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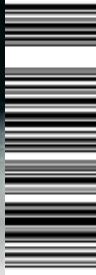
Winter 2024/25

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In Pursuit of Beauty: Aldo Bakker

On self-discipline and contributing meaningfully



Solo at LICHT Gallery, Tokyo, 2023 / Photo courtesy of LICHT Gallery



Aldo Bakker's presence mirrors the way he envisions his works – objects that appear natural, as though they belong. They are not meant to stand out or demand attention, but instead to feel as though they have always existed. “This describes the delicate balance between something that feels familiar – something that resonates with you because it is deeply rooted in your memory – and something new. That’s the fine line I am drawn to, and I think it is what I am searching for,” imparts the Dutch designer.



The ‘fine line’ marks the unique standpoint Aldo Bakker holds in the design world. He defies categorisation within a particular generation or genre; his works embody the essence of timelessness, evoking a sense of familiarity in such a way that you have always known them. Rarely in the public eye, Bakker eschews the almost religious belief that a designer must maintain a constant presence in the spotlight, deliberately avoiding the fairs. His most recent appearance at Milan Design Week was in 2022, for the launch of J. HILL's Standard collection in a private fashion showroom, which was so understated it was almost designed to be missed. Before that, his last notable appearance in the design capital dates back to 2009, when the Dutch design label t.e. presented the studio's porcelain tableware collection, including *Oil Can*, *Oil Platter*, *Salt Cellar*, *Vinegar Flask*, and *Water Carafe*.

That presentation marked the first meeting between Bakker and the design critic and author Alice Rawsthorn, a moment he later referred to as ‘pivotal’ in the early stages of his career. In her 2011 New York Times column, Rawsthorn reflected on Bakker's approach, noting,

“There is never anything showy about his work... yet each object has a quiet confidence, as if every element has been resolved with nothing left to chance.”

As officially stated on the studio's website, Bakker's professional journey began in 1998. Although prior to that he had already worked for eight years at Atelier Willem Noyons in Utrecht, all the while contemplating his own work. His unique upbringing in a household of renowned avant-garde jewelry designers, namely Emmy van Leersum and Gijs Bakker (who later co-founded the influential Droog Design group), meant he was surrounded by the artistic influences of his parents as well as a vibrant arts community. These all played a significant role in shaping his ap-

proach to design and his creative ideology..

“The *Glass Line* collection (1998) was the first piece I was truly proud of,” Bakker said, having spent years searching for a glassmaker capable of meeting his exacting standards. Eventually, through his father, he was introduced to the artist Ed van Dijk, who discovered someone who fit that role – a skilled craftsman at Petran, a small company in the Czech Republic. “At that time, I was searching for my own formal language. I had clear ideas of where I wanted to go, but no idea how to get there. Without formal training, I had to find my own way. I studied books by other artists – not to read, but to examine the images over and over again, from different periods. I continually reflected on my own



Pivot gold-plated silver pourer, 2014 / Photo © Erik & Petra Hesmerg

Alinetob porcelain vase, 2014 / Photo © Erik & Petra Hesmerg

situation: Why does this piece resonate with me and not the other? If it were mine, what would I change to make it better?"

Over the past two decades, Bakker has cultivated a distinctive body of work centred on creating meticulously crafted objects with a functional purpose, in various scales. Often produced in limited runs by expert artisans or specialised workshops, he uses materials such as metal, glass, lacquer, porcelain, wood and stone, reaching a discerning audience through a carefully curated list of galleries and labels. "I

view my creations primarily as objects, independent of their functionality. Many of these creations are not intended for practical use in the traditional sense; they are meant to be touched, disassembled, and re-assembled - more like sculptures, if you will. The blending of disciplines feels natural to me, and I see no boundaries in this approach." Each piece is defined not just by its aesthetic appeal but by the sensuality it offers, blending form and experience in a meaningful way.

"I wanted to create beautiful things. That has always been my goal, right

from the beginning, and it remains unchanged." says Bakker. 'Beauty' is struggling in the current climate, where the legitimacy of design is often determined by its capacity to address urgent global challenges - climate change, sustainability, social equity, and other pressing issues in the design industry, and the role of aesthetics can sometimes be overshadowed or diminished. Yet for Bakker, the pursuit of beauty has never been more important - especially amidst the turmoil and unpredictability of the world. "True beauty is the highest and most challenging goal - sublime and pro-

found, not superficial. It is about maintaining independence, taking a clear stance, and striving to contribute meaningfully rather than seeking comfort or following the crowd for superficial or short-lived excitement," says Bakker. Beauty offers a form of refuge, reflection, and a deeper connection to life, making it a vital part of the design discourse, even in times of crisis.

Bakker's design process often begins with an emotion, a fascination, or a specific desire, but the path to realising these ideas and their inherent beauty is disciplined and



Ring Table, 2022 / Photo courtesy of Carpenters Workshop Gallery

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methodical. "For me, the key is to ensure that every element within a design is interconnected and contributes to overall existence. Take the *Ring Table* series, for instance: it consists of four sections, each defined by the same inner curve of a circle. By breaking up the ring, I can experiment with the outer lines, giving each section its own character while ensuring they flow seamlessly together, serving and enhancing the unity of the whole." He is deeply driven to clarify and articulate his choices, striving to understand the reasons behind his decisions - in essence, to retain control over his actions.

"I think it's a very dualistic part of myself - not fully able to accept the label of 'artist' or to claim that identity. But it is not just about the name; it is more about the responsibility it carries. Why do I feel entitled to take something from

Nature, transform it into something of my own, and present it to the world? There is always a bit of tension, a quiet conflict, but maybe that is necessary. It keeps me sharp and honest. Because I know that if I do not handle my work with care, if I just push things into the world without thought, I will lose my way." There is always a logical, formal principle guiding his work - much like Nature, which exists with an intrinsic structure or mathematical order, even if we do not always grasp it. And, ultimately, there's an intuitive sense of whether something is right or not.

Bakker's works are complex, not only in their creation but also in how they are mentally and philosophically absorbed. Perhaps this explains the limited number of labels and designers the studio has collaborated with. "The personal relationships I have with those I

work with are crucial. It is important that my collaborators are attuned to where my ideas lie. In a collaboration, you are so dependent on one another. When I invest myself in something, I want to see it succeed - I want to make it worthwhile."

Tijmen Smeulders and Konstantin Schmoelzer, Bakker's former students, joined the studio in 2012 and 2015. Schmoelzer, from Austria, takes the lead on business strategies and future initiatives, while Smeulders focuses on furthering the production of objects, graphics, and scenography. Together, Bakker and Smeulders realised the scenography for *Specific Objects* (2023) at Kunstraum Zug in Austria, *Asian Bronze* (2024) at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, and beyond.

Bakker and the Lobmeyr company first connected in 2016, though he

Sitting Table, Stack, 2022 / Photo courtesy of Carpenters Workshop Gallery



had long dreamed of collaborating with the storied Austrian glassmaker since his teenage years, when he discovered Hans Harald Rath's *Drinking Set* and Oswald Haerdtl's *Candy Dish* from the renowned producer. Their partnership began in earnest with the release of the *Reigen* tumblers and the *Night Set* series in 2020, culminating in October with Bakker's inaugural exhibition at Lobmeyr's flagship store in Vienna, marking a new chapter in their collaboration. Anike Tyrell of Ireland's J. HILL's Standard visited Bakker's Amsterdam studio shortly before the pandemic, and Bakker was deeply impressed by her demeanour. "She founded the busi-

As you delve into Bakker's oeuvre, you find yourself suspended in time, where each object feels both like a beginning and a completion. Their beauty transcends temporal constraints; his works live, evolve, and reincarnate, forming an eternal cycle.

ness with a deep care and respect for craftsmanship; Anike and her team are such wonderful, trustworthy people, and likewise, they are driven by a passion for creation and the magic of transforming nothing into something." The first fruition of their collaboration, *Pot Variations*, came in 2021, a collection

featuring a pipe, an ashtray, and a pot, all designed to enhance the rituals of everyday life.

A new, unexpected chair design for the French label Moustache is underway, with a likely debut at the upcoming Milan Design Week. For the past few years, the studio and its longest-standing collaborator, t.e., have been exploring production in China, led by Chen Min, an alumnus of Design Academy Eindhoven who was also taught by Bakker. Thus far, they have successfully launched a porcelain version of *Watering Can* (originally released in copper in 2010), the *Harvey* series, and *Nose* (2021). And after a hiatus due to the bankruptcy of the Czech workshop, the production of *Glass Line* has also resumed in China.

It takes time for Bakker to build trust before committing to a partnership, and one can imagine how tough it would be for him to part ways, especially when it is inevitable. Last year, he designed the final piece for the t.e. collection, a tribute to his dear friend Thomas Eyck, the label's founder. In Eyck's last visit to the studio, he came across a grey Indian quartzite vessel that Bakker had initially created as a vase. Eyck asked him to rework it into an urn. The Urn, limited to ten editions, was first made for Eyck, who sadly passed away in July 2023.

As you delve into Bakker's oeuvre, you find yourself suspended in time, where each object feels both like a beginning and a completion. Their beauty transcends temporal

constraints; his works live, evolve, and reincarnate, forming an eternal cycle. You connect with them instinctively, setting out on a personal journey to uncover the underlying truth of their intrinsic qualities. Bakker sees himself as part of a long-standing tradition in the pursuit of beauty, one of many who have walked this path, each contributing to its enduring legacy.

For Bakker, integrity lies in his strong belief in bringing meaningful new things into the world, and in self-discipline. While the conditions or context may sometimes make this more challenging, it has always been his way of being – and it will likely continue to be. "We

are living in difficult times, and it often feels impossible to imagine a positive future. With the state of the climate, politics and the economy, the challenges seem endless. We think we know a lot, yet there is still so much we do not understand about life, science, Nature, and the systems we have created. These systems needed change long ago, and the call for change only grows stronger, fuelling anger, impatience, and a fixation on consumerism. It's easy to give in to these impulses, but they lead nowhere. I believe it is our responsibility to keep searching for hope and to keep striving for a better outcome." <



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