

# HOUSE & HOME

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## A kinetic aesthetic

*Work in Progress: Simon Heijdens. By Janice Blackburn*

Recently, at a show of work of young designers in London I was mesmerised by a white wall with graceful silhouettes of wild flowers that seemed to be growing, changing shape and swaying gently in a breeze. This poetic symmetry stopped me in my tracks. Entranced, I imagined the soothing influence it might have in my home – far more interesting than conventional wall coverings or the self-conscious artistic presence of a video installation.

Lightweeds, the piece that so captured my interest, was created by Simon Heijdens, who graduated from the Design Academy at Eindhoven in the Netherlands in 2002 clutching the prestigious René Smeets Droog award for two innovative projects, Moving Wallpaper and Clean Carpets. The accolades were ironic both to Heijdens and to his sceptical tutors: his years of studying had been far from plain sailing.

Heijdens grew up in Breda, a small town in the Netherlands. The son of a carpenter, he enjoyed watching his father construct furniture in the workshop, while scavenging waste materials for his own inventions. Seemingly directionless after leaving school, he

was encouraged to try for a place at Eindhoven by friends, who had always been intrigued by the strange and fanciful sketches and doodles papering his bedroom walls.

Heijdens' early years at the design academy were not successful: his inability to master the rudimentary skills of drawing caused his teachers to throw up their hands in frustration and after two years he moved to Berlin to study experimental film. It was here that the concept of merging film and design evolved and he returned to Eindhoven to explore an idea for wallpaper involving constantly changing images.

In 2004 he set up his own studio in Rotterdam, working on projects and researching ways of integrating nature into artificial spaces. Products resulting from his experimentations included a chandelier for Swarovski and Tree, a location-sensitive outdoor light. Lightweeds, his site-responsive, interactive wallpaper, was exhibited in New York's recent *Design and the Elastic Mind* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art and subsequently selected for the permanent collection. All the items were self-financed and developed with a tiny budget and Heijdens says he is "very proud that they have ended up

travelling through amazing museums and public spaces all over the world – Tokyo, London, New York, Paris, Shanghai – and the reaction has been great".

His moving wallpaper project was inspired, he says, by Georges Perec's 1974 book *Species of Spaces*. Perec claims "walls are the end of our spatial

experience – borders one would prefer not to see. Better to hang up paintings – but after a while the paintings become the wall and one either has to change the paintings or the walls". The designer refers to moving wallpaper as "ambient design" and he is one of the leaders in this fast-developing field.

He explains his designs as a method

of "implementing technology in a subtle way, which alters our conservative perceptions and expectations of products." As a reaction to the dangers and side effects on the environment resulting from globalisation and urbanisation, "our world [is] increasingly generic, nondescript and perpetual," Heijdens says, and so his work is made up from "fake plants that reveal real nature", created by "a living digital organism growing on the walls and floors of an indoor space, that reacts to the actual nature of its location".

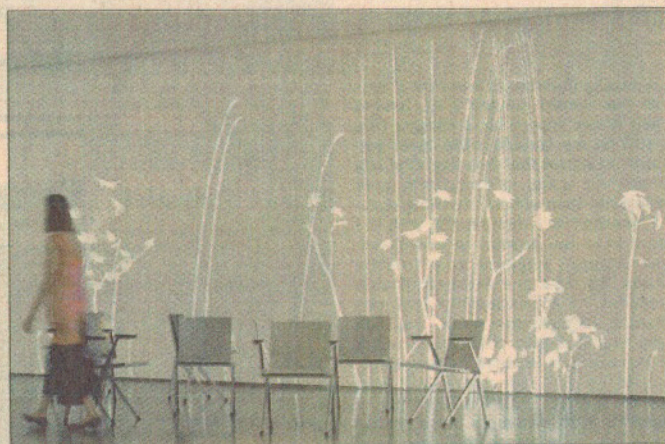
UK-based curator Libby Sellars first met Heijdens at one of his early exhibitions at the Design Museum in London and describes Lightweeds as "a visual lullaby – like sitting in an organic field all day long. Beautiful and peaceful". She is fascinated by his ability to combine sophisticated and skilful technology to achieve such a tranquil effect, which he does, she says, "with subtlety and finesse".

The complex technology makes owning an example of the work expensive – the starting price is £30,000. Along with the costs of the software, written and fine-tuned by Heijdens, there is the time required to install the piece "to make sure it looks as perfect as a plant that is growing from the floorboards".

Heijdens traces his love of the organic back to growing up in one of the most densely populated countries in the world, with a "very regulated landscape and society". He says: "Even the trees in the street which we perceive as nature are actually cut, watered and cultivated to behave in a certain way, which has turned them into artificial objects". As a result, his work often develops, or makes a feature of, natural processes. In the case of Broken White, one of several of his collaborations with the Dutch design co-operative Droog, he explores how cracks in the glazes of ceramics, "the dishes and cups we most use", become a "natural decoration in time". Heijdens calls the process "craquele" and has created a range of products that he says "will grow with their user and become richer over time".

In 2006 he moved to London and is now teaching at the Royal College of Art as well as designing work to be sold world wide. New projects include a café for the Museum of Modern Art in Rotterdam, due to open in August, and site-specific installations in Hong Kong, Oslo, The Hague and Geneva.

[www.simonheijdens.com](http://www.simonheijdens.com)



Interactive Lightweeds at the Milk Gallery, New York

Simon Heijdens