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ALFREDO HÄBERLI'S PRODUCT DESIGNS REVEAL BOTH HIS RIGOROUS RATIONAL APPROACH AND HIS SENSUOUS NATURAL CHARM **BY NELDA RODGER**

It often seems that there are two kinds of designers. There are those who develop a signature style and whose work is instantly recognizable by its form, or sometimes by the application of decoration – such as the Campana brothers or even Ettore Sottsass. And then there are those whose work is marked by an approach, by the way the designer sets out to solve the problem. If the first group of designers are the artists, the second are the industrial designers' industrial designers. Alfredo Häberli belongs to the latter group.

Born in Argentina in 1964 and now living and working in Zurich, Häberli is part of an international group of designers, including Jasper Morrison and Konstantin Grcic, who follow in the footsteps of Achille Castiglioni and Enzo Mari. And although the pursuit of the natural, though not necessarily obvious or humourless, solution to the question at hand – typical of the work of these Italian product design pioneers –

underlies Häberli's approach, he also brings to his work a sensuous charm. His creations have a clear, rational base, the result of his orientation and training, but they also have a fragile, emotional, even poetic, quality that stems from his openness and his culturally diverse upbringing.

Häberli spent his childhood in Argentina, where his parents owned an upscale restaurant outside Córdoba. When political and economic tensions there came to a boil in the late '70s, they decided to relocate and Häberli was transplanted, at the age of 13, to Switzerland, the country his great-grandfather emigrated from 50 years earlier.

Although he did well at school, winning the diploma prize when he graduated with a degree in industrial design, he often felt like an outsider in his adopted country. This influenced the course of his career, making him more inclined to pursue work outside his own country; it also sharpened his investigative technique. "When you come from someplace else," he tells me, "you can raise more questions, be more critical."

Häberli began his studies with architectural drafting. His decision to pursue a career in industrial design came as a sort of epiphany while on a road trip to Italy in his early 20s. "I drove to Milano in my sister's Volkswagen Golf GTI,

designed by Giorgio Giugiaro," says Häberli. "In Italy, I discovered through magazines that there were designers behind the things I liked." He also became aware that many of his favourite things were designed by Achille Castiglioni: "I found out that there is a person behind the objects and I was so struck by that situation that I decided to study design."

At the end of the program, buoyed by the prize he had won, he called up Castiglioni to thank him for the inspiration and wrangled an invitation for coffee. The promised 15 minutes stretched to three hours; at the end of the meeting the recent grad predictably asked for a job. Castiglioni, whose tiny office was already staffed to his liking, sent Häberli back to Switzerland, encouraging him to open a studio in Zurich – and that is what he did.

Since 1991, Häberli has been designing for a slew of international companies, either alone or with Christophe Marchand, with whom he shared a studio and frequently collaborated until around 1997. By his own account, his office was busy from the get-go – not the usual situation for a young designer starting out on his own.

Häberli is quite gregarious, a trait he describes as "typical Argentinian." This, along with his

OPPOSITE PAGE ALFREDO HÄBERLI'S BRIGHT AND AIRY STUDIO OFFERS A VIEW OF LAKE ZURICH. ALONG ONE WALL IS A COLLECTION OF ARTIFACTS AND OBJECTS THAT HE DRAWS ON FOR INSPIRATION AND REFERENCE.

ABOVE TAKE A LINE FOR A WALK (2003) ORIGINATED WITH A SKETCH HÄBERLI SUBMITTED IN RESPONSE TO A REQUEST FOR IDEAS FOR MOROSO'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY. THE CONTINUOUS LINE DESCRIBING JUST THE OUTLINE OF A CHAIR WAS SO APPEALING THAT THE COMPANY DECIDED TO PUT IT INTO PRODUCTION RIGHT AWAY.

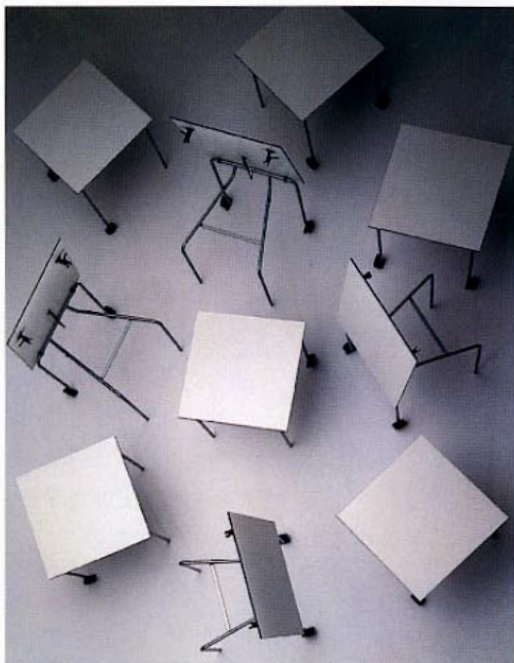


ABOVE LEFT THE DISTINCTIVE BACKREST OF THE SEGESTA CHAIR (ALIAS, 2003) IS DRAWN FROM THE SEAT IN A CONTINUOUS LINE. THE CHAIR COMES WITH A SWIVEL BASE, FOUR LEGS, A ROCKING BASE OR IN A TALL "TENNIS" VERSION.



ABOVE RIGHT THE RECENTLY LAUNCHED STACKING CHAIR SELINUNTE, BY ALIAS IS A PARED-DOWN VERSION OF SEGESTA. IT HAS A SHELL MADE OF COMPOSITE LAYERS OF TECHNO-POLYMER AND A STEEL FRAME.

BELOW LEFT MOVE IT (1996) IS A MULTI-PURPOSE TABLE FOR THONET. THE TOP LIFTS LIKE THE HOOD OF A CAR AND IS SUPPORTED BY A GAS SPRING, PERMITTING THE TABLES TO STACK HORIZONTALLY LIKE CARTS.



While still a student, he managed to connect with the director of Museum für Gestaltung (MfGZ), the design museum associated with the design school in Zurich. His keen curiosity prompted the director to suggest that he co-design an exhibition. "So we did this exhibition," says Häberli, "and we ended up doing about 20 exhibitions. And this gave me some kind of cultural background, so when I started as a designer I knew a lot of design history – such as Enzo Mari's work."

Exhibition design continued to be important to Häberli after graduation. In 1995, he conceived and designed a retrospective on Bruno Munari for the MfGZ called *Far Vedere L'aria* (Air Made Visible) and co-authored a book by the same name. In 2001 he developed the concept and designed an exhibition on new technology called *Download*, mounted at the *Ambiente* show in Frankfurt.

Renato Stauffacher, art director for the Italian furniture company Alias, was one of Häberli's first clients. "He saw a small article in a magazine that had a nice picture of the huge studio I had at that time – with a lot of material research and stuff, everything I had as a student, put up on the studio wall," Häberli recalls. "He just called me and said, 'Listen, I have to meet you.'" Häberli's first project for Alias, a collaboration with Christophe Marchand, was a component-based cabinet system called *Sec* that took two years to design and was launched in 1997.

Other projects with Alias followed, including the Segesta chair (2003), whose curved backrest with distinctive cut-out shape is drawn out of the seat in a continuous line; and the recently launched Selinunte stacking chair, a pared-down version of the Segesta chair.

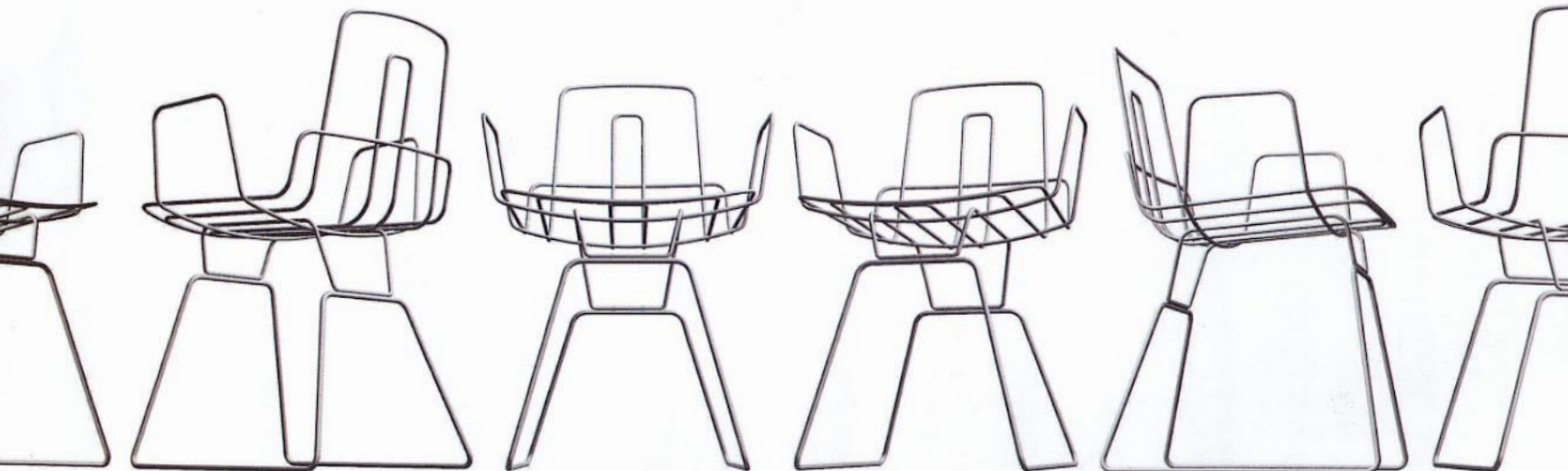
The harmonious lines of Segesta are echoed in *Take a Line for a Walk*, designed for the Italian soft-seating manufacturer Moroso – his best piece of work to date. Responding to a request for ideas to celebrate Moroso's 50th anniversary, Häberli submitted a simple sketch – just the outline of his concept. Moroso's design team fell in love with it and decided to produce it right away. The armchair's lyrical shape is matched by its comfort. It manages to be at once completely rational – just a line that completes itself – and totally whimsical. Within its almost cartoon-like shape are historical references: the carriage seat, a chair by Carlo Mollino and Arne Jacobsen's Egg chair. "I felt like having a bit of calm and silence," says Häberli, "so I designed this big-eared armchair." The incorporated footrest grew out of another thought: "You know when you are at home and sit in a lounge chair, you want to put your feet on the ottoman and you always say, shall I take my shoes off or not?" The name came from a book about Paul Klee: "He says that when he sketches he feels like he goes walking with his pen and I thought, is that not beautiful?"

talent and rigour, and perhaps also his Latin good looks and credible sincerity, has given him an edge. "Alfredo did something that I envy him for," says friend and colleague Konstantin Grcic, the Munich-based industrial designer. "He decided that he really wanted to meet all his heroes: Castiglioni, Munari and so on. And when he was a student he called them up and went to see them. I couldn't do it, a lot of people couldn't and Alfredo can – that's the way he is."



ABOVE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, THREE PRODUCTS PRODUCED BY OFFECCT: SOLITAIRE (2001) IS A SOFT, MORE LAID-BACK VERSION OF THE CONFERENCE CHAIR WITH TABLE. IT IS INTENDED FOR CASUAL MEETINGS OR FOR SOLITARY WORK, EATING OR READING. THE YAKIN SOFA SYSTEM (2004) HAS A SHALLOWER SEAT PAN THAN MANY OTHER SOFAS NOW ON THE MARKET. SECTIONS OF THE SOFA SYSTEM COME WITH A HIGH BACK THAT FUNCTIONS AS A DIVIDER AND HEADREST. PICK UP (2002) IS A MAGAZINE HOLDER THAT BEGINS LIFE AS A WALKING AID FOR TODDLERS.

BELOW FOLLOWING IN THE TRADITION OF THE CLASSICS BY EAMES AND BERTOIA, THE WIRE CHAIR NAIS WAS LAUNCHED IN APRIL BY CLASSICON. THE STEEL FRAME COMES CHROMED OR WITH A POWDER-COATED FINISH. LIGHTLY UPHOLSTERED COVERS ARE AVAILABLE FOR THE SEAT AND BACK.





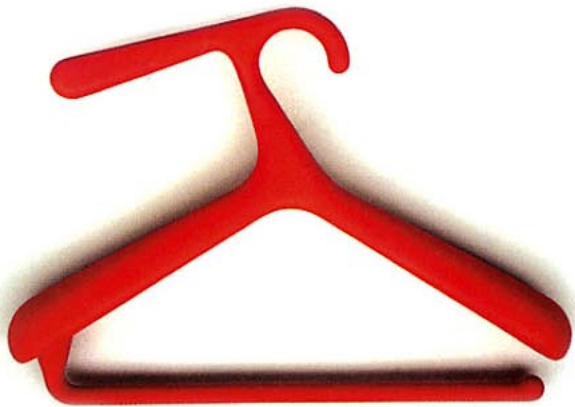
ABOVE LEFT FOR THE ESSENCE COLLECTION (IITTALA, 2002), HÄBERLI SUCCESSFULLY INTEGRATED TRADITIONAL GLASSWARE QUALITIES WITH A MODERN SHAPE.



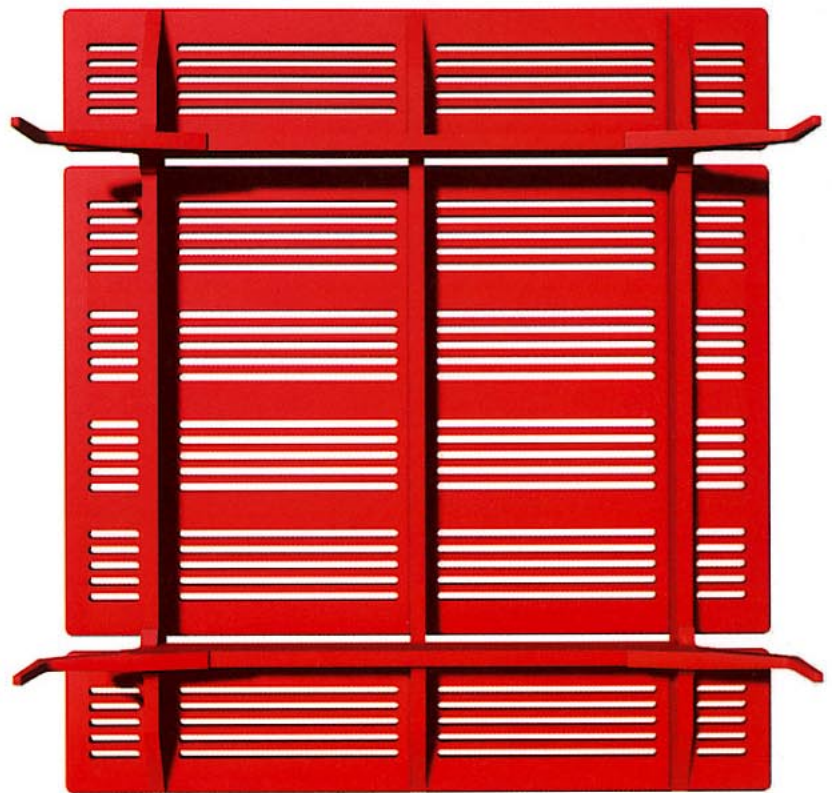
ABOVE RIGHT ORIGO DINNERWARE (RÖRSTRAND 2000), IS AVAILABLE IN WHITE; SEVERAL PIECES ALSO COME IN VIBRANT STRIPES. THE SAUCERS DOUBLE AS LIDS.

BELOW KIDS' STUFF CUTLERY (IITTALA, 2003) ILLUSTRATES HÄBERLI'S BELIEF THAT OBJECTS FOR CHILDREN SHOULD BE PLAYFUL, BUT SHOULD ALSO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY.





ABOVE LEFT HAND BY HAND (1999), A DESIGN FOR A CLOTHES HANGER WITH A HANDLE, IS NOT YET IN PRODUCTION.



ABOVE RIGHT THE MODULAR WOODEN BED LEGNOLETTA (ALIAS, 2001) IS SHOWN FROM THE UNDERSIDE.

BELOW LEFT THE CALLIGRAPHIC LINE OF THE CLOTHES RACK TAUROMACHIA (DRIADE, 1997) IS CREATED WITH JUST FIVE PARTS.



Häberli might be the David Beckham of the design world. He's totally up front about his sensitive side and, with two young children and a talent in world-demand, he struggles to balance the requisite travel with his young family's needs.

Besides working for companies in Italy, Spain and Germany, he collaborates with several Scandinavian companies. In 2001, he designed Solitaire, a soft version of the conference chair with tablet, for the Swedish company Offecet. This past April, Offecet launched a new sofa series by Häberli called Yakin at the Milan furniture fair. For the Swedish porcelain manufacturer Rörstrand (now part of Iittala), he designed a beautiful and clever dinnerware set in which the saucers double as lids for bowls and cups. Dating back to 2000, his collaboration with Finnish legend Iittala includes a range of glasses and the recent Kids' Stuff collection of dishes and cutlery for children.

"In the Nordic countries," Häberli says, "a designer is like a cultured person who gives to everyone a culture, like the musician. So you sometimes meet people in Sweden or Finland who thank you for the object that you did. They say, 'Listen, I have to smile. Every day I smile because I drink coffee out of your ...' or, 'I have a Solitaire at home, it's a pleasure to meet you.'"

Despite positive feedback and professional recognition, such as being named designer of the year at the Now! exhibition in Paris this year, Häberli has his moments of self-doubt. At the Milan furniture fair in April, standing in front of the Campana brothers' Corallo – a tangle of orange wire that sculpturally alludes to "chair" –

he confided, "I should give up." The Campanas' piece is undeniably brilliant, but having sat in it I was able to assure him that the world still needs the industrial designers' industrial designer.

"In Alfredo there's something very adult and childish and rational and totally emotional over the top – out of all boundaries," says Grecic. "He has two opposites inside him in many different ways. He can be extremely introverted, very serious and reflexive, thinking sometimes too hard about things. And then the next moment, he's like a firecracker."

His best work is produced by harnessing this dichotomy. At age 40, after working more than a decade as an industrial designer, Häberli is hitting his stride. He continues to work on furniture and household objects for some of Europe's top producers. At the same time, he is breaking into a completely new area, although one that he has a longstanding passion for: he's designing a new car for Volvo that he is only able to describe as "emotional and very ecological."

One thing that Alfredo Häberli is very clear on is how much he enjoys his work. It shows. **A**