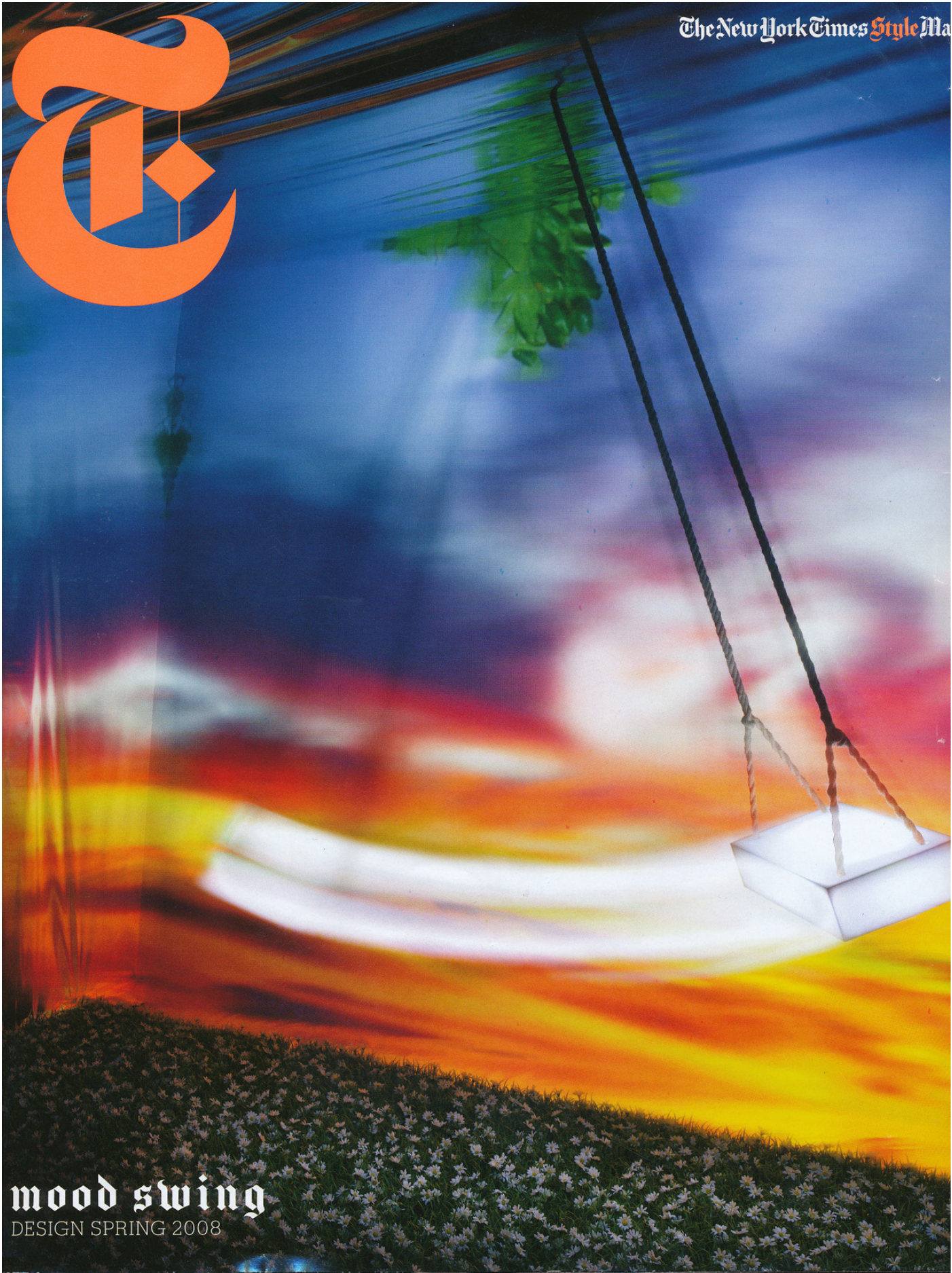


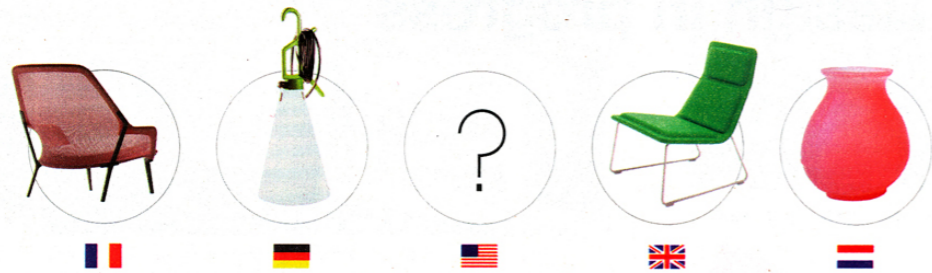


mood swing
DESIGN SPRING 2008



Dearth of a Nation

WHERE HAVE ALL THE GREAT AMERICAN DESIGNERS GONE?



First, a confession: I'm British. And now a warning — the theme of this column is what's wrong with American design, so if you don't like the idea of a foreigner whining about that, stop reading right now.

So, what is wrong with American design? I'm not talking about every category of design, just the one that's most important to this magazine — furniture. There isn't much wrong with the rest. Quite the reverse. The United States is home to many world-class designers: Marc Jacobs in fashion, Paula Scher in graphics, Will Wright in games, Tobias Frere-Jones in typography and Apple as a role model of corporate design.

But where are America's leaders in furniture design? Its last furniture coup was the Aeron chair, designed by Don Chadwick and the late Bill Stumpf for Herman Miller — and that was in 1994. The blunt truth is that if I were to compile my list of the world's top furniture designers, it would include Jasper Morrison and Marc Newson in Britain, Konstantin Grcic in Germany, Hella Jongerius and Jurgen Bey in the Netherlands and the Bouroullecs in France, but no Americans.

And it's not as if furniture design isn't taken seriously in America. The United States has the world's finest modern furniture design collection at the Museum of Modern Art, the best design store in Moss, the plushest design auctions in New York and the

biggest design fair in Miami. Furniture also dominates the media coverage of design.

There's even a great history to draw on, because American furniture designers ruled back in the 1940s and '50s, when Charles and Ray Eames, Harry Bertoia, George Nelson and Eero Saarinen were in their heydays. But that was an exceptional time. "Designers are like flowers," observes Paola Antonelli, the senior curator of architecture and design at MoMA. "They thrive in the right terrain: usually a mix of intellectual and artistic fervor, supported by a lively industrial sector of small to medium-size companies. That's why American design was unstoppable after World War II."

What has changed since then? An important change is the structure of the furniture industry. Herman Miller, Knoll and other companies that once championed the Eameses and their peers are now too big and too nervous about upsetting their shareholders to risk experimenting with design.

Today there are few American versions of the small, gutsy European furniture manufacturers — like Britain's Established & Sons and Moooi of the Netherlands — that champion innovative design. Michael Maharam, a principal of the Maharam textiles group, believes that this is because corporate success in the United States is driven by "functionality, price and availability, not the roots of craft tradition and refinement." In other words, being small, independent and daring isn't valued in corporate culture. Or profitable: too few manufacturers are able to make a living producing creative work in small quantities. It's not only furniture design that suffers; fashion and architecture face the same problems, too.

Today, world-class designers aren't as

dependent on local manufacturing as they were in the 1940s and '50s. Thanks to digital technology and the global economy, designers now communicate remotely with factories, and manufacturers scour the world for designers, of which too few are American.

One problem is the fragmented nature of design education in America. Furniture design tends to be taught in art schools here rather than with other design disciplines, as it is in top European schools like Eindhoven in the Netherlands and Britain's Royal College of Art. Antonelli, for one, believes that American design students would benefit from more exposure to other disciplines such as engineering.

Nor does the United States provide the grants that support young Dutch and French designers during their education and in the vulnerable early years of their careers. American design graduates have to fend for themselves and generally end up taking jobs to make ends meet, leaving them with little or no time for creative experimentation.

Would it be possible for a gifted young American furniture designer to overcome these obstacles and break into the global Top 10? Yes, but only if he was an anomaly, so talented and gifted and driven that he was seemingly unstoppable. And even then, it would be much, much tougher for him than for the Eameses in their era. ■



Shelf Life
SPRING TURNS OVER A NEW LEAF.
DESIGNED BY RONAN AND ERWAN BOURULLEC