

HOT STUFF
Petrobelli looks on
as a glass-blower
from Murano firm
Simone Cenedese
creates a piece
for her 'Simple'
tableware set



BLOW UP

'Simple' glass tableware set, by Paola Petrobelli

PHOTOGRAPHY: JAMES MOLLISON WRITER: PAUL MCCANN

BLOWN AWAY

Creating the colour in the 'Simple' tableware set is far from simple, requiring two craftsmen to blow two pieces of glass of different colours to exactly the same size at the same time

Photography: Sam Hofman



S

ometimes it can seem as if contemporary European designers all share the same characteristics: impossible youth and unshakeable self-confidence; the glow of a hit degree show at ÉCAL or Eindhoven; the presence of expensive eyewear; and a website that uses enough Flash Player to power a moon landing.

Then you have Paola Petrobelli, whose CV is like no designer you have ever met. First of all, she studied sciences at school and went on to get her masters degree in the biology of infectious diseases at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. As if said route was not circuitous enough, she chose to make it even more twisty – and muddy – with a love of motorbikes, racing professionally and successfully for several years. Her speciality was motocross – for Team Honda and Yamaha UK – racing through conditions

that would shake the pricey specs off many a young design maven.

'My father was a racer and I come from a petrolhead family,' says Petrobelli, who hails from Padua in northern Italy, but has lived in London since the 1990s. 'As for the microbiology, I wasn't wild about classics so I stuck to science at school, but I always knew I wanted to make things.' A delay in the funding for her biology PhD left the way clear for destiny to step in: she took the chance to go and study glass-making with the master craftsmen on the Venetian island of Murano. She never did do that PhD.

'I had known about glass all my life because I grew up near Venice. I had strong ideas about what I liked, so I took six months to see if I could learn enough to start designing. It worked.' She got her start with private commissions for figures in the art world, including light fittings for Damien Hirst's manor in Gloucestershire. Her

always functional, simple-looking, technically complex designs have since featured at the London Design Festival, Design Basel and in a solo exhibition at the Wilmotte Gallery in London.

Petrobelli first studied with the Murano firm Simone Cenedese; and it was to them she turned when we asked her to make the beautiful glass tableware set 'Simple' for Wallpaper* Handmade. These beguiling plates and glasses were made using a combination of the *incalmo* blowing technique and threaded *filigrana* workings. *Incalmo* is when two pieces of glass of different colours are blown at the same time and joined together, a technique used most famously by Finnish artist Tapio Wirkkala in his 'Bolle' set for the celebrated Murano glass firm Venini in the 1960s. 'It is the only way you can achieve two really separate colours, as opposed to just overlaying two colours,' says Petrobelli. 'It gives a characteristic you can feel with your fingers where the two colours join. It is expensive because you have to have two craftsmen working at precisely the same time on one object. Getting the two pieces blown to exactly the same sizes is extremely difficult. It is a lot of work for a little band of colour.'

The *filigrana* – or filigree – technique is how the rim colour was created. It requires the use of clear rods with a centre of coloured glass. The rods are cut to the right size and heated on a plate, at which point a clear glass object is slowly rolled onto the colour; the colour melts and sticks to the object. 'It is super time-consuming,' says Petrobelli. 'The time is not about the making of the one successful piece but the many that have to be rejected because of a tiny flaw.'

These techniques are harder because of the quality of the glass used in Murano. Its purity is so high that it is worked at temperatures of 1200°C, compared with the 300°C used to blow normal glass. 'The Murano firms make their own colours and glass base, so that you are able to create things that are very strong but incredibly thin,' says Petrobelli. 'Glass with more soda you can work with at lower temperatures, but it stays chunky and you never get the precision.'

For all the patient skill of the Murano glass-blowers and the quality of the colours and glass they use, Petrobelli cautions against getting too excited by techniques. 'I am really not interested in sculpture for the sake of beauty. When people decide to make glass sculpture they have become seduced by the material; they start from the material and work backwards. They want to do something as weird as they can. I only want to make things that have a function and that are simple and beautiful.'

'What excited me about the Handmade project was the opportunity to make commissioned tableware – something which used to happen in the past but is too expensive now – using traditional Murano techniques but with contemporary forms. I think my aesthetic sense comes a little from my science background, in that I like clean, simple lines. It is easy to get seduced by all the colours; much of my design is about restraining myself.' ★
www.paolapetrobelli.com