

# design **WEEK**

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# After a stint as curator at the Design Museum, **Libby Sellers** has taken the plunge and opened her own gallery space – albeit a temporary one. She tells Trish Lorenz about her penchant for emerging designers

Design art. If you haven't heard the term you've obviously been hibernating for the past six months. Mention the phrase to Libby Sellers (whose eponymous design gallery opened during London Design Festival and will move to Art Basel Miami Beach later this year) and she gets a little defensive. 'Bandwagon and hype are two words that have been mentioned to me,' she says, before going on to insist that gallery spaces are, in fact, at the heart of the origins of modern design.

'This is how design was sold before the rise of the manufacturer as retailer and before the rise of the high street and brands like Habitat,' she says. 'There's a tendency today to hold up Modernists as pioneers of mass manufacturing, but that's a slightly revisionist view. Eileen Grey sold her pieces and the works of other designers in a gallery in the 1920s and pieces like the Charles Eames rosewood recliner with its hand-stitched leather seats have never been mass produced.'

'I don't like the term design art,' she adds. 'The pieces I sell are more about conceptual, expressive design.' Point taken. And whatever you call it there's no getting away from the fact that design galleries are growing in popularity. Established & Sons opens its version in London's Mayfair this week and others are sure to follow. Sellers believes designers will benefit from the shift towards this more art-led approach. 'Gallery commissions give designers the freedom to experiment with new materials and processes, free from the constraints of cost efficiency and other manufacturing limitations,' she says. 'That learning feeds back into the rest of their work; there can be a nice dialogue between the two.'

Opening her own gallery would seem to be a natural progression in Sellers' career. After completing the joint Royal College of Art and Victoria & Albert Museum History of Design MA in the late 1990s, her first job was working on the Glasgow 99 Festival with Deyan Sudjic and Rowan Moore, where she says she 'met everyone I subsequently worked with and for'. This was followed by a stint working on a project with a then newly promoted Tom Dixon at Habitat before she set up Restructure, a company providing content for the design and architecture industry with friend Helen Jones. The company worked on Great Expectations, the Design Council's touring exhibition, taking it to New York in October 2001. Though it was a success, it spelled the end of Restructure. 'Installing an exhibition with armed guards and burning buildings around us (after the events of 9/11) was tiring and we decided to have a break from running our own company,' says Sellers.

When the Design Museum under Alice Rawsthorn's leadership offered her a curatorial position, she 'jumped at the chance', in the end spending five years there. 'It was a challenging role. There were a lot of temporary exhibition spaces and I had fairly free rein. I realised I most enjoy working hands-on, one-on-one, with emerging contemporary designers. It's the major reason I am where I am now,' she says.

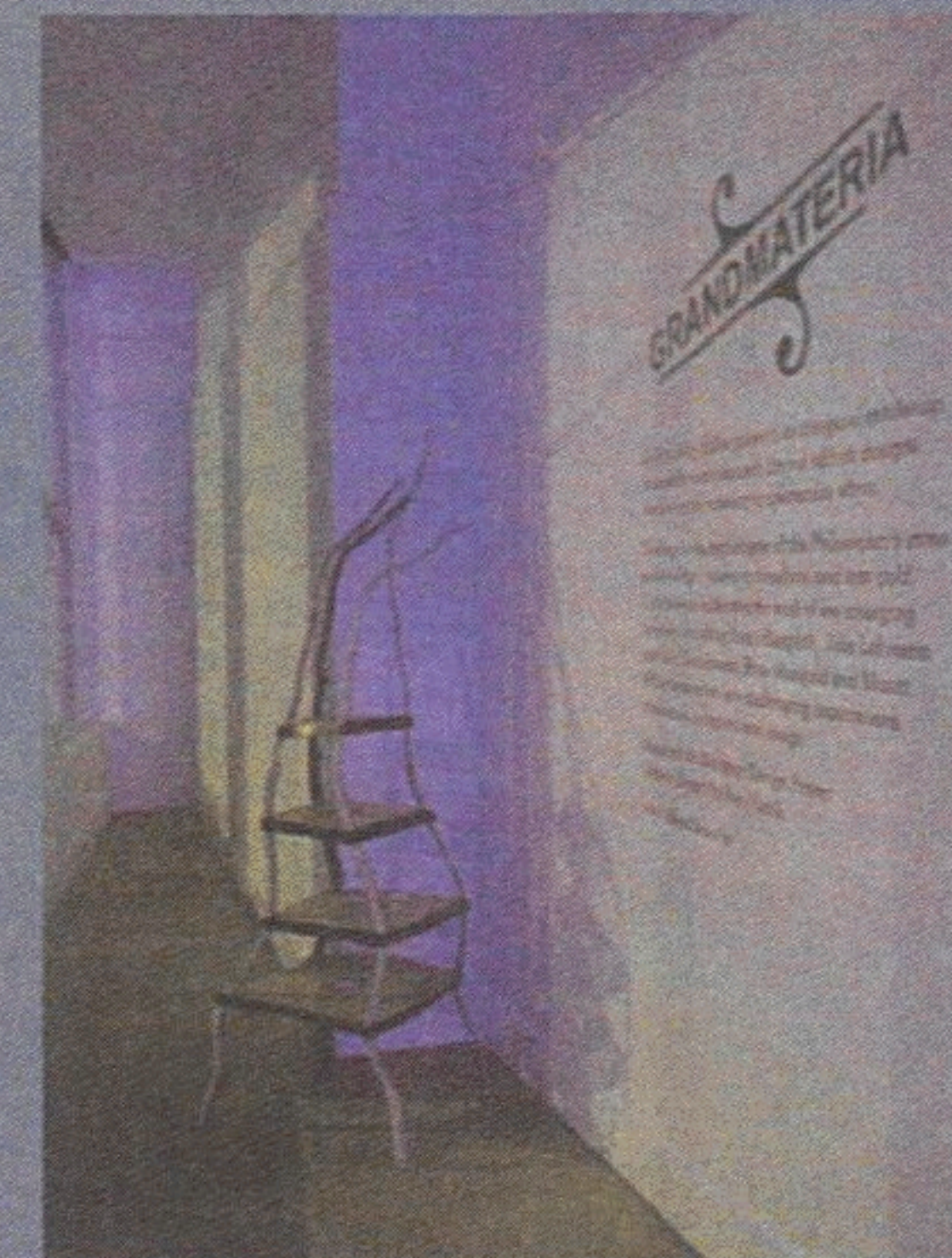
Where she is now is Exhibition Road in London's South Kensington, though the gallery space is only temporary and will close after Frieze art fair. She benefited, she says, from property developer South Kensington Estate's bid to market the area as the Brompton Design District, making space available for design-led activities during the festival.

Sellers' first exhibition, *Grandmateria*, features the work of four designers. Though she says there was no conscious curatorial agenda, a theme did emerge. 'All four designers elevate humble, everyday materials to spectacular effect,' she says.

Stuart Haygarth's Aladdin tables, filled with reclaimed glassware, propelled him into the limelight two years ago. For this exhibition he has reclaimed tail lights from industrial vehicles to create a series of lights. Julia Lohmann's and Gero Grundmann's series of seats made from soap are designed to erode for the first few years of their life, before petrifying into shape.



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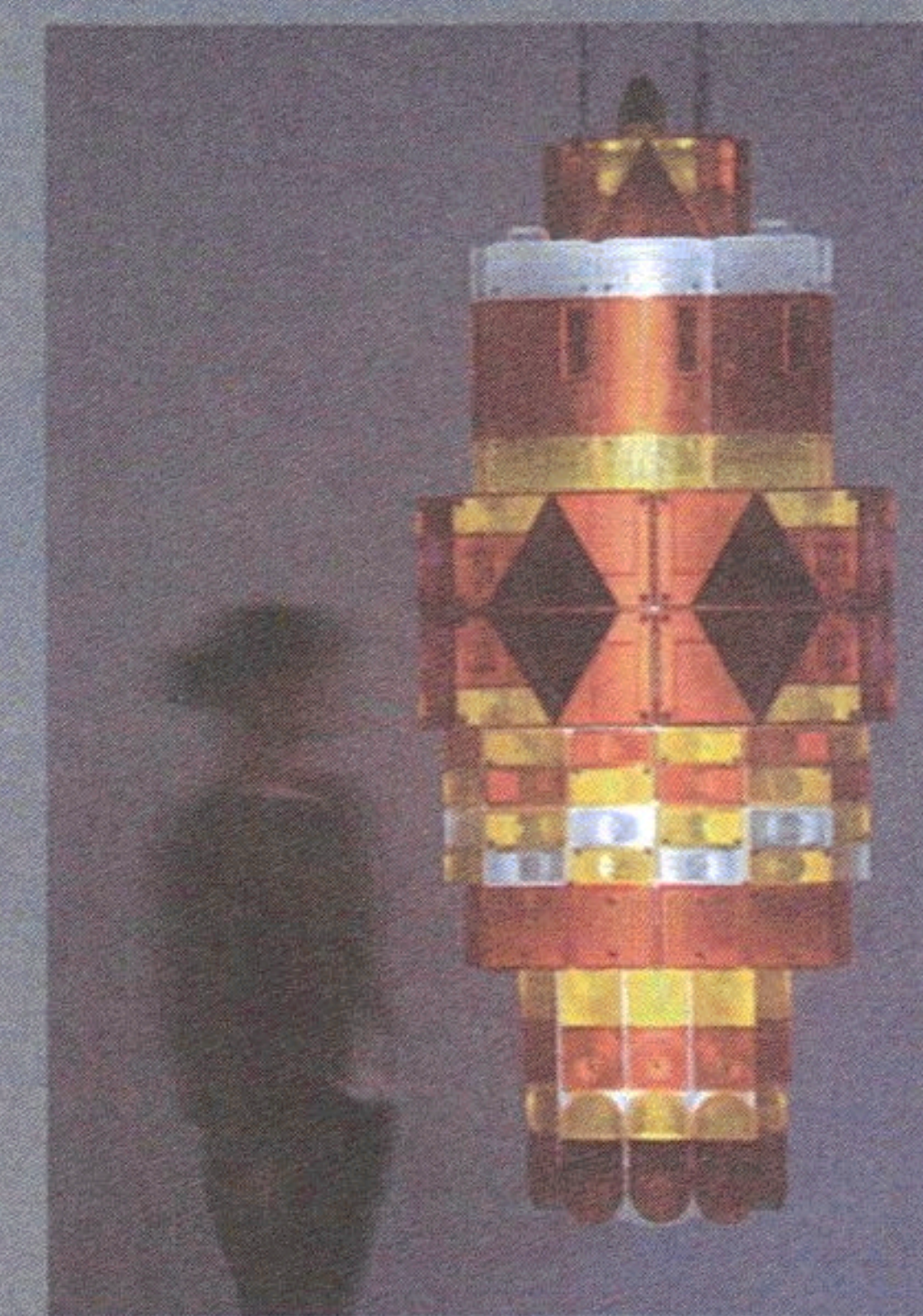


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1 By Royal Appointment, interactive chairs designed by Moritz Waldemeyer  
2 *Grandmateria*, Gallery Libby Sellers' opening show  
3 Libby Sellers  
4 Tail Light by Stuart Haygarth, a light constructed from reclaimed tail lights



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Peter Marigold is known for his Make Shift shelves, which simply wedge into place. His Octave Series comprises more forms dictated by the nature of the material, with minimal impact from fixings. Moritz Waldemeyer is a technological wizard, having worked for Ron Arad and designed a set of interactive drumsticks for The White Stripes. His new high-backed chairs are inspired by Charles Rennie Mackintosh; they also reflect the colour of their users' clothes on to the wall behind, creating a personally coloured aura.

Sellers has long-term plans for growth. She's planning to commission two more designers in time for the Art Basel fair in Miami in early December, but won't name names. 'Eventually, I'd like to have a permanent space and represent as many designs as I can; this is purely an organic start,' she says. Design art, it seems, is here to stay.

*Grandmateria* runs until 14 October at Gallery Libby Sellers, 1-5 Exhibition Road, London SW7