



“I DON'T HAVE ANY FANTASIES OF BEING A DESIGNER AT ALL. I MAKE THINGS”

Tom Dixon's Void Light, made from a single sheet of spun copper, and Bronze Copper Shade



In a watery corner of west London, Tom Dixon is empire-building. September sees the opening of the designer's first-ever stand-alone shop – along with the influx of a coterie of international talent – at Portobello Dock, and with it, the makings of a new design hub for London. HOMEWORKS met him at the dock to talk about his new showroom, why working at speed is best, and getting in trouble for keeping gas canisters at the office

Portrait John Millar

What's new at The Dock that's going to tempt people to go west during the London Design Festival (which runs from 18-26 September) and beyond?

We always needed a proper showroom, so that will be opening – our offices are moving over the canal, to where Branson's office was when this was the old Virgin building. The Dock Kitchen [the on-site restaurant, run by chef Stevie Parle] is expanding. And then there's Global Industry, where we'll be bringing in brands from all over the world. I've tried to find things that have a statement, a story – things that have a bit of heart. So far there's Sort of Coal, a Danish charcoal company; New York's Areaware; New Caribbean Design; and Piet Hein Eek, a Dutch designer who's never really had a presence here. I started off thinking it should be an orgy of Britishness, but then, most British brands already have their own place, and I like the idea of using the analogy of the dock – its history as a place for import and export.

Dutch design company Moooi has also opened its first showroom here, how did that come about?

They're our closest competitor in a way, so it's nice to keep it friendly. I like their attitude and the fact that they've got this really strong aesthetic. Casper [Visser, Moooi's founder and CEO] and I have a connection that goes back a long way, and I really like Marcel [Wanders, designer and co-founder], he's such an interesting personality. And of course the Dutch have canals as well, so it's kind of symmetrical: I wanted to stage the opening as the Anglo-Dutch wars, with them on one side of the canal and us on the other. But actually, this sort of collective can only make us stronger. The big battle now is to get people away from their computer screens, or Westfield, or wherever, so we needed to build some kind of critical mass here.

Do you normally stay put during the Design Festival, or get out and about to see things?

I'll be here. I'd go to a bike show, or fashion week, I like fashion week. But I'm not so keen on design shows.

You've also launched a version of your acid-etched light, Etch. What's the story behind it?

It's a digital-age product. I've been working on a chair for five years for [Italian furniture company] Magis, and it's only just come out as a prototype: that's just insane, it's so unbelievably slow. And I'm a naturally impatient person. So I wanted to prove to myself that I could design, make and sell something in six weeks. I also wanted to make a product that could be sold on the internet, that's efficient for shipping – it fits in to a letter-box-sized box, and you assemble it yourself.

Are we going to see more of this ultra-fast turnaround in the future?

On-demand makes good business sense: rather than making vast amounts of stuff and hoping it's going to sell, what's better is to get the money in your pocket, and then make things really quickly. We need to be faster, cleverer, more streamlined – eliminate all the bits in between, like the set-up costs, the warehousing, the shipping.

Etch's launch earlier this year at Milan's Salon del Mobile was quite an event, with boiler-suited 'factory workers' assembling and selling them, something that's being repeated in London. Is the spectacle itself as important as the product?

Yeah, but I'd have preferred it if we could have got the actual acid etching tanks in there as well, for a bit of danger...you know...just the smell of them. People are so remote from it, they've got no idea how things are made. ▶

“WE NEED TO BE FASTER, CLEVERER, MORE STREAMLINED”



Industrial action: Pressed Glass, above, lights made in a factory that also manufactures car headlamps; and Peg Chairs, right, in black and fluoro orange



You touch on that idea of consumers’ remoteness from the production process in your book, *Industry*. Why did you decide to publish a book yourself?


Same thing [as Etch] – lack of patience. Making books is a laborious process, and by the end of it I’m always highly dissatisfied. I’m much more interested in what I’m doing now than what I was doing last year, and self-publishing is quite fresh, it’s just the chance to work in another way. People often ask me to do a monograph, but I don’t want to do that ‘til I’m dead, and you can’t easily bring a monograph up to date – with this I can publish one chapter this year, another one next year, and finally we’ll publish all of them together. Or if I’m dead...we’ll just stop.

Designers seem to be increasingly shifting the emphasis of what they do onto the design process itself, and the story behind a product, rather than purely the finished

piece – but that’s something that you’ve done from the beginning. Is everyone else just catching up?

How things are made has always been my main inspiration. I don’t have any fantasies of being a designer at all. I make things. The design part is almost incidental: products are informed by the way things are made and what the function might be, and I try and remove ‘the designer bit’ as much as possible.

Finally, are you still partial to a spot of welding?

I’ve just bought another welding machine, actually. I’ve got back into it, after a wood-working phase: it’s the fastest way to make something structurally sound that you can sit on, or stand on. In fact I’ve just been told off for having two gas canisters down here... 

WIN TOM DIXON ETCH PRODUCTS, CREATED FOR THIS YEAR’S LONDON DESIGN FESTIVAL

Until 26 September, Tom Dixon’s Etch lights and candle holders will be made in a special on-site ‘Flash Factory’ at The Dock, where you can assemble your own light if you go along in person. If you don’t make it, however, HOMEWORKS has one light (worth £135), and four candle holders (worth £30 each), to give away. To enter, send an e-mail to info@homeworksmag.co.uk with ‘Etch competition’ as the subject line, and include your name, address and daytime phone number. The closing date for entries is 15 October 2010. For terms and conditions, see below.

Competition open to UK residents aged 18 and over. The prize is not transferable and there is no cash alternative. One entry per person. By supplying your email address, you agree to be contacted via email by Write On Ltd. Your email address will not be passed to third party organisations, but may be used to communicate news, special offers and product and service information, and to take part in magazine research via email. If you do not wish to be contacted in this way, please state ‘no contact’ in your e-mail.

