

CREATING CREATURES



at Museum van Loon, Amsterdam

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Aldo Bakker (The Netherlands, 1971) has acquired international praise for his work as a product designer. Yet anyone who has even glanced at the objects from his hands would nonetheless agree that ‘product designer’ does not quite fit his profile. Breaking radically with a Dutch design tradition that feverishly favors practicality above beauty, Aldo Bakker creates objects radiating vivid elegance. He tells us about his relationship with things as an artist.

Place a box beside designer Aldo Bakker and he will look at it, pace around it curiously, stroke it, feel it, question its existence, and even take a peek inside. He surely would not, however, think inside it. ‘Some people need rules for structure, which can even be useful at times. Yet I believe it wouldn’t befit any significant artist to think within set parameters, disciplines, or rules.’ His latest exhibition in Villa Noailles, Hyeres, France, shows works that may not directly tell you what they are for. ‘He succeeds in going beyond the evident function and in appealing to a range of fundamental sensory experiences,’ says friend and artistic director of the Belgian Z33 Jan Boelen. The title of the exhibition, *Creatures, Studies for Existence*, reveals more

about what he makes: ‘The works are so charged with existential questions that they wield their own significance, or right to be,’ says Bakker. Indeed, an object may function as a seat or an oil flask – but it is also appears to be a creature on its own, in absence of man giving it purpose. ‘That is what I strive to create. An object must radiate its existence just by being there.’

THE TRUTH IN ART

Prompted by an undying curiosity, Bakker continuously seeks to learn more about himself in order to come closer to his own truth. ‘Questions I raise about why I appreciate a certain beauty, why I am touched by one thing and not by another, how to get even closer to one’s self, should be the prevailing continuity in all my work.’ As new creations are always on the verge of being born inside Bakker’s mind, he cannot be anything other than a firm believer in inner progress. ‘I couldn’t say that my taste changes, it just develops. I have recently finished works that were originally ideas I thought up fifteen years ago. I wasn’t ready to make them yet, either because they needed amending in the mind or because I didn’t master the skills to make them at the time.’ Bakker says his confidence as an artist grows with the



RED
Design: 2008
Size: 370 x 260mm
Material: two tones of red urushi
Production Urushi: Mariko Nishide
Urushi supplier: Takuo Matsuzawa, Joboji Urushi Sangyo
Represented: Particles Gallery



LE LAC
Design: 2007
Size: 1770 x 1410 x 120 mm
Material: Ocean green Urushi
Production Urushi: Mariko Nishide
Urushi supplier: Takuo Matsuzawa, Joboji Urushi Sangyo
Represented: Particles Gallery



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accumulation of knowledge he gains over the years, which also means he's an artist who will never retire. 'Of course this growth contributes to what I can make. I expect to create my most beautiful piece when I'm eighty, or ninety. Or perhaps even a hundred.'

The things Bakker creates, whether a piece of furniture, a fork, or a glass, always start with a lingering image, picked up somewhere along his way. Since he only started putting his ideas into practice seriously towards the end of his twenties, one could say he let them linger, or maybe ripen, indeed. 'The idea transforms in my mind and slowly reveals itself.' The result of this process is literally amazing, for his creations deliberately appeal to the senses through aesthetical beauty. In this Aldo Bakker breaks with his designer father Gijs Bakker, and with what Dutch design is often typically associated with: taking the 'extra' right out of extraordinary.

THE SCHOOL RULE

Bakker hopped from one art academy to another, tasting his options and never staying put longer than a couple of months. 'I suppose I was simply too stubborn to follow any regime.' He is therefore autodidact, although in a way

he was home schooled by his parents, influential Droog Design co-founder Gijs Bakker and late avant-gardist jewelry designer Emmy van Leersum.

Within the world of design, there is a tremendous amount of disciplines, and there are books packed with 'golden' rules on each discipline to abide by. Meanwhile, this amount is only increasing steadily due to innovative technological possibilities. The Design Academy in Eindhoven, The Netherlands, where Bakker teaches the curriculum Well Being, counts eight separate majors already.

Although Bakker is hardly one to think in rigid terms of artistic boundaries, the question many an art critic or art historian struggles with now, 'Should we look at art beyond any specific discipline?' is irrelevant to him. 'I give meaning to form. I'm a designer of three-dimensional things one may use for a certain purpose. That's what I can do. I never think in terms of artistic disciplines because it's not relevant to me. The only people who do are critics, curators, and journalists, because they seek explanations.'

Remaining true to himself, Bakker is as honest and pure as achievable in everything he does and creates. At the Design Academy he teaches what he does best himself: connecting emotion and empathy to the creation of things.



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The one place that, for Bakker, does justify the separation of disciplines, rules and a clear framework to work in is here, at the academy. 'Art school is a vague concept in itself. When young students come here, often fresh out of high school, they need something to hold on to. The academy provides that by offering structure.'

DESIGN VS. NATURE

Whichever perspective one takes on design, as an art, a functionality, a marketing tool, or perhaps all three combined, one everlasting truth remains: everything in the world that is not nature, is design. A paradox for a designer such as Aldo Bakker, who remains true to natural materials such as wood, glass, porcelain or copper. 'I'm overwhelmed by the boundless force that is nature, but a man made object reflects so well what a human being can achieve. I'm intrigued by it, I can philosophize on it and explore it. Nature doesn't permit me this comprehension.' This said, Bakker enjoys the philosophical experiment of the natural state. To not imagine what people would be like, but what the first ever created chair might have looked like. 'What if that first chair would have looked slightly different, would it have

changed the entire evolution of design?' he ponders. This is also his way of remaining true to himself as an artist: it is an attempt to cast out as many external influences as possible. 'I like to imagine the object I want to create from a clean slate. As if nothing but nature exists.' According to Bakker this is a necessity in order to be an authentic designer: a giver of meaning to form. 'You need to be on guard as an artist. It's easy to slump into becoming a stylist, adorning things that are already perfectly fine. Plummeting down that hill can only lead to mediocrity.' Artistic director Jan Boelen praises Bakker in his essay *Beyond the Appearance of Things* for doing just the opposite: 'With Aldo Bakker, design returns to the roots of its existence. He joins a tradition of modernistic designers who succeed in developing a formal language that connects culture and nature, man and object.'

The endlessness that nature signifies for Bakker is, again paradoxically, represented in his work. The ancient Japanese Urushi varnishing technique he uses on furniture for example, is immensely costly and moreover highly time consuming. Here he aimed to influence the factor of time and thus create a sense of a time gap. It is Bakker's answer to what design also resembles in today's society: mass consumerism. 'There is a comprehensible mysticism



SIDE TABLE
Design: 2008
Material: Lilac Urushi
Size: 800 x 550 x 340 mm
Production Urushi: Mariko Nishide
Urushi supplier: Takuo Matsuzawa, Joboji Urushi Sangyo
Represented: Particles Gallery



STOOL

Design: 2006

Size: 340 x 330 x 320 mm

Material: Ice blue Urushi

Production Urushi: Mariko Nishide

Urushi supplier: Takuo Matsuzawa, Joboji Urushi Sangyo

Represented: Particles Gallery



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about everything man made which fascinates me endlessly. At the same time, we live in a world of mass consumption. I am a part of that: I create more and more, adding without subtracting. One has to find a way to live with this.'

THE STUFF OF FUTURE

While China spits out endless amounts of mass produced, low quality, low cost goods and copycat design furniture is available for all at rock bottom prices at IKEA, it's hardly surprising that this designer and teacher feels concerned about the future. 'Mass production and consumerism have many downsides, but I'm not against it entirely. If something of mine or a student's would be suitable for mass production, I'd celebrate it. Provided that it doesn't lose its original meaning and integrity.' Bakker recently bought two racks at IKEA, he admits while his expression tells more than he voices. 'They are fine for the simple, functional basics. I'd prefer going to Muji, but they are not yet in the Netherlands. IKEA really gets on my nerves when they start being pretentious about design. They should either keep it simple or be really innovative and develop a new vision like Muji did. Nothing is more tiresome than copycat design making up the same boring interiors everywhere.'

It is with this notion in the back of his mind that Bakker supports and promotes craftsmanship at art schools. 'You need to master your skills in order to make unique things. You can't always create what you conceptualize in your mind. You need to feel the material with your hands to know what it does, or will do once you work on it.' Besides the belief that mass production makes things less interesting in the world, Bakker believes it could also have more rigorous consequences for nature and society. 'We are flooding the world with products. Truthfully, my wish for the future would be for nothing to be produced massively anymore, for all of us to evolve into living organically. But industry and consumerism are so deeply embedded in our system. I can't say I herald a very cheerful prospect of this ever happening. Humankind would need a serious disaster to realize this.'

Aldo Bakker's catalogue Creatures, Studies for Existence has just been released. On October 30th, the exhibition Emmy + Gijs + Aldo opens in the Dutch Zuiderzee Museum. The exhibition is curated by Jan Boelen.

aldobakker.com