

Contradictive Tendencies

Sebastian Herkner counters tradition

Already during his studies, Sebastian Herkner was focused on designing objects and furniture that merged various cultural contexts, combining new technologies with traditional craftsmanship in order to highlight the intrinsic beauty of the materials and draw attention to the tiniest details. "There is a sensitivity and identity to my work that emphasises the function, the material, and the detail. I transport and interpret characteristics from various contexts of society and culture, and implement them in new artefacts. This character infuses the most everyday objects with respect and personality." The designer of Das Haus at imm cologne 2016, Herkner is certain that in this way, seemingly contrary things can experience esteem.

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Bell Table series for Classicon, 2012

For many years Sebastian Herkner was known as the nice guy from Offenbach. But when looking closely at his approach, it is clear that the rebellious spirit from the German province should not have been underrated. With the start of the new year comes much expectation about these designs of his that are completely free from the German tradition.

It's not so long ago that Sebastian Herkner would join us to wander through the halls of the Milan fair and curiously ask our opinion on different furniture pieces. We used to have intensive discussions not only about design in general, but also about specific details. We would open the debate by taking a clear position, and when somebody had found a very convincing argument for its opposite, the others would change their previous opinion. At the time, Herkner participated in many young designers' shows, such as the Salone Satel-

lite in Milan and Design Talents at imm cologne. All of a sudden, however, things changed. For in 2011, Herkner was awarded the design prize of the Federal Republic of Germany as best newcomer. The following year he didn't join us for the tour of the Salone. Instead, we met him at the Moroso stand, where he proudly presented his brand new armchair called Coat. And five years later, at imm Cologne 2016, the designer is the Guest of Honour who developed Das Haus – Interiors on Stage. Former editions of Das Haus have been designed by Neri & Hu, Louise Campbell, Luca Nichetto, and Doshi Levin. Now the challenge has gone to a German (b.1981), a designer who still possesses the unpretentious ways of former times.

"I like it here", Herkner says when we stepped into his studio in Offenbach recently. The small space is situated in a back building and jam-packed with



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Things have not always been so easy and the designer's work was not always as successful as it is today. For instance, his Bell Table was first showcased at the Salone Satellite and produced by a Spanish company, before Herkner went to Classicon with the product. The coffee table consists of a blown-glass base in the shape of a bell, and a circular top surface made of brass. It turns convention on its head, using the fragile material for the structure and solid brass for the ornament. Form follows material and craft, that is the belief of the designer. He is not frightened to experiment with these at different scales, and with objects that might be slightly kitsch for strict German tastes. His Container Vases for the small label Pulpo, for example, have an extremely decorative touch that might induce critics to compare them

tools and patterns and freshly made models, as well as a mini-kitchen. There is an island of desks in the middle, where Herkner and his fellow designers work at computers – they seem to be a family of likeminded souls. "Frankfurt is really close, so when I am in a mood, I go there to meet friends", he says, smiling, full of the optimism that drove him through the last several years and that guides him towards the future. He studied at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Offenbach, near the marketplace, and afterwards remained in the city. But with Frankfurt airport nearby, he feels very connected to the whole world.



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Sebastian Herkner, 2013 (1)
Photo: Ingmar Kurth

Bell Table in production, 2013 (2)
Photo: Ingmar Kurth

Mbrace armchair for Dedon, 2016 (3)



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Sebastian Herkner in his studio, 2014 (1)
Photo: Ingmar Kurth

Pipe furniture collection for Moroso, 2015:
Sketches of the Pipe chair (2)
Models of the Pipe collection (3)
Pipe chair and side table (4)
Prototype of the Pipe chair (5)

with shimmering Christmas tree baubles. But the designer does not care for style judgements. With an easy-going attitude, he happily opposes convention and follows pop culture.

Sebastian Herkner grew up in a world that was not framed by Dieter Rams, and “form follows function” is not his credo. He did an internship at Stella McCartney in London during his studies.

He is fonder of Memphis than of functionalism. While other designers experiment with wire that’s as thin as possible, he cheekily opts for the opposite. Pipe Chair for Moroso (2015) does not hide its construction but boldly reveals the large tubes at its base. Even if the backrest is in the form of an upholstered tubular curve and the structure of the chair itself might irritate, the object is a clear statement that plays with contradictions and ig-



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nores traditional rules. When it comes to the crafts, however, the designer is very devoted. “I have personally always been fascinated by glass, wood, and metal”, he explains. “And I don’t want to be romantic about the crafts, but they are crucial to the work of designers.” It is indeed his conviction that only when they are incorporated can the quality and authenticity of products be established. This position also guided him to a workshop in North Zimbabwe

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two years ago, organised by the British Council, Alliance Française, and the Goethe Institut. Far away from design matters in Europe, and in collaboration with a community of weavers, he developed a range of baskets that increases the local income. After this experience, he kept on weaving, creating a new outdoor collection for Dedon with coloured synthetic fibres. The wingback, lounge, and rocking chairs have a solid teak frame, with no distinction made between indoor and outdoor use. These pieces are being presented at imm in January.

Herkner’s world spans from the crafts to the industrial and from the traditional to the contradictory. His work might not be easily accepted by everybody, but it brings a fresh and young perspective to design in Germany. Thus the work of the designer from Offenbach might be very German and at the same time not German at all. It simply breaks with cliché. <

Basket workshop, Zimbabwe, 2015 (1,3)
Photo: Eric Gauss

Baskets made in collaboration with the Binga Craft Centre, Zimbabwe, 2015 (2)
Photo: Eric Gauss

ALA easy chair for LaCividina, 2015 (4)

ALA easy chair study model, 2015 (5)