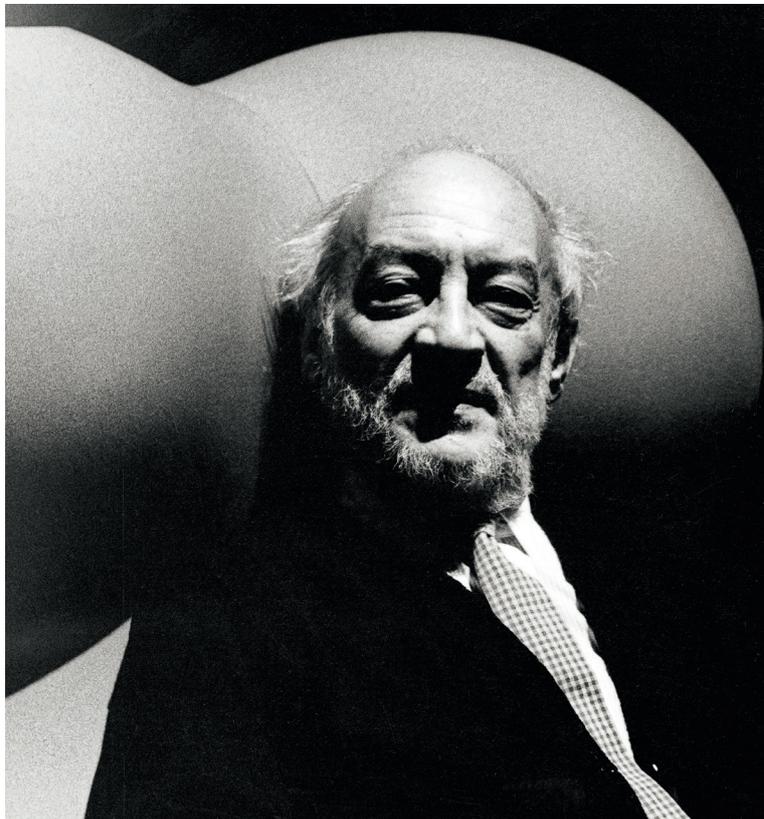


Words • STEPHEN TODD



Say it with seating

Age has not wearied the relevance of this Italian's work.

Gaetano Pesce designed the Up armchair – known as La Mama – in Paris in 1968 just as second-wave feminism was cresting. A plushly upholstered reclining female figure, it cradles the sitter by the thighs, ample breasts form the headrest. Attached to the eternal maternal – by a cord – was an optional ottoman shaped like a ball. "It's an image of a prisoner," Pesce said. "Women suffer because of the prejudice of men. The chair was supposed to talk about this problem."

Fifty years later, in the midst of the #MeToo era and from his studio in New York, the 78-year-old Italian designer reckons that "the message that object was expressing then is still valid today".

Pesce is not a particularly political designer but he is acutely attuned to the culture. His project for a Pluralist Tower in Sao Paulo (1987), for which a different architect would design each of the floors, anticipated the Millennial spirit of collaboration. His Organic Building in Osaka (1989), with its elaborately planted façade, prefigured today's push to optimise urban green space.

And his 1994 interior for advertising agency Chiat\Day in Manhattan was the first example of hot-desking in action. A

mass of multicoloured polyurethane resin squished into improbable volumes, floors were like viscous oil slicks, walls composed of silicone bricks, chairs wobbled upon metal springs. (Disclosure: I have used one of Pesce's 543 Broadway chairs designed for Chiat\Day as a desk seat for more than two decades and can attest it keeps me, as workplace theorists say today, nimble.)

But isn't all that gooey polymer kind of vulgar? "Innovation, at a first impact, always results in vulgarity," parries Pesce. "Novelty inherent to innovation disturbs the sleepy mental baggage of individuals."

Unimpressed by the modernist canon of perfection, in 1971 Pesce developed a process he called "diversified series production". Today we might simply call it disruption: while producing his resin furniture and objects industrially, he instructed the fabricators to make haphazard alterations throughout the process; to introduce rogue pigments, allow spontaneous drips, bubbles and oozes, to never repeat a gesture. "If God exists," reflects Pesce, "She or He is perfect but the human being is a bearer of flaws that become its beauty."

The aleatory process reached its

apotheosis in his Nobody's Perfect furniture series, created from 2000 to 2009 by Italian bicycle manufacturer Zerodisegno. Hand-casting in flexible moulds without uniform dimensions meant the person who physically produced the chairs, bookcases, cabinets and beds became a part of the process, signing a birth certificate that was issued with each piece. If you're quick you can pick up a green, red, blue and yellow poured resin Nobody's Perfect table on 1stdibs.com for a tad over \$23,000 – detachable "tablecloth" top and two candleholders included.

Gaetano Pesce was born in the ship-building town of La Spezia in northern Italy at the outbreak of World War II, during which it was massively bombed. (In a sense, tabula rasa would become his modus operandi.) He studied architecture at the University of Venice under enigmatic modernist Carlo Scarpa, from whom he learned the power of provocation. "Scarpa was certainly a grain of sand in the eye of the conformist Italian architects of that epoch, and for this he was fought and opposed, particularly by the so-called Marxist architects." That said, for Pesce, "Scarpa was too interested in the details and in the use of artisans of rare capacity and of very expensive costs."

Pesce was always more focused on the quotidian. The "La Mama" Up chair is part of a series of seven pieces, now produced by B&B Italia, which the designer concocted while under the shower one morning. "I had the sponge in my hand, and when I pressed the sponge, it shrank, and when I released it, it returned to its original volume," he remembers. In the atelier he began experimenting with vacuum-packing polyurethane, the latest industrial innovation. He managed to reduce a bulbous



Clockwise from far left: Gaetano Pesce; Chiat\Day interior; 543 Broadway chairs. Below: "La Mama" chair.

mass to a 10-centimetre thick disc that, when removed from its PVC envelope, would spring into the shape of a luscious armchair.

If his early feminist polemics seem a little heavy-handed in retrospect, Pesce's work of the past half-century caused a singular fissure in the smooth façade of modernism – a male-dominated movement to which he feels he has "no relationship".

"Modernism was an expression of the 20th century, and already then it was a little outdated. The goal of designing something is to represent our own time and not being nostalgic for the past." ●

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