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EVERYTHING

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## *young*

He has designed must-have products for clients that read like a Who's Who of contemporary design. Now during the first ever Hong Kong exhibition of his highly covetable collection of designs, Michael Young talks about his stellar career and why he believes Hong Kong is the future of design.

Images courtesy of Michael Young



He has designed bikes for Giant, collectible furniture for Established and Sons, apprenticed with Tom Dixon in the early '90s and was championed by Sir Terence Conran as his choice of most inspirational British designer. He is also really big in Japan. Based in Hong Kong for the past six years, we will undoubtedly be seeing and hearing a great deal more from highly regarded design maverick Michael Young. Scruffy and dressed in shorts and a nautical striped shirt, Young looks like a seafaring buccaneer. "I've been awake for about six days with the baby, then I had to fly to Milan for endless interviews and parties. I'm crushed," he smiles. Back on home turf, he's about to embark on another long week of interviews and parties. On the eve of opening his latest exhibition at The Space, Michael Young meets to talk about his career which has so far spanned almost two decades.

Born in 1966 in the North of England, Young graduated from the Design School at London's Kingston Polytechnic where he enrolled as a mature student because, he says, "I couldn't do anything else and failed everything at school. I didn't have any qualifications so I got in as a mature age student and then started making my own things." After graduating, an apprenticeship with designer Tom Dixon kick-started his own career in design. His early woven steel works were created out of whatever material was most easily accessible

and economical for a designer starting out, and were immediately acquired by public institutions. "I was quite lucky that the first thing I made became a cult object...it ended up going into The Louvre and The Pompidou Centre," he recalls. Early financing by a Japanese company shortly after leaving college enabled Young to open his own design office, MY-022, in London in 1994 and he hasn't looked back. Since then, he's become a regular fixture of design magazines such as Wallpaper, prominent at design fairs, and has racked up awards for chairs, tables and multiple other objects. Despite a long list of covetable creations, there is no one stylistic hallmark of Young's work. "The products are quite ethereal," he says. "I think they're connected more by my philosophy and approach to life - questioning typologies and the innovation of the manufacturing."

Young has designed iconic products for everything from restaurants to transport to apparel, even a sex toy (which was apparently sent as a gift to Zaha Hadid), for clients as diverse as Lacoste, Dunhill, Chivas Regal, Schweppes, Kiki de Montparnasse and Cappellini. Not to mention a cosmetic surgery clinic in Taipei. With an almost 20 year career in design, and offices in London, Iceland and Taiwan, six years ago the peripatetic British-born Young moved his base to Hong Kong, the manufacturing hub of Asia, to pursue more innovative and sophisticated manufacturing processes. "I moved



to the SAR specifically because I realised there was everything I needed here. I became fascinated with all of the things I could do in Hong Kong," he explains. "In Europe it's like this over-indulged industry, but in Hong Kong it strips back all of the bullshit. It's a designer's playground!"

In the SAR, Young is closer to the producers and the materials required for his work, and he is able to take advantage of his strong relationships with manufacturers to produce pieces that have become renowned for the marriage of design with technical execution. "Since I came to Hong Kong the ease and the enthusiasm of the factory community has really accelerated my work to a dimension that has left people in Europe speechless because they still have this old antique European attitude of, "Oh it's a tea break. I'll speak to you in a week...blah, blah, blah." It's a nightmare getting anything done, whereas here it's a walk in the park. The experience of making things is embodied in the culture." It has also allowed for a certain level of freedom in experimenting with techniques and materials in an effort to push the boundaries of design, a luxury seldom afforded elsewhere.

With an office tucked away between the dry food vendors of Sheung Wan, Young's working environment doesn't seem like a typical super sleek sterile design operation, something he is at pains to avoid. "I enjoy walking around and seeing the environment around me, exploring the local architecture, watching the guy down the road in his pajamas having a cigarette...I think the number of people brave enough to move here is still quite limited. People are still scared off by the language barrier. For me the complete lack of understanding is an even better environment to be in. I'm happy that I don't know what any of the street signs




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say." This anarchic nomadism has infused his work and design sensibility with a global perspective and has allowed for a creative freedom unhindered by space or routine.

The influence of his adopted home is evident in Young's work, with elements of East and West fusing elegantly with a modern aesthetic in pieces such as his Ming chair and Birdhouse or Zipzi table for Established and Sons (made up of hand-folded interlocking paper and drawing on Chinese paper lanterns). His debut show in Hong Kong at The Space featured works from various commissions and collaborations including his most recent collection for one of China's glassware companies, Tittot which he says "will help bring them to the forefront of glass design in Europe." The geometric patterns Young has employed throughout the collection reflect the Chinese technique of roof tiling, but could just as easily be mistaken for scales, tying into China's love of all things dragon. Also featured prominently in the exhibition is Young's Zipte Link, a flexible sculptural installation that expands across the area's central space like an architectural market. Premiered during ART HK in 2009, the

piece is notable for representing the strengthening ties of modern design and local Chinese technical abilities, something Young is keen to continue to explore in his adopted home town.

Hours away from opening his exhibition, the gallery space is buzzing with activity and Young's uber cool entourage of young creative types. I spot a member of local indie band Poubelle International drilling and displaying works for the evening's exhibition. His team reflects that perfect intersection of creative worlds – artists, designers, musicians and photographers. It's impossible for Young to miss a beat, having his finger on the pulse of what's new, hip and desirable in the creative world. "Yes, the studio attracts a certain type of person. We've been really lucky to have such a great team. It's like a celebration of being in Hong Kong, using local talent," enthuses Young. The studio certainly appears to be capturing the zeitgeist, creating products that you never even knew you needed but will definitely want. They're cool, they're unique, and they represent a new direction in contemporary design.