

Wallpaper*

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WORK HARD & BE NICE TO PEOPLE

The Wallpaper* work issue: Defying the daily grind





hot

CHILL FACTOR
Shay Alkalay (left) and Yael Mer (right) of Raw-Edges design studio, part of a larger collective, Annexed Industry, at their London studio. The sign is part of a 'Hot and Cold' set, made by Annexed Industry's John Hatt and Michael Croft for London's 2007 Design Festival

ON THE EDGE

East London's fresh young design duo Raw-Edges are in the hot seat

In London's creative melting pot, a new design studio has recently emerged, by the name of Raw-Edges. The Israeli duo, Yael Mer and Shay Alkalay, both 31 and from Tel Aviv, are partners in life as well as design and met while studying for their BA degrees at Bezalel Art and Design Academy in Jerusalem. As individuals, they have been on Wallpaper's radar for a while. Mer's milk cartons, which bulged according to the fat quota of their contents (skimmed, semi or full), stood out at the Royal College of Art MA show in 2006, while Alkalay's 'Pivot' shelves, fresh off Arco's production lines, made it into our Köln

IMM hit list in W*109, earlier this year. As a duo, however, the pair's two most recent projects, 'Volume' and 'Stack', reveal a more sophisticated direction, and with Established & Sons already having snapped up 'Stack' for its 2008 collection, it's clear that Raw-Edges is becoming a smooth and polished act.

Why did you choose the name Raw-Edges for your design studio?

Mer: It's to do with materials. We're both very interested in the character of different materials, particularly ones whose edges don't need to be >>



LUCK OF THE DRAWER

This picture, 'Stack' floating drawer units, price to be confirmed, for Established & Sons

Below, the 'Volume' moulded chairs, from £385, can be ordered in different sizes, shapes and materials

treated and can be left rough, like paper, leather and felt. It's also to do with our design approach.

Alkalay: We don't like to over-cook our ideas or over-style the finished products. We want simple shapes and concepts to speak for themselves.

Hence it's important that we make everything ourselves, so we don't have to compromise on any of our original ideas or intentions. We have total control over the production of the finished piece.

What do you learn from making your products yourself by hand?

Alkalay: I think there's a very different approach when people don't have any connection with their products. You don't touch, you don't use and so you don't feel anything. If you don't understand the material you're using from your own first-hand experiences with it, then you miss out on important processes of experimentation and discovery, which is what we love about design. We're very lucky to have a workshop in our studio, so we can make everything ourselves.

Mer: You learn so much more making things yourself than if you're sat with your sketchbook or your computer. Having said that, I'm really interested in making big, physical 3D forms using light 2D materials, so, in fact, a lot of my work, like 'Volume', can be made in the office.

How does your 'Volume' furniture get made without going into the workshop?

Mer: The mould is like upholstery. I make a large sheet by pasting together pieces of paper, then



mix together the polyurethane parts and pour it in stages into the hollow shell. Once the foam has expanded and hardened, the furniture is solid and durable. It's a performance-based design, it doesn't need to be done in the workshop.

Alkalay: We like the idea of tailoring furniture. With the technology used to draw the templates for 'Volume', we can very easily tailor the size of the chair or sofa for different people by scaling the design up or down to suit the exact height or shape of the person intending to use it.

Do you always work together?

Mer: Yes, we're both very much involved in each other's projects. Even when we go home we take our ideas and problems back with us. So it can be really quite intense sometimes.

You both seem to have different approaches to design – how do you reconcile this?

Alkalay: We always support, help and criticise each other, but we try to keep things quite free and fluid. If Yael has an idea then I'll give her feedback, and vice versa. Loosely, she does things that fold and I do things that move, so our projects are still quite separate in that sense. I have a kind of cartoonish language to my work. Both 'Pivot' and 'Stack' have an unexpected playfulness, simplicity and scale to them.

'Stack' is now in production with Established & Sons. Is it difficult for you to compromise your handmade work ethic with the commercial success of having your pieces in production?

Alkalay: Our work is very intuitive, but we don't create abstract things that can't be manufactured or don't have a practical function. Tomoko Azumi said to us at a party that it's good to go crazy with our ideas and develop our own language, but we should remember that our work still needs to be connected to society. If people don't understand what we're doing or don't want to use it, if it's just a very personal expression of our own ideas, then it doesn't really work as good design.

What factors do you feel particularly affect young designers today?

Mer: I'm affected by people's attitudes towards design. With Ikea and other global design stores, people today feel design is disposable. I wish it wasn't like this, but then at the same time it's opened design up to many more people.

Alkalay: Ikea represents design for the majority of people throughout the world. Very few people can afford Established & Sons products or one-off pieces. Different people desire and can afford different things. I think there's no one rule for design and designers. There's room for everyone.

How do you feel about the term design art?

Mer: I prefer the term experimental design, rather than design art. So many of the things people label as design art are not about art; they're about the user, about the process of making, and they speak about design language in a way that art simply doesn't and doesn't attempt to. Someone can buy an expensive product, but still it's design. I'm driven by design, not by artistic values. Eventually my products can be artistic, but it's a very different starting point.

Alkalay: Maybe our work isn't 100 per cent functional and has an element of fantasy to it, but we don't think of it as pieces of art. At the most, we are experimenting with design.

Where would you like to go from here?

Alkalay: We'd like to keep working in the same direction and hopefully keep doing furniture for leading manufacturers. I think Yael would like to do a bit of fashion and I'm also interested in doing some shop interiors, restaurants and hotels maybe. We don't want to get stuck doing the same thing – with the exception of folded chairs and drawers, of course. ★

www.raw-edges.com