OBJECT LESSON
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uit: New York Times
Style Magazine
november 2006

Kitsch of the Day

TODAY'S HOTTEST PATTERN COMBINES THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL.

At the risk of sounding a tad too Karl Lagerfeld (1977 vintage), when it comes to china, nothing beats the late 18th century. And it's hard even to come close to the Green Frog Service commissioned from Wedgwood in 1773 by Catherine the Great for her St. Petersburg palace, La Grenouillère.

The Green Frog was extraordinary. The empress of Russia insisted that each of the 944 pieces should bear the image of a frog — as the site of La Grenouillère was once called the Frog Marsh — and, as she was fashionably Anglophilic, a scene from British life. The service was made from Wedgwood's simple, inexpensive creamware, a technical marvel of the time. The exceptional bit was the decoration. Josiah Wedgwood, the company's founder, instructed artists to paint or draw no fewer than 1,244 views of Britain and even sent someone across the country with a camera obscura to document it.

The result was Josiah Wedgwood's vision of Britain during the Industrial Revolution: rural scenes of stately homes and quaint cottages alongside ironworks, canals and frenzied London streets. It's fun to think of Catherine and her guests looking forward to discovering a splendid Georgian mansion on the new dish placed before them, only to gaze at a beautifully painted stretch of the Bridgewater Canal.

Now sitting quietly on the shelves of Moss in New York is a latter-day version of the Green Frog Service called Biscuit. I should point out that it isn't nearly as ambitious in scale as the Wedgwood. For one thing, Biscuit consists of just 14 pieces (nine plates with a vase, lantern, candelabrum, box and cake stand), not 944. For another, it was designed for anyone to buy — at least anyone lucky enough to be able to afford to shop at Moss — rather than for one of the most powerful figures of the day.

That said, Biscuit is every bit as ingeniously made as the Green Frog. And it is an equally compelling portrayal of the worldview of its creators, Job Smeets and Nynke Tynagel, the product designers behind Studio Job in Antwerp, Belgium, who were commissioned by the Dutch porcelain manufacturer Royal Tichelaar Makkum. By depicting an assortment of objects in unglazed, pressed porcelain, they have created a clever, kitschy, provocative, cruel and cheeky vision of contemporary life as they see it.

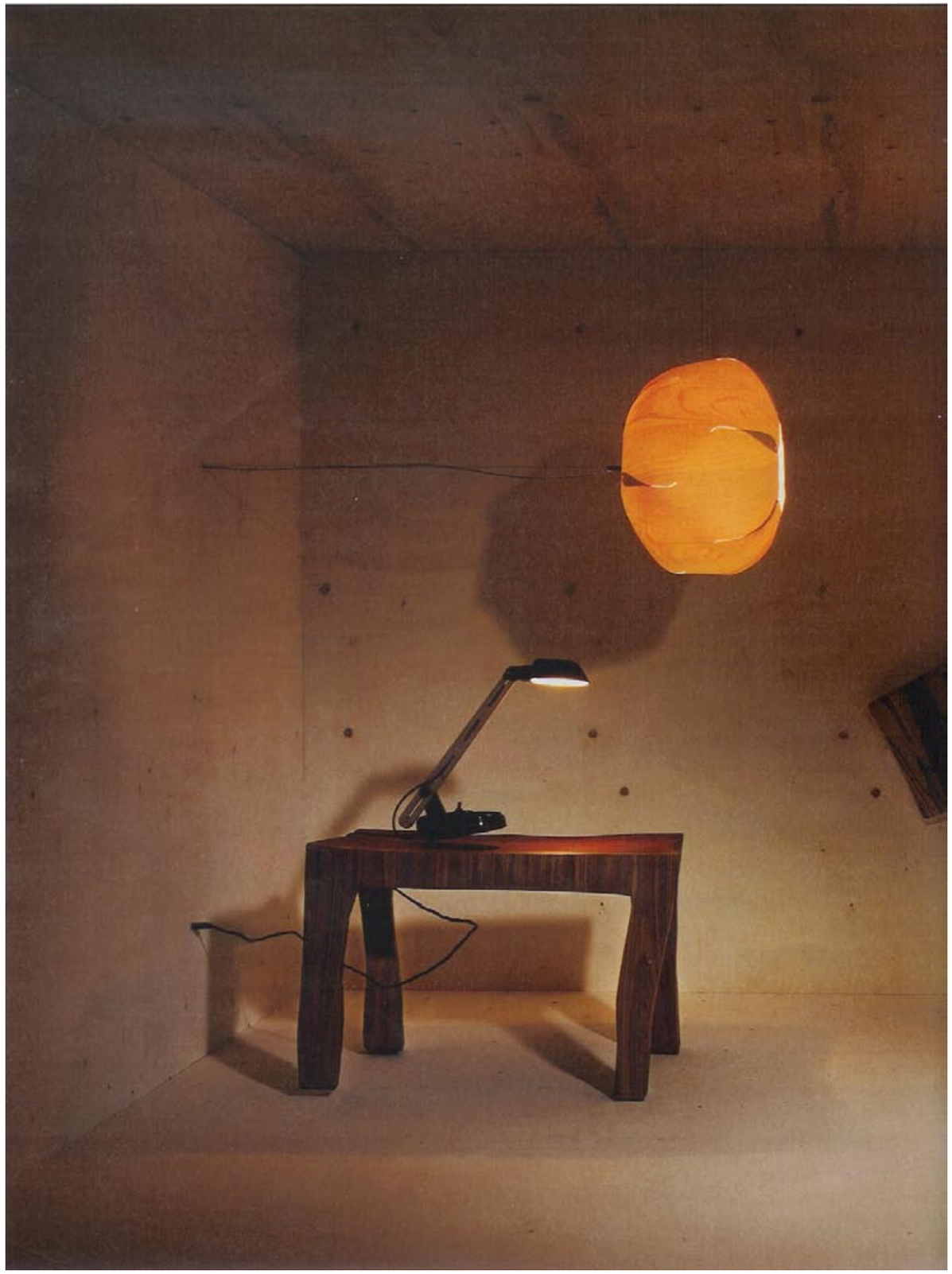
The personal and the political are mixed in each piece. The only thing these objects have in common is that they are white, like the porcelain. Political symbols like weapons, corpses, doves of peace and Red Cross emergency vehicles are jumbled with sentimental motifs like a poodle, ice skates, ice cream cones, a Sumo wrestler and actors' masks. One plate bears the debris of a war zone on the front, with crucifixes on the back and sperm swimming around the rim. Another pairs a spooky skeleton with cute lambs.

Biscuit tells us not only how Studio Job sees the world, but also about design today. There was a time when young designers saw their role as making things more efficient, but now that's taken for granted. As much as I love Biscuit, I can't pretend that the plates do their job better than other plates, although they collect crumbs well and are tough enough to survive the dishwasher. To Studio Job's generation, design is a medium of self-expression. "We see our work as a mishmash of experiences," Smeets explains. "Biscuit is part and parcel of a bigger inventory we have created over the years. Our work is not about one piece; it's about a collection of pieces."

Luckily for them, companies like Royal Tichelaar Makkum allow them to work in that way. Makkum was founded in 1594, but unlike most of Europe's industrial aristocrats — whose stories of decline read more or less like "Buddenbrooks," by Thomas Mann — it has thrived. Makkum's creative collaborations with designers like Hella Jongerius and Jurgen Bey have produced some of the most collectible ceramics of recent years, and Biscuit is no exception.

The project began when Makkum asked Studio Job to work in pressed porcelain, a technique originally used to make Baroque sculpture and eventually less glamorous things like electrical components. Makkum soon discovered that it could mold the porcelain into the clear, strong shapes that Studio Job needed to tell its story.

The world according to Biscuit is hardly reassuring, but it's as honest an illustration of what Smeets calls the "chaotic, confused and bizarre atmosphere" of our time as the Green Frog was of the Industrial Revolution. My favorite is a plate with the White House on one side and the Studio Job designers dancing on the other. "There's the White House in thick fog," Smeets observes, "while Nynke and I are all dressed up, ballroom dancing in ignorance." And all on a plate. Even Catherine the Great would have approved. ■

Place settings Biscuit, Studio Job's provocative porcelain for the venerable Royal Tichelaar Makkum, mixes modern metaphors.

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