second half of the previous decade. And then, in another first, the team at Sketch commissioned Mahdavi to design the follow-up, this time in collaboration with British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, unveiled in April last year. Now, the vast, square, windowless interior is finished in warm ochre-yellow hues offset with copper wallpaper by De Gournay and vegetal textures, an ode to and showcase for the artist's African heritage.

"Warmth is the new colour at Sketch," Mahdavi said at the time of opening. Trend alert! Indeed, since that refurb there's been talk of how "Gen-Z yellow" is the new hue for the 2020s.

THE MINI-EMPIRE of India Mahdavi is on the Rue las Cases in Paris's 7th arrondissement. Her showroom is at No.3, offices at No.5, a "Petits Objets" outlet at No.19 and a "Project Room" sits on the corner with Rue de Bellechasse. On the way up to her studio, squeezed into one of those cupboard-sized lifts fitted within the spiral stairwell of a 19th-century Haussmannian building, we marvel at the imposed intimacy of the setting. It's as if a pandemic doesn't separate this and our last meeting in September 2019 when we began discussing her scenography for an exhibition of works by post-impressionist painter Pierre Bonnard at the National Gallery of Victoria. It's finally due to open in June.

As she opens the double doors into the studio, the grey Parisian winter day fades away: inside is a kaleidoscope of intensely quirky colours on Mahdavi-designed furniture, lighting and objects artfully arrayed to look as if they had come to party in chic formation.



Mahdavi in her offices on the Rue las Cases. Her work will appear as part of an exhibition at the NGV in June.



Above and below: India Mahdavi's showroom. Right: Jardin d'interieur, her collection for La Manufacture de Cogolin (Gelato chairs, Jetlag sofa, Starr table). Below right: True Velvet, her collaboration with La Maison Pierre Frey.



Ahead, two deep-plum sofas bracket a curvaceous "bivalve" timber low-table in what serves as the waiting area. (The studio was originally an apartment, and Mahdavi has leaned into this sense of domesticity, or intimacy, in her manipulation of the space.) Next, a row of her iconic Bishop stools in a dusty pink, a citrus yellow, disco mauve and a red that is approaching the shade of rich borscht (no added cream) – stand sentinel around two large dining tables which, pushed together, form the studio's consultation space. On a section of wall, next to an elegantly arched doorway, Mahdavi and her team have taped enlarged copies of details from various Bonnard oil paintings, sometimes so close up as to pixellate into abstractions.

Squint your eyes, and you detect, perhaps, a red-and-white check pattern lifted from a Bonnard painting, *Coffee* (1915), depicting a woman imbibing said beverage accompanied by her dog, both seated at a table covered in gingham cloth. A blue-and-white pixellated pattern seems similarly to be derived from a painting including fabric the French call "vichy" (named after the town before it became synonymous with France's World War II government). Other details become blurs of colour and pattern: a gold-





white stripe pattern seems to evoke the work of Daniel Buren; at other moments you get a foretaste of the soft-focus aesthetic of German painter Gerhard Richter.

Bonnard, a notable French post-impressionist, is considered a vital link between the impressionists and modernists. He is renowned for complex domestic scenes that often layer panels of decorative texture (wallpapers, screens, curtains, tablecloths) as nuanced planes of colour and pattern to form backdrops to intimate still life compositions. His friend Matisse declared Bonnard "a great painter, for today and definitely also for the future".

"I love artists that announce something to follow," says Mahdavi, "that are part of a trajectory bigger than themselves. Matisse pushed everything so much further, but already you can detect a joy, a vibration in Bonnard. He has a perception of colour that is distinctly his own."

As does Mahdavi. But she sees great differences between their palettes. "I think Bonnard's colour emerged in the light of the south of France. There are lots of variation of intensity in the oranges, purples and pinks. My colours are more pop colours, colours that are really dense, saturated. I've been influenced by so many cultures as my family moved around so much when I was a child. But one of the things that really marked me was American cartoons."

Looking around the studio living area, from the vantage point of a velvet sofa so deeply dyed as to feel like ink ("I use velvet a lot, exactly because of the intense way it renders colours") it's not hard to envisage a bit of Hanna-Barbera in the decor: a Bishop stool that's not just "purple" but the colour of Jane Jetson's dress; a citrus yellow colour matched to junior Elroy Jetson's "blonde" hair. The new interior of Sketch could be seen as having its roots in the crown Bugs wears from time to time in *The Bugs Bunny Show*.

"The idea is to create a coherence, an overall sense of harmony in an interior," says Mahdavi, "but also to allow the colours to gently clash, to insult each other from time to time."

With their subtle differences in use of colour, the pairing of the scenography of Mahdavi, who is 60, with the paintings of Bonnard, who died in 1947 aged 79, will likely elicit a few blue words from beyond the grave. To reinforce the provocation, NGV has titled the exhibition *Pierre Bonnard: Designed by India Mahdavi*.

"It's extreme, because India's palette and patterning is intense," admits NGV director Tony Ellwood. "But it's a very



Above: Clover Suspension light in glass and brass; Cavallino chair in leather and wood.

design



Top left: *The Imaginary Architecture* exhibition at Homo Faber, Venice, in 2018. Above: Bishop stool in lime blossom. Left: Pierre Bonnard's work *Stairs in the artist's garden* 1942-44.

authentic pairing because she has studied Bonnard's work for several years now since being appointed pre-pandemic. Every element she's borrowed from the Bonnard works is done with great intellect and great care and the resulting wallpapers are glorious and sumptuous." And yes, Mahdavi "Bonnard" merchandise will be available in the gift shop.

INELA MAHDAVI'S bold way with colour and texture has inflected the Australian design scene for going on a decade now, beginning with Melbourne interior designer David Flack who opened his studio in 2014 and quickly found a deep niche as a purveyor of colour-saturated, texturally savvy, highly personalised interiors. He and others, such as Sydney's Yasmine Ghoniem; Juliette Arent and Sarah-Jane Pyke (Arent & Pyke) and art director Amanda Talbot (adviser to Justin Hemmes) have effectively booted the blonde-wood-and-Arne Jacobsen Series-7-chair aesthetic out the now heavily hand-carved, perhaps baize-lined door.

Flack fanboyed when told Mahdavi would like to meet him at his Fitzroy studio in early 2020 while she was on an entre-lockdown Melbourne visit. "I have always loved India's work," says Flack. "I relate to her because she uses colour with such clear intention, nothing is left to chance. She seems to inherently understand the impact of colour, as if she feels it in a way most people can't." He recalls an early encounter with her interiors at Cafe Francais on the Place de la Bastille, part of the Beaumarly group. Founded by Gilbert and son Thierry Costes, the group operates Parisian hospitality landmarks such as Cafe Beaubourg, Le Cafe Marly and restaurant Georges atop the Centre Pompidou.

Cafe Francais opened in 2013 and Flack visited just before launching his studio. He recalls "the rich burst of saturated reds and blues contained in the banquettes and then all connected by the beautiful pattern and shape contained in the wall panelling and tiled floor. I was awestruck by the sheer mastery of it – and it still looks incredibly chic today."

Flack especially noticed the plush red and blue Eva Gabriella leather and velvet club chairs designed especially



"The idea is to create a coherence ... but also to allow the colours to gently clash, to insult each other from time to time."

for the space (and named after owner Thierry Costes' second child). "They're defiantly present, like mini-sculpture, but also incredibly comfortable."

And there's the rub. While Mahdavi is renowned as a colourist (the same *New Yorker* article reckons she is a "possessor of perfect chromatic pitch") she also has a pronounced and singular affinity with form, constantly conjuring up new shapes that sit within existing typologies (a chair is recognisable as such, a table too) but pushing them to the parameters of the (aesthetically, but sometimes technically) possible.

Partly, that's her training – after gaining a degree in architecture from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, she moved to New York to study furniture design at Parsons School of Design, then graphic design at the School of Visual Arts. Partly, it's technical prowess picked up working for seven years alongside famed French organic-minimalist Christian Liaigre before setting out on her own. Whatever its source, it is wholly, uniquely, India Mahdavi.



| Bishop stool from the Achromia collection.



| Achromia collection: all white but still indelibly Mahdavi.

BACK DOWNSTAIRS under a low, winter sky (a grey so particular the French word for it is "plombe", leaden – the colour of the city's metal roofs, not often on Mahdavi's spectrum) I ponder that white marble furniture again. Part of a collection called Achromia, it was developed as a kind of manifesto to suggest the centrality of form-giving to Mahdavi's practice. Stripped of all polychromy (much as statuary from ancient Rome and Greece has lost its vibrant colour and is now perceived as "naturally" white)

the collection features Bishop stools that are fluted on the diagonal, highlighting the three-tiered structure, almost animating it in space. A split-topped, asymmetric Alber table, originally designed for late fashion designer Alber Elbaz, is likewise perched upon twisted pedestal legs; vases and bowls too.

"I love the way light plays across the pieces," Mahdavi explains. "It creates a vibration even without colour." And she's right – even without her trademark, saturated colour palette, these pieces are indelibly Mahdavi. The story is always the colour, but she's a master of shape as well.

But then, as the winter day fades and I'm left standing alone on the deserted Rue las Cases, the buzz of traffic on the nearby Boulevard Saint-Germain almost soothing, we hit that gloaming moment the French call "entre chien et loup" (between dog and wolf) and Mahdavi's multiple outlets on an otherwise residential street begin to glow in the approaching dark. Animating the streetscape as surely as they animate a home or hospitality space, her furniture and objects look set to party. Welcome to India, I imagine them saying, as I slip off into the Parisian night. *

PIERRE BONNARD: DESIGNED BY INDIA MAHDAVI IS ON AT THE NGV FROM JUNE 5 TO OCTOBER 8.