INTERNATIONAL LIFE

At Milan fair, a somber and disquieting spirit

By Alice Rawsthorn

It runs true to form, we should all be worried. Year after year the exhibition of the work of the Ekhofen Design Academy at the Milan furniture fair has anticipated the future direction of design. The theme of the Ekhofen show in Milan last week was scarcely reassuring — it was death.

The biodegradable cardboard coffins and funereal pictures dreamed up by the Ekhofen students were unusually melancholic, even when compared to other directional exhibits. Yet the boops of the Milan fair — from the birthday party thrown by the fashion designer Miuccia Prada in her private art foundation, to the New York entrepreneur Ian Schrager drooling over the trophy-like forms of Zaha Hadid’s futuristic Corian kitchen — could not disguise the fact that the new spirit of design is somber, surreal and introspective.

Only a few years ago the hottest theme in design was romanticism, with its ornate decoration and pretty formal forms. Yet design changes with the times and it has darkened, like fashion, art and other areas of contemporary culture. Romanticism seems frivolous in an era of economic uncertainty, environmental crisis, ethnic strife and political forces like Silvio Berlusconi’s last stand in the final days of the Italian election.

These pressures are especially acute for the makers of the furniture that filled the labyrinth at Rho-Pero, where the main Milan fair is now located. They are also grappling with the onslaught of cheap competition from China, and the grim truth that in a postindustrial culture already bloated with too much stuff, no one needs to buy more of it.

What makes it worthwhile for the designers, manufacturers, retailers and journalists who flock to Milan each year are the few genuinely inclusive projects, which will influence the way we live in the future. The most compelling of last week’s launches were those that reflected design’s new dark spirit, often by applying new technologies.

The skulls, rats, weapons and other subversive symbols sculpted on to the Biscuit collection of genuinely inclusive projects, which will influence the way we live in the future.

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A bamboo stacking chair designed by Artik Studio.

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