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DESIGN | DESIGN



# THE ART OF ITALIAN DESIGN

by *Alessandro Mendini\**

“Italian design” has always had a place of its own in the history of world design thanks to its specific style rooted mainly in the aesthetics and innovation of its objects and products. The artistic nature of Italian design can be traced back directly to the workshops of the Renaissance, which resemble today’s professional studios in terms both of philosophy and size. For their part, from the ’50s on, the “design factories” have proved themselves open to more intense experimentation than in the rest of Europe; experimentation that made design fundamental to the workplace (and not just to value added).

Italian design was born in Milan during the ’50s under the name *Bel Design* [Design Beautiful] and has never ceased adopting new forms over the years from the point of view of theory, methodology, aesthetics and production. The Seventies and Eighties witnessed the appearance of the *Controdesign* [Anti-Design] phenomenon and then of *Alchimia* [Alchemy] and *Memphis* as well as the first influx of foreign designers into Italian industry. That this flow has continued to this day explains why Italian design is now so very refreshed; it has become more international and its body of designers project much diversity of images on the cultural stage. A number

of design schools also emerged during the same period, operating independently of or within universities or schools of fine arts.

It is interesting to spotlight the contemporary identity of Italian design in this context and in relation both to the past and to its future prospects. Italian designers, in contrast to their foreign colleagues, are at pains to maintain a creative and humanistic stance that is typical of the Italian psyche, meaning developing a relationship that is at root artistic and emotive at the same time.

## **The history of Italian artisanship**

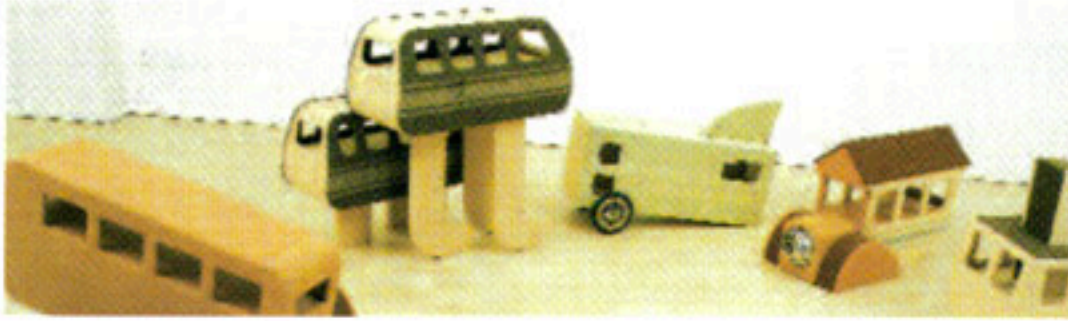
Contemporary Italian design is a direct descendant of Italian artisanship from its earliest manifestations. In every region of Italy from north to south, the tradition of producing objects –whether folk or elite– is continuous, deeply ingrained and of the highest quality. Depending on locality, every region works clay, porcelain, glass, marble, leather, cloth, wood, metal etc. Famous factories conceive of unique shapes and production methods. The Renaissance artist’s studio has its origins in the Cinquecento as a humanistic phenomenon. It was here that the great artists and their pupils created the paintings, décor, statues and objects that were to grace public and religious spaces in every Italian city. These studios are magical places dedicated to creativity; they resemble and foreshadow the environment of today’s designers. Italian businesses are also heirs to this

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heritage. One of the largest and most open, Andrea Verrocchio's fifteenth-century workshop in Florence, is noteworthy, and typical in so far as it started out as a goldsmith's workshop before expanding into all the visual arts; Leonardo Da Vinci also worked here at one point.



### **Art: its influence on design**

Italian design culture is hard to understand in isolation from the visual arts of twentieth-century Italy. There is a synergy between art and design, which can best be perceived as applied and non-applied Arts; architecture provides a true synthesis of the two. With its concept of "total projection of the world", futurism, in particular, has left its mark on the relationship between the arts, actions and objects, extending as far as clothes and the city. A sense of theatricality pervades both design and inhabited spaces, and is evident, too, in the magic of the still lifes and metaphors of Savinio, De Chirico, Casorati, Carrà, Boccioni, Severini, and Morandi.

### **Italian Design and Modernism**



Early modernism, which emerged in the wake of futurism and in the same time-period as fascism, is of particular interest. Important classicizing architects such as

Piacentini in Rome and Portaluppi and Muzio in Milan, breathed new life into large-scale public or middle-class buildings with the elegant and detailed design of their furnishings, going as far as to remodel door-knobs. The Italian modernist movement very ably steered an independent course through difficult political times and established links with the Bauhaus thanks to Terragni, Persico, and the *Casabella* magazine. Italian rationalist design responded to social calls for the renewal of Italy's cities, the unity of habitable spaces, and of materials through an austere, classical, and simplified idiolect inspired even by the classical civilization of ancient Rome.

### **The importance of interior design**

The most significant Italian designers are nearly all architects. This explains their involvement in different disciplines and their sensitive handling of space. This is the context in which the unique design typology which flourished in Milan's suburban homes of the Sixties and Seventies. Cini Boeri, Vittoriano Viganò, Joe Colombo, Nanda Vigo, Gae Aulenti, Fornasetti and others create interiors in which space and furnishings are integrated. This is what distinguishes the history of Italian design as the history of furnishing and decoration.



### **The five movements**

The five core movements of Italian design, in terms of its studio styles of the



modern and contemporary era, are Futurism, Bel Design, Radical Design, Alchimia and Memphis.

The issues and social and ideological values that gave rise to five especially fruitful cultural workgroups which were to create superb collections of objects and images emerged from these five movements. Starting with the distant paradigm of Verrocchio's Renaissance workshop, we arrive at his successors: Depero's "wizard's workshop", Achille Castiglioni's famous studio (a typical example of the Bel Design phenomenon), the Contro-design of the Radicals (Archizoom, Superstudio, Pettena, Deganello, Ufo, the *Casabella* magazine etc.), Alchimia (Alessandro Guerriero), and finally Memphis (Ettore Sottsass). Despite the ideological disparities, there can be no doubt that Italian creative methods have come down to us without interruption since antiquity, and that the fundamental and dominant element has always been the Italian approach to art and the image, meaning an object's emotive and spectacular aspects. Italian design is aesthetic design, and particularly sensitive to the soul and the hedonistic provocation of objects and spaces. It also assigns particular importance to its craftsmen; from the builder to the mason, the goldsmith, the potter, the tailor, the baker, the carpenter...

For a long time, cultural movements and advanced professional studies played a more important role than the schools of design in shaping the dynamic of Italian design in theory and practice, and through experimentation.

## **Master designers: the first generation**

Contemporary Italian design was born in 1945 amidst the euphoria of national reconstruction in the wake of World War Two. Youthful architects collaborated with very young artisans and small-scale industrialists with a view to making the enjoyment of choosing quality merchandise available to everyday folk once more. The Bel Design miracle was chiefly based in Milan with Bruno Munari, Jo Ponti, Achille Castiglioni, Enzo Mari, Vico Magistretti, Ettore Sottsass, Carlo Mollino, Angelo Mangiarotti, Marco Zanuso and others; an incredible concentration of master designers staffing factories including Olivetti, Kartell, Alessi, Abet Laminati, Piaggio, Brionvega, Cassina, B&B, have gone down in history as the creators of one of the central creative phenomena of the modern era.

## **The situation today**

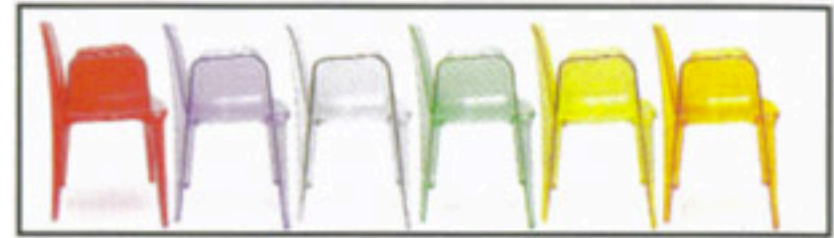
Since the era of the great historical masters, some of whom are still leading players engaged in energetic and significant activities, the world of Italian design has followed fashion in becoming increasingly complex and acquiring an international dimension. Milan's reputation has had designers flocking to the city from around the world, while its triennale and publications (*Domus*, *Casabella*, *Abitare*, *Interni*, *Modo*, *Ottagono*), coupled with its annual Fiera del Mobile [furniture exhibition], make it both a meeting place and a reference point for design-related issues of every kind. Italian industry has opened its doors to foreign designers, and well-



known Italian designers have been joined by famous colleagues from abroad, from Philip Starck and Jasper Morrison to Mark Newson and Droog Design.

Design-consciousness enterprises are growing in number and expanding to every corner of Italy; even the smallest and most far-flung companies want to face up to design culture and the aesthetics of form, and take a revenge of sorts on kitsch. Now a second generation of important Italian master designers has emerged to reveal our humanistic DNA, including Andrea Branzi, Nanda Vigo, Michele De Lucchi, Alessandro Guerriero, Gaetano Pesce and Riccardo Dalisi, while design schools are expanding their range into polytechnics and universities as well as certain schools of fine art and reputable private schools including the Domus Academy, the European Institute of Design and the New Academy of Fine Arts and Design (NABA). These designers and schools consolidate environmental and regional issues, as well as those relating to social requirements, ecology, the pull of the new and changes in lifestyle and introduce them into an industrial setting. It seems that a new generation of designers is at work on mirages of the future and on utopian visions that have arisen as a counterweight to the violent times in which we live; on the basis of their utopian dreams, they also qualify as masters. Tarshito, Anna Gili, Aldo Cibic, Denis Santachiara, Stefano Giovannoni and others instil their work with a sense of harmony, irony, religiosity, archaism, sensuality, symbols, nature, lightness, playfulness and myth with a view to representing their objects in the world,

thus defining their own identity and blazing their own trail through the chaotic magma of design.



### **Eco-compatible and virtual design**

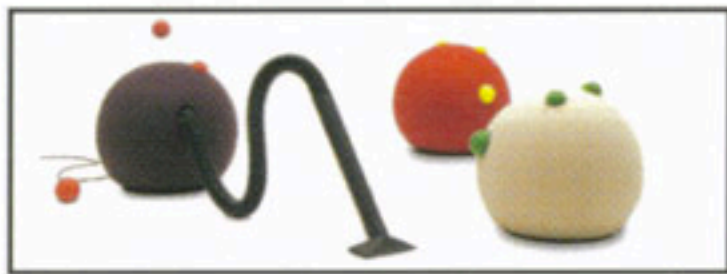
The identity of the objects of our times is one of simplicity and humbleness.

The design of these objects has two factors in mind: recycling, and simplified production and purchase processes. While the concept of consumption has clearly become an intrinsic aspect of modern society, this makes it no less essential to search for ways of controlling different forms of pollution both material and mental, visual as well as biological. The progressive non-materiality of products leads to thoroughly unexpected considerations and phenomena.

A number of young designers, for example, design humble everyday objects for superstores (clothes-pegs, sponges, plungers, rubber gloves) and present themselves as a group that pays attention to the quality of little things. Another group going by the name of SaleFino [table salt] has published a sophisticated book containing the same ideas in what almost constitutes an attempt to be rid of the designer altogether by means of the large scale production of inexpensive and small objects. ONEOFF has taken another interesting initiative in setting up a laboratory for automating production by creating "prototype-products" directly and in the desired quantity.



Finally, "Remade in Italy", which is promoted by the Lombardy Region through various national recycling competitions, is a pilot programme aimed at supporting enterprises that use recycled materials in their products. These approaches are evidently watched closely by important manufacturing sectors aiming to achieve "zero environmental impact". Finally, we must also mention the increased commitment to involving marginalized individuals such as prisoners and mental health patients in the production of hand-made objects and to utilizing their sometimes extraordinary creative abilities (cf. the Wurmkos group).



### **The future of Italian Design**

The world of Italian design is currently experiencing a period of enormous structural changes. We have gradually moved away from Italian and towards international designers. Although no new distinctive designers or situations are currently emerging, the bed rock of the design culture is undergoing profound change. The world economic crisis has shifted the focus of Italian manufacturers towards China and turned the industrial and commercial order upside down, introducing new groupings and business systems (cf. the Charme phenomenon).

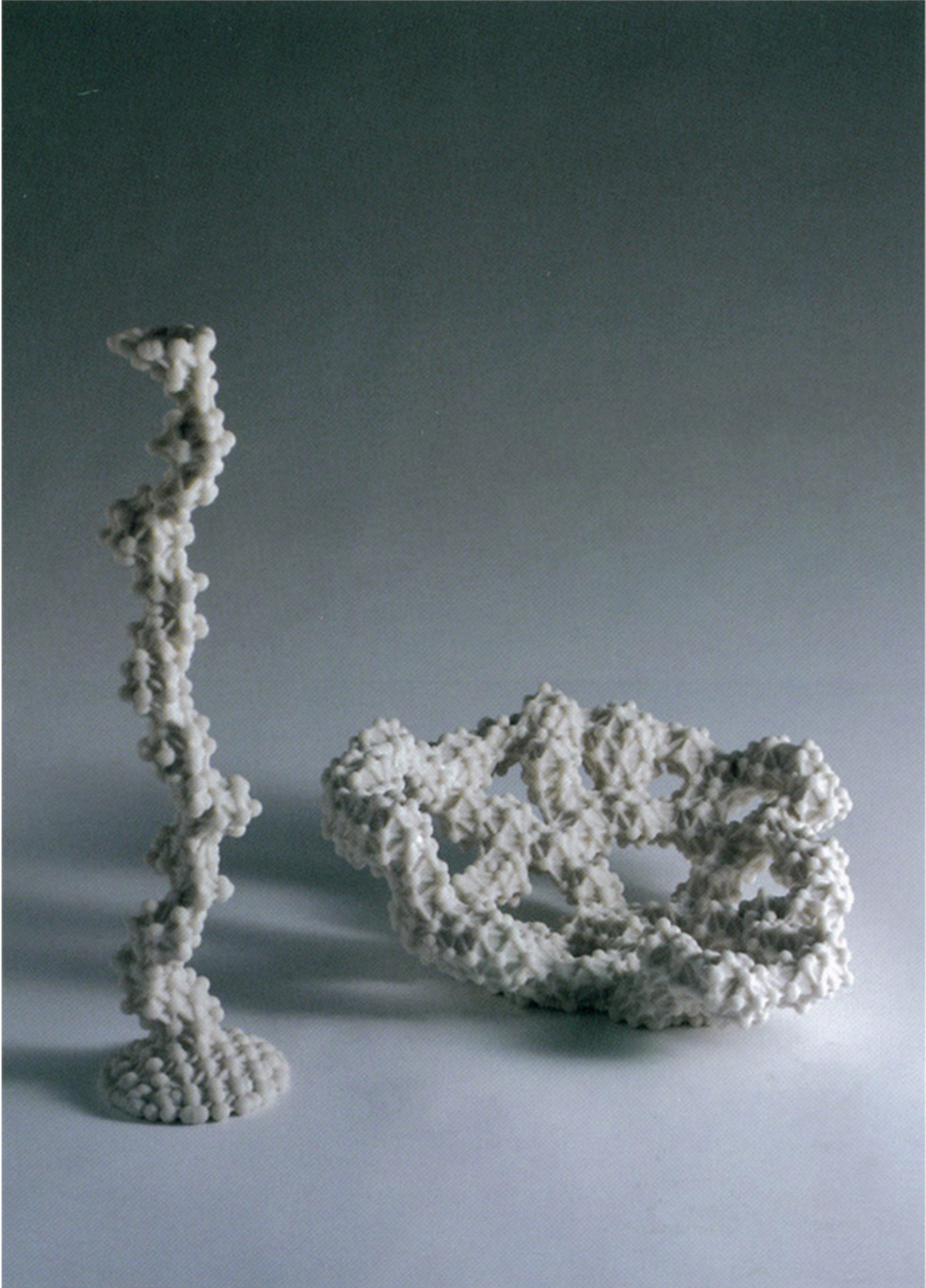
Although Italian design may seem to be sailing calm waters, today's reality is hard and beset by many and complex problems. However, it has never ceased

to be artistic, humanistic and Mediterranean.

Mystery, purity, narrative, leisureliness, dreams, empathy and poetry may well prove to be positive stimuli in the face of the rough-hewn nature of consumerism, globalization, and technocratic determinism. The future of Italian design may well lie in these aspects, as well as in the possible re-emergence of radical behaviours; a re-emergence whose importance should not be underestimated. Although the current era is one of rapid large-scale economic changes, in design terms it is inward-looking and probably static. Though there is still no sign of it on the horizon, the world is expecting the birth of a new radical group, a school of thought, a tendency, a new laboratory, an inspired movement that will drive designers out of an excessively pragmatic, agnostic and fruitless isolation.

What may help a new "methodological style" gel could well emerge from the awareness of the fragility of Man and the Earth. Instead of taking luxury systems as our reference point, we may well come to rely on a kind of "poverismo", on the idea of the delicacy of things and of fragility: possible images in a dialectic with weak materials. A visionary viewpoint, a possible struggle between objects of a different class. ■





Jim Hannon-Tan, *Nanobowl & Nanostik*, Industreal by ONE OFF, 2005. Production automation, innovative technology that allows objects to be produced in a matter of hours without the use of tools using a 3D design software system.



William Sawaya, *Beautiful and re-made*, Sawaya & Moroni, Remade in Italy, Capellini & Partners, Regione Lombardia, 2005



Maurizio Meroni, *Danielita*, Industreal by ONE OFF, 2005. Production automation, innovative technology that allows objects to be produced in a matter of hours without the use of tools using a 3D design software system.

2501, recipient.cc, *Flexible polymer*, audio-visual installation, 2004

