Hella Jongerius's Worker chair is modeled on beloved old armchairs, but is immaculately engineered by Vitra's German factories.



At Milan fair, a somber and disquieting spirit

By Alice Rawsthorn

MILAN

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

The biodegradable cardboard coffins and funereal picnics dreamed up by the Eindhoven students were unusually melancholic, even when compared to other directional exhibits. Yet the hoopla 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 trog-lodytic 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 floral 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 farces like Silvio Berlusconi's last stand in the final days of the Italian election.

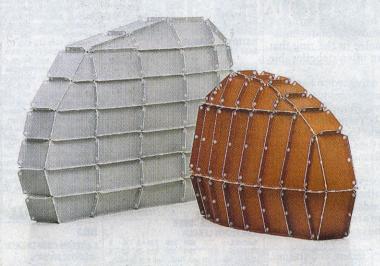
the furniture that filled the main Milan fair is now located. onslaught of cheap competition expression of design's new darkness. needs to buy more of it.

the future. The most compelling that people love in handcraftsmanship. of last week's launches were those nologies.

white pressed porcelain by the Belgian design duo Job Smeets and Nynke Tynagel of Studio Job were the product of a new process invented by Royal Tichelaar

beauty of the hand-charred original. Baas also unveiled someone else. a new collection of clay furniture that he made with Bas







These pressures are especially acute for the makers of The most enjoyable new projects at the Milan fair were shameless exercises in technical showmanship, including the Roc screens and storage designed by Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec.

labyrinth at Rho-Pero, where the glossy clay. "The process is so simple that I could have done it at elementary school," he says. The effect is sen-They are also grappling with the sational. Raw, forlorn and exquisite, clay is an eloquent

from China, and the grim truth that in a postindustrial culture already new generation of European designers. All three treat bloated with too much stuff, no one design as a medium of personal expression, as artists have traditionally done. They have come of age in a What makes it worthwhile for design culture free from the old modern movement the designers, manufacturers, retailers and journalists who flock freely with advanced technology. Having also grown up to Milan each year are the few with sophisticated design software, they treat it as an genuinely incisive projects, which experimental tool to imbue mass-manufactured objects the Japanese designer Naoto Fukasawa for Swarovski, will influence the way we live in with the richness, complexity and narrative qualities

The doyenne of this movement is the Dutch designer that reflected design's new dark Hella Jongerius, who coined the slogan "form follows spirit, often by applying new tech- feeling" as a play on Mies van der Rohe's modernist mantra "form follows function." Her Polder sofa for The skulls, rats, weapons and Vitra, with its mismatched colors and cushions, was a other subversive symbols sculpted hit at last year's fair and much copied this year. Jongerion to the Biscuit collection of us trumped her imitators in Milan last week by unveiling the Worker club chair, which is modeled on the beloved old armchairs that people personalize with favorite cushions, but is immaculately engineered by Makkum, the centuries-old Dutch porcelain maker. Vitra's German factories. Superficially it appears ec-Equally macabre was the "serving pet" created by the Swedish design group Front for Moooi in the form of a The Worker is an inspired example of Jongerius's abilgrotesquely realistic pig.

Moooi, now buoyed by investment from the B&B

ity to engage our interest in an object by provocation.

By contrasting unexpected colors, materials, shapes ity to engage our interest in an object by provocation. Italia furniture group, worked with the young Dutch and the old with the new, she confuses and then sedesigner Maarten Baas to manufacture his Smoke duces us. Her objective is for her work to become as prechair, originally made by burning an existing chair into cious to us as family heirlooms, so that we will enjoy usa new shape, on an industrial scale, but with the bleak ing the pieces for years before passing them on to

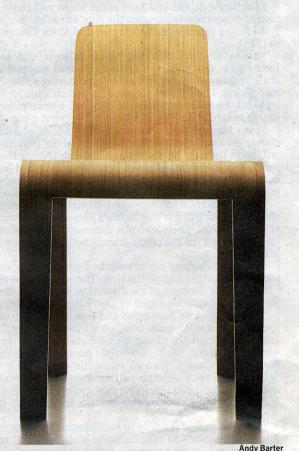
Other designers have different objectives, and some den Herder by coating spindly chairs and shelving in of the most enjoyable new projects in Milan last week

A few years ago the hottest theme in design was romanticism. Yet design changes with the times, and it has darkened.

were shameless exercises in technical showmanship. Take the spiraling bird's nest of a chandelier devised by or the pulsating giant jellyfish chandelier conceived by the veteran Italian architect Gaetano Pesce. Equally innovative was the process developed by Vitra to bond cardboard and fabric into the boulder-like forms of the Roc screens designed by the French brothers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec. Artek, the Finnish furniture maker, marked its first year under the creative directorship of the British designer Tom Dixon by combining technical virtuosity with an environmental conscience by inventing a new way of engineering fast-growing bamboo into furniture.

The British designer Jasper Morrison adopted yet another approach to the thorny issue of how designers can justify creating new products in a saturated market by concluding that sometimes they can not. He designed The Crate, a stool-cum-storage unit, for the British manufacturer Established & Sons as a precise replica of the wooden wine crate where he stashes books and magazines beside the bed in his Paris apartment. Beautifully made in Douglas fir, The Crate even reproduces a crack in the original. "The old crate was so perfect for s purpose," observes Morrison, "that it seemed pointless to try to invent something better."

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A bamboo stacking chair designed by Artek Studio.



iht.com/culture

A slide show of images from

the Milan furniture fair.

"The Crate" by Jasper Morrison is a replica of the wine crate where he stashes books and magazines in his apartment.