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Material witness

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MATERIAL

Belgian designer **CHARLES KAISIN** works like a choreographer with a dancer, seeing endless possibilities of form and flow in a wide variety of materials, as he pushes the boundaries of what each one can achieve. *DAISY ZHONG reports*

MATERIAL WITNESSES



Charles Kaisin picked up a utilitarian paper cup from the coffee shop on HKDI's Design Boulevard and moved his hands around it, like he was kneading pizza dough. His eyes and hands seemed to build an instant relationship with the materials used for the vessel's pressed paper and plastic lid. "Ultimately," he said, "the choice of an object is about identity. The colour and materials it's made of reveals what you are. In rural Africa, people wear different clothes

depending on their generation, their village and their history. All design objects say something about cultural heritage, and it's interesting to see the linkages between objects and social life".

The coffee cup in Kaisin's hands suddenly seemed to assume much more importance. It was as if it had become an exhibit: an indictment of industrial culture and the way it wastes materials. It reminded me of the way Kaisin introduced one of his signature works, *Recycling Glasses* in the notes for a recent exhibition. "The glass," he wrote, "is individualised each time it's used: the traces of the lips that were pressed against its rim vanish every time it's washed." In other words, the object and the user have a relationship that says as much about the person as it does about the objects they use.

ABOVE: EXTENDABLE NEWSPAPER BENCH
PAGE LEFT: CHARLES KAISIN ON HKDI'S DESIGN BOULEVARD, MARCH 2013

As a designer and artist Kaisin is famous for exploiting the artistic potential of materials, which is why he often appears sentimentally attached to every object he creates. His work has been touched by his personality, by his heart, on every surface, inside and out. In the *Recycling Glasses* series translucent beakers of different sizes and diameters were created from used glass bottles through cutting, erosion and sanding, resulting in green, white, blue and brown tones that were the original colours of

«INGENUITY IS THE WAY THAT YOU ADAPT QUICKLY AND REARRANGE MATERIALS FOR NEW CREATIONS.»

RIGHT EXTENDABLE NEWSPAPER BENCH
BELOW EXTENDABLE PLASTIC BENCH



BELOW K-BENCH DISPLAYED AT THE GRAND DUKE JEAN MUSEUM OF ART



the recycled glass. The work is a transformational metaphor and standing in a row the tumblers seem almost musical, like the tranquil notes in Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. Each one of them seems to tell a story about how Kaisin cared too much about the original materials they were made from to let them be thrown away.

Kaisin likes to use the metaphor that life is like the journey of a ball that rebounds from one cell to another on a grid, in which the cell represents an artistic discipline and the ball can "absorb and accumulate the experiences of that very journey". When this perspective is mixed with materials that have been individualised by their own history, like the coffee cup between his hands, the result is a cultural synthesis. Because Kaisin regards materials as the embodiment of culture, meaning and consciousness, he believes creating objects is akin

to creating an identity. This belief in material culture, the idea that artifacts epitomise our identity, or "being depends on having" – underlies Kaisin's philosophy of design and has resulted in an infatuation with exploring the endless possibilities of materials.

Kaisin's design journey began when he studied Architecture in the Institut Supérieur d' Architecture Saint-Luc in 1996 in Brussels, and then in 2000 he took part in an exchange programme with the Kyoto University of Art where he conducted research on new materials and "had a lot of cultural inputs".

In his early career Kaisin interacted with some of the most influential names in design. In 1997

he did two internships at French architect Jean Nouvel's studio in Paris, then worked with British sculpture artist Tony Cragg. After graduation from the Royal College of Art in 2001 he spent two years in Ron Arad's industrial design workshop, before establishing a design brand under his own name.

Although different in style, Kaisin's works show the influence of Ron Arad, particularly in terms of a daredevil curiosity about using materials in mischievous ways. "Ingenuity is the way that you adapt quickly to a lot of new information and rearrange materials for new creations," he says. In Kaisin's case this has led him to design pieces using a wide range of materials, including glassfibre, carbon, Kevlar, ceramics, paper, plastics and even chocolate. With each piece the forms that he created had an ingenious twist and a humanist perspective. For example, in cooperation with Royal Boch, the Belgian earthenware manufacturer, Kaisin created ceramic trays and plates that are reversible. The series is themed around "movement" and references the different stages of the legendary life of Gala, whose unique charm captivated and inspired many 20th century artists, including surrealist masters Paul Éluard, Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí.

Another design that Kaisin created is a bag for Delvaux, the luxury Belgian leather goods company

«EVERYBODY ON EARTH IS A DESIGNER»



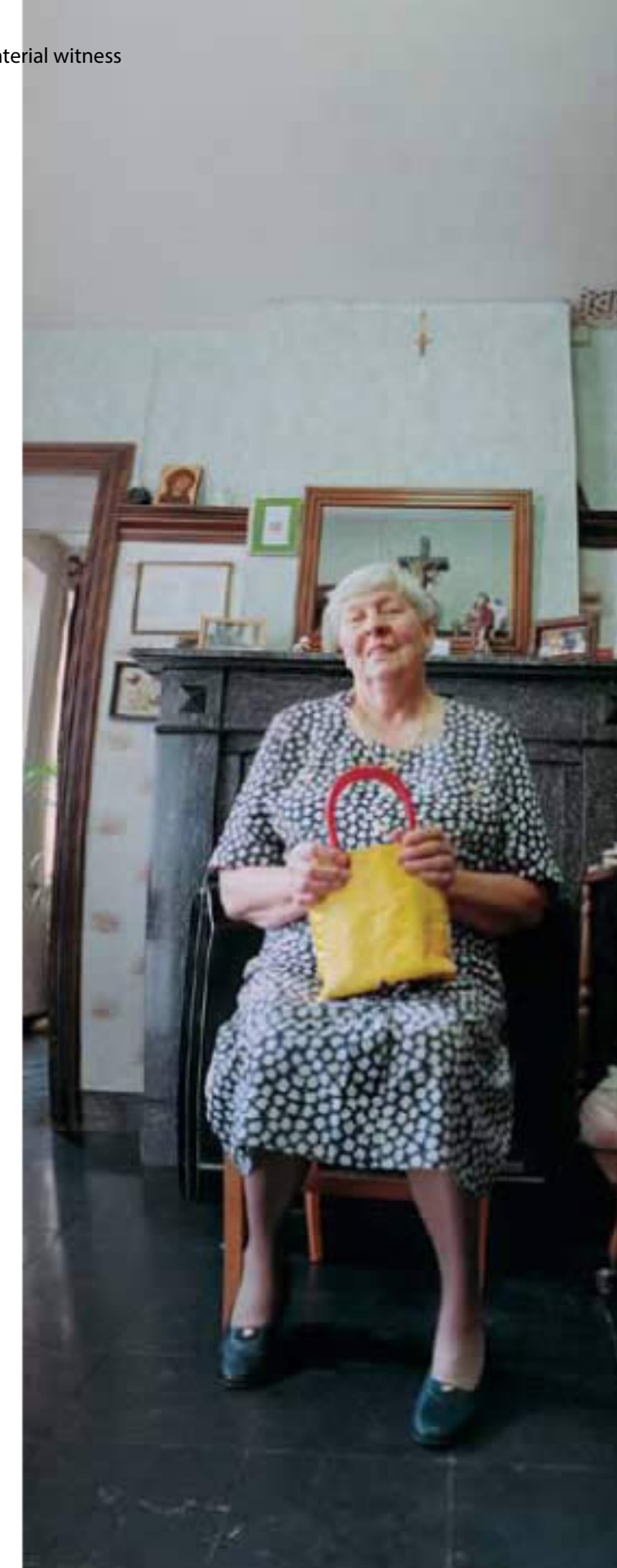
« IT'S IMPOTANT TO BE CREATIVE, BUT ALSO SOCIALLY AWARE ABOUT THE WAY PEOPLE MEET THEIR GOALS. »

that was recently acquired by Hong Kong-based Li & Fung. Named *Basket*, the extendable Delvaux bag remains totally flat when empty and open, due to the use of extremely supple leather. When closed, however, it develops an elegant, extended shape with a structured surface that creates a moire effect that resembles the alveoli of the lungs.

Material stretching is a theme explored in many of Kaisin's works. The K-bench, one of Kaisin's signature pieces, has a honeycomb structure that makes it flexible in length and tough. A limited edition of his K-bench, in opaline translucent blue, has been displayed at the Grand Duke Jean Museum of Modern Art in Luxemburg since 2007, stretching and meandering in the lobby like a Water Dragon in Chinese mythology. Versatile by nature, the bench can also be made with recycled plastics or compressed newspapers.

Recycling is the other main theme of his work, and he rejoices when he is able to give an abandoned object a second life. "Nowadays we produce so many objects that every object has a short life cycle. This is true for every country, it's almost universal," he says, "Sustainability should be something that every one should be aware of and practice."

His commitment to sustainability has forced Kaisin to explore new uses for a wide range of everyday materials. For his *Newspaper Chair* he turned old newspapers into a material as strong as wood through a processes of gluing,



LEFT WOMEN HOLDING PLASTIC SHOPPING BAGS FROM CHARLES KAISIN'S PINGOLINGO PROJECT
BELOW BEAKERS FROM THE RECYCLING GLASSES SERIES



layering and compressing. And his *Recycling Containers* transformed the port-hole windows of washing-machines into glass bowls. In his signature Pingolingo project, he cut and randomly superimposed layers of used plastic shopping bags with their different logos and slogans and made new bags after pressing and heating. The result is a series of unique bags with different fragments of writing on each one that symbolises the "intermingling of today's cross-cultures" and gives back life to the "residues of consumption", something Kaisin believes is a fundamental obligation of any designer.

Sustainability being one of his goals, Kaisin firmly believes that designs should be value-embedded.

He thinks that what characterises a good design is that it contributes to improving human wellbeing. "Everybody on earth is a designer and can improve their lives in many situations. For example, when we talk about sustainability, as a manager of a company you can choose what material to use. It's all about the question of choice."

The idea that designers and creative professionals have a responsibility and are able to cause real change in the world through good design is shared by many design masters such as Victor Papanek, who says that designers have responsibilities to society in the choices they make in their design process. "I believe that as a designer, you can do a lot of things to influence the community through engagement in societal affairs," says Kaisin.

One of the "social responsibility" projects that Kaisin completed involved working with prisoners in Brussels to

create an installation named *Pneuma* for the bicentenary of the Brussels' Bar. A total of 10,000 origami pieces were hand-folded with the help of inmates from Saint-Gillis Prison and hung from the lobby ceiling at the city's Courthouse, forming a massive wave at the center of the space. Being consistent with Kaisin's recycling theme, the paper used to fold the origami came from books of old legal codes provided by the Bar.

The linkage between design and social life is the theme Kaisin wants to emphasise in a solo exhibition of his work, to be held in December in Hong Kong, named *Design in Motion*. "Design in Motion will explore the relationship between the object and us. I use references to literature and culture, to create a maximum of link. In *Design in Motion*, I show that it's important to be creative, but also very socially aware about the way people meet their goals in life. Creative works are part of our real life – political, economical, sociological – and all these factors are woven into the process of making and presenting an object." 