

Culture

Commercial, but ambitious

LONDON

Attention is turning, at last, from 'trophy' to distinctive works

BY ALICE RAWSTHORN

Walter Maurer's paint shop in an old aircraft hanger near the Bavarian town of Fürstentfeldbruck is usually filled with racing cars, helicopters, jets and anything else with an engine. This spring it has been cluttered with chunks of aluminum tables on which he has painted boldly colored graphic symbols, just as he does on Formula 1 cars.

The tables were developed by the German designer Konstantin Grcic for "Champions," an exhibition opening June 10 at Galerie kreio, a contemporary design gallery in Paris. "I love equipment covered with graphics suggesting that the objects are fast, dynamic etc.," Mr. Grcic said. "I've never used graphics or pattern in my work before, but this project isn't just about decoration. I'm interested in the meaning of the colors,

by's auction on the previous day

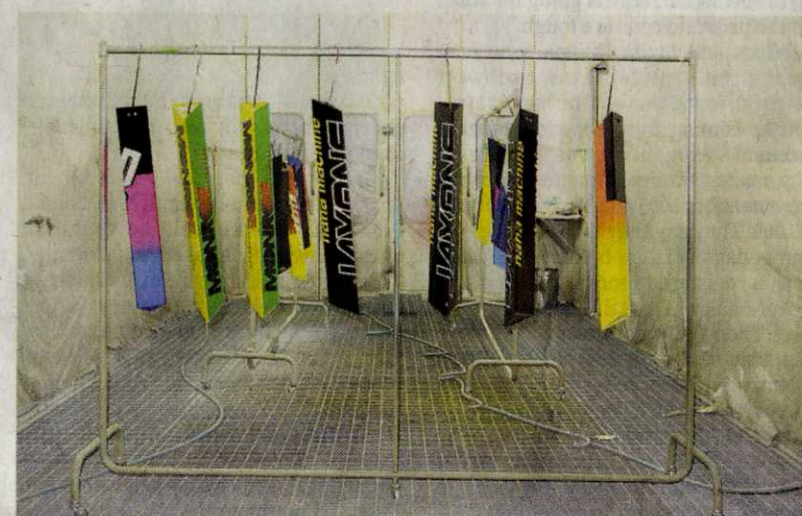
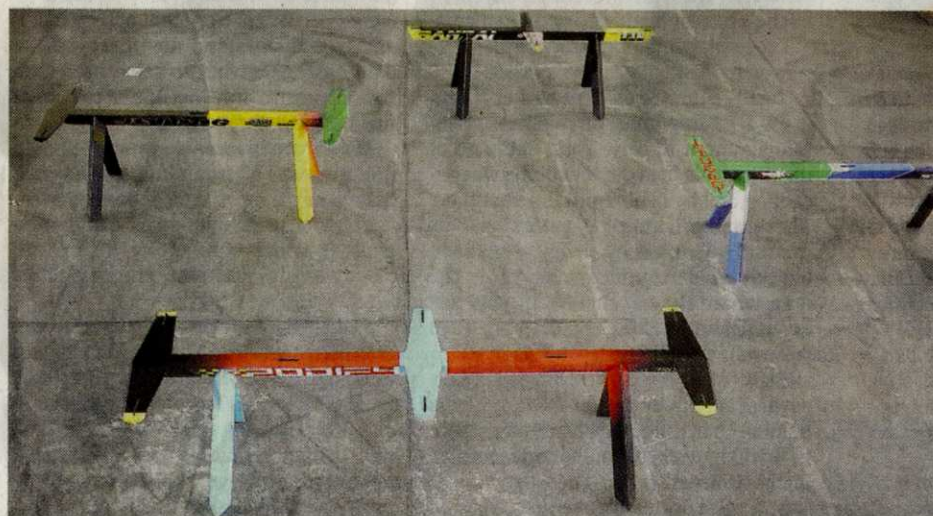
"We made a very conscious decision to go purely historical this time," said James Zemaitis, senior vice president of design at Sotheby's in New York. "We had a terrific early Ron Arad piece in a sale last December. It was everything that was great about him, and sold for \$60,000 to a single bidder. Back in 2007, it would have made \$150,000 — no problem."

That's the bad news. The good news is that another area of contemporary design collecting is much livelier: The "primary market" of new work developed by designers for commercial galleries, like Mr. Grcic's "Champions" at kreio.

So much the better. Design purists (including me) loathed the "design-art" bubble, largely because it pandered to the woefully inaccurate but irritatingly pervasive perception that design is all about overpriced chairs. Nor did it always represent designers at their best. The collectors who once splurged up to \$2.25 million on a Lockheed Lounge, one of the chaise longues that Mr. Newson made a few years out of design school, could enjoy a more refined example of



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERICA OVERMEER/GALERIE KREIO



Tables in Walter Maurer's paint shop, developed by the German designer Konstantin Grcic for the "Champions" exhibition opening next month at Galerie kreio in Paris. The tables are limited-edition works.

words and symbols, and in what happens if we stick 'fast' on to a static piece of furniture."

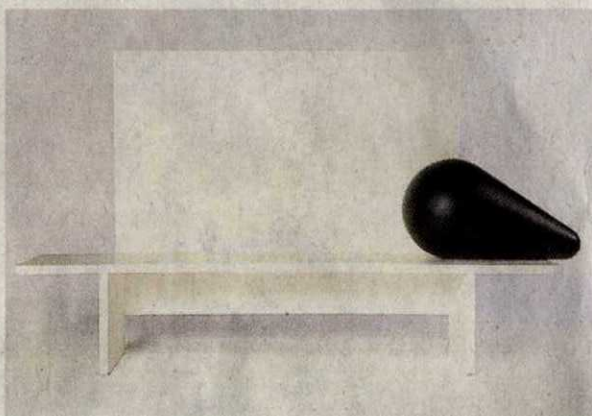
Mr. Grcic has been one of the most influential industrial designers of recent years. You could spot (generally dud) copies of his angular style in lots of younger designers' work at the Milan Furniture Fair last month. Usually Mr. Grcic designs for mass production, and "Champions" is his most ambitious project so far in his development of objects to be made in a limited edition and sold by a gallery. It is also among the most eagerly anticipated design shows of the summer.

Only a few years ago, the collectors' market for contemporary design was dominated by the record-breaking prices paid at auction for trophy furniture by 'design-art' stars such as Marc Newson and Ron Arad. Things changed after several once-coveted works by Mr. Newson failed to elicit bids at a Phillips de Pury auction in New York last spring. There will be a few pieces by Mr. Arad at Christie's design sale in New York on June 16, but not a stick of contemporary design at Sothe-

his practice by buckling into a coach seat in one of the aircraft cabins he has designed for Qantas. Though one lasting benefit of the "design-art" bubble is that it focused the art world's attention on design.

New commercial galleries have opened to represent contemporary designers. A new generation of design curators has emerged, and there are more

Right, an Ignotus Nomen bench by Pierre Charpin that will be part of Galerie kreo's show at Design Miami-Basel next month; and, far right, vases by Nicolas Le Moigne with the Berlin gallery Helmrinderknecht.



MATHIEU ROQUIGNY/GALERIE KREO (ABOVE); INGA KNOELKE/HELMRINDERKNECHT (ABOVE RIGHT)

collaborations between artists and designers. Among them is "Ernö Goldfinger v. Groucho Marx," an exhibition by the artist Ryan Gander and the designer Michael Marriott running through June 25 at The Russian Club in London. It is their homage to 2 Willow Road, a Modernist house built in north London in the 1930s by the architect Erno Goldfinger. Ian Fleming, the au-



thor of the James Bond novels, lived nearby and disliked it so much that he named a particularly nasty villain after its architect.

Design has also been embraced by commercial art galleries. A highlight of the fall will be the September opening of an exhibition by the Italian designer Martino Gamper as the first design show at Galleria Franco Noero in Turin.

Already a favorite of influential art collectors including the fashion designer Miuccia Prada, Mr. Gamper is to spend much of the summer in Turin making work for the exhibition, which will fill all nine floors of the gallery's very tall, very thin, late-19th-century building, known as Fetta di Polenta, or slice of polenta.

More art and design galleries will commission new projects like this from designers in future. Not all them will be as interesting as Mr. Gamper's, but as the prices of new works sold by galleries in what is called the "primary market" tend to be lower than those of existing pieces when flipped at auction, the work can be more challenging. Predictably, the first wave of contemporary design collectors tended to be attracted to the showiest, though not necessarily the most thoughtful or demanding, works. As the market evolves, collectors are becoming increasingly knowledgeable, and likelier to invest in more complex, experimental projects.

They should find some interesting examples at the Design Miami-Basel fair in Basel, Switzerland, from June 14 to 18. Kreo is to show a new collection of fur-

niture by the French designer Pierre Charpin. Galerie BSL in Paris will exhibit new pieces by the Spanish designer Nacho Carbonell, and Helmrinderknecht in Berlin is to showcase work by the Swiss designer Nicolas Le Moigne.

Gallery Libby Sellers in London will present "Colony," a new textile project developed by the Italian designers Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin of Studio Formafantasma at the Audax Textile Museum in the Dutch city of Tilburg. It explores the complex cultural history of Italy and its former colonies, and the current controversy over immigration.

There will also be some design historical gems on show at Basel, including a 1944 kit house, conceived by the French architect Jean Prouvé as emergency housing for war refugees, which is to be exhibited by the Parisian design dealer Patrick Seguin. The house was designed to be built by three people in a day, and will be constructed from scratch every day of the fair.

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Previous articles by Alice Rawsthorn can be found at global.nytimes.com/arts

Long and winding roads that follow a chance meeting

The London Train. By Tessa Hadley 324 pages. Harper Perennial. Paper, \$14.99; Jonathan Cape, £12.99.

BY JEAN THOMPSON

The people in Tessa Hadley's latest novel, "The London Train," seem to be managing the trials of adulthood reasonably well, right up until the moment their lives jump the tracks. Their problems are the familiar and expected ones

BOOK REVIEW

—grief at the death of a parent, career disappointments, marital friction — although that makes them no less difficult or wrenching. No one is more surprised than Ms. Hadley's characters when they act on irrational impulse. She sets out to make these blinkered lives plausible, and then to subvert our natural sympathy into something more resembling judgment.

The novel is split between two characters whose connection is not immediately clear. Paul, a blocked, desultory writer, lives with his second wife and two young daughters in the Welsh countryside. His wife refurbishes antique furniture and does most of the other hands-on work of the household, while he both values and chafes against their domestic life.

Two events sharpen Paul's malaise into crisis. The first is the death of his elderly widowed mother, which shocks him with an unanticipated and profound sense of loss. At the same time, his college-age daughter from his first marriage drops out of school and re-

fuses to return home. She resurfaces, pregnant, living in a gritty London apartment with her boyfriend, an enterprising Polish immigrant, and his sister. A quarrel with his wife leads Paul to flee to the city and find unexpected happiness living with his daughter and her new, incongruous family. "Paul seemed to slip back inside that past time when he was heedless and 20," Ms. Hadley observes, "as though all his substantial life between then and now melted away." Paul's sense of liberation is heightened by his sexual attraction to the Polish sister.

The other half of the book belongs to a woman named Cora, who has separated from her husband, Robert. One of the stresses in the marriage is their failure to have children. Eventually we learn that three years earlier, after a brief encounter on the train from Cardiff to London, Paul and Cora began an affair, long since concluded. And in the present, Robert, whose serious, stolid temperament would make him voted least likely to mysteriously disappear, does exactly that.

This divided structure is one of the most artful aspects of "The London Train," allowing us to measure and adjust our perceptions of both characters. Cora is overwhelmed by the affair, and the depiction of her passionate, abject involvement contains the novel's most graceful writing: "She began to feel herself enveloped in that rich oil of sex attraction, so that she moved more fluently, knew there was something gleaming and iridescent in how she turned her head away or smiled at him."

Paul, by contrast, thinks only glancingly of his affair with Cora and even seems to misremember the color of her eyes. His extramarital involvements (Cora was not his first lover and isn't likely to be his last) cause him no real pangs. Yet, lest we are tempted to entirely absolve Cora, it's true that she in turn has been dishonest and unkind.

Like Paul, Cora has suffered the recent loss of her mother, leaving her enervated, depleted. It doesn't seem coincidental that conception, or its absence, figures largely in both narratives. The passing of one generation invests the promise of the next with terrible importance. Paul and Cora are only children, which increases their sense of isolation and urgent loneliness.

Both Paul and Cora have come up in life from humble family origins, but are now financially comfortable, literate,

The journeys taken by Ms. Hadley's characters seem more a form of escape than an arrival at a destination.

articulate, self-conscious. Both seem, in their various flights and journeys, to be escaping rather than moving purposefully toward a destination. They travel through the British countryside — now built up and lamentably developed — or the incessant London traffic or contemplate the departure boards at railway stations without seeming to question their own lack of direction.

Ms. Hadley is a close observer of her characters' inner worlds. Her language

can be fine-grained, subtle, eloquent, as when Cora, separated from Robert, is so "scalded by her solitary nights, sodden with dreams and longing, that she crawled downstairs to sleep sitting up in one of the armchairs. Then, her empty bed seemed ignominious, as if she was an old woman already, having lost everything." Such well-rendered empathy is a large part of the book's appeal, but it can also muffle plot momentum. There is so much interiority, so much commentary. Even the suspense of Robert's disappearance is resolved rather quickly. It is as if Ms. Hadley is determined not to manipulate or step too far outside the boundaries of the everyday. There will be no car chases or train wrecks here.

But remarkable or unseemly or grotesque things can happen to the most flat-footed of us. Consider the Alice Munro story "Chance," which also unspools from a meeting on a train. Blandly summarized: A stranger commits suicide by throwing himself beneath a moving train. A young woman feels guilty — because she has been momentarily rude to him, because the menstrual blood she's left in the train's toilet is mistaken for the suicide's — and is consoled or, rather, laughed out of it by another man. Some months later she makes an impulsive detour to visit him, arriving on the day of his invalid wife's funeral, when he has already left to spend the night with his mistress. Although few of us fare well when compared to Ms. Munro, the story suggests the ruthless and exuberant possibilities available in any dramatic setup. Fortune favors the bold.



BRIAN CRONIN

In "The London Train," Cora has taken to reading "women's novels, commercial novels" some of which she finds "remarkably well written, better than much so-called literary fiction, more true to life." This observation, appearing apropos of nothing, dangles like a piece of juicy meat over a barely concealed pit. Is the sentiment Ms. Hadley's as well as Cora's? Does Ms. Hadley consider herself a practitioner of one form or the other? Rather than debating what "women's novels" are, might we just agree to jettison the label, freighted as it is with belittlement? Then, in fairness, we should also dispense with "so-called literary fiction" and the suggestion that complex, ambitious works offer less reading pleasure.

It might be more helpful to examine the term "true to life." A realistic social

novel like "The London Train" provides recognizable portraits of our world and how its particulars shape our consciousness. Ms. Hadley is a supremely perceptive writer of formidable skill and intelligence, someone who goes well beyond surfaces. It seems unfair to ask that she take a further step into the imaginative and transformational, into life that is not merely true but riveting and magical. Yet one does ask, because in that way we may come in time to speak more easily of "women's literature."

Jean Thompson's latest novel, "The Year We Left Home," has just been published.

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