

DESIGN

VOICES

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Milan Design Week and Salone del Mobile. Milano is as much about the people as what's presented. We spoke to six leading voices about their latest work and shaping the future of design.

Hannes Peer pg 181

India Mahdavi pg 186

Vincent Van Duysen pg 192

Arno Declercq pg 198

6:AM Glassworks pg 204

David Lopez Quincoces pg 210

POLYGLOT POLYCHROME LOCAL

Architect India Mahdavi

Interview: Sophie Lewis

How has having lived in several countries and being exposed to diverse cultures from a young age influenced your approach to design?

I have convened those experiences, memories, or impressions and channelled them into my approach. It's like opening a mental door. It gave me the freedom to explore beyond the limits of what I was taught in school – always looking to translate those emotions that I have gathered over the years.

It also allowed me to push the boundaries of my discipline from architecture and interiors to furniture, objects, graphics, fabrics, and wallpapers. In doing so, I found a way to define myself and my own signature.

You established your Paris studio in 2000 and launched your first furniture collection and showroom in 2003. In

2011, you opened 'Petits Objets' to promote a 'range of crafts, ancestral techniques and your signature colour palette'. What has been the role of these spaces in the evolution of your work?

When I opened "Petits Objets", it was out of personal necessity simply because I couldn't find that specific typology of objects on the market at that time. It made me think on a different scale, using different production methods based on craft knowhow from all over the world as a starting point. We have worked with weavers from Mexico and Brazil, ceramic makers from France, Turkey, Iran and Spain, glass blowers from Murano Bohemia and Lebanon, lacquer from Vietnam, cashmere from Nepal and Ari stitching from India. We now invite independent designers as guests to be part of our

selection – these include among others Maximilien Pellet, the Crafties, Audrey Ballacchino and Wendy Andreu from France, Folkform from Sweden, Insaf Kooli from Tunisia.

One activity has always fed another. It's really about finding the flexibility to switch from one scale to another, mentally and physically. Every project leads me to create new furniture pieces; from there, I can imagine scaling them down, creating new objects or scaling up to create an environment. Rue Las Cases has become my epicentre, as I now have five spaces on one street: my creative studio, which I see as the core; the furniture showroom and its adjacent 'Little India,' which displays new pieces; 'Petits Objets,' the home accessories shop; and the 'Project Room', which is a cultural space that experiments with domesticity.



Portrait Antoine Doyen
Photography Felix Speller & Mattia Greggi



India Mahdavi was invited by new tile brand Alternative Artefacts Danto and its artistic director, Teruhiro Yanagihara, to be their first international collaborator on their installation, *Archaeology of Tiles*, during Milan Design Week 2024.

In 2020, you founded Project Room as a cultural exhibition space in Paris and a 'portal to new expressions of design from around the world'. What opportunities has this space created for multidisciplinary collaboration?

The Project Room opened in 2020 and invites, produces and exhibits. It merges talents and crafts, instigates conversations with designers from across the spectrum under the form of installations, décors, models, screenings, performances, lectures, and meetings. The Project Room regenerates four times a year and its access is free.

Since it opened, we have produced over 14 projects rooms, invited galleries such as Carwan Gallery from Athens, AGO Projects from Mexico, curators such as Dan Thawley from the new Matter and Shape design fair in Paris, designers such as Martine Bedin, Chris Wolston, Maximilien Pellet, the Crafties, projected "Les Mystères du Château de Dé" by Man Ray for the 100th anniversary of Villa Noailles and many more to come.

At this stage of my life, I wanted to share and create collaborative projects that could include designers from all over the world.

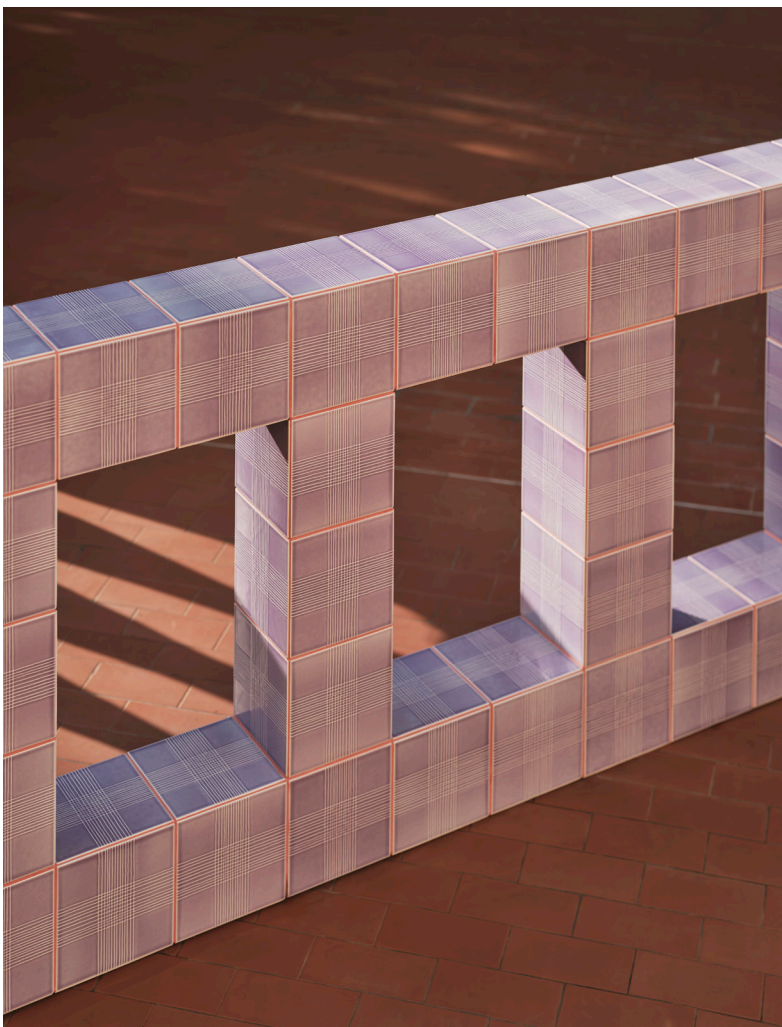
In our esteemed 10 interview, you described your approach as 'polyglot, polychrome and local'. Can you share an example of how these themes are revealed across different projects?

Polyglot, because my work is the result of my cosmopolitan upbringing, polychrome because colours have

become an expression, and local because I try to draw as much as I can from the context by using local materials, local resources, and local production methods.

When we asked about an influence to anticipate in your work, you said, 'less building, more ornament'. Why is this a design focus moving forward?

'Ornament – 'the art we add to art,' as art historian James Trilling defines it,



makes people happy; it stands for everything that makes life worth living. But ornament was effectively banned from our world almost a century ago, with modernism's doctrine that ornament was a betrayal of the beauty of function. Devotion to modernism stripped away our historical awareness of ornament and broke the tradition of craft that once kept ornament alive. Now that modernism is itself receding into history, ornament

is again acceptable, but moving forward seems to mean reinventing the wheel.

Ornament is the easiest way to redefine existing spaces and give them a new identity without undergoing construction work to be more sustainable. I started doing this 20 years ago by using ornament in its most minimal form.

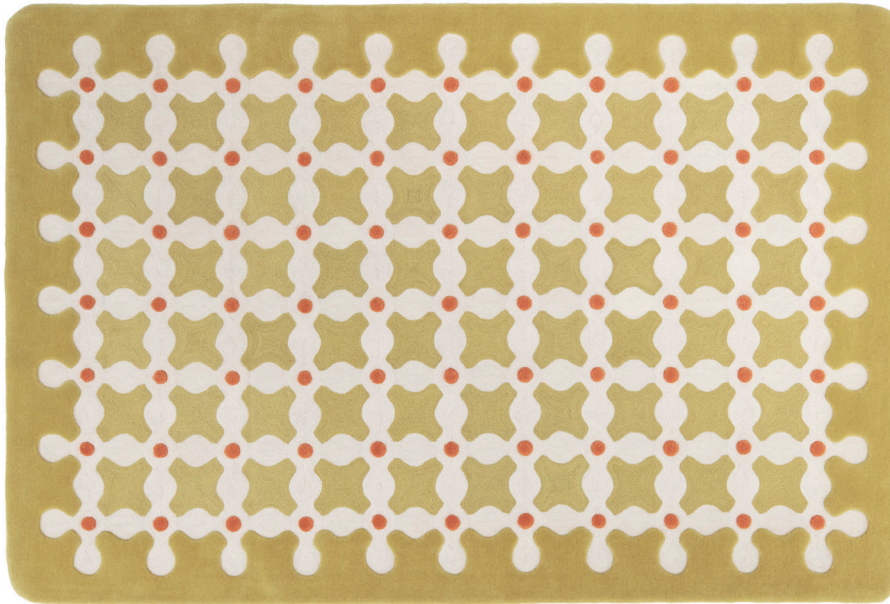
You are often called the 'queen of colour.' What is your philosophy regarding the use of colour in design?

Is this carried into your own personal spaces?

Colours have become my mode of expression precisely because they embody the artistic freedom that I seek. They are the light and shadow of all the souths from which I originate and relate the nostalgia of a paradise lost that sparks within me the desire to imagine others.

The use of colour is natural to me; it has never been artificial. It's instinctive and felt – more than it is conscious. When I see a space for the first time, colour emerges. It emerges like a feeling. I feel colours. I think my psyche, just as my body, is synesthetic: each colour is related to an emotion, to a smell, to a gesture, to a vision, to an impression.

I invite them into every space and every object. They follow me everywhere I go. The more, the merrier. Our infinite conversation isn't mundane, nor is it nagging. I like them to fight, argue, have a conversation, then comfort each other, reconcile and love each other again. Colours live in me – and with me. So my house in Arles naturally follows.



For Milan Design Week this year, new tile brand Alternative Artefacts Danto and its artistic director, Teruhiro Yanagihara, invited you to be the first international collaborator on their installation, *Archaeology of Tiles*. As this was the official launch, can you shed light on how you worked with the brand to bring a fresh perspective to Japanese tile design?

In creating the tiles, we utilised a multi-layered glazing technique on a single surface, allowing for effects that mostly imitate nature. This experimentation involved observing the reactions produced by the firing process, resulting in beautiful irregularities and variations on surfaces that evoke a different aspect of nature. This process led to the creation of the Mycelium and Freckles collections, both reflecting a shifted representation of nature with the beauty of wabi-sabi.

Another aspect explored in this collaboration is the cracked finish on the tinted clay tiles – where the colour lies within the clay rather than being applied as a glaze, giving colour a tangible presence. We also played with the relief of the tile, moulding the clay

and creating different scales of monochromatic grids, which, when assembled, produce an interesting vibration, enhanced using different colour joints.

Congratulations on your 'Criss Cross' hand-knotted rug collection for cc-tapis. How does this collection build on and differ from previous work with the brand?

The design combines two artisanal production methods: chain-stitching and hand-tufting from Northern India. Both techniques create complementary decorative layers, with one stitched to the base and the other tufted by hand, resulting in a motif that is propelled into a third dimension. This layering of graphic and geometric elements is dyed in colour combinations, intersecting traditional processes with modern elegance.

In a previous interview with est living, you also credited Milan Design Week as where you go to appreciate exceptional design. Why do you see it as such an important source of inspiration and platform for designers in 2024?

One can understand all the trends in the world of design, and the way products are presented is outstanding. Having said this, Max Frazer wrote in Dezeen online, an urgent reminder to all of us – to the designers and the industry: "The tempering of Milan fever is overdue, and the urgency of meaningful change is now. We must stop acting as if somebody else is going to make the changes to production and consumption that we so desperately need to enact."

What excited you about Milan Design Week this year?

I was touched by the projects that were driven by craft or by innovative uses of materials. Ronan Bouroullec's work with Mutina was impressive, with a poetic use of ceramic. Capsule plaza at Corso Como, showing historical designs of Verner Pantone but also new explorations of materials such as leather (Ecco) or aluminium (Format, an Aluminium Formwork series by Niceworkshop). And, of course, the Prada Frames talk series, led by Formafantasma's spellbinding research and programming.



Pictured: 'Criss Cross' hand-knotted rug collection by India Mahdavi for cc-tapis released as part of Milan Design Week 2024.

