

MEMPHIS BELLES

A Melbourne design buff joins forces with a designer from an audacious avant-garde Italian movement that rocked the '80s

DRAPED ACROSS AN EASEL, LEFT, IN NATHALIE DU PASQUIER'S MILAN STUDIO IS A NAPKIN PRINTED WITH ONE OF THE ARCHIVED MEMPHIS 1980s PATTERNS SHE AGREED TO LET MELBOURNE'S THIRD DRAWER DOWN PUT BACK INTO LIMITED PRODUCTION.

PHOTOGRAPHER: MIKKEL VANG PRODUCER/TEXT: ANNEMARIE KIELY

NATHALIE DU PASQUIER, RIGHT, ISN'T WORRIED THAT HER WIGGLES, CUBES AND AMOEBAS – SCATTERED ACROSS THIRD DRAWER DOWN'S NEW RANGE OF HOMEWARES – MIGHT LOOK STRANGE TO A NEW GENERATION. SHE THINKS HER COLLABORATION WITH A "YOUNG AUSTRALIAN GIRL" KEEPS THEM FRESH.

AS ABIGAIL CROMPTON, owner of art souvenir shop and design agency Third Drawer Down (TDD) recalls it, she was indulging her love of surface pattern with a search on the web when she happened upon "the extraordinary work" of Memphis founding member Nathalie Du Pasquier. Not one to let long distance or legend get in the way (she shared tea and productivity with the late Louise Bourgeois), Crompton instantly put in the international call to her and suggested the re-issuing of select Memphis patterns across a range of homewares. Du Pasquier promptly declared herself "in".

For those too young to read the provenance of du Pasquier and her Postmodern pals (who first gathered around design grandee Ettore Sottsass to collaborate on an exhibition of 'functional' pieces for the 1981 Milan Furniture Fair) into the work of current design provocateurs Job Smeets or Marcel Wanders, Memphis was a Milan-based collective that gave the two-fingered salute to Modernism's dictates on marketability and ergonomics. It was the smart lovechild of cheesy pop-culture and mass consumerism, conceived in the same year that a Hollywood actor became the 40th president of the United States. Memphis made hyperactive commentary on class and the cross-pollination of politics and culture with a collection of objects made from the mundane materials of the everyday, all over-decorated with 'signs of the times' (micro science to macro space). From kitsch to Kandinsky, it referenced colours and shapes that simply couldn't stay the course of fashion taste. Indeed, the catalogue essay that accompanied Memphis' premier collection made its own self-reflexive critique: "We are all sure that Memphis furniture will soon go out of style". Ironically, the manufacturers, design magazines and furniture stores lined up for a piece of its planned obsolescence, which, true to prediction and the pendulum swing, did go out of style, but perhaps not relevance.

It's 30 years since du Pasquier's kinetic squiggles, pulses and zigzags first shock-waved Modernism out of its utopian mindset but Crompton claims she can still read into them strong commentary on a complex world suffering an overabundance of same stuff. "Not long after our phone conversation, a folio of Nathalie's designs arrived," she says, gingerly pulling out sheets unmistakably patterned by Du Pasquier's pen. "See, the Texta marks are still visible, all drawn by hand...so beautiful."

While the Memphis collective disbanded in 1987 for the pursuit of individual member goals, re-production of its product has remained largely in lockdown. The question begs of Du Pasquier: why now? Was this revival a signal of style's pendulum swing back? "The girls completely understood the spirit in which these patterns were done and if they don't work, it will be 100 per cent my fault," she says of TDD down the line from Milan. "I don't mind if they don't look new; I hope they still look strange, from another planet, but please, not nostalgic of the '80s! I believe that these old patterns being picked up by young girls from Australia in 2011 gives them a new touch of freshness, something we girls can feel from one generation to the next." ANNEMARIE KIELY *Third Drawer Down, (03) 9534 4088, thirddrawerdown.com. See a fuller exploration of Nathalie du Pasquier and her Milan studio in our story 'Object Lessons', on page 148.*