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KENGO KUMA : ADAM KIMMEL : SUPPOSE : NENDO : TOKUJIN YOSHIOKA : LOUIS VUITTON VS TOPSHOP : FRANCESC RIFÉ
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**INTERIOR
REALITY**

LOFT, A CLEAN-LINED WALNUT RECLINER BY SHELLY SHELLY.



AN AMERICAN CHAMPION

JERRY HELLING, head of US-based BERNHARDT DESIGN, which he has transformed into an international success story, is a pragmatic proponent of new American design.

WORDS SHONQUIS MORENO
PHOTOS COURTESY OF BERNHARDT DESIGN

The location of the HQ of commercial manufacturer Bernhardt Design – in Lenoir, North Carolina, the heartland of traditional American furniture design – tells us where the company came from. Its recent ‘do-gooder’ programmes, as president and creative director Jerry Helling affectionately and jokingly calls them, tell us where the company is going. Helling, who began his career at Bernhardt Design 23 years ago, transformed it from a domestic manufacturer of traditional wood furniture into one of the few American furniture labels to earn international success, collaborating with established and emerging designers from London to Tokyo, and from Valencia to Reykjavik.

Six years ago, he initiated a one-year course at the Art Center College of Design that walks students through the commercial-design process

from pitch to prototype, and from production to marketing. This was followed by the 2006 launch of ICFF Studio, a juried exhibition of international work shown at the eponymous New York fair. Then this May saw the establishment of the American Design Honors award, which will be bestowed on two people each year. Helling spoke to *Frame* about cheerleading, the challenges faced by American designers, and why it feels good to be a champion of the industry.

Where did the Art Center College of Design partnership, ICFF Studio and, more recently, the American Design Honors award come from?

I get approached by so many young graduates with fanciful ideas who don't know how a company works, how to make a presentation or what it's like to launch a commercial project.

I approached Art Center and said, ‘You do a great job teaching creative skills, theory and thinking, but most of the students lack business skills when they get out of school.’ We show them every aspect of the commercial process. We start from the presentation and take them through the prototyping phase to see how a product changes when it hits the factory floor and how their vision has to change to go into production. We help them write their bios and press releases, and we make their product and launch it into the market. And then they get paid a royalty like any working designer. Their work is not ghettoized as student work. It's displayed at ICFF and NeoCon, next to work by Arik Levy or Jaime Hayon. Today we have the work of 13 former students in our line.

ICFF Studio began in 2006 with the realization that it's a real challenge to be a >>>

THE STACKABLE AUDIO CHAIR, BY CHRIS ADAMICK.



young American designer trying to build a career. How can we best help? We don't produce any of the work from Studio. Instead, it's about giving the designers a platform to meet manufacturers, retailers and media and get their work seen. Our only role is to be a coach and a cheerleader. I take competitors over to the Studio booth all the time to introduce them to the designers. This year, a large commercial competitor, Hayworth, launched a product by former participant Chris Adamick. Several have gotten contracts with manufacturers. For others, it's a launching pad to self-produce for themselves or the likes of DWR.

This year, we teamed up with Stylus Media Group [an interiors-industry research firm] to create the American Design Honors award for Americans: one student and one young practising designer. This is a way to pay pinpointed attention to two people. A year from now, this is going to be the interiors version of WGSN Network [an online fashion resource], a comprehensive service for the interiors industry that will help designers gain legitimacy and credibility as they build their careers.

Even though ICFF Studio is open to designers around the world, the jury selected ten Americans this year. What's your take on the American design industry?

My biggest fear is that furniture is becoming not just a commodity but a disposable commodity, a situation that undermines producers and designers who want to do good work. If people no longer invest in something that has had the time and care devoted to it to be well designed, that's a real problem. We've got the Apple syndrome in this industry. Who takes a warranty

out on an iPod? You know you'll want the new version before the warranty expires. We buy the lowest common denominator, because we know it will soon be obsolete and we'll just throw it away. Once things were handed down. My wife and I have all our parents' and grandparents' furniture. But who's going to pass down the West Elm sofa?

American designers in particular don't have many places to go; there are few producers who are trying to do high-quality design work. It's not like Europe, where there are so many mid-sized and small, family-owned companies that give designers the opportunity to do that type of work. Some US manufacturers believe the demand is: don't tell us your story about how well made it is; we want the sofa for \$399, and we want it in three weeks. And that's where the big dollars are.

American designers who want to become exportable don't have the government support, grants and programmes needed to have their work shown in other countries. The British Council brought 50 designers to ICFF this year! Half the fair was made up of the pavilions of governments that support their designers. So, everything considered, this is a very challenging career for an American.

Which Americans have a consistently strong body of work?

The bodies of work that I most admire are made by designers who have had many opportunities to work. Niels Diffrient is 82 years old. He's done fantastic work since the 1970s. There's Don Chadwick. You have to look to the office industry to find people who were able to create serious

bodies of work. Yves Béhar is going to have this. I'm not sure if he will be remembered more for his products or for his thinking, process and vision, but he's got the voice to make a difference. I think Joe Doucet will follow right in his footsteps. As for young people, Todd Bracher and Jonathan Olivares have now been given platforms to create bodies of work. And you know who gave them that opportunity? The Europeans. The Europeans gave Bracher and Olivares the voice to be heard in America. ■

SOLA, A DESK AND CHAIR IN ONE BY TALITHA JAMES, WAS EXHIBITED AT THE ICFF IN NEW YORK CITY.





JERRY HELLING (CENTRE LEFT) WITH THE FIRST GROUP OF ART CENTER COLLEGE OF DESIGN STUDENTS, WHOSE WORK WAS PRODUCED THROUGH COLLABORATION WITH BERNHARDT DESIGN.



JERRY HELLING, CREATIVE DIRECTOR OF BERNHARDT DESIGN.

BERNHARDT DESIGN

WEBSITE bernhardtdesign.com
LOCATION Lenoir, North Carolina
ESTABLISHED 1889
MARKET SECTOR Office, Hospitality, Residential
BEST-KNOWN PRODUCTS Go, Corvo, Loft and Orbit Chairs
BESTSELLING PRODUCTS Orbit Chair, Aro Barstool, Gaia Sofa, Suzanne Trocmé Collection
COLLABORATING DESIGNERS Ross Lovegrove, Arik Levy, Patrick Jouin, Noé Duchaufour-Lawrance, PearsonLloyd, Lievore Altherr Molina, Yves Béhar, Jamie Hayon, CuldeSac, Fredrikson Stallard, Christian Biecher, Patrick Norguet, Fabien Baron, Suzanne Trocmé, Philippe Cramer, hansandfranz, Jeffrey Bennett, Shin Azumi



THE SEMPRE CHAIR, BY SUZANNE TROCMÉ.

**‘Design is a very challenging career for an American’
 Jerry Helling**



EMI FUJITA'S NAMESAKE DESIGN: THE EMI CHAIR.