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THE MAGAZINE FOR COLOUR, DESIGN & TRENDS FROM GLOBAL COLOR RESEARCH™

ISSUE 22 FOUR 2010

€19,50/£17,824



interview

Pushing the Boundaries



In just 23 years, **Jerry Helling**, president and creative director of Bernhardt Design, has taken an all American traditional furniture company and turned it into a cutting edge global design brand.

Jerry Helling is a brave man. When he joined Bernhardt Design in 1987, the company was textbook US traditional, "Very conservative, very timber based," he says. Despite being successful in its own niche, Helling thought the company could do more; visits to Milan and Paris had ignited a passion for good design and, he reasoned, if Americans were happy to buy from Italy, why not from an American company? "I thought, why shouldn't we make beautifully designed product? We have the skills. What we didn't have was the credentials, people were looking for a European label, we just didn't have the same kudos," says Helling.

Luckily the Bernhardt board were persuaded to share Helling's vision (you suspect that Helling's boundless enthusiasm for design and sheer energy were hard to resist). "This is a family company and they have been very supportive and, importantly, they trust me. Apart from prudent questioning they're really open to change which is why Bernhardt has managed to reinvent itself," says Helling.

It helped too that Helling's championship of Ross Lovegrove proved an inspired move. The designer's second chair for Bernhardt Design, called Go, generated a media storm and found its way onto front covers and into museums. "Then people paid attention and this meant that Bernhardt could add a portfolio of designers to rival any Italian company," says Helling.

The role call is certainly impressive by any standards. In the past ten years Helling has managed to gather work by Yves Behar, Fabien Baron, Arik Levy, Jamie Hayon, Monica Förster, Noé Duchaufour-Lawrance, Patrick Norquet, Marc Thorpe and Shin Azumi.

Helling is now an enthusiastic and discerning collector of design talent. "We select designers that we really want to work with; it's usually something that they have done; we see a spark. We never go by resumes (Helling is often sent 100 portfolios a week), and we like to work with people on



Gaia, Arik Levy



Orbit, Ross Lovegrove

the ascent," he says. Most of all, he adds, "There has to be a personal connection; it's hard to explain." He cites his collaboration with Madonna's brother Christopher Ciccone. "I literally cold called him after I saw some work he had done."

Bernhardt doesn't sit back and leave a designer in splendid isolation. "We are incredibly collaborative. The initial product nearly always ends up completely different from the drawings we saw initially on the table. That's why we need to work with nice people. There's a real need to put egos aside or you can't get anywhere." As it is, the process is a slow one, up to three years in some cases. Cuddeback's first design underwent 14 different developmental stages to get it right. "They thought we

would stop around three, but we kept on going, that's what makes Bernhardt Design different," says Helling.

Helling is passionate about supporting young designers. Bernhardt Design is an ICFF Studio sponsor and mentors young designers on how to get the most out of the show. He has also worked with establishing an annual studio at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. The studio was created to provide students with invaluable work experience with clients. He is so proud of this work that at the Bernhardt stand at ICFF for 2011, the display will focus on a 'family tree' of students over the last five years, charting their successes and body of work.

Helling's support of students is all the more remarkable in the face of the dire US



Go, Ross Lovegrove



Vika, Monica Förster



Bardot, Jaime Hayon



Corvo, Noé Duchaufour-Lawrance



Atlantic, Culsac



Curio, Claudia & Harry Washington

economy that has, as Helling admits, been brutal. Bernhardt Design has been luckier than many of its competitors; corporate clients have continued to work with the company and entering the European, Asian and Australian market has spread the risk.

Helling is particularly taken with the UK market, to the extent that he chose this year's London Design Week to re-launch the brand in London (there was a small presence in the 90's on the tail of American clients who moved here following the banking boom). A new showroom in Clerkenwell and a commitment to manufacture furniture both in the US and Denmark will speed up lead times and further strengthen the brand's position in the European market.

It's clear that Helling loves London and sees it as the hub for European business. He is certainly tired of a Milan that has "Become like Las Vegas, not about the design any more, just about the big brands. The London show is where it's at from now on, its very organised and I love the clearly defined districts. It feels like there are ideas to discover."

2010 saw Helling celebrate 23 years of business with Bernhardt Design. In this time the brand has gone from all American classicism to a lauded international design focused company. Helling has had to carefully navigate many challenges, not least creating a cohesive brand based on the talents of an enormously diverse roster of designers. How has he achieved this?

"We look for designs that cross many boundaries. If I had to quantify the qualities of a Bernhardt design I would say simplicity, we don't like anything too complicated or asymmetrical. That's why French designers work so well for us, they have an innate feeling and understanding of beauty, even when they are being progressive."

First and foremost though, Helling is also a great believer in gut instinct. "Sometimes when you try to articulate what makes a good design it is just impossible, it just is. How do you know? You just look at something and you can tell if it's good or not. It really is that simple."

Contacts

www.bernhardtdesign.com