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What is beautiful? The Designer Milena Krais is intent on finding answers

Product designer Milena Krais creates bulgy chairs and cushions with bumpy knit surfaces and is now taking on the western standards of beauty. Her collection "Deform" showcases furniture as brightly-colored sculptures which are both beautiful and ugly– and certainly anything but sleek.

"Our perception of beauty is heavily influenced and determined by the media and marketing hype. Everything has to be perfect and smooth," says the 26-year-old designer who studied Product Design - Textiles at Hamburg University of Applied Sciences - HAW. "This notion of beauty means people should ideally be slim and products as perfect as possible." Whereas nobody contests that a product can –and may – be merely an object of beauty, the relentless media barrage that "slim is beautiful" is taking a toll on people: "It is putting a lot of pressure on girls. Having Photoshop around and knowing that women's magazine covers have little to do with reality doesn't make things any easier," Milena Krais remarks. But what caught the interest of the young design student looking for a topic for her thesis was precisely this fine line between illusion and reality since, as she says, "I was looking for something that would challenge and provoke, and tread the barriers of classical design."

A passion for fabrics and patterns

Milena Krais' earlier "Go Away" collection of unusual knee savers and "Farewell" tights for jilted lovers had already succeeded in pushing the barriers of convention a little further. Her textile and light installation "Hansel and Gretel" is literally a series of road markers, which actually point more towards art than to product design. Her work is marked by great craftsmanship – a bow to her roots, no doubt, since before studying in Hamburg, the young woman apprenticed to become a fashion designer in her home town near Pforzheim in Southern Germany. Ever since, Milena Krais has been using fabric, texture and pattern to create and design. It is no wonder then that she has tackled the issue of beauty with a "textile" approach. She began upholstering old chairs with uneven linings of polyester wadding, and then covering them with finely-knit wool of varying thickness. Using an old knitting machine from the fifties, she was able to wrap each part of a chair individually but in such a way as to make the different parts appear as one single piece. The surface, however, maintained its bulgy, uneven texture – exactly as she had wanted. She is pleased with the results and continues to use this technique as she experiments with other objects such as cushions and stools.

Design from Germany: An introduction

Not mocking obesity

Yet there was something else she was concerned about. "I didn't want to make fun of overweight people at all. I was afraid that my bulgy chairs could be misconstrued to do so." Indeed, on one occasion at one of her shows two girls did get very upset at the sight of her chairs. "Sure enough, they stood there wondering what on earth the whole thing meant." But the international design scene, which has been paying close attention to Krais' work, knows better. Krais is now represented by an Italian gallery and exhibits her work at the "Maison & Objet" trade show in Paris. The widespread interest in her pieces comes as no surprise: far from being a problem limited to Germany, obesity seems to have long become a global issue in the West.

Not merely a German problem

Milena Krais is not alone. Other designers like the Dutch Lambert Kamps are also focusing on this topic. While searching for an unusual theme for the interior design of a boutique hotel room, Kamps caught sight of an extremely overweight man whose body mass had something strangely surreal.

This inspired him to create his Fat Furniture collection, which features pumped-up, almost grotesque shapes. In this respect, Kamps' views differ slightly from those of Milena Krais. He believes the steadily rising obesity rates in people represent a problem in and of itself, and not just society's hypocritical way of dealing with it. His swollen furniture pieces made of polyester foam

thus have a somewhat coarser and more exaggerated appearance that Milena Krais' finely-woven chair-sculptures. But Kamps' pieces look interesting – maybe even beautiful because "the beauty of imperfection truly conforms to reality", as his colleague Krais well knows.

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