

AD

Gaetano Pesce Is As Radical As Ever

The edgy Italian talent unveils new furniture at Salon 94 Design

By: Hannah Martin



In 1984, at a Pratt Institute laboratory in Brooklyn, Italian designer Gaetano Pesce cast nine chairs using the same mold. For each, he changed the resin formula ever so slightly. The first, jiggly as Jell-O, collapsed immediately on the floor. The second stood up, but, with one touch, toppled over. The third, fourth, fifth, and so on, grew more and more sturdy, but the eighth and ninth were so rigid that they were uncomfortable for sitting. His point? The difference between art and design is merely a slight alteration in chemical formula. It's a narrative that has been embedded in his design practice for decades, and one he revisits this month as he unveils 16 new Pratt chairs (cast with fresh-to-the-market, transparent resins) at Salon 94 Design. A few days before the opening, I caught up with the designer at his SoHo studio, surrounded by goopy, globby objects of every variety, to talk art versus design, the resin market, and—just a day before the wildly polarizing midterm elections—politics.

AD PRO: Tell me about that first Pratt series in 1984.

Gaetano Pesce: It's a demonstration of the difference between a design object and an art object. It's a very thin difference. In this case, it's the difference of a chemical formula. I made nine different densities. Number one is very soft, it's like a body without the bones—it collapses. Number two is standing up but as soon as you touch it, it collapses. Number three is standing but you cannot sit on it. Number four is good for a child but not for an adult. Number five is good for an adult but you have a sense of instability—like the instability that we have in our time. Number six starts to be rigid,

number seven more, number eight more, and number nine is so rigid that it is uncomfortable—it is just a sculpture on the floor.

AD PRO: What were you trying to communicate to people?

Pesce: A chair—you sit in it, and it's comfortable. But the same chair, when you change the rigidity, it becomes a sculpture. There is no difference. An architecture critic from Italy once made a book talking about how there is no difference between a spoon and the city. The spoon is small, the city is huge, but they are all objects. Architecture is just an object with a big scale; an object that you can enter inside.

AD PRO: This is a city that you're sitting in, right?

Pesce: Yes. It's a city made, at a smaller scale, into a sofa.

AD PRO: Why did you decide to revisit the Pratt series?

Pesce: From that time to today there was an evolution in material, an evolution in pigments. At the time I did the chair, there were no translucent pigments. Now there are. I wanted to start a new series to show the progress in material. If you see the new chairs, there are some that are like a piece of glass.

AD PRO: What is the formula for the new ones? Are they usable?

Pesce: The ones at the gallery are all number seven. They are too rigid, at the point that they are not comfortable. You look at them as a sculpture. Around the chair there are some details that express why I made that chair—a symbol of the hand means the manual work is very important. There is a book which means that the chair represents culture, and so on.

AD PRO: Are you using the original mold?

Pesce: The old mold I made in 1983 was not able to make more than 30 or so copies. It was breaking, so we made a new mold for the new chair.

AD PRO: When did you start working with resin?

Pesce: I finished [architecture school] and I realized that I knew nothing about new materials. I was sending letters to chemical companies asking if it was possible to visit the places where they were; some answered, and I had the possibility to see materials from today. There were certain things I had never seen before. What touched me was the foam—two liquids that you mix together and it levitates like bread. I use that material to do that chair.

AD PRO: But didn't you have to change the material?

Pesce: It is not possible anymore. At that time there was a gas that it is not possible to use because it was polluting.

AD PRO: It must have been amazing to see it rise from the ground. How do you find out about new materials now?

Pesce: I have to pay attention to what is new. For me, I look for materials that are liquid and become rigid or elastic. That kind of material does not have a lot of evolution. Last year there was a new material that was very interesting—a foam that was so light that when you had a cube of this dimension in your hand you had the impression that you had nothing—and translucent also. The problem is, it was very fragile. You would touch it and it would break. There's nothing really very new today in the field of elastic, soft, liquid material. Maybe in the future.

AD PRO: Why are you stuck on that material?

Pesce: There is a relationship between the material and our time. Our time is a time of quite liquid with values that move like liquid. They disappear, appear; they come back; it's like water. Me, I am interested in that kind of material which is close to the meaning of our time.

AD PRO: So tell me about the exhibition.

Pesce: It's an exhibition about objects. Usually they call my work multidisciplinary because I touch many different things. With Salon 94 this time, the protagonist of the exhibition is this chair because there are 16. But there are other objects that were interesting for me to show. There is a lamp. There is a console. There are two tables, one low table and one normal height. A carpet and a resin skin. Do we have the text of the old man? [Pesce is referencing a cabinet in the shape of a man bent on all fours.] Later you will read this. This is why I did that piece.

AD PRO: When do you make new cabinets like this man?

Pesce: I make cabinets when I have an idea for a new cabinet. If someone wants to understand what design means today, you have to understand what I am doing. There isn't anyone in the world who is doing what I'm doing. The importance of the show is this: going to the show you have an idea of where design is going to be now and in the future. Design is telling a story through an object. This is what I'm trying to say.

AD PRO: What are you inspired by?

Pesce: Reality.

AD PRO: Do you think design can change the world?

Pesce: If you think about that chair there [he points at his iconic, bulbous Up chair, seated across the room]. It was done 50 years ago and it was talking about the problem women have in reality—they are victim[s] of violence—today we discuss that problem very much. Starting from the guy in L.A. who was taking advantage of women to some Islamic countries where women can't go out alone. There are problems in reality. That object was pushing people to think about this problem, for instance. Maybe it has not changed a lot, but you see the image and you start to think. It is clearly an image of someone with a ball on their foot—the image of a prisoner.

AD PRO: Is it important for design and objects to engage with politics?

Pesce: Oh, yes, but also an object can speak about religion, an object can speak about philosophy, personal problems. It depends if you want to express. Most designers do something that my grandfather was doing. They have to understand that everything is communication. We cannot just communicate that this is comfortable. It's not enough! Something must be comfortable, must be useful, but today we can express more. That object [the Up chair] is comfortable—you use the sphere as an ottoman—but there is a second step where there is a message. The object can send out messages.