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Plaster master



Veteran designer Elizabeth Garouste stays ahead of the curve with a new free-flowing collection for Ralph Pucci

WRITER: PEI-RU KEH



Design

This page, the 'Herman' mirror, designed by Elizabeth Garouste for Ralph Pucci using Plasterglass

Opposite, Garouste's 'Priscilla' sconce, also in Plasterglass, comes in three colourways



Well before collectible design was established as a genre, there was Ralph Pucci. The New York gallerist, who has been an active force in the city's creative scene since the 1970s, operates his eponymous furniture and lighting gallery from an unbelievable penthouse loft in the heart of Manhattan's Flatiron district. It is filled with an array of statement-making pieces from designers as far-reaching as Hervé van der Straeten, India Mahdavi, Vladimir Kagan and Jens Risom, as well as a growing collection of collaborative pieces made at its in-house sculpture studio and furniture workshop. A visit to the unprecedented space, its home since 1992, underscores just how unique the Ralph Pucci enterprise is.

Although many of the designers in Pucci's repertoire are well-established, the energetic gallerist has long upheld a distinctive point of view, which is evident from the gestural furniture and lighting pieces that fill the gallery's two floors. His latest collaborator is none other than the French interior designer Elizabeth Garouste. One half of the Parisian design duo Garouste & Bonetti, who were also known as 'the New Barbarians', the duo were the toast of the design scene in the early 1990s and beloved for their fusion of quirk and grandeur. Having focused on private commissions since 2002, Garouste puts her unconventional, colour-forward aesthetic back in front of a new audience with this new body of work with Ralph Pucci International. It comprises seven pieces, including a mirror, chandelier, sconce, console, table lamp, dining table and side table (with tabletops in marble and mosaics), all incorporating the company's proprietary Plasterglass and Garouste's love for artisanal found materials.

'This new collection is a wonderful combination of imagination and functionality,' says Garouste, who has known Pucci for more than a decade. To develop the ideas for this collection, she spent several weeks in New York last summer working with Ralph Pucci International's sculpture studio, which is located on the gallery's lower level. 'The possibility of sculpture with Plasterglass has allowed me to create more abstract shapes and forms than is possible with more conventional furniture craft. The Plasterglass material works in a very particular way so it is possible to create sculpted forms that can be produced again, which gives a huge freedom.'

Pucci's Plasterglass, a proprietary mix of plaster and resin that makes the material suitable for both indoor and outdoor use, is rooted in unexpected origins. In its earliest iteration, the company was established as a mannequin repair business by Pucci's parents, Nick and Lee in 1954. In 1976, at the age of 22, Pucci joined the family business and began



Above, Garouste at work on a clay model of her 'Herman' mirror at the Ralph Pucci sculpture studio in Manhattan's Flatiron district

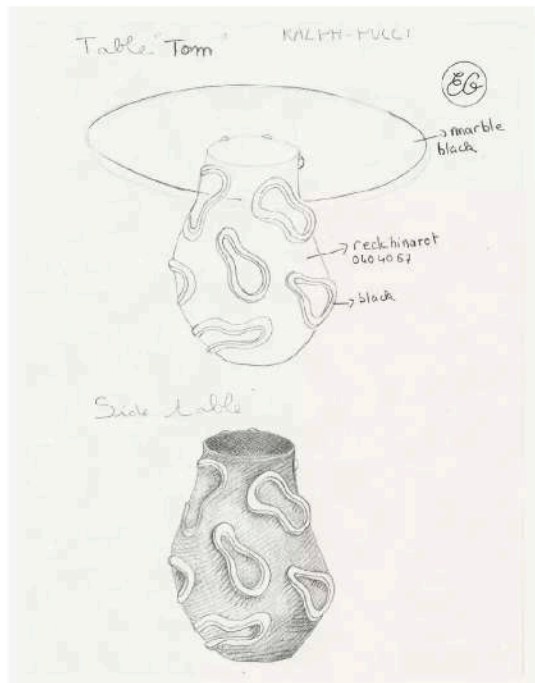
experimenting with its proprietary methods of manufacturing. He began fabricating unique mannequins, to great acclaim, for fashion designers such as Diane von Furstenberg, Anna Sui and Pierre Cardin; working with now-legendary figures such as Kenny Scharf and Isabel and Ruben Toledo; and creating his own sculptural art pieces as well.

It was working with Andrée Putman on a mannequin for Barneys in the 1980s that formally crystallised Pucci's position in the design world. At Putman's urging, Pucci began representing her Ecart International line exclusively in the US in 1988 and then expanded to exhibit works by the likes of Chris Lehrecke, Patrick Naggar and »

Design



Above, a clay model of Garouste's 'Priscilla' sconce
Right, a sketch of the 'Tom' dining table, which features a Plasterglass base adorned with biomorphic shapes and a black marble top



van der Straeten in a 15,000 sq ft warehouse located below the mannequin factory in SoHo. Dramatically different from the store or museum setting that furniture was typically presented in at the time, the pioneering format was one of the earliest to change the course of how design was viewed.

Even in its recent years, the gallery's innovative spirit has continued to grow; in 2021, it remodelled its sculpture studio into an all-white, window-encased jewel box where its team of artisans and visiting artists sculpt plaster freehand or refine 3D-printed forms, making it a memorable sight for clients and visitors alike. Located next to its furniture workshop, where many of the gallery's collaborative pieces are made, the fabrication process is seamless and tightly controlled, with the creative possibilities seemingly endless.

In Garouste's case, these capabilities brought a new dynamism to her work. 'This collection is special because it was developed in the atelier. I was able to come to site to work on the models, like they were sculptures,' she recalls, sharing that she even challenged Pucci to experiment with adding colour. 'I wanted my collection to play with colours, and even to introduce a new material, mosaic.'

The result is a vibrant and memorable collection that has pushed both parties into a new era. 'Until now, we've mostly been dealing with plaster in white, grey, black and terracotta, mostly neutrals. So when Elizabeth, who is known for colour, asked if we could do colour, I said, 'Well, we're going to find out,' recounts Pucci, who had staged two prior exhibitions with Garouste during the pandemic. 'Since our first show together, Elizabeth's been gaining traction. Garouste & Bonetti was a long time ago and have mostly been forgotten, but her vocabulary is back and so we proposed creating pieces in our studio for this show, which has added another layer.'

The family aspect of the Ralph Pucci business is probably its strongest attribute. With Pucci's children, Michael and Nicole, now working alongside him, the gallery has expanded healthily with new outposts in LA and London, and a space in Miami currently in the works. 'In having a family business, you're able to take risks in terms of what you exhibit and show,' reflects Michael. 'Working with someone like Elizabeth would have been considered risky from a traditional sales perspective, but what makes us unique and different is that we're going straight in with something that may take time for clients to understand. Each of our exhibitions and collaborations are almost lifelong, they're never just a one-off.' *

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