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Champagne
Dom Pérignon
Vintage

The god of small things

Marc Newson has the future in his hands, and he's crafting it into a striking place full of sinuous lines, vibrant colours and sensual shapes. He has reworked everything from furniture to footwear – and now he has his eye on outer space. Harriet Quick meets the messiah of the design world. Portrait by Snowdon

“So you are going to get an award? Something for the mantelpiece?” enquires hotelier André Balazs as he skips up the steps of his hotel, The Raleigh on Miami South Beach, to greet Marc Newson, who is awaiting his driver. “Oh yeah, something important-looking I guess,” says the Design Miami Designer of the Year, drawing an iceberg-like shape in the air. Balazs interjects: “A big Perspex dildo?”

They grin and Newson and his girlfriend, *Vogue* contributing fashion editor Charlotte Stockdale, depart in a limo for a gated community of extravagant Palladian-influenced villas called Sunset Islands I and II. “He seems like a nice guy,” says Newson of Craig Robins, founder of the design-fair arm of Miami Art Basel, which is rammed with the best in fashion, design, art and hedge-fund managers. *The New York Times* dubbed it “an art Costco for billionaires”.

The evening turns out to be one of much anticipation, which Newson shrugs off as being “no big deal”. The Australian-born industrial designer recently caused gasps as one of his earliest limited-edition furniture pieces, the Lockheed Lounge (1986), a blobular riveted-metal chaise longue, sold at auction for an astonishing \$968,000: the most ever paid for a piece of contemporary furniture. The fact that Madonna reclined on it in her “Rain” video and it took centre stage in the foyer of the Paramount hotel has only upped its cult status. New York gallerist Larry Gagosian is staging an exhibition of Newson’s new limited-edition furniture pieces, making him the poster-boy for the emerging design market. He has also just received the prestigious Royal Designer for Industry distinction from the Royal Society of Arts in London. Not that the scrolled award commending “design services to industry” would trigger >

Marc Newson stands alongside his 1989 Felt chair, produced by Capellini, and the champagne ice bucket he designed for Dom Perignon in 2006. Grooming, Jason Stanton



Newson has an expansive portfolio of design projects, all of which are shot through with his signature space-age style. *Clockwise from far left*, Diode lamp, 2007; red-gold Hemipode watch for Ikepod, \$28,000; Voronoi shelf in Carrara marble, 2007; Event Horizon table, 1992; Zvezdochka shoe for Nike, 2004, designed as all-purpose footwear for cosmonauts; Kelvin 40 concept jet, 2003

that much gush in Miami – here the triad of good looks, bankability and visionary talent are what get them going.

First stop on the Sunset Island tour is the Lindemann residence. Adam Lindemann, owner of Ikepod watches, is hosting cocktails to launch Marc's latest collection: a limited-edition range of signed designs in platinum, gold, titanium and diamonds, which start at around \$10,000. One watch, the Megapode, can compute fuel consumption for pilots.

Newson, in DJ and trainers (white leather Nikes which he designed for the Australian Olympic team) with his trademark square beard and floppy, layer-cut mahogany hair, darts through rooms dotted with twentieth-century art and collectibles, including his curvaceous Orgone chair. Sipping on champagne, he is his amiable, laconic self, answering questions about the watch designs from the cluster of collectors, connoisseurs and hedge-funders with money to invest in new timepieces. A chap who advises basketball champs on stylistic matters eyes up the watches with a clear intent to score several. "The players will wear anything he tells them to wear," boasts his girlfriend.

The watches' chief salesman carefully drapes their moulded rubber straps over valuable wrists. Respective partners look on admiringly while the chip-and-pin is fingered in the background. "Rather like a Venetian salesman visiting a palazzo in the sixteenth century with his box of exotic imports," muses Joel Berg, the graphic designer behind the packaging of the Ikepod line.

Next stop is another palatial house, this time belonging to Craig Robins, where the Designer of the Year is feted with a buffet spread of fresh langoustines, rare-beef brochettes and flutes of Dom Perignon. Tom Dixon, Nadja Swarovski, artist John Baldessari and *New York Times* scribe Alix Browne all flit and flirt by the pool

as gusty winds swiftly put paid to pricy blow-drys. There's no Perspex dildo, but a whole lot of love for Newson. "He's such a great designer – never clichéd, and that's hard," says Craig Robins, who studiously positions Richard Tuttle and John Baldessari sculptures in his duplex condo developments to amplify their value. "Marc captures the moment in his work. It's fresh and current and will still seem so in 50 years – he's someone I'd like to collect."

By 1am, Marc, Charlotte, his PR director Patsy Youngstein, Gagosian gallerist and critic Louise Neri and Sebastian Segers, the architectural associate for Newson's company, are ensconced at a Miami karaoke night hosted by his pal André, owner of the cult Paris nightclub Le Baron. "I wish I could see inside Marc's brain," says Charlotte, who first met him 10 years ago when she was a stylist on a Newson profile for the *Sunday Times*. They met again, and have been a much-invited great-looking couple about London, Paris, Tokyo and New York for a year now. "I've no idea how his mind works," she muses.

Patsy, who has worked with Marc for nine years, talks softly about his charm and his genius. André gives him a wink while another art-person-of-note belts out Springsteen backed by the kooky French covers band. "Don't give up the day job," nods Newson in the art person's direction, before exiting to the courtyard, where a magnum of champagne awaits him, chilling in a Newson-designed bottle-shaped icebox (commissioned by Dom Perignon). "Do you think it's big enough?" he says, stroking the neck of the bottle.

The next day, hangovers managed and five press interviews done and dusted, Newson is sitting with Louise Neri on an open-air stage to discuss his work before a live audience. Behind him, images are splashed onto a big screen: a concept aeroplane shaped like a stingray (the Kelvin 40); a Nike trainer

made for cosmonauts; a molecular sculpture (which dismantles into modular chairs) created for the Fondation Cartier Space; the award-winning interior of the Lever House restaurant in New York; a rubber-pronged dishrack; the Qantas Skybed, and his latest furniture designs.

Marc eloquently walks the audience through his work, explaining his fascination with materials, his obsession with processes and his perfectionism. Occasionally he brushes his hair back from his eyes and adjusts his cream felted-wool jacket to shield the biting wind. The session ends and, a few TV interviews later, the Newson crew speeds off to Joe's Stone Crab – a classic South Beach seafood diner – for a feast with Larry Gagosian, culture-preneur Johnny Pigozzi, cult publisher Benedikt Taschen, fashion-show producer Alex de Betak, André and a huddle of fun people that Marc and Charlotte have generously invited. Newson does not become ingratiating in front of mega-money and power – he's too Australian for that, and too much fun. Besides, it's difficult to fawn when you're wearing a paper lobster-bib and your girlfriend is passing around a digital camera loaded with snaps of you in the nude. "I'd lost my luggage," explains Charlotte. "I was miserable and he thought I needed entertaining."

Back in Paris, on a twinkly night just before Christmas, Newson, in his trademark hoodie, is in a more contemplative mood. He skips up the stairs of this two-storey studio in the Marais, apologising for his lateness. An end-of-year session with the company's accountants has eaten up most the day. There are conference calls to be made, Qantas work to be finalised and blown glassware for a series of Diode lights to be approved. Sebastian is working on architectural plans with his nose pressed to the screen, while Nicholas Register, his right-hand man, pops in with specifications. Dotted



Clockwise from right, Newson with his girlfriend, Charlotte Stockdale, at the Gagosian in January 2007; the Ford 021C concept car, entirely designed (apart from the mechanics) by Newson; the interior of Azzedine Alaïa's Paris boutique; the Lockheed Lounge chair, 1986; the Micarta chair, 2007, made with a now-obsolete form of laminate

around the sparse studio are models of rockets, aircraft, swatches of hi-tech springy materials and a window-shelf full of awards arranged like a student's miscellanea of postcards.

Reflecting on the blast that was Miami, Newson says: "Yeah, it's funny, at a certain point you get swept up. In the space of a couple of months I've been to half a dozen major events that I've been the focus of. I try to keep a healthy disrespect for pomp and ceremony – none of that stuff means much to me. Of course, it's nice to be the centre of attention, but it's not always like that. It's not what my job is about. My profession is a grounded occupation – unlike fashion, film, music."

Limited-edition furniture is the elite arm of an expansive and influential body of work by Newson, now 43. He started in Sydney in the Eighties, operating out of his backyard workshop on a tiny budget, and making limited-edition or one-off pieces of furniture as a way of experimenting with materials and sculptural forms. The first Lockheed Lounge sold for A\$1,500 at a gallery in Sydney – the sale price did not even cover his three months of labour and materials. "My time was not worth much then, but it was a good investment in the long run," he says. "I was happy to get rid of it at that price."

In January, at the Gagosian Gallery, he unveiled a new series of sublimely beautiful furniture designs carved out of giant blocks of Carrara and Bardiglio marble. The Extruded Chair is a sinuous glyph of Carrara marble, while the mind-boggling Voronoi Shelf is a honeycomb network for shelving books, again carved from a single block. Prices range from \$79,000 to \$400,000. The exhibition was in the planning for three years, after Molly Dent-Brocklehurst, Larry Gagosian's right-hand woman in London, scouted out Newson in his then studio in Heddon Street. "I have a whole host of names I would love to work with,

whether they be factories or people – I just needed a good excuse to do something," explains Newson. "I had worked with marble on architectural projects before, but nothing as ambitious as this. It was a fantastic discovery. Marble is a material most would think anachronistic, out of context in modern product design. On the other hand, it is classic and has been with us for thousands of years. I'm always, in all aspects of my work, thinking about the perceived value, and although marble is not inherently expensive, it has a huge perceived value."

This series of pieces that have been years in development will appeal to the new taste for product-design-as-art, a hybrid first glimpsed with Philippe Starck's Juicy Salif lemon

which are enough in themselves." The blocks of marble alone take months to find, before being cut into forms that even experienced marble workers had thought impossible.

This year also sees the unveiling of Newson's interiors for the new Qantas Airbus 380, a project he and his team have been toiling on for five years. It has been a huge undertaking to design everything from seats and lighting to cutlery and entertainment systems. Compared to his furniture, this is hardcore industrial work, governed by a zillion rules and protocols, and monitored via as many meetings. "PDMs [preliminary design meetings], CDMs [creative design meetings] – the whole process is governed by acronyms," says Newson of his endless powwows with "suits" and visits to the

A mere glimpse of his world would make many grown men weep tears of envy – the beautiful, successful girlfriend, the Lamborghini Miura, the Paris pied à terre, the Aston Martin...

squeezer (1989). Back in the stock-market-fuelled Eighties, the customers were loft-dwelling yuppies with a call to Schnabel and Basquiat. Now they are billionaire tastemakers and art collectors who will happily reinforce their dining-room floors to hold the likes of Newson's lathed-marble table.

"In terms of prices, it's nowhere near what's going on in the art world. This phenomenon is not widespread, but for me it's perfect timing. The Toms [Tom Dixon], Rons [Ron Arad] and Zaha Hadids are all getting into furniture now. We'll see where it goes, but the whole point of moving into the art world is that the parameters change, the rules change. You no longer have to work to limits, and that is so liberating for me. I'm only restricted by technical issues,

Falmer and Le Bourget air shows. The aviation industry has historically relied on engineers for interiors, and Newson is the first designer to enter the field. He won the job after pitching to design a skybed for the Qantas first-class cabin. He was an outsider with little experience in the aeronautics field, a factor that he says typically works for rather than against him. Challenges drive Newson.

"Most plane fits have literally been shoe-horned in and there is little continuity between the different classes. The overall impression of Qantas Airbus should be different. Everything is considered and done properly – not as an afterthought. I hope the reaction is like, 'Wow! Shit! This hangs together, someone has thought about this.'" > 331

Newson's range is extraordinary. Last year saw the opening of his extension of the Alaïa atelier/shop in Paris – a pale marble Tardis inset with skin-pink leather-lined niches to showcase shoes. Forthcoming projects are as diverse as housing designs in Tokyo, and a collection of binoculars and telescopes for Swarovski. He is a renaissance man: talented, with great technical skills and, most importantly, his own design “handwriting”, recognisable on any piece. There are only a handful of designers who can boast such a recognisable stamp: Jonathan Ive of Apple, Philippe Starck, Karl Lagerfeld and John Galiano among them.

“He’s best known for what’s been called the ‘retro-futurist’ style – a reinterpretation of the Sixties space-age aesthetic, with lots of bold colours and sinuous shapes. He does it beautifully – and it’s been ripped off very unbeautifully in every other skunky bar and building society. Thanks to these rip-offs, even people who’ve never heard the name Marc Newson would recognise his design style,” explains Alice Rawsthorn, design critic of the *International Herald Tribune*, who curated a Newson retrospective at the Design Museum in 2002. “What makes his work so special is that those luscious curves are underpinned by an absolute technical rigour. He approaches design like a technological toy box: pushing software programs, materials and production processes to new extremes to create improbably complex shapes.”

Design talents aside, Newson is that rare combination of inwardly geeky and outwardly sexy, and a mere glimpse of his world would make many grown men weep tears of envy. Count the triggers: the beautiful, successful girlfriend for whom he chooses Alaïa outfits; the bright yellow, baby-blue-leather-upholstered Lamborghini Miura tucked in the garage of their Paris pied à terre (Charlotte and Marc actually live in London); the Aston Martin parked on the road and the bicycle of his own design. To cap it all, he is designing a bespoke aluminium surfboard for surf champ Laird Hamilton to ride a 40ft Tahitian wave. “Well, it had to be a one-off – there’s not many nutters who would risk their lives riding one of those,” he points out.

In Newson’s apartment and studio there are virtually no pieces of his own making. “I’ve always led a transient life. I’m just not a collector. Every project is like a university degree – what I get out is knowledge. It’s more about feeding my mind, not my environment. I live a pretty modest existence and I don’t need all that much stuff; besides, I travel a lot.”

He has been travelling imaginatively since

he was a young boy growing up in the Sydney suburbs. He would spend hours tinkering in the backyard, making and remaking toys, bikes and surfboards. “It’s not that I had a lot of toys but I just always felt frustrated with them. I wanted them to be better,” he explains. “Frustration or anger is a driving force behind design. I’ve had that feeling all my life.” Newson enrolled in art school to study jewellery design, which fuelled his fascination with the unseen. “In jewellery, the design of what you don’t see is as important as the decorative aspect.” The unseen, or negative space is a compelling element in his work. The Event Horizon table in polished steel features an ovoid hole in a tantalising burnt red colour; his new Extruded marble table has a teardrop shape in the centre, as if the two leaves had not quite joined.

On leaving art school, Newson won a grant and began creating – the Lockheed Lounge being his first big piece, inspired by a fascination with aircraft. “I had nothing, but I was fortunate to be living in Sydney as you can have a good standard of living for very little; being in Europe would have been a lot tougher. I remember running my car on a dollar of gas a day, calculating exactly how much I needed to reach the top of the hill, so I could freewheel down on an empty tank to the gas station. If I hadn’t been compelled to make things, I would have just hung out at the beach all day.”

The success of his first exhibition led him to

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Tokyo. Here a random meeting between his then girlfriend and Teruo Kurosaki, owner of contemporary-furniture firm Idée, led to a Newson/Idée collaboration. By the time he reached Paris, Newson had a sizeable body of work. But even then it was a slog. Rawsthorn remembers meeting Newson in Paris – he had just one pair of boots to his name, riddled with holes. “When Marc got off the banana boat from Tokyo,” says Tom Dixon, “he arrived with a strong aesthetic from the New World which seemed fresh. At that time the dominant influence was the Memphis group.”

“People often ask me about my big breaks,” muses Newson, “but there have been none – just a constant slow and mundane build-up. I’ve been working now for 20 years, and there wasn’t one moment when everything fell into

place. By and large it’s been a long, slow build to where I am now. If you won an Academy Award, that would catapult your acting career; but it’s not so in my industry.” What has stretched Newson’s reach is a curiosity about other fields: architecture, film and technology. “There are not many fashion designers who interest me, but I think Azzedine Alaïa has to be the only designer approaching any sense of genius. The thing that I love is how he makes things. I respond to that level of tension and level of craftsmanship in what he does – it’s something you don’t see much of any more, so sophisticated and so specific,” says Marc.

Alaïa originally approached him to work on the Paris shop five years ago – Newson was allowed to design whatever he wanted for the space. He has also designed a shop in Tokyo for jeweller Marie Hélène de Taillac, luggage for Samsonite and a niche line for denim brand G-Star with friend and graphic designer Richard Allan. “I just wanted to design clothes I could wear,” he says, pointing to his uniform of hoodie, trainers and baggy jeans. “It started off with workwear. I could wear overalls all day long, which I did for a long time; they are such a cool idea.”

There are few signs of Newson’s big world in his studio. An airfix rocket, a tin aeroplane model, and a door sign reading “Marc’s Stuff: Danger”. “He strides fast and is often buried in thought,” explains Charlotte of how he carries his enormous workload. Both of them

are zooming about the planet at equal pace. “She has a similarly demanding profession and what could be competition to our relationship, isn’t. It all works well – but it would have been a disaster five years ago. We’ve got to respect points in careers where we have the power to control our own schedules.”

As long as Newson feels unhappy about the state of design and is propelled by his fascination with the new, he will carry on creating. He revealed in Miami that his dream would be to design for outer space. He has already been up in a MiG combat aircraft, which flies at supersonic speed. “When that £20 million comes, I’ll be up there.” In the meantime, I have a few requests: could he apply his prodigious talents to condoms, ski-wear and the London Underground? ■