

INTERVIEW

Go figure

Ralph Pucci started out manufacturing mannequins. His second incarnation as a luxury furniture maker is about to expand again

This winter, during Design Miami and Art Basel Miami Beach, Ralph Pucci International—a leading luxury furniture, lighting, and former mannequin company—will move to another new gallery in the Wynwood Art District of Miami, where it first opened in 2014. This follows the launch of a space in London's Mayfair, and will entrench the company's triangle of US showrooms in Florida, New York, and Los Angeles.

The move marks another step in the remarkable evolution of the company into a major player in the field of contemporary collectible design. The story began in 1954, when Ralph Pucci's parents established a mannequin repair shop in Manhattan. When Ralph joined the team in 1976, he had the idea of fabricating unique mannequins for fashion designers such as Diane von Furstenberg, Anna Sui, and Pierre Cardin.

"Instead of giving mannequins the usual painted faces and wigs, we sprayed them in single colors, so they became sculptural statements. We had found our language," says Pucci. By the mid-1980s a community of creative people were attending his shows, including the photographers David LaChapelle and Christopher Makos.

His collaboration with designer Andrée Putman changed his course. "The Olympian Goddess," an imposing, androgynous, metallic-toned mannequin Pucci made in 1986, caused a sensation. Impressed by the attention, Putman suggested Pucci represent her business, Ecart International, in the US. She had recognized the appeal of early-20th-century furniture and objects made by then largely forgotten designers—such as Eileen Gray, Jean-Michel Frank, and Pierre Chareau—and began manufacturing and selling "re-edits" of their designs.

The works flew out of the gallery, but the prices were high, so in the late 1990s, Pucci began to produce his own furniture, working with designers, and using the skills of the craftspeople in his mannequin workshop. Collaborations began with Patrick Naggar, Paul Mathieu, and Hervé van der Straeten, among others.

In the 2000s the German-American designer Vladimir Kagan began working with Pucci. He started to explore the possibilities of using fiberglass, which the company used to make its mannequins. "Kagan was the first artist to experiment with the material. He was increasingly inspired by sculpture, and he was interested in creating what he described as 'art furniture,'" says Pucci.



The success of Pucci's furniture gradually eclipsed the mannequin-making side of the business. Despite having been honored in 2015 with an exhibition at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, *Ralph Pucci: The Art of the Mannequin*, he closed it down during the pandemic.

He transformed his New York building, creating a showroom in one half linked to a large workshop and studio. "When people see the work being made by hand they are really impressed," he says. One of his more recent collaborators is the French designer Elizabeth Garouste. She has added bright colors to the Plasterglass mix and has a show of new pieces opening in London in the fall.

One factor in the appeal of Plasterglass pieces is the price. "It is still high design, but it's more affordable," says Pucci. "People may graduate to bronze, but we have created a language in design. Everybody needs one or two pieces of Plasterglass in their collection." *Emma Crichton-Miller*
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Working with the company's master sculptor, Kagan was able to "perfect the sinuous silhouette of his *Foundry* chair, which was launched in 2009." This, and the work of other Pucci designers and artists eventually led to the formulation of Plasterglass, a proprietary composite mixture of plaster and fiberglass that has the sculptural possibilities of the former combined with the lightness, strength, and durability of the latter. The company now sells Plasterglass tables, chairs, lights, and mirrors alongside a wide range of luxurious furniture made from traditional materials.

Clockwise from left: Stefan Bishop's *Vulcan Mirror #3*; a fireplace mantel designed by John Koga; designer Ralph Pucci; Hanabi Large Light Pendant by Alexandre Logé

Photos: Courtesy of Ralph Pucci International.

TRENDS



Plaster masters

The potential of a once-humble building material is now being realized by furniture designers

Using plaster as a building and decorative material dates back to at least 7000BC. The mixture—of clay, or ground gypsum and water, which hardens as it dries—was used as mortar and to give walls a smooth finish. By the Middle Ages, white gypsum plaster was used to make decorative moldings, as a base for frescoes, and to make cheap plaster casts of bronze or marble sculptures.

Sculptors also recognized the creative potential of plaster since a solid block can be easily carved and shaped. Then, in the early 20th century, it began to be used as a medium in its own right, notably by Alexander Archipenko and Pablo Picasso. Recently, designers too have seen its potential, either on its own or as part of a composite material, such as in the Plasterglass furniture—a mixture of fiberglass and plaster—made by Ralph Pucci (see page 8).

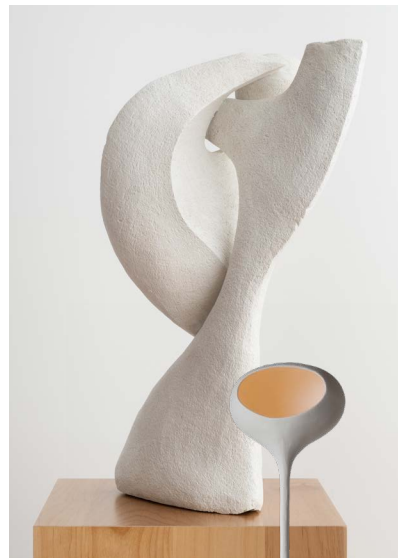
The founders of the studio Voukenas Petrides, Andreas Voukenas and Steven Petrides, hand-fabricate side tables, chairs, and lights using the material. They say that

the liveliness of their organic forms is partly a result of working with mesh and plaster.

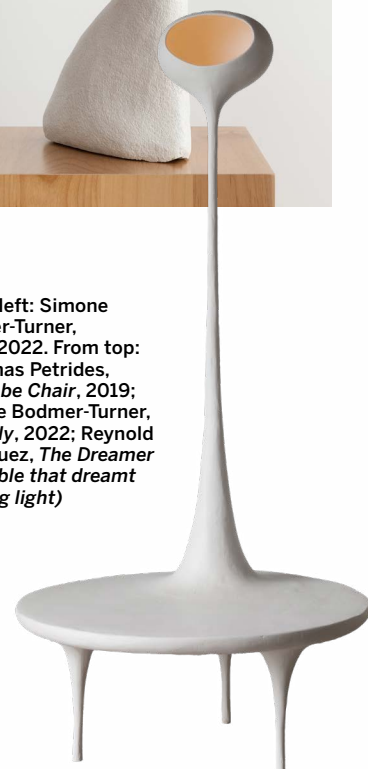
Brooklyn-based Simone Bodmer-Turner also makes furniture using clay and plaster. “The reason I am so drawn to this medium is because of the tactile, quiet interactivity of building each piece,” she has said. “It forces the viewer to interact with the piece—to pull on a suspended ball to turn the light on, to grasp a seed-shaped knob to pull a drawer.”

Reynold Rodriguez, a designer based in Puerto Rico, discovered plaster during lockdown. He loves the variety and spontaneity it offers. “You come out with something very different every time,” he says. “There is a passion in the process because plaster is so forgiving. It doesn’t hold a grudge like wood or stone do.”

His startling table, “The Dreamer (the table that dreamt of being light),” was born from the idea of a table that wanted to become a light: “I was thinking about objects that yearn to be something else, as fluidly as plaster can become something else.” *ECM*



Above left: Simone Bodmer-Turner, *Joust*, 2022. From top: Voukenas Petrides, *Tear Tube Chair*, 2019; Simone Bodmer-Turner, *Cala Lily*, 2022; Reynold Rodriguez, *The Dreamer (the table that dreamt of being light)*



Photos: Elinevne Berge, courtesy of Emma Scully Gallery; Courtesy of Gerasimos Domenikos for Gallery FUMI; Joe Kramm, courtesy of Emma Scully Gallery; Graham Pearson, courtesy of Charles Burmand Gallery.

THE SCENE



Stars turn out at RADA

David Harewood and Alex Kingston were among the actors and alumni of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) who attended a cocktail party at Sotheby’s London. Harewood is an actor and presenter known for his role in *Homeland*, while Kingston’s notable roles include *ER*.

At the event, guests enjoyed performances by RADA graduates and took part in a charitable auction to support the drama school. The event, which took place on June 1, came almost exactly a year after Sotheby’s hosted a reading with performances by RADA graduates for the Jubilee Arts Festival.

Clockwise from left: Actors David Harewood and Alex Kingston; the opening of Sotheby’s Shanghai; Kristian Spofforth, Jemima Chamberlain-Adams, associate specialist, jewelry, and Hope Francis, associate cataloguer, London, at Annabel’s



Shanghai is go

A new venue has opened in Shanghai as Sotheby’s celebrates 50 years in Asia. The multi-functional hub showcases fine art and luxury items and hosts exhibitions, talks, and other events. A ribbon-cutting ceremony took place on May 19. Nicolas Chow, Sotheby’s chairman, Asia, worldwide head and chairman of Chinese works of art, Nathan Drahi, managing director, Asia, and Yu Jinsheng, secretary general of the art committee of the China Association of Auctioneers attended.

Diamonds for Annabel’s jubilee

Diamonds were the focus of a talk led by Kristian Spofforth, Sotheby’s head of department, Jewelry, at Annabel’s private members’ club. Spofforth explored colored diamonds and other market trends and offered a peek behind the scenes of some of the most famous ever diamond sales.

The event, which took place on June 6, was held as part of a wider month-long celebration in honor of 60 years since the opening of Annabel’s, marking its diamond jubilee. The establishment has hosted celebrities, presidents, and even royalty—it is the only nightclub that Queen Elizabeth II ever visited—since it opened in 1963.

