

ZEALOTS

Two exhibitions at this year's Milan Furniture Fair showcase, in thrilling fashion, the age-old man vs. machine design debate

THERE IS WAR in design heaven – or at least a rift behind the vitrines in Milan. This year's most exciting presentations at the Salone del Mobile mustered along two technical axes. Along the first were designers whose shtick fell into the modern crafty template – 'It took fourteen years to source an artisan who could still splice authentic Swiss shingling, but alas by then the urushi lacquer master had passed away'. From the other came conversation peppered with references to CNC milling, Selective Laser Sintering and nano-level fibre treatment.

It was one more battle in the old man vs. machine struggle, and there were zealots in both camps who believed they held the key to loveliness and higher purpose. As to loveliness: any fool, regardless of whether he's working with a laser cutter or chip of flint, can make hideous, pointless designs (and indeed, many did). Higher purpose is another matter, since in the current design climate the concept pretty much boils down to sustainability and environmental friendliness. The hand-of-

Over at the Fendi space, Raw-Edges (who are Israeli designers Shay Alkalay and Yael Mer) confirmed their reputation for intelligent, counterintuitive design with chairs upholstered in pleated Tyvek (DuPont's polyethylene paper synthesis), which they filled with quick-setting foam to create a sort of giant-origami-water-balloon effect. (The pair produced a quiet moment of poetry elsewhere in Milan, with a tiny installation of interlocked rotating paper trees that magically grew out of a pile of papers at Spazio Rossana Orlandi).

Other neocrafty thrills at Fendi came from Studio Glithero, who impregnated ceramic vases with photosensitive chemicals, strapped wildflower sprigs to the side, then skewered them on an apparatus resembling a doner kebab, the grill replaced by a UV lightbulb. The rotating exposure left the vases embellished with spriggy blueprints expressing the haphazard energy of bursts of sunlight.

Senseware took its title from a term describing new materials cool enough to induce brainfreeze – from light-transmitting concrete to nanofibres with a diameter 1/7500th the thickness of a human hair – which were transformed for this show by architects, flower designers, artists and industrial producers. Fukitorimushi – Panasonic's robotic floor cleaner that resembled the disembodied, nappy-clad bottom of a crawling baby – stole hearts as it polished the parquet. Above it floated the unbowed expanse of Jun Aoki's six-metre-long, ultralightweight hollow cantilever beam made from a new carbon fibre material stronger than steel.

"Like a stone of the Stone Age or paper in the paper age, today's artificial fibres stimulate our new creativity", curator Hara explained, emphasising his desire to bring Japanese technology into the practice of creative minds outside his country. "In using this Senseware, we're entering a new field of creation; I wanted the world to contribute to it."

Senseware may generate a new field of creation in functional terms, but it still tickled the old-school aesthetic sensibilities with Makoto Azuma's sunken moss garden, which

words **HETTIE JUD**

man axis considers this home territory. In these days of craft chic, anything involving artisans carries a misty aura of makers living at one with materials, recuperating what they can and not overburdening the world with mass-produced goods.

The new-technology camp possesses a fighting rejoinder. It is they who use the materials and methodology most fit for the job, and computer-controlled manufacture is not only perfectly adapted to small production numbers but also allows designs to be sent electronically for manufacture *in situ*, rather than shipped over as finished objects. Thus Ponoko, a custom manufacturing company in New Zealand, commissioned a plywood shelf unit for its collection from designer Steve Watson in London. It arrived as nothing heavier than the email attachment that provided the template for individual laser-cut batches to be popped out each time the piece is ordered.

The two camps provided the inspiration for a pair of shows, each with its share of thrills: *Craft Punk*, a live-makers' workshop produced by Fendi in collaboration with Design Miami; and *Senseware*, Kenya Hara's new-materials-meet-creative-ideas display at the Triennale Design Museum.

ran through the centre of the exhibition space like a spiritual anchor. Sure, it was planted in biodegradable polylactic acid fibre mats, but the installation was there to provide a natural balance and harmony that had little to do with its precocious material underlay.

The idea of split sensibilities in the design world is driven by a fear that as we embrace the new, we forget and denigrate the old. There is concern that computer design programs are producing a generation that lacks respect for the laws of physics and forgets that just because something looks good onscreen doesn't mean it's necessarily fit for production outside of Second Life. It may not have been the intention of either show, but both *Craftpunk* and *Senseware* demonstrated the exciting potential of that creative point where the two sides are reconciled, and where new techniques and materials can both inspire and serve.