

In conversation with

Daniel Charny

Designer, curator of the Aram Gallery, and tutor at the Royal College of Art, Daniel Charny is a man in the know. Having trained as an industrial designer, Charny has worked across disciplines including public art, furniture and product design. He is currently guest-curating *Super Contemporary*.

What can you tell me about *Super Contemporary*?

We are trying to understand the elements that make people understand what design is, how we perceive it and how it impacts on people's lives. *Super Contemporary* looks at all the elements that have developed in the last 50 years: architecture, fashion, product, communication, retail, media, schools, education and government, and the creative networks that have made London into a real magnet, where so many leading designers choose to base their practice. The exhibition splits between pragmatic ideas to some really visionary ideas, there is a proposal for a floating sky garden for Nelson's Column. The idea is of a vision for green space in the middle of the city, but also to have heroes that we could meet face to face instead of looking up to distantly.

How does the work engage with London's particular issues?

Neville Brody's *Freedom Space* is a statement about the fact that we are being surveyed every day in London, although a lot to do with safety, it's not the freedom that he envisaged in the 1980s. His installation has 400 CCTV cameras, so when you walk in you get your dose of London surveillance in one setting. He has created a microphone that you can speak into and express how you feel about this freedom, which will be broadcast on a website.

Are there plans to bring any of the works out into the public realm?

It's a possibility. *Bus Shelter* by David Adjaye, is a really elegant new system that supports the way that people wait at bus shelters, working on iphones or reading. He has broken this up into components for different seating or work stations. It feels more like a gazebo, rather than part of a system and machine. It's thought out to a level that it could move ahead, and we're hoping that other people will pick up on it, moving on from the aesthetics of the machine into a new organic sense of space.

What makes London design stand out for you?

The most amazing thing is the parallel practices in London – the diversity, and the different approaches that live here, London has become a place for free thinking. This is why people like Ron Arad, Zaha Hadid, and Alexander McQueen, choose to work here. There is a feeling that you can do your own thing, rather than be part of a style or a movement.

What issues are unique to the built environment today?

The unification that comes from chain stores goes against individualism, in terms of the built environment this change has been for the worse. For me the industrialisation of catalogue shopping has over-impacted, and so you get too much of the same, you walk into a flat in Moscow



Photograph by Nienke Klunder.

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and it's like a flat in London. You think that you have freedom but it's a limited freedom. Tom Dixon's *London Transport* is an electric car, but with an angle of freedom of choice. He's converted a Bentley with an electrical car kit; it's cannibalising the milk float. It is an indication of the 1970s DIY ethos, and on the other hand it's a strong message for electric cars.

What do you feel is the greatest impact of modern design?

The biggest impact is the focus moving from industry to society, more designers are thinking about the people who use the products. I've been teaching for 12 years at the Royal College of Art, and the students have changed; their social interests have increased. This started in the 1980s with critical design, but it's a global movement. Young designers want to have a group impact, a social network and want to be a part of the community. In terms of professional and commercial design, big companies are now designing their mass production with user research at the beginning rather than at the end.

Super Contemporary gathers together work from numerous fields – how did you curate the show into a coherent narrative?

We have split the exhibition into three experiences. There is a 75-metre timeline from 1960 until today, and there are images from fashion, architecture, communication and product design, grounding news and cultural events to those particular years. This gives you a sense of how things are being pushed from year to year. The second narrative is a series of 40 maps made by people like Neville Brody and Wayne Hemingway, to create a map of their London and the things that have influenced them. These are personal insights into their own creative networks. The third part is the ideas for the future. The curating is three layered, but the central theme is the commissions, which aim to show the many different approaches to design. You have to see how different they are, rather than finding the similarities. That's the key message.

Design Museum and Beefeater 24 present *Super Contemporary*, 3 June – 4 October at the Design Museum. www.designmuseum.org. For more information about Daniel Charny visit: www.danielcharny.com.