

ODYSSEY

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Rachel Howard

Subversion by

THE ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF MICHAEL ANASTASSIADES



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A dapper gentleman sips Earl Grey in an armchair upholstered in manicured grass, while his wife serves cucumber sandwiches on an oak table, whose open drawer is full of soil. Closer inspection reveals a glass jar embedded in the earth, designed to grow perfectly straight cucumbers. Wooden Talking Tabs stick out of the surrounding flowerbeds, concealing recording mechanisms that either perk up plants with poetry recitals or alarm them by declaiming vegetarian recipes. This modernist mad hatter's tea party may seem like the product of a quintessentially

British sense of irony, but "Weeds, Aliens, and Other Stories" is the offshoot of a trio of London-based designers that includes Greek-Cypriot Michael Anastassiades.

"I'm interested in creating an alternative domestic environment that challenges the attachments people form with objects," explains the soft-spoken Anastassiades. "I want to establish a new

Design

psychological relationship between object and user by looking at existing situations and assumptions, or creating imaginary scenarios to explore a completely new approach to everyday objects."

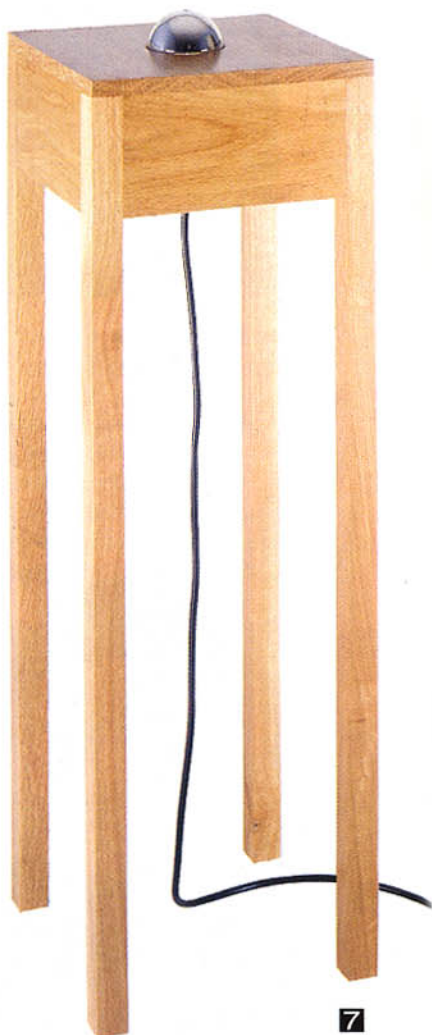
This playful subversion of the material trappings we take for granted includes a set of mirror-backed chairs that encourage solitary diners to talk to themselves and neglected housewives to really feel like part of the furniture, "Anti-Social" lights that turn on when a room falls silent, and a bedside table that doubles as an alarm clock, vibrating when snooze time is up. Though Anastassiades often uses high technology to reinvent the things we tend to discard or overlook, his designs are characterized by their subtle simplicity and elegant formality. Despite their implicit critique of consumerism, these objects of desire are so beautifully crafted that many people will feel they cannot live without them.

Anastassiades' own sleek marble and mahogany monochrome home is a striking antithesis to the squawking market spilling across the central London street where he lives. Born in Greece but raised in Cyprus, Anastassiades moved to London to study civil engineering: "I thought it would give me a stable profession, but I was always more interested in making things." He moved straight onto an MA in Industrial Design at the Royal College of Art, where his ingenious Message Cups (now in the Victoria and Albert Museum collection) confounded his conventional tutors. These plywood cups have a false bottom containing a recording device, which stores a message when the cup is turned upside down and is then replayed to the next user. The concept was inspired by the Cypriot expression "If you want to hear the gossip, listen to your tea cup."

After 13 years in London, with a string of international exhibitions and commissions to his credit, Anastassiades maintains he doesn't feel attached to any particular place. "I'll always be connected to Greece, but for now I'm more influenced by what's around me here. Design is almost non-existent in Greece, and whether you like it or not, competition is a factor that helps you refine your ideas." Since setting up his design studio in 1994, Anastassiades has dazzled competitors and consumers alike, from Sydney's Museum of Art and Design to the trend-setting Colette boutique in Paris. He staged several fashion shows for British designer Hussein Chalayan, eschewing the traditional catwalk for Perspex and muslin backdrops, mirrored floors, and a string quartet. Anastassiades' talent has not gone unnoticed among London's Greek community: the Hellenic Foundation pronounced him Artist of the Year in 1997, he has designed and participated in exhibitions at the Hellenic Centre, and fitted out Halepi, one of London's best—and most stylish—Greek restaurants.

Currently, Anastassiades is busier than ever—designing a new range of porcelain tableware for Greek manufacturer Ionia, a silver service for Rosenthal, crystal chandeliers for Swarovski, furniture for a restaurant in Bombay, and a salon in Belgium. Despite his hectic schedule and prolific output, the wunderkind of contemporary design is taking time out to co-found the first yoga retreat in Mani. Anastassiades' understated style and honed contours reveal surprising depths—rather like his designs. □

For further information or enquiries see www.michaelanastassiades.com



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1 Mirror Chair 2 Reserved 3 Cucumber Sandwich 4 Message Cups 5 Ball Vases 6 Meeting 7 Table Light 8 Talking Tabs.