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PERPETUAL EMOTION

CHARLES KAISIN is a designer who wears his heart and intellect on both sleeves, embracing the world with passionate enthusiasm and challenging ideas. His role as the co-curator of the Dress Code and Design in Motion exhibitions that will be at HKDI through the spring proves that one man can be in several places at once, so long as he has enough imagination. DANIEL JEFFREYS reports.

The *Design in Motion* exhibition of Charles Kaisin's work at HKDI derives its title from the Belgian's devotion to innovation and recycling, but it could equally be a name inspired by a sixty-second conversation with the man himself.

One minute with Kaisin is enough to conclude that the forty-one year old savant rarely stops moving or thinking and often does both simultaneously, with the kind

of kinetic energy normally associated with a high-speed rollercoaster. It's a state of agitated consciousness that Kaisin freely accepts as his. "I regard my own journey as that of a ball that rebounds from one cell to another, absorbing and accumulating the experiences of that very journey," he writes on the landing page of www.charleskaisin.com. "My deepest wish is to keep that ball endlessly rolling."

For now, there seems no risk of Kaisin slowing down – either creatively or in terms of the pace that he moves from one project to another. Most of the designers who attended this year's Business of Design Week (BoDW)

would have been content to curate one exhibition on behalf of Belgium, this year's host country, but Kaisin has curated two and just to put the cherry on his busy cake he also created the Surreal Dinner, the most coveted ticket of this year's design season. The Surreal Dinner was one of the highlights of the prestigious Belgian Spirit project, an initiative of the three Belgian regions, Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia, to promote Belgium's creative industries in Asia.

Kaisin was the scenographer of the dinner, which represented six months of work. The dinner's centrepiece was a 30 metre long table that "transported invitees to a unique experience between *Alice in Wonderland* and Belgian Surrealism" according to Kaisin. The setting was inspired by the paintings of René Magritte and James Ensor and offered a culinary journey through Belgian cuisine, with Chef Pascal Devalkeneer (the 2 Michelin Star-chef at Le Chalet de la Forêt in Brussels) leading the kitchen team.

The Surreal Dinner, designed like a daydream, was created to challenge all the senses of each guest with each dish staged separately and using Belgian designs as part of the scenery. It was a concept that draws heavily on Kaisin's own approach to inspiration, which consists of leaving his senses open to everything that comes his way.

"Personally I'm nourished and inspired by travelling, reading and meeting people of all kinds," says Kaisin, who was educated at the Royal College of Art in London, Kyoto University of Art in Japan, Institut Supérieur d'Architecture Saint-Luc de Wallonie in Belgium and Ron Arad's studio. "It's clear

ABOVE CHARLES KAISIN'S K-BENCH



I absorb all these impulses to find them unconsciously in my new work. The process of making objects, from low tech to high tech is very interesting to me. Low tech for example is the Pingolingo bags, whereas high tech is the ultrasonic melting used for the K-Bench.

Both the K-Bench and the Pingolingo bags are featured in *Design in Motion* and each in their own way are iconic representations of Kaisin's work. The K-bench mixes the poetry of origami with modern materials to create what the Belgian design company Vange, which manufactures the piece, calls the "perfect mix of tradition and modernity". The beehive structured extendable seating can be shaped to meet many different needs.

The Pingolingo bags were made using randomly superimposed

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layers of used plastic shopping bags with their different logos and slogans. Kaisin says the bags symbolise the "intermingling of today's cross cultures" and give back life to the "residues of consumption", something Kaisin believes is a responsibility of any designer. In both these works the designer is showing an exceptional devotion to the poetry of rebirth and the epistemology of recreation, both of which are key aspects of his practice.

"I'm fully aware of the delicate state of the world today," says Kaisin who has been featured in five major exhibitions since 2000 while working as



a designer, educator and consultant. "It's only natural but not an obsession to explore this in my work, and sometimes that results in recycling into new forms. It makes me happy to transform and rethink the obvious. My latest artwork is made of old books, folded into a long line of poetic text."

In one sense Kaisin's work seems to be an embodiment of Leibniz's and Galileo's law of the conservation of energy, which states that energy can be neither created nor destroyed, but can only change form. As a designer and an architect his work seems to be devoted to looking at materials to see their potential for renaissance as something that is either more useful or more beautiful and preferably both.

"Motion is movement, movement is life," says Kaisin. "Life is about sustainability and my research is directed to find solutions for the way things can be improved or at least embellished. Ecological issues are important but they are not the only reasons for doing this – there is also the search to find beauty and poetry in what are at first sight common things."

This evocation of the sublime from the mundane – or better still the marriage of the ordinary with the transcendent – found one of its most famous and profound expressions in *Pneuma*, Kaisin's installation in the Brussels Courthouse lobby to celebrate the 2011 bicentenary of the Brussels Bar. The work consisted of 10,000 origami, folded with the help of Saint-Gilles Prison's inmates to form a gigantic wave in the centre of the space. The origami were made with paper from books of old codes provided by the Bar.

"Pneuma" means "breath" in Greek and the creation was a perfect example of Kaisin's belief that the best design consists of giving oxygen to old or discarded materials so that they might experience a life-affirming metamorphosis. It's maybe no surprise to learn that Kaisin was trained as a piano and organ master. Every great musician knows that each time they play a piece of music is like a form of rebirth and Kaisin's work in *Design in Motion* shows the power of that idea when it is applied to the creation of useful and beautiful objects.

The exhibition Design in Motion will be at HKDI until 14 February 2014.

LEFT PINGOLINGO BAGS BY CHARLES KAISIN
ABOVE CHOCOLATE SCULPTURES BY CHARLES KAISIN
BELOW A DELVAUX BAG DESIGNED BY CHARLES KAISIN

