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Gaetano Pesce
Etagère en forme de croix (Shelf in the shape of a cross)
1987
Photography by Daniel Kukla
Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Gaetano Pesce

GAETANO PESCE: RADICAL DESIGNER

Friedman Benda presents key works from a time of great experimentation.

By Katy Donoghue

Currently on view through December 14 at Friedman Benda in New York is "Gaetano Pesce: Age of Contaminations." The exhibition brings together rarely seen pieces the iconic architect and designer created between 1968 and 1992—a time in which he generated several influential radical design objects and ideas.

Just as he continues to do today, he experimented with the media of his time, exploring the possibility of industrial fabrication, recycling material, and poking holes in the separation of art and design.

To learn more about this pivotal period for Pesce, *Whitewall* spoke with Glenn Adamson, the curator, author, and historian, who has written an essay on the visionary for the show.

WHITEWALL: *Tell us about your relationship with Pesce.*

GLENN ADAMSON: I actually first got in touch with him and got to know his work some time ago, when I did the "Postmodernism" show at the V&A in 2011. This round of interviews was really initiated by Marc Benda, and also Jeanne Greenberg from Salon 94 [which had a concurrent show in the fall] almost a year ago.

Pesce has a lot of fixed ideas about what his practice says and why he does it the way that he does it. One is that you always have to be a designer of your time. Looking back can be useful, but you have to respond to what's happening around you. That's a key reason why he departed from modernism, for example. He is opposed to people who are operating within an established idiom without a lot of thought about what that idiom says or why you would be doing it in the first place.

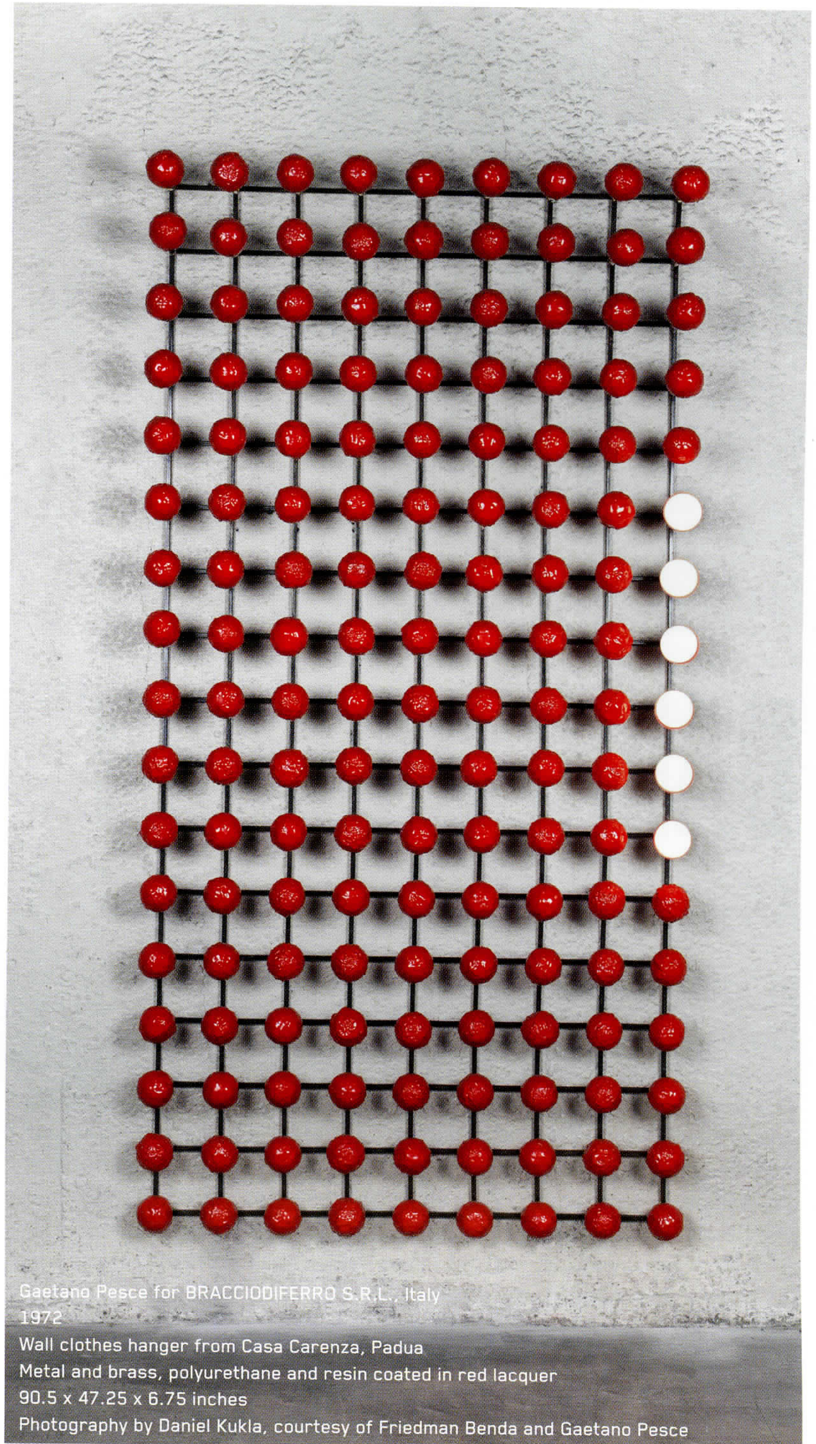
WW: *The show includes rarely seen works and prototypes. What are some of the representative pieces from this time of experimentation?*

GA: There are two really super-important moments that are documented in that show, one of which is the commissioning of the Carenza apartment. It is a compendium of Pesce's ideas up until that point in 1969.

He had been part of this abstract kinetic art group called Group N in the early sixties until he really rejected that quite forcefully. He decided that they were all obsessed with repetition and seriality and he wanted to explore the opposite—experimentation, gestural design, speculative design.

He formed this relationship with Cesaro Cassina, the head of the

Gaetano Pesce
Felt Cabinet - Human Shape
1987–1991
Urethane, felt and papier-mâché
112 x 34 x 19.75 inches
Photography by Timothy Doyon
Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Gaetano Pesce



Gaetano Pesce for BRACCIODIFERRO S.R.L., Italy
1972
Wall clothes hanger from Casa Carenza, Padua
Metal and brass, polyurethane and resin coated in red lacquer
90.5 x 47.25 x 6.75 inches
Photography by Daniel Kukla, courtesy of Friedman Benda and Gaetano Pesce

furniture firm Cassina. This culminated in the "Up" series, his inflatable furniture. One of those is the famous Up Donna chair, which is the one that looks like a woman's body with the ball and chain stool. Carenza had one of those, which is in the show.

He then started this experimental laboratory with Cassina. That's the context in which he made the Moloch floor lamp and Golgotha chairs and table.

WW: *Can you tell us about the Golgotha furniture and how this marked a turning point in his process?*

GA: If I had to choose one project from his entire career that says, this is his breakthrough moment, it would be the Golgotha chairs and table. You could say it's the moment that he begins to generate these ideas that he's really worked with ever since.

WW: *And in terms of kind of material experimentation, and even inventing techniques, what are the major examples that we'll see in the show?*

GA: One of the key ways that he expressed this idea of being a designer of your time is to work with materials that are new and industrial. He said to me at one point, "If you show me what material a designer works in, I will know everything about him."

What he's doing to make the Golgotha chair is to take a kind of textile that he sprays with resin and lays it over an armature. Then somebody sits in it, and impresses their body against the textile. It holds that form as it dries and it's totally rock solid. It preserves this one moment of impression forever.

In the context of this seemingly quite religious Catholic Italian project, Golgotha being the hill where Christ was crucified, he was thinking about the Shroud of Turin that captured Christ's face in the fabric. He was thinking about a design process that would achieve a similar trace.

In the table he stacked up blocks and put a red gel coat in between them like a mortar. He did that with the table upside down. And so when he turned the table over, after it had cured, the drips go up instead of down. He speaks of that as an emblem of transcendence and the idea of Christ rising from the dead.

That's another good example where he's taking a material solution and giving it a very strong symbolic character.

WW: *Can you tell us about the Pratt chair?*

GA: The basic idea is that he's making a chair in one mold with different formulas of resin and multiple pigments. There are nine variations of this chemical formula. One is so soft that it just flops down onto the ground in a sort of puddle. And number nine is rock solid so you can't sit on it really comfortably at all. And then in the middle somewhere, you have this object that's pliable and comfortable to sit on.

What he was doing there was making fun of this whole idea that art and design are different. That, you know, if I vary the chemical formula, somehow I get from art to design, from a nonfunctional to a functional object. That is clearly ludicrous. He's interested in the ridiculousness and absurdity of that. If it is just changing the components in the formula, then how could that possibly be a meaningful distinction?