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DESIGN AFTER THINGS

PIPE DREAMS

London-based Spanish designer **TOMÁS ALONSO**, co-founder of **OKAY STUDIO**, is fascinated by materials, particularly metal tubing...

WORDS CHRIS SCOTT
PHOTOS NICK BALLON, COURTESY OF NEXT LEVEL GALERIE



TOMÁS ALONSO'S VARIATIONS ON A TUBE COLLECTION.

You obviously have a strong interest in tubes. Why is that?

I started looking into metal tubing while exploring the idea of using the latest LED fluorescent replacement tubes for the Mr. Light series. The size of the light source and the number of components in these new tubes allowed me to fit them inside the metal tube that became the main body of the light. I was interested in finding new ways to combine metal tubing with wood. I wanted to create a balance between cold, sleek metal and rich, warm wood.

Is this an ongoing fascination?

It's just a temporary affair. Like any work done with materials and processes, you need to spend time exploring and playing if you want to understand the potential and make the most of the properties you discover. Only after you have carried out in-depth research can you develop a personal language to be used with a particular material. I might continue my investigation into the potential of tubing a while longer, although I have been playing quite a lot with concrete recently.

Can you give us an insight into the materials you use and the combinations you create?

My pursuit of balance through the contrast and juxtaposition of materials became an interesting subject of research that occupied a lot of my time last year. What I find important about working with different materials is that each one has a set of intrinsic properties that makes it behave differently from the rest - and that makes it work better for certain purposes. The exploration is not only interesting; it's also a great starting point for a new object. I think a good design is one that makes the most out of such properties, and that pushes them one step further. Another fascinating aspect of materials is their ability to transmit tactile and visual qualities. I like the idea of showing materials as they are, in an honest way. Using and combining materials is key to the design language of my work.

The prototypes you make seem to be a vital part of the overall design process.

I like having direct contact with the material. I use prototyping as part of the development of every project.

Yes, it's a crucial step on the way to a good design. It allows me to see whether something works or not, to study the design in an objective way, and to view the object in a three-dimensional light. The prototype provides a way for me to understand the full-size proportions of a design, as well as its relationship with the users and the space around it.

Generally speaking, the lines and forms of your pieces are simple, minimal and graphic. Why?

That's the result of my desire to reveal the essence of an object, to get down to the sheer simplicity of a design. I remove everything superficial - in terms of both form and number of elements - in an attempt to arrive at the most essential design. The outcome of this approach, in my opinion, is a design that is clean, simple and balanced.

What inspires you?

The people and companies that most inspire me are those with a similar approach to the use of materials and similar aims: a desire to achieve beauty and balance through reduction and simplification. I have been reading about Poul Kjærholm, whom I greatly admire, and looking at a lot of minimal art, such as work by François Morellet. I also like the work of some lesser-known architects, including the Spaniard José Antonio Coderch. In general, I find that just living life and observing people provides me with a source of inspiration for my work. My natural determination has taken me to places which have helped me develop as a person and as a designer. Situations that take you out of your comfort zone are the ones that teach you and influence you the most. It never ceases to amaze me how many different points of view you discover along the way.

Is your furniture being manufactured?

Although I enjoy making prototypes and producing small design series, my primary aim is to work with companies. The work I do in my studio, including research, is an initial step towards industrially produced pieces. To date I've been working with Nils Holger Moormann, the company that produces my 5 Degree designs, and with Teracrea, which produces the Greenroom, a system for growing climbing plants indoors. I'm also collaborating with Italesse in the development of a production version of my Stamp cutlery.

What's next?

I'm busy working on proposals for commercial interiors - brand-new territory for me. Here, too, I'll play with contrasts in materials and forms. I'm developing a desk version of the tube lights for possible production with a company. And I'm eager to start working on some table ideas that I've been playing with recently, using aluminium and wood. But you never know what will be next. I'm always open to suggestions - not to mention new commissions!

tomas-alonso.com

BOTH BOX-SHELF (PICTURED BELOW) AND SCRIVANIA (PICTURED RIGHT) ARE AVAILABLE AT NEXT LEVEL GALLERY IN LIMITED EDITIONS OF EIGHT PIECES AND TWO PROTOTYPES.



‘Situations that take you out of your comfort zone teach you the most’

TOMÁS ALONSO

SPANISH DESIGNER TOMÁS ALONSO (1974) GRADUATED FROM THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART IN 2006. AFTER GRADUATION, HE AND SEVERAL FRIENDS FOUNDED THE NOW WELL-KNOWN OKAY STUDIO.

