

SARA RICCIARDI AND THE BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

"I don't think there is one single definition of design that applies to everyone. You have to discover the meaning of design yourself, no one can escape from this," says Italian designer Sara Ricciardi.

Her multifaceted, chaotic and colourful vision was selected to guide the students of the Baptist University in Hong Kong on *Material Life Matters*, a research project which is part of the *Design Made in Hong Kong 2020-2021* programme.

Born in 1989, Sara Ricciardi opened her studio in 2015, creating products for companies, unique pieces for galleries, interior designs, immersive installations, performances and socially oriented projects. Each of her works stems from the need to tell a story, a way of communication where the form follows the message.

The research of the Chinese design students, led by Annie Wan and Evelyn Kwok, is based on the unprecedented conditions imposed by COVID-19, from Milan to Hong Kong. We live in an age where many of the everyday norms have been revolutionised, where physical and social interactions are potentially harmful and where isolation and confinement have become commonplace.

The project of the Baptist University poses fundamental questions. How do we live fully and joyfully in these times? Which materials are really important?

Ceramic is the material of choice for the academic explorations. Whether handmade or industrial, ceramic products are an integral and essential part of many everyday rituals. They are tools for transmitting cultural and aesthetic values and conveying thoughts, feelings, memories and imagery. It is a material capable of interacting with our body and psyche.

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The concept developed by the students is perfectly in line with the elaborate design research of the designer from Benevento, Italy. Sara Ricciardi expresses her aesthetic visions particularly in the production of furniture and objects. In her studio in the south of Milan, the designer likes to immerse herself in a chaotic environment, rich in materials, sensory stimuli, personal memories and bizarre objects. She likes to act on instinct, experimenting with new forms and compositions to create unique objects.

Natura Morta, which Ricciardi created in 2016 for the independent design festival *Operae* in Turin, is a perfect example. The collection is inspired by Ikebana, the ancient Japanese practice of arranging flowers. It is a philosophical art capable of stopping time, in order to understand the meaning of life and restore the balance of soul and spirit, simply by giving value to the elements of nature. The supports of *Natura Morta* were made using different materials, such as brass, copper, marble and plaster. They are solid structures that enhance the fragility and beauty of the branches and flowers. These small, non-functional objects - which are true works of art - aim to validate death, to "perceive it as a passage and thus celebrate the intensity of life".

From the microcosm of her studio, Ricciardi often goes out meeting master artisans which represent the excellence of the Italian territory. From Caltagirone ceramics to Murano glass, the designer visits Italian craft districts and talks with artisans to develop contemporary projects rooted in the *Made in Italy* tradition.

For her *Fauna* collection, Ricciardi was inspired by the various techniques used to apply colour to blown glass. The result is a series of vases that gives shape to a bizarre glass and brass fauna: a speckled horse in racing trim and two spotted beetles with their elytra ready for flight, all in those bright colours that nature is never afraid to wear. For this project the designer collaborated with Venini, one of the most important artistic glass working companies in the world based in Murano.

For the ambient fragrance brand Culti, Sara Ricciardi created her own version of the typical room diffuser with wooden sticks, an element that we often see in domestic environments with its banal and recurring design. According to the Ricciardi, "the sacred and the magic of everyday life can enter the home as a sculptural element to celebrate itself, satisfy the sense of smell and give emotion to a space". The *Templi* collection follows the precise aesthetics of Greek and Roman places of worship. Using arches, capitals and colonnades, Ricciardi created a capturing alphabet intimately linked to these places, reinterpreting the values of the brand which aims to combine care, culture and style.

Sara Ricciardi's approach closes the clear separation between design and production, as invoked by modernity with the industrialisation of the product. The return to an artisan dimension that goes beyond mere functionality is a trend we can see in all the major global centres, both in the East - Hong Kong, Seoul, Beijing - and in the West - Paris, New York, Milan. The *Material Life Matters* project fully embodies this perspective. The three teams challenged the concept of "good design" by stressing the boundaries between functional and dysfunctional, useful and useless, right and wrong, necessary and secondary.

The installation *Singing Bowls*, created by the group guided by Lau Yat Wai, relates to our material and spiritual life, subverting the relationships we have with consumer objects while looking at the true essence of design. At the centre of a ceramic container filled with water is a stone that seems to float. Mystical sounds activated by a hidden sensor complete the experience, which sees design at the service of an intimate and personal reflection. Although the ceramic artefacts apparently have no function, they reveal a profound need to rediscover what is essential in contemporary times.

Timescapes interprets the uncertainty and fragility experienced over the last months in Hong Kong, being marked by exceptional events such as the protest movements and the pandemic. This unprecedented situation is interpreted by the team coordinated by Ng Ka Ho, through a special ceramic casting technique. The designs harness time in the objects, marking the artefacts with surface rings reminiscent of tree trunks. Each form is unique and fragile, with cracks and fissures testifying to the precariousness of the era in which we live.

Useless Tableware looks at the relationship we have with everyday objects and, by including unusual variables in their design, challenges the concept of utility. The team led by Ryan Hui designed useless, dysfunctional and uncomfortable utensils, making banal objects into real works of art that nonetheless maintain the delicacy and simplicity of the accessories we use every day.

Design, production, distribution and consumption are the four factors that, according to historian Renato De Fusco, make the design experience a unitary process. From the projects of Italian designer Sara Ricciardi and the students of the Baptist University we can see how these factors can be subverted and combined. It is in this innovation that we find all the contemporaneity of their thinking. In a world where physical and digital, near and far, concrete and abstract are revolutionised, design must investigate new ideas, forms, meanings and values.