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THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN > MAR/APR 2004



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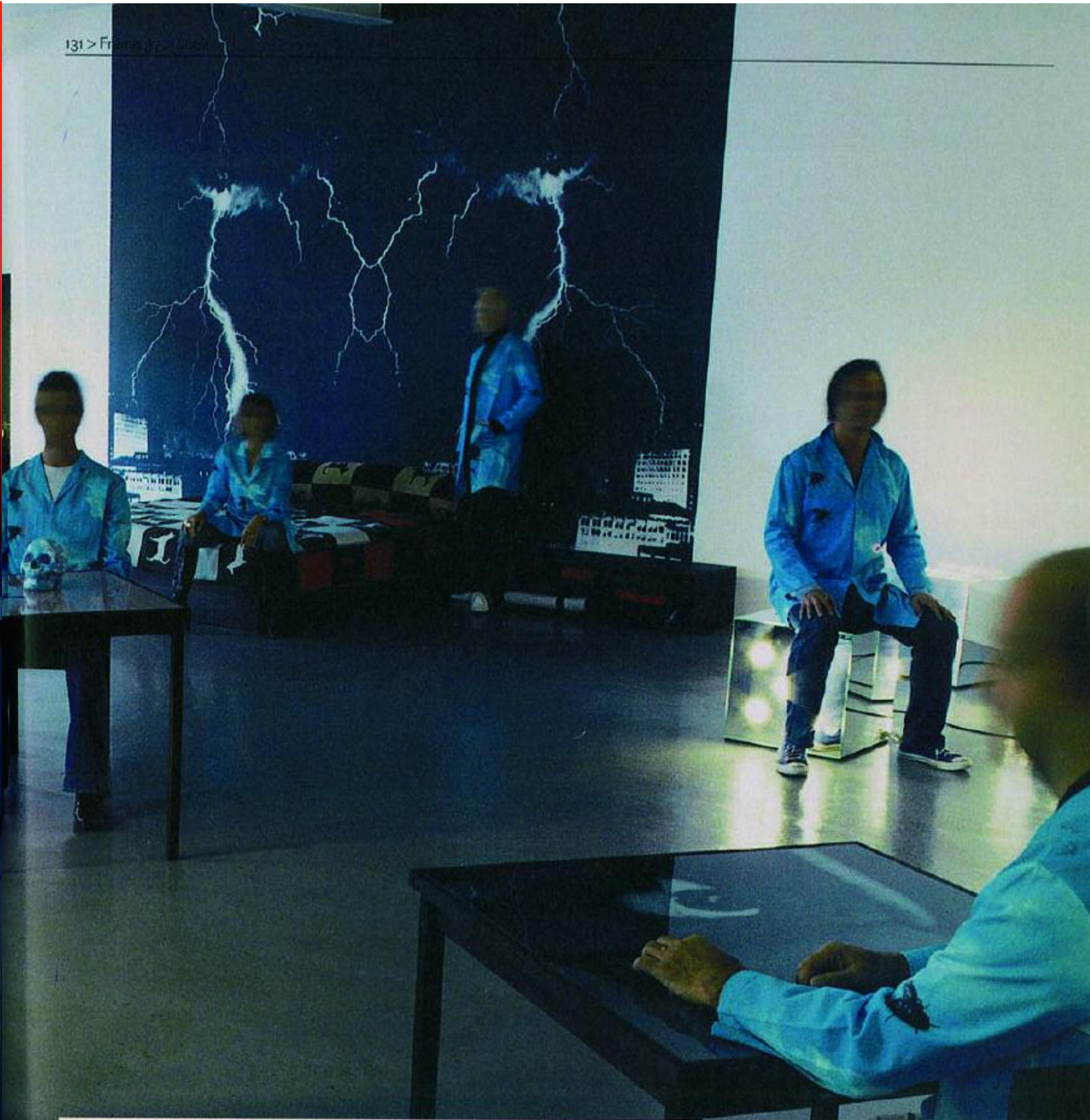
EU €15 UK £11 Canada \$29.50 Japan ¥2,940 Korea ₩35,000
Printed in the Netherlands



Showroom Dummies – a multidisciplinary quartet of London creatives – taps deep into the unconscious mind with macabre murals and freaky furniture.

Domestic Violence

Text by Daniela Mecozzi. Photography by Coco Amardeil



Just what have grizzly skulls, giant lizards, thunderstorms and volcanoes got to do with interior furniture and fabrics? Nothing at all up to now. But that's about to change if Abigail Lane has her way. The British artist is turning her attention to the innocent world of domestic interiors and injecting it with a heavy dose of her trademark gothic imagery. Lane is one of four partners behind Showroom Dummies, a recently established London design collective that also includes fashion designer Brigitte Stepputtis, printer Bob Pain and furniture maker Edwin Wright. The four have just presented their first collection of furnishings in an exhibition that bears the improbable title *Interior Motives (Natural Histories and Natural Disasters)*.

Such a lengthy and lofty title suggests that this isn't your run-of-the-mill furniture collection. All the items on show – wallpapers, furniture, screens, blankets and tiles – bear surreal surfaces 'decorated' with skeletons, stuffed animals, flies, erupting volcanoes,

electrical storms and other images not ordinarily encountered in the comfortable cosmos of interiors. No surprise, therefore, that the venue chosen for the launch wasn't a London art gallery or design showroom. Nor was it 100% Design, the city's annual gathering for furniture design and manufacturers. Instead, *Showroom Dummies* took its interior freak show to a club in King's Cross that is neither gallery nor commercial venue.

Such neutral territory is fitting for a furniture collection that eludes rigid classification. Abigail Lane (1967) has been a figure on the London art scene for over a decade. In 1988, while still a student at Goldsmith College, she participated in *Freeze*, a seminal exhibition staged in a dockland warehouse by fellow student Damien Hirst. *Freeze* included work by the likes of Sarah Lucas, Matt Collinshaw and Gary Hume, all representatives of what was later dubbed BritArt. Many of these artists gained recognition through the use



Esoteric Agenda

Furniture designers are often in awe of form-making. It is refreshing to see image-making direct the meaning of the work. Showroom Dummies' furniture seems to be more of a three-dimensional canvas for the images involved.

The threshold between the decorative arts and furniture has a long history in this country. The Arts & Crafts movement and the work of the Bloomsbury Group at the beginning of the twentieth century embraced similar multidisciplinary aspirations, in which surface pattern-making was as instrumental to the meaning of a piece as was the form itself. The work of Fornasetti also comes to mind with reference to the decorative nature of designs by the Showroom Dummies, although the latter may aspire to a more political and subversive agenda. It is always positive to see boundaries between furniture and other decorative arts blur. The beauty of furniture is that it can tolerate the extremes of mass production and function, while illustrating the more esoteric agenda expressed by Showroom Dummies.

Luke Pearson, designer PearsonLloyd, London



of shock tactics. Art with plenty of gory details was a sure-fire way of creating a stir, and the inevitable public outcry seemed to reinforce the credibility of the artists. Hirst, perhaps the best-known member of the movement, rose to notoriety by displaying dissected animals in tanks of formaldehyde. Marcus Harvey made a portrait of convicted child-murderer Myra Hindley composed of children's handprints. In 1995 Lane covered the walls of the ICA in London with wallpaper featuring photos of trails of blood left by homicide victims. The work of Showroom Dummies doesn't go to such extremes, but the house-of-horrors quality clearly bears the influence of the art scene of which Lane is a part.

All the more fitting, therefore, that Tracey Emin, perhaps Britain's most provocative artist, should have been the one to introduce Lane to Brigitte Stepputtis. German by birth, Stepputtis (1956) ran her own fashion label, worked as a costume designer and is currently

head of couture at Vivienne Westwood. Lane and Stepputtis first collaborated as Showroom Dummies – having borrowed the name of a song by Kraftwerk – when they designed costumes and wore them to art events. A commission to design 52 uniforms for the launch of the BBC4 arts channel in 2002 ultimately provided them with the incentive and the funds needed to create a range of furnishings. They subsequently invited Bob Pain (1955) of Omnicolour, a London printing company, and Edwin Wright (1969), a London-based set designer, to join them. Pain is responsible for printing, while Wright focuses on furniture design. Stepputtis, who oversees the textile side of things, stresses that decisions are taken collectively. She adds that the present collection, however, 'is very much Lane's vision'. For her part, Lane describes the exhibition as 'an installation that shows what we can do, a calling card, an introduction to the industry'. The hope is that bigger and better things



lie ahead, including commissions for products and entire interiors.

A future that finds a permanent place for the work of Showroom Dummies will have to be a future in which in-your-face imagery generates an appeal not limited to the art scene. What sets the current collection apart is the surface treatment, which is a far cry from the type of decoration that dominates contemporary furnishings. Showroom Dummies covers items of furniture with imagery that is anything but comforting. Instead, it taps into the subconscious, into magic and mystery – subjects that regularly surface in Lane's work. Overlying the comforts of domestic living is the untamed violence of nature. Lane's sternly gothic aesthetic touches on what she calls 'the glamorous side of danger'. Certain images can be traced to her collection of pictures of stuffed animals – photos shot in museums of natural history worldwide. A black-and-white mural depicting a volcanic eruption surrounds a domestic

fireplace faced in tiles featuring skeletons apparently in motion. Another mural, behind a bed, shows a huge electrically charged sky ripped by shards of lightning. These murals were inspired by the floor-to-ceiling scenes of tropical beaches and romantic sunsets found in many 1970s interiors. Lane likes the idea of 'having an entire world on your wall'. The result is a domestic interior that protects occupants from the elements, while displaying the fury of the very same natural forces from which they need to be protected.

Even without the flair that a seasoned design agency might have lent the collection, it still offers a playful, ironic comment on the furniture that dresses our daily lives

The same merry dance of odd couples is apparent in everything Showroom Dummies designed for the exhibition. For the panels of



Opening spread: View of exhibition, with the cast of Showroom Dummies in Fly Sky uniforms.
 Previous spread: Glass-topped table and chairs with lizard motif (left); Domesticated Animal, acrylic screen with bones (right).
 Left: Detail of glass-topped table with gambling motif. Top: Electric Storm, mural, with Francis. Above: Ethel the dog with her skeleton basket and cashmere blanket.
 Next spread: Volcanic mural and fireplace with skeleton tiles (left); chequered cashmere blanket with bug motif (right).

two concertina screens, Lane again used images that reflect her interest in taxidermy, a process resulting in animals that are 'real and fake at the same time'. Walking across the surface of one screen, called Domesticated Animal, are a life-size cow, goat and chicken, as well as the skeleton of a pig. On a second screen, two white horses nuzzle each other. The opposite side of the screen shows a squad of parachutists dropping from a blue sky. Cashmere blankets are chequered with bones and bugs. Navy wallpaper features white skeletons frolicking with their own spare femurs. Glass tabletops become canvases for images of giant lizards, Duchamp-like eyes and the hands of card players. The tranquillity of the bright-blue sky that covers the upholstery of the chairs is rudely interrupted by a giant fly.

Devising images for such mundane domestic items offers challenges in terms of compositional approach, says Lane, for the simple reason that making furniture differs from working in a gallery 'on a

vertical wall with a square shape'. The difficulty is particularly visible in the tabletops, which reveal that although the transition from art to furniture has produced intriguing results, it has not been entirely smooth. Wright designed the pieces as pared-down structures, the kind of 'classic, good, functional furniture that can hold images', he says. The process, as he explains it, seems to be one of simply applying two-dimensional images to three-dimensional objects. From the point of view of interior design, however, this is precisely the sticking point. Nowhere are the shapes informed in any significant way by the surfaces applied, or vice versa. The two lead separate existences. And despite the underlying ambition to take art out of the gallery and into the real world, the fact that these objects are viewed 'in the round' rather than 'head on', like pictures on a wall, has meant only a change in venue and not a different approach to spatial arrangement. Nevertheless, even without the flair that a seasoned



design agency might have lent the collection, it still offers a playful, ironic comment on the furniture that dresses our daily lives.

Whereas Stepputtis, Pain and Wright have kept their day jobs, Lane is concentrating all her efforts on Showroom Dummies for the time being – a decision that should not be interpreted as her farewell to art. She hopes the new venture will provide her with the means to pursue her art without having to rely on subsidization. Set up as a commercial endeavour, Showroom Dummies shares the entrepreneurial and irreverent attitude that marked the Freeze exhibition 15 years ago, now transported into the arena of interiors.

Lane is all too aware of the risks involved when an established artist ventures beyond the confines of the art scene in this way. She has regularly staged events outside the boundaries of gallery and museum, once going so far as to host a hair salon in her studio. Change has been the one constant in her work. Thus the current

collection can be viewed as simply another phase in a steadily evolving art career. And despite the fact that matters of function and practicality are part of product design, Lane hasn't suppressed the artist in her. It is her art that makes the images she projects onto familiar interior items so startlingly refreshing. Then, too, she seems unconcerned about how her work relates to what's happening in the field of furniture and interiors. 'I have always thought it impossible for me to know the impact of my work within any field. I think that is really for others to judge. I feel any fixed statements so early in the development of a company are more of a hindrance than a help, as they cannot possibly be based on experience at this stage. I see my design for Showroom Dummies in relation to the rest of my creativity and try not to worry too much about where or how it fits in. If I like it, then I hope that some other people will too.'



Not for the Faint-Hearted

What Abigail Lane brings to the design world is an artist's sensibility. The pieces in this collection are vehicles for her images, which always have an ambiguous quality. Yet she's not simply recycling her art or making multiples. Nor is she suddenly reinventing herself as a furniture designer. For whom are these objects intended? Not for the faint-hearted, obviously, but they are livable, lovable objects that cover a broad base and are versatile enough to appeal to a range of potential clients. And they can be integrated into the desired space by degrees. Lane creates bespoke pieces that can be made to measure in much the same way as a Saville Row suit.

Louise Buck, London-based art writer