

WHAT'S NEW AND HAPPENING

IN ARCHITECTURE, CRAFT, INTERIORS & DESIGN.

Design

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBERTO FRANKENBERG HAIR AND MAKE-UP: NUNZIO CARBONE

STARCK CONTRAST

*Guest editor
Catherine Martin,
deep in conversation
with her design hero,
Philippe Starck.*

Catherine Martin: I'm not a journalist...

Philippe Starck: Ah, yes. By the way, congratulations on your Oscar for the design of *Moulin Rouge!*

CM: Oh, the Oscar. You know, what I do is a minor trade...

PS: There's no such thing as a minor trade, just so long as it's done well. Ah, yes, it's true that you're not a journalist!

CM: Well, no. I was very worried because I didn't have questions written out exactly.

PS: That doesn't matter. Anyway, I was amazed when I met the director of *Moulin Rouge!* and you get the impression that he's in total overdrive... *zing, zing, zing!*

CM: Oh, yes, all the time. Absolutely. As he's my husband –

PS: – ah, is he your husband? –

CM: – yes. We were talking about you because... I know that it's absolutely boring to say that we're fans...

PS: No, no, that's fine, that's fine. I like that!

CM: That's fine? It's always good when people say they like you. We were talking about you and I said, "It's not possible, I'm gonna go and meet my idol. How am I going to start the conversation?" And my husband said, "The thing that impresses me is the quality of the work, but also the depth of the work and the enthusiasm with which

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CM: YES, IT'S ON.**

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it's done." He said, "If I could have Philippe Starck's energy and get up every morning. I wanna know the secret."

PS: Have you got the recorder?

CM: Yes, it's on.

PS: The answer is extremely simple: you have to be dumb.

CM: [Laughs]

PS: You have to be dumb because that allows you to have an extreme naivety – to believe that we can remake the world, to believe that people are kind, that science is going to save the world, that a utopia can still exist, that we can still invent political parties based on sharing, that capitalism is going to collapse. Simply, it's the naivety of being able to believe things which often appear idiotic. Then, the second point of stupidity is to hang on obstinately to those beliefs. I am un-teachable. People can't teach me anything.

CM: [Laughs]

PS: I'm not bragging about it, just stating a fact. And it makes me sad, because if I had been able to learn something, I would have made much more interesting things than toothbrushes. But I was never able to understand what I was told at school, and so I didn't go. Only when I do it, when I dream it myself, when I invent it myself, can I learn things. So, when you're naive, when you dream, when you are dumb and obstinate, then it's simple.

CM: Do you think that it's dumb and obstinate or –

PS: – no, wait, you were talking about depth and quality. There's also a phenomenon of rustic simplicity.

CM: Yes, yes.

PS: Being asked to do something, I consider that a great honour. And that it is my duty to do it well. Very well.

CM: Thoroughly.

PS: Thoroughly. Whether it's good or not – sometimes I don't succeed – I'm obliged to do everything I can to live up to the honour of being shown this trust. Once you wrap all that up with a very heavy religious upbringing, this places me in continual opposition to two things; my only reason to exist is to deserve to exist. I don't think that existing is something to be taken for granted. That's why I do lots of things, to continually prove my life to myself. That's why I've always lived intuitively, from my birth, in a system of what we might call Einsteinian relativity, or physical relativity, or chemical

relativity. For me, that means that at a deep level, nothing exists. And these aren't just words. I mean that this here doesn't exist any more than that there, that nothing exists around me. So, I move around in a state of freedom and terror because if nothing exists then we have nothing to catch on to, we have nothing to hide behind and so everything...

CM: There is no point of reference.

PS: There is no point of reference. There is nothing. So, I am continually moving around multi-dimensionally within unknown spaces. And that's okay. The end result is that when I go to bed, I say goodnight to my wife and I say, "Now, down to work!" Because my nights are terrifying, meaning that they have no relationship to existing worlds. Every night, I visit different social systems, different physical systems, different inventions, people whom I've never seen, urban landscapes which I've never seen, ways of thinking which I've never employed, and in the morning I'm exhausted! They're not necessarily nightmares. It's simply that at night my strange mental structures which are, in my opinion, close to madness...

CM: Yes...

PS: Free me of my inhibitions and I'm in my real mental structure,

which is one of total diagonality. The structure of intelligence is an orthogonal and linear system. I haven't got any intelligence. That means that if you ask me to play the simplest card game, I can't do it. I break out in a sweat. You can tell me, "I'll kill you if you don't do this division problem," but I won't know how to do it. It's a bit of a problem. However, in exchange for this absolute lack of intelligence, I have diagonal chemical functions which mean that it's not something qualitative, I'm simply talking about the function. I don't need to search, I find. Someone is going to ask me a question and before they can finish their sentence – *whoosh* – I'll have already gone diagonally directly from here to there, to a space in which the solution is already ready. And so I see it already finished, perfect, and at that moment I can draw it, print it out like a printer in a few seconds. So, people say, "It's impossible. He can't work that quickly." But I can. I simply find myself in places where the work's already been done. I'm analysing and thinking about things non-stop. I'm going to be continuously looking at the optical effects of the mirrors while I'm talking to you. I am totally obsessed by the curve at the base of the hanging, which is not the same curve as in the middle of the hanging, which is not the same as at the top of the hanging. And these are the things which obsess me. Tomorrow, when you ask me to draw a line, I'll already have three lines stored away, so I'll know exactly how to draw it because I already know which line I liked.

CM: That's because you're working all the time.

PS: All the time, all the time, all the time.

CM: You are always taking things in. So, it's preparing internally.

PS: That's it. I'm switched on about everything all the time – my life, society, civilisation, the species, my emotional life, my sex life, my work. I'm in my work all the time. With a reverse side, which is that 90 per cent of my time is taken up with my romantic interests, which means basically all I ever think about is my wife. We don't leave each other for a second and all I do is look at her. Like, I've just had an hour-long appointment while she was away in her office, and I didn't feel good, not good at all.

CM: But I don't think that that's being dumb, that's romanticism.

PS: Of course.

CM: Because I think, basically, I usually pose as being a little cynical, you know. I'm always saying things which are a little sarcastic. >

< But at the end of the day, I still think that we can improve things, that things can be better, that things can be more beautiful.

PS: Of course.

CM: There's no excuse for things being ugly, even if you don't have money.

PS: Of course.

CM: I was also talking with my husband about that idea of yours of using things... We opted for the phrase 'precious plastics'. The idea of making objects which are very precious, with a material which is totally –

PS: – firstly, I'd like to answer you in relation to two points. You said three important words. I remember two of them. Cynicism is totally not part of my make-up. I don't have the cynicism software. On the other hand, I love, let's say, talking trash, meaning constantly saying dumb things, sending jokes, which are that much funnier, that much more cunning and sharp, because they're based on a deep kindness.

CM: And perhaps a truth.

PS: And a truth. But what I want to say is that there's no cynicism in me. You can't be naive and cynical at the same time. I don't think that's technically possible. So, now I'm coming back to plastics. The use of plastic is already an anti-religious act because it's a material invented by man and not by nature, which believers generally mix up with God. For believers, God created nature, the trees, stone, iron, things like that. Plastic originates from a rottenness which is mastered by man's intelligence. So, that's already an act of non-belief. Then,

PS: THE TERM 'BEAUTY' BELONGS TO A BOURGEOIS SYSTEM.

there's an act of faith, of admiration for human intelligence, which is the most beautiful thing that exists because, amongst other things, it also invented the concept of love. That this poor little animal species, which we still are by the way, one day decided, as Jérôme Monod would say, for reasons of luck and necessity, to take control of the pace and the character of its evolutionary movement. And that's what makes us special; our difference, our beauty, our poetry and our romanticism. These extraordinary plastics of incredible intelligence are a very beautiful symptom, a very beautiful demonstration of human intelligence, and that's why I use them. Then, there are political reasons. To the extent that I've always worked with the idea of democratic design, trying to give the best to the greatest possible number of people, trying to present quality and bring down prices; plastic is the only material which will do.

CM: I love the concept of working in the possibilities of beauty, but that you don't lower your standards for something that's accessible. And that interests me a lot, working in these two worlds, because I think it's an incredibly dynamic combination.

PS: Before going on, I have to pick you up on one word, which is the word 'beauty'. I don't have any relationship with beauty. It's a concept that doesn't interest me. The term 'beauty' belongs to a bourgeois system. That's not a system I move around in.

CM: Is it more a feeling?

PS: No, I'm essentially into function. In the same way that in the 1920s or '30s people talked about the functionalists – Bauhaus, things like that. Strangely, 80 years later, I'm also a functionalist, except that whereas in the '20s the functions were purely material, I add immaterial functions. Being pretentious, we could say this is a post-Freudian, or maybe even post-Lacanian functionalism, meaning that the symbolic, psychological and meaning-related parameters are taken into consideration. So, for me, the term 'beauty' doesn't exist. If I try to understand what that means, the one word that comes closest to it for me is 'coherence'. When an action or a project is coherent, when it achieves its purpose, when its purpose is good, when it uses good material, the minimum of material, when the price is right, when it's the right colour, when all the signs emitted are right, you clearly see

the coherence. And I think it's at that moment we can talk about beauty, which is, by the way, totally comparable with what happiness might be. The concept of happiness is absolutely not automatic. Because, for me, everything must be constructed. There's a term in bullfighting, 'the temple'. People can tell you about the temple, but you can't understand it until the moment you see it. It's clear once you've seen it. It lasts for a thousandth of a second. There's the right angle of light. There's the right smell. There's the right noise. There's a certain amount of dust. There's a gesture, a proportion, and that's when you see a perfect harmony. Perfect! You have seen what is called beauty and through that you can understand what happiness might be. That's it. It's simply a flash, a snapshot of material and immaterial things which move around in space, in time, in decibels and degrees and, in a moment, it comes together.

CM: I think it touches on the subject you've just talked about, but in English we call it 'the theatre of space'. It's not the expression of each object in a place, but it's all the objects and the people who enter there. What strikes me a lot in your work is the way [it] envelops and changes the thought. You just walk in, and, you arrive. And you become naive.

PS: You have answered the question. Your husband directs and I'm a director, too. You could say that he brings the ephemeral to the stage whilst I, alas, bring things which last to the stage. The big difference, perhaps, from other designers or architects, is that they talk about the product. For me, the product doesn't exist. I couldn't care less and – it seems ridiculous to have been saying this through the

years – I've got no taste. A real decorator will tell you whether the blue goes well with the yellow. I've got no idea, and I don't care. So, I'm not into the product. I'm into the effect the product is going to create. I'm only interested in the scenario which people are going to live out – that when I create a location, I see the film. They are going to go from one place to another like that. They are going to move like that. Those sorts of people are going to settle into that area there for physiological reasons. Others are going to prefer over there at certain times of day depending on their mood. So there are going to be different qualities of light and so on. So, I'm making a film, and this film has only one purpose, which is the purpose of at once transporting people. It appears paradoxical, but it's the reality. When you are transported out of yourself, it's the best way to get face-to-face with yourself. By taking people out of themselves, out of their everyday lives, by putting them in places which are supposed to make them sexier, more beautiful, more romantic, funnier and more inventive, this turns them back on themselves and they are forced to reflect on their own inventiveness, their capacity to love, their capacity to be elegant, and so on. So, in fact, what I'm doing is making educational films with the purpose of waking people up so that they stop simply being spectators, consumers, numbers, and become actors in their lives, in their family, their society, their civilisation, and they finally enter into the big picture of mutation.

CM: That really has an effect on me because years ago, I don't know, it must be almost 20 years ago that we were incredibly poor. Whenever we had a few francs we would go to the café...

PS: Café Costes...

CM: Café Costes. As young people, we had nothing, and it gave us –

PS: – don't worry, when I did it, neither did I! –

CM: – we had the impression of being great actors in a huge drama; that the possibilities were immense and that we could do anything we imagined. Yes, that made us dream.

PS: You're absolutely right, the Café Costes was the very start of all that, because you see the back-facing, theatrical staircase which is a way of showing yourself to the crowd. Did I descend correctly?

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PS: There were letters all around which made you wonder about their meaning – no-one found it. There was the big clock which was a glimpse of light surrealism, light but not to be dismissed. Then, there were those three-legged chairs so that you had to maintain some form of balance to survive on them. And there were the toilets where you saw yourself while you were having a piss, which is an act which already tells us a lot about ourselves. So, really, it was a machine. You're absolutely right. It's a good example. Let's say it was my prototype.

CM: That made us dream. We had the impression that we could do what we wanted to do in life. That idea that you are not your childhood, your parents, your way of thinking.

PS: I'll tell you, you make me very happy because you're the first person in 20 years to have put it into words so precisely. Because, as I said, I'm in the same trade as your husband. But he does it better because he leaves indelible memories; transports people much higher, much further. Real abstractions that put out incredibly revolutionary ideas with an extraordinary force in an hour and a half, and afterwards all that fits on a DVD, which is a millimetre thick and 13 centimetres in diameter.

CM: Yes, the solution is very elegant. But for me, in my everyday life, when I switch on my little Kartell lamp every day it makes me very happy because I see the bulb shape, but it's extremely precious.

PS: That's it. You are absolutely right.

CM: It's very beautiful and it's a pleasure, which I feel again every day. It's an active pleasure.

PS: What a shame you aren't a journalist. You're absolutely right. It's the repetition, the daily encounter with a toothbrush, a lamp, an invisible chair, which is going to, little by little, take people to the places where I want to take them. But to do that, it takes a lifetime. It takes a lifetime and perhaps 6000 creations. In other words, it's exhausting!

CM: It's that idea that an experience with objects can transport you on a daily basis. They're provocative. It's a completely stupid thing, which is off the subject, but I've always been completely obsessed with catalogues. I think that I'm going to try to buy one of your Good Goods catalogues on eBay.

PS: They'll be on eBay. In any case, we haven't got one.

CM: You haven't got one?

PS: No. But you're young. I was lucky enough to have known the great American Sears Roebuck catalogues. In France, there was the Manufrance catalogue. You could build houses. It was extraordinary.

CM: I love that. The house which I'm sure about 36,000 people have already asked you about – the house for 3 Suisses – I find that house sublime. It's so lovely.

PS: I lived in it. It's the best house in the world. I'm trying to buy it back at the moment.

CM: It is really, really, really lovely. It made me dream.

PS: So, you have picked two examples. Amongst the examples of which I'm most proud. The Good Goods catalogue is a very strong political act: the catalogue of non-products for non-consumers of the future moral market. So, I'm very proud of it. But, all that was 15 years too early, and the 3 Suisses house as well.

CM: That's incredible. What I also find very interesting in the 3 Suisses house – it's a home.

PS: It's a home, a real home, but it's about the very essence of the home. A home firstly meaning living with someone you love. There's no point in having a mansion if you're all alone. So, that's clear, it's a house which is centred on a love, which is centred on a hearth, which is symmetrical so that you don't need to worry about the architecture, so that the architecture is forgotten about in the interests of love, intelligence, contemplation and so on. And then, there's the least material possible around the humans, meaning simply wood. Then, it's the lowest price possible so that people aren't worried, aren't preoccupied with paying their debts, so that they can love each other and think.

CM: I find that it's an incredible gift to give people the possibility of having something that could give them so much pleasure. In Australia I've started buying LA oil.*

PS: Do you like LA oil? The oil is good.

CM: And I think a lot about you when I use it. I didn't know it was your container. And I think it's really beautiful.

PS: Ah, but the container is of no importance. The important thing is the oil inside it.

CM: Yes, but listen, what I really like is that it's not pretentious. The same effort's gone into the oil as into the lounge of Le Meurice [hotel].

PS: Of course. I'd say more effort went into the oil, you know!

CM: And it tastes so good as well.



PS: Ah, yes, and then, above all, it's good for your health. So, when I do an oil like that, I'm very proud. I'm prouder about doing an oil than about doing a hotel, for example.

CM: Very well put, as we say in English. And the other thing that interests me a lot in your work is the sense of humour, because what annoys me the most is décor that is incredibly –

PS: – incredibly beautiful, but that bores you to death –

CM: – yes! My husband always tells me that good taste is the enemy of art. It's because, he always teases me, I have little pretensions. I say, "That's good" and "That's not good." And he says, "You know what? Next week, you'll say it's great." It's just that it's... appropriate, right? It's the thing that works for the situation.

PS: No, but the idea of taste is once again a bourgeois concept. They are words which should disappear. The word 'taste' should disappear. It doesn't exist. There is only restriction in the word taste.

CM: Yes, that makes me anxious because I think that I don't have any taste. I come from a little town...

PS: Don't worry! In that case, that makes two of us.

CM: A very small town at the end of the world, with an intellectual father and a mother who was totally crazy, and I say to myself that I never really know what good taste is. I think that that works okay, that that's going to be good, but I don't know. So, it makes me anxious a little.

PS: Hold on, hold on. There are lots of people who have very bad taste. Those people who call themselves people of taste, in my opinion, come up with horrible things. There's no taste. There are simply things for creating effects. Meaning, one moment there is a good reflection; one moment, there is something which is too big; one moment there's a succession of lights like that; then a Salvador Dali lamp which is obviously bizarre. Then there's the Jeff Koons type who comes out of that, but who cares? And there are little stories. There are all the fairies who frolicked here in the fireplace and after a night of love left their *lorgnettes* (spectacles) behind.

CM: Yes, but I find that inspiring.

PS: Yes, because everybody knows that the fairies come to Le Meurice to screw!

CM: I enjoy your sense of humour.

PS: Yeah. Humour is an obligation, not a choice.

CM: I enjoy what you've done with the 'Gnome' [stool].

PS: Ah, yes.

CM: And when I see an incredibly serious person sitting on one, talking about his stuff, I really enjoy that, not because it makes him ridiculous, but because it is a way of saying that at the end of the day everyone is equal, everyone is human.

PS: Of course. The example of the 'Gnome', it's a bit more than just humour; it's a way of farting in church.

CM: [Laughs]

PS: I mean it has to be put back in a context. The 'Gnome' came out, I think, in the third or fourth year of the so-called 'minimalist' fashion. And when you see a fashion which starts to become established on false bases with a false terminology, and everyone seems very happy about it, and so there's the risk that it will go on for a while, that's the time you need to fart in church. You have to say, "Your chic gives me the shits. What you think is chic isn't. What you think is elegant isn't. What you believe is art isn't. It's just '70s fashion." It was a guerrilla attack. Cultural guerrilla warfare.

CM: Ah, I love that.

* *La Amarilla de Ronda olive oil can be purchased from El Mercado; call 0415 879 613 or visit www.losimportadores.com.au.*

