



119 // TALKING WITH THE BIG KREAM  
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# larger than life

ON JUST THREE COFFEES A DAY, KARIM RASHID IS CURRENTLY WORKING ON 75 PROJECTS IN 24 COUNTRIES. HIS AIM IS SIMPLE: TO "SPREAD THE DESIGN GOSPEL GLOBALLY". NO WONDER HE SOMETIMES SEEMS ALMOST SUPERHUMAN.

IF HE WERE AN ACTION HERO,  
SAYS KARIM RASHID, HE WOULD  
TAKE THE MONIKER BIG KREEMY,  
THE DOCTOR OF DESIGN.

In his superhero guise, Rashid would swoosh about wearing an ultra-high-tech, white microfibre suit loaded with fibre-optics, solar energy panels and polymer liquid-crystal displays. He would sport smart tattoos on his arms containing personal data and have microchips embedded in his eyes and ears for real-time telecommunications, zooming capabilities and designing in virtual space. Big Kreemy's mission, as Rashid's famously is, would be "to spread the design gospel globally and to motivate everyone to live in a world surrounded by beautiful, fulgent, poetic, smart, contemporary things and spaces".

Rashid has publicly and earnestly declared his global intentions in the title of his 2001 book,

*I Want To Change the World.* With his gushing utopian language, his hugely prolific output and his signature white crewneck T-shirt, white jeans, Alain Mikli bubble sunglasses and devilish widow's peak, the only thing missing from this scenario is a little technology. As it stands, Rashid's preferred design tools include a black Pilot Fineliner, a pink fluorescent marker, a Wacom notepad with wireless pen and his laptop, loaded with SolidWorks software and permanently connected to the internet.

Whether you like Rashid's work or not, the comparison with a superhero is apt: the designer, who drinks only three strong coffees a day (two regular and one decaf, with hot milk) is currently working on some 75 projects in 24 countries. These include a jewellery collection, a mobile phone, a vacuum cleaner, a bicycle, cosmetics for Prada, products for Coca-Cola and furniture for nearly a dozen manufacturers. There is glassware, bathroom fixtures and lighting for Artemide; restaurant interiors in New York City, Long Island, Moscow and Paris; hotels in London and Brighton; a clothing shop and cafe in Dubai;

**FACING PAGE** Rashid's Bokka lamp, produced by Kundalini in 2005, is made from mouth-blown and waterjet-cut triplex glass. It is available as a table lamp (with chromed metal base and dimmer switch) or as this pictured suspension lamp.





water and beer bottles for a Greek company; watches for Alessi; carpets for companies in Germany and Turkey; plastic shoes and fashion accessories for a Brazilian firm; a newspaper vending machine for the city of New York (he has already designed a manhole cover for Consolidated Edison); and a line of canine accessories. He is also creating art installations and paintings for an exhibition, making his own music (under the name DJ Kreemy, of course), autographing fresh copies of a book called *Digipop* for Taschen (May, 2005) and completing another (*Design Your Life*, due out in September) for HarperCollins. (And this is only a partial list of his current projects ...)

"Of all the designers I have worked with on one level or another, Karim is the hardest working designer I have ever met," says David Shearer, founder of New York group Totem Design and now at Exhibitions International. "His success comes from his passion and drive, not luck or stylistic approach."

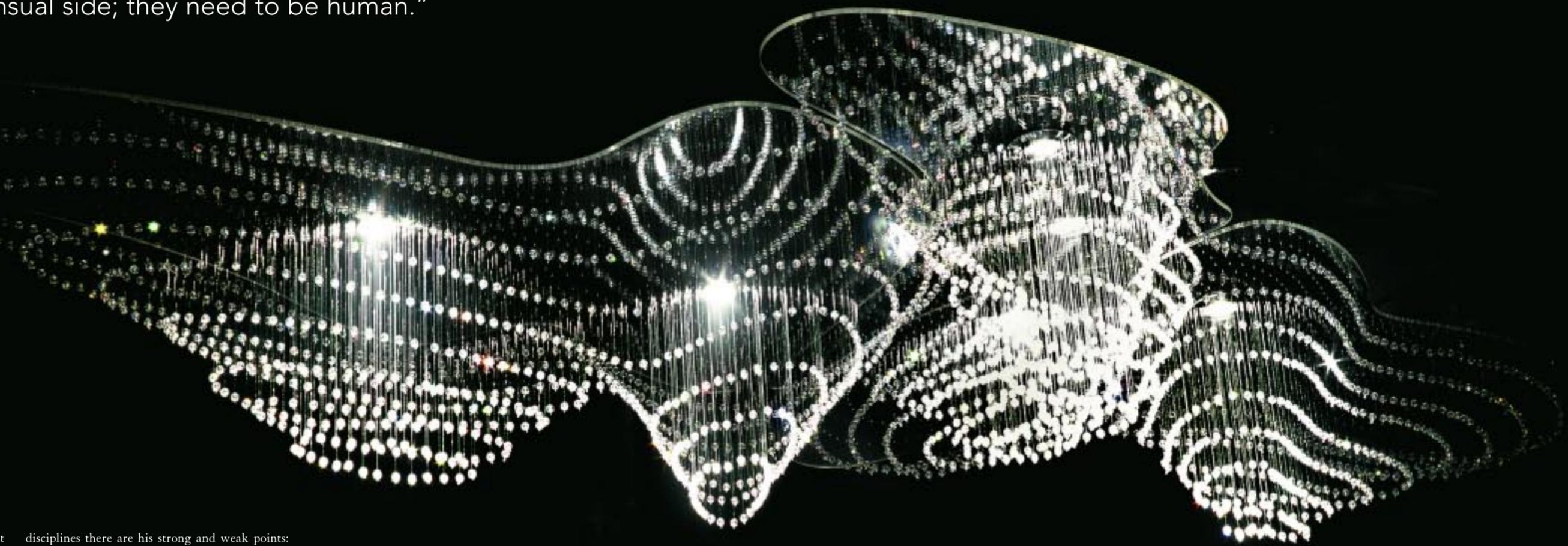
Rashid also recently opened a Karim shop in Manhattan, where all his work can be purchased in a single space: his digital/organic wall coverings for Wolf-Gordon (2003); shampoo bottles from the Semiramis Hotel in Athens, which he designed in 2004; the Oh chair for Umbra (1999); Ego vases for MGlass (2004); the Spider shoe for Fessura (2004); Stak dishware for Danese (2004); even his eponymous, glossy-flanked DJ booth. In March alone, Rashid travelled to Moscow, Copenhagen, Milan, Padova, Venice, Frankfurt, Sao Paulo, Toronto, Cincinnati, San Francisco, San Jose, Chicago, Amsterdam, Breda and Detroit.

"I have my favourite airlines," he admits, and then helpfully catalogues them. "Alitalia for the coffee and food, British Airways for the beds, Singapore Airlines for the service, Scandinavian Airlines for the bathrooms, Emirates for the hospitality, Air Canada for the micro-brewery beer, Air France for the attitude, KLM for the duty-free catalogue and Virgin for the manicures." Rashid

**FACING PAGE** Kari, Ari, Arim and Rim candelabras/vases hand-blown from lead-free crystal, produced in 2002 for Turkish firm Gaia & Gino. Rashid took his inspiration for these multi-purpose creations from the ornamental shapes indigenous to the various ethnic tribes that found a home in the ancient lands that now form modern Turkey. Other Rashid designs for Gaia & Gino include tableware sets that mimic the skyline of Istanbul, complete with minarets. **ABOVE** The Plod sofa for FeliceRossi (2004), made of polyurethane foam on a cold-processed chrome steel base. "Comfort is not a style but a performance issue," says Rashid. "Our domestic environment should be as smart, seductive and engaging as a laptop and other technology."

“I am a preacher of cultural shaping and I must communicate this everywhere I go, by any means possible. I believe that it is important not to over-embellish objects – to keep a certain truth to the product – but that objects also need to touch our sensual side; they need to be human.”

< KARIM RASHID >



finds focus in midair: on a single European flight he can fill a 100-page sketchpad. Last year alone, he slept on well over 100 different mattresses.

PREACHING THE DESIGN GOSPEL.....

“I am a preacher of cultural shaping and I must communicate this everywhere I go, by any means possible,” he says. “I believe that it is important not to over-embellish objects – to keep a certain truth to the product – but that objects also need to touch our sensual side, [they need] to be human.” By preaching the design gospel of “sensual minimalism”, as he calls it, Rashid hopes to contribute to the shifting of our physical – and, one must assume, our mental – landscapes. “This is my ‘nutopia,’” he says, a world in which design is integral to every aspect of living.

In part because of his cheerful candour in responding to press and clients alike, no matter their size or apparent significance, Rashid the person is as accessible (and overpublished) as his raspberry, white, lime and canary-yellow designs. “As Karim’s body of work carries over many

disciplines there are his strong and weak points: his packaging is phenomenal, while his furniture might be considered derivative by some,” says Shearer. “Karim certainly has influences but his work is wholly his own.”

And there’s no denying his client list. The sales of his designs have been known to rapidly increase the revenue streams of some manufacturers. In at least one case (for Method), according to Shearer, Rashid’s designs almost single-handedly accounted for the company’s success. Why is it that Rashid has created so many more commercial and creative opportunities for himself than the other talented designers out there? Is it the optimism and ubiquity of his work, his extreme extroversion, the hip hippie philosophy, the fact that he travels frenetically, works long days, sleeps little (but deeply) and is hugely prolific, or that he sees potential in every opportunity without discriminating between them? The answer is probably all of the above.

“Karim is one of the most articulate people I’ve ever met,” says British designer Ross Lovegrove.

**ABOVE** The Topograph chandelier, Swarovski, 2005. Each year Swarovski invites a range of progressive designers such as Ron Arad and Tokujin Yoshioka to interpret the chandelier in the crystal manufacturer’s ‘Crystal Palace’ collection at the Milan Furniture Fair. The Topograph’s form was inspired by the Tyrol mountain range (Swarovski’s base) in Austria: the flowing lines, which are lit with halogen spotlights, are contour map lines of the area.

COURTESY SWAROVSKI



**ABOVE** Rashid's Dragonfly chair (2005) for Italian manufacturer Bonaldo opens its 'wings' and transforms from an armchair into a chaise longue. The seat comes in either fabric- or leather-covered expanded polyurethane on a swivelling chrome-plated steel base.

“He has a remarkable drive, unparalleled probably in the design world. His energy and maverick entrepreneurialism are rare. Every time I tell him to slow down he just accelerates. I suppose when one is so much larger than life, with such determination, there’s no point hunching over and pretending to be smaller than you are. That’s just false modesty which, I imagine for Karim, is the worst form of insincerity.”

TRAVELLING LIFE .....

Rashid, 44, was born in Cairo (along with younger brother Hani, co-principal of New York-based Asymptote Architecture) but raised in the UK and Canada, where he earned his first industrial design degree. He then moved to Italy for graduate studies (under Ettore Sottsass, among others), followed by a year of work at the Rodolfo Bonetto Studio in Milan. By 1993, he had opened his own practice in Manhattan.

June marked the 10th anniversary of Rashid’s marriage to artist Megan Lang, but don’t look for a ring: the pair gave each other graphic-symbol

tattoos instead. The couple are childless, but they are the happy owners of a 1956 Techbuilt Systems yellow-and-blue-panelled cottage on the Hudson River, which Rashid bought on the internet after deciding he needed a place where he “could drink beer and kill mosquitoes”.

This year’s Milan Furniture Fair was filled with Rashid’s products. These included the Kite armchair and Orikami sofa for Label, glass-sheet shelving and a bi-level coffee table for Tonelli and the collapsible aluminium Karm task lamp for Fabbian – 21 designs in all. Meanwhile, Rashid is still on the move and constantly plugged in. He sends a message into the ether immediately after touching down on the west coast of the US: “Just arrived in San Francisco on my way to lecture at SFMoMA in one hour,” he writes. “Yes, it is crazy these days ... enjoying it exhaustively.”