

# ADPRO

Exhibition

## At 79, Design Legend Gaetano Pesce Still Has Work to Do

Two New York shows celebrate the influential Italian's radical creations, then and now

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Gaetano Pesce at work in his Brooklyn Navy Yard studio. He will bring much of its contents to Salon 94 Design for an exhibition called “WORKINGALLERY.” Photo: Courtesy of Salon 94 Design

Walking into Italian architect Gaetano Pesce’s studio in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, the first thing you notice is the smell: wet paint. “Sorry about that,” his studio assistant says. “We’re finishing the structure for this cabinet—Sole.” Just as quickly, your other senses

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kick in—music thumps and machines buzz. Sun pours in through the windows, glistening atop shelves of candy-resin confections. (Pesce calls such synthetic materials “the testimony of our time.”) A giant red mold—Pesce’s own profile—is lying on the floor. Soon it will be filled with resin in one choreographed, near-continuous motion. It should take about 20 minutes.

Just a few days after my visit, nearly everything I observed—the resins, the prototypes, the studio assistants, and especially the music (“it helps the mind create,” Pesca says)—will be packed up and reinstalled on East 89th Street in [Salon 94 Design](#)’s new space. The exhibition, called *Workingallery*, will open October 25 and run for just nine days. The short timespan is a testament to the unique nature of the show, which hinges not only on new finished works from the legendary Italian polymath but also pieces he will create in situ, before an audience.



Pesce’s Golgotha table, 1972, is made from glass bricks, foam, and polyester resin.

Photo: Daniel Kukla / Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Gaetano Pesca

“The public has always had a strong curiosity for the act of creativity,” Pesca tells AD PRO. His radical works have been erasing the line between art and design since the late 1960s. “This desire to know sparked the idea of bringing [the process] in front of spectators. The visitors will be able to ask questions and we will answer them.”

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His process will become a performance—a medium that has long interested Pesce. After completing architecture school at the University of Venice in 1965, he was involved in Gruppo N, a collective in Padua that aimed to engage spectators in the creation of an artistic experience. Even now, his work is not unlike theater: It engages the senses, relies on a narrative, and while it often follows the same script—pouring resin into the same or similar molds—time and again, the results are always different.



Pesce at the studio. The face of his new Sole cabinet—which will debut at *Workingallery*—is behind him.

Photo: Courtesy of Salon 94 Design

It was his gory 1967 performance *Piece per una Fucilazione* (Piece for an Execution), in fact, that became the predecessor for what design critic and curator Glenn Adamson calls “the single-most important Pesce piece”: the Golgotha table, a tomb-shaped slab named for the mount on which Christ was crucified. Its glass-block form appears to be dripping with blood. “He had this incredible breakthrough in many ways at once,” Adamson explains to AD PRO. “He was taking ideas of tragedy and pain and religion and putting them into design, an idea that was really unprecedented.”



That piece, along with its companions—a pair of resin chairs—are on display at [Friedman Benda](#) in *Age of Contaminations*, a show that also opens this week and remains on view through December 14. The exhibition focuses on historic works drawn largely from private collections, including the illustrious Carenza apartment (the client gave Pesce carte blanche to design the interior), lending unprecedented context to the contemporary show uptown. Among its 30 pieces are Pesce’s first asymmetrical seating concept—the Yeti, as well as highlights from his experimental Felt series. There’s also some of his pioneering, mass-customizable [Pratt chairs](#) and his cult-favorite feminist icon—[Up](#). But the most gobsmacking pieces, perhaps, are a blood-red storage unit and craggy bookcase that stretches some 20 feet.



The Up5 armchair and Up6 pouf—Pesce’s 1969 feminist icon—were made for Casa Carenza in Padua.

Photo: Daniel Kukla / Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Gaetano Pesce

“In our world, these are the holy grails,” Marc Benda tells AD PRO. “Things that everyone knows about but have never seen.” Where once you had to travel to SFMoMA to spot a Seaweed chair, now a 1991 prototype of the seminal work—made from scrap fabric, soaked in resin or polyurethane—sits in Chelsea. And back at the Navy Yard, the

technique is still in use—an assistant is carefully coating strips of fabric with resin to produce a dress for the Sole cabinet headed to East 89th Street.

The cabinet, like most of Pesce’s pieces, has a story to tell: “It’s about the iconography of the woman in art history,” Pesce explains. In the same way, a shelf in the shape of his head is just what it sounds like: a self-portrait. “It stems from my desire of the past 50 years to convince people that objects—along with their practicality—can express and utilize contents and typologies of art,” he says.



Pesce’s colorful resin creations fill his studio.

Photo: Courtesy of Salon 94 Design

It’s an idea that has finally stuck. Simply look at the work of [Misha Kahn](#), [Chris Schanck](#), [Katie Stout](#)—or the ocean of young designers creating figurative, narrative, collectible pieces of furniture—and Pesce’s influence is immediately clear. “It’s sort of

like the influence of punk in music,” says Adamson. “Or abstract expressionism in fine art.”

But Pesce is looking forward, not back. He’s not sure what he will make in real time at *Workingallery*. He’ll finish a Felt table, the self-portrait shelf, and a remote-control cabinet, but much, as always, will be left up to chance. “Frequently, the initial idea is not complete enough for its realization. So we intervene, improvising experiments and improvements, changing it or abandoning it,” he explains. The narrative—like his narrative—is ever-changing.



This Felt sofa was designed between 1985 and 1986 for Marc-André Hubin’s Paris apartment.

Photo: Daniel Kukla / Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Gaetano Pesce