



SENSORY OVERDRIVE

In most arenas, those who effectively break the rules must first demonstrate a mastery of them. With his first US solo show, this winter's Decisive Design at the Art Institute of Chicago, Konstantin Grcic proves an undeniable command of the language of design.

The German designer has made a career of subverting and reinterpreting familiar social and cultural references in such a way as to make them strangely, fascinatingly, unfamiliar. His minimalistic work sharpens the senses, making us question common objects we so often take for granted, and how they define the spaces in which we move. Chairs, desks, lamps, kitchen equipment, you name it: all just different enough to raise our antennae, but still recognizably approachable.

Take, for example, Grcic's Mayday lamp. Produced for Flos, these cheeky little lamps were inspired by the industrial lamps used in auto mechanic shops; Grcic playfully appropriated them for the domestic setting. Or the Myto chair, designed for Plank: Grcic found inspiration for this cantilevered chair in the Mito motorbike made by Cagiva; its low-slung thrust was made possible through the use of advanced plastic polymer.

Konstantin Grcic's Decisive Design at the AIC

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But Grcic's experimentation is firmly rooted in years of experience. Originally trained as a carpenter and cabinetmaker at Britain's Parnham College, Grcic went on to earn a masters in Industrial Design from the Royal College of Art in London. He even worked beside design great Jasper Morrison prior to launching his own studio in 1991. Since then, his designs have won several international awards, including the the Blueprint Award: Best Interior Product, 100% Design London Awards, the Design Award of the Federal Republic of Germany, the iF Gold Award and the Compasso d'Oro in Italy.

Zoë Ryan, the AIC's Neville Bryan Curator of Design in the Department of Architecture and Design, describes Grcic's approach this way: "He's a very fearless designer. He does not expect a positive response ... He just wants to provoke a reaction, often by lacing [his designs] with a very wry humor and a subtle irony ... He wants to test people's interactions with objects."

He's also demonstrated a passion for the design process in and of itself — embracing new materials and technologies in the pursuit of creative innovation. Says Ryan, "This isn't about a laborious process to make everything new and new objects. It is very much a process of investigation. He always has to push his projects so they take him one step further."

Decisive Design captures all these artist elements in a unique and thoughtfully organized presentation, one meant to clarify the design process — from concept to realization — for museum-goers. Grcic and Ryan collaborated on the exhibit's design, and chose to organize it into two complementary sections. The first, set in the perimeter, presents a studio-like atmosphere, with completed works set alongside prototypes, models, sketches, and large format photography of Grcic's studio and of work being made.



Clockwise from top left: Seed Media Group identity; Chaumont exhibition poster;

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- Zoë Ryan, Curator of Design, AIC

As visitors move deeper into the exhibit, they enter a second, central zone outfitted like a mini racetrack (a design that reflects Grcic's long-standing interest in Formula 1 racing), surrounded by stacked tires-turned-seating that also double as light poles for Grcic's Mayday lights. Here, in the racetrack's center, visitors can try out some of his award-winning designs for themselves, including the Myto cantilevered chair and the Landon (built to seat four!), as well as some of Grcic's newer works.

This interactive approach is almost necessary for appreciating a designer like Grcic. It's one thing to talk about materiality and design; it's another to experience it. Take, for example, his 360° chair: designed for Magis, its quirky, slightly awkward form rethinks the traditional office chair. However, "unless you actually get to try that piece out yourself," says Ryan, "it's very difficult to understand, because it is such a radical reinvention of what we typically think of a standard work chair ... It's perched. It was made for casual sitting ... for people working in studios like Konstantin. Or, say, for hairdressers, etc., for people who are constantly in a dynamic environment where they are moving around."

The exhibit's hands-on element was incredibly important to both Grcic and Ryan, allowing for a fuller appreciation and more in-depth discussion of Grcic's own work, but also, on a larger scale, feeding into the expanding public interest in design.

Ryan concludes, "Konstantin will only commit to a project if he thinks it will provide a new angle on his work or push his work into a new terrain. Therefore, from the beginning I was confident that we would be able to produce an exhibition that would be a valuable addition to not only the museum's program, but also the larger field of critical dialogue in design."

Decisive Design runs through January 24, 2010.



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