

The Illusionist

Whether in New York, Tel Aviv or somewhere in between, Ron Gilad is bent on creating his own experimental world.

Words **Shonquis Moreno**
Photos **Roni Cnaani**

By 8 a.m. the ashtrays – broken cut-crystal Baccarat goblets with jagged lips, a scale model of George Nelson’s Coconut armchair – are brimming full. Designer Ron Gilad is a heavy smoker and a light sleeper. He has been called ‘a philosopher of the everyday object’, because his sceptical and interrogatory approach to design calls into question many things that we take for granted. He has suspended a glazed wall panel from the ceiling to turn it into a pendant lamp; extruded 2D floor plans into a 3D coffee table; and assembled a chandelier from a bouquet of various task lights for Moooi’s famous homage, Dear Ingo. His looming, obelisk-shaped clothing valet recalls both a tombstone and a grandfather clock, reminding users of how domestic objects often help – and force – us to mark time.

Gilad strips banal objects bare, rescaling, abstracting and plucking them out of context in the belief that too much familiarity can blind us to our surroundings. And, at a time when consumers are craving a deeper connection to the things they live with, this approach – starting from ideas and imbuing products with their meaning – ensures that ordinary objects become both more remarkable and more marketable.

Gilad interrogates domestic space but gives it little room in his life. The studio serves as his home, not the other way around – the two are indistinguishable in his mind – and design is not something he sets aside on evenings and weekends. This hybrid environment serves as a sanctuary from whence Gilad modulates his interactions with the world outside, projecting his prolific meditations into the space around him – which then speaks volumes about him, even when he doesn’t.

For 11 years, starting in 2001, he worked in New York, initially running a lab for his ideas and making objects in-house under the studio name, Designfenzider, and then

in 2009 launching into more industrial work under his own name. Perhaps his most fertile connection to industry is with Flos president and CEO Piero Gandini, for whom Gilad made Wallpiercing, a white, halo-like ring of light built into the architecture in numbers that make this austere object ornamental. Gandini remembers being astonished the first time he walked into the industrial Brooklyn loft where the designer spent his last five years in New York. The space reflected Gilad’s fervid, whimsical and sometimes dark imagination: plastic horses galloped along the wall, and

tiny follies – including a doll’s head (drowned?) in a glass of water – flowered everywhere. A mezuzah wrapped in a plastic bag was attached to the doorjamb with electrical tape, tape that also marked off a section of wall crowded with three-dimensional ‘doodles’: orphaned bits of objects, like a black feather affixed to a watch mechanism that made the quill ‘tick’ endlessly clockwise. ‘The building was in the middle of nothing,’ Gandini recalls, ‘and then here was a big *something*. I saw things that looked crazy and extremely poetic,

and all of a sudden I realized I was in a really different world; I was entering the cave of a magician.’

In contrast to the high-ceilinged, crumbling concrete bunker that was his Brooklyn loft, the bright Tel Aviv house that Gilad rented last summer has gallery-white surfaces and an intimate scale, but is clearly shaping up to contain the same character. Gilad made the move to shorten his frequent commute to Milan and to prepare an exhibition for the Tel Aviv Museum of Art that will open next summer and welcome visitors for a period of five months. The show’s curator, Meira Yagid, has known Ron since the mid-90s, when he left the industrial-design programme of Jerusalem’s Bezalel Academy after four years without graduating. At the time, the local design scene was in a ...

‘The way for me to talk is through objects’

Heavy smoker and light sleeper Ron Gilad in the garden of his Tel Aviv studio, which he has furnished exactly as if it were a room.



Gilad's studio abounds in evidence of a 'fervid, whimsical and sometimes dark imagination,' from his drawings (above) to 'tiny follies' (opposite) that are effectively 3D doodles.

... formative stage, focused on improvisation, materiality and rawness. 'In opposition to that, Ron was into something else,' she remembers, 'questioning the relationship between function and shape and juxtaposing values and notions associated with contemporary art. He had the ability to move from scale to scale, making surprising visual links, and was one of those who blurred the boundaries between design and art.' Today, although he has touched down in Tel Aviv again, Gilad is racking up air miles, working on carpets for Nodus, a third show for Dilmos, a *tansu* system for Japan Creative and a summerhouse, his first foray into architecture. So often on the move, he says, 'I try to create home in my mind, in a place that is not necessarily physical. I'm fed by what goes on around me, but I'm also trying to expose myself to reality on my own terms. I'm trying to create my own world.'

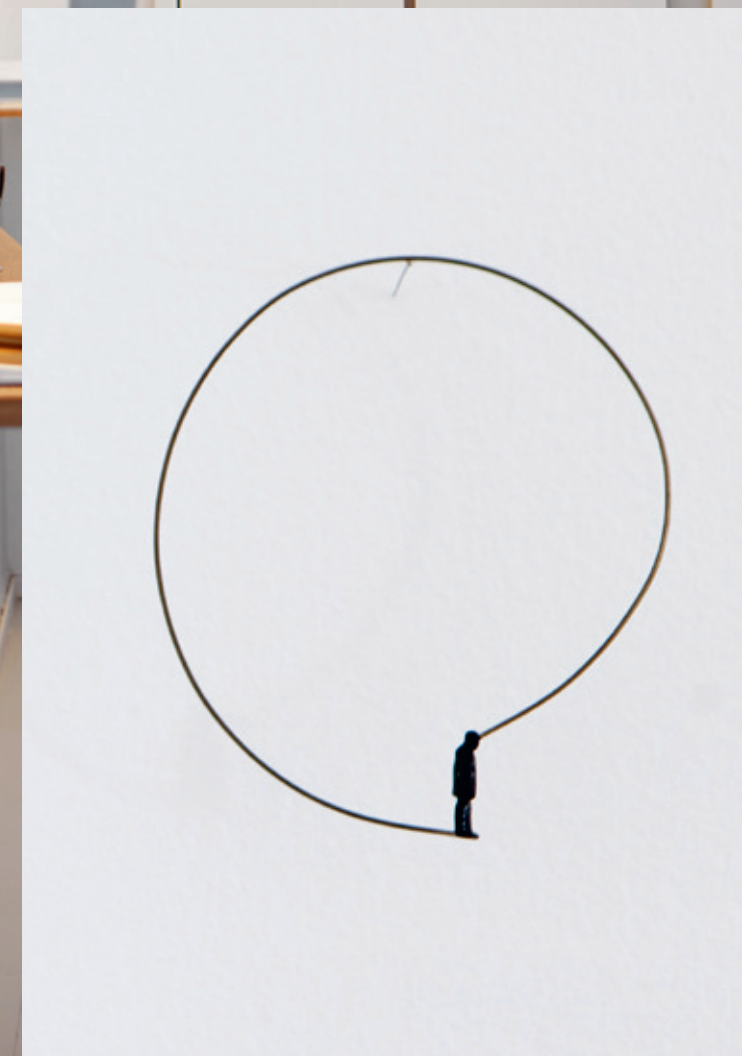
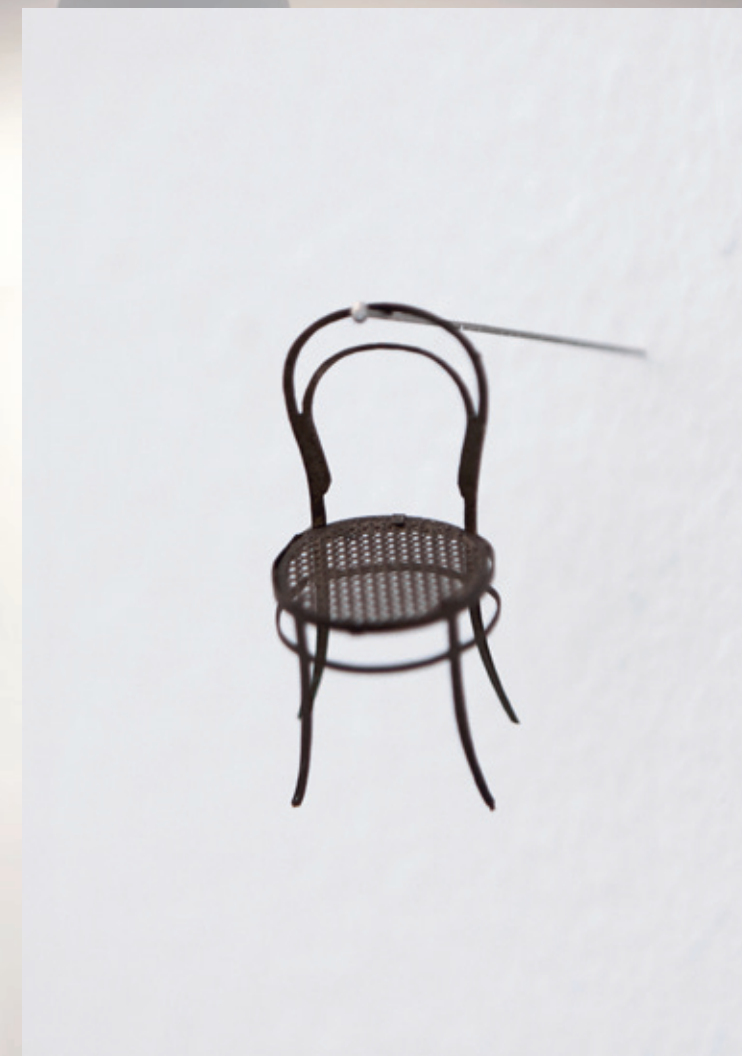
At the moment, that world is illuminated by Flos: gems like the Castiglioni brothers' Toio and Starck's Gun floor lamp, its aluminium base cast in the shape of the same M16 rifle that Gilad carried during his military service. In the garden, lit by the violet glow of a bougainvillea, he has planted a Corbusier armchair, end tables and a bookshelf as if furnishing a room indoors. Inside, he has partially obscured a hole in one wall, created by a leaking air-conditioning unit, with the tiny plastic

'I try to create home in my mind'

model of a chauffeur, knees bent, arms outstretched as if blithely accelerating into the gap. 'I can't just see the crack as a defect,' he says. 'I must do something with it so that I created the crack, not nature. Many times these beginnings are also ends, but sometimes they lead me to new places.' After a few minutes in the studio, visitors begin to look at the walls – all walls – differently.

In 2009 Gilad the philosopher began to form relationships with industry leaders like Gandini, the Molteni family and Adele Cassina. The result was that his work, art-inflected products and functional art, was ubiquitous at this year's Salone furniture fair: candlesticks for Established & Sons; a colour-limned, 15-piece collection for Molteni; a series of marble objects for Salvatori; and a solo exhibition at the Dilmos Gallery, which used only the most basic geometry to test the limits of expression (apparently finding that there were none). French designer

Fabien Dumas even paid tribute to Dear Ingo, Gilad's 2004 homage to Ingo Maurer, with a ready-made chandelier called Dear Ron. 'I would not have been able to jump into the realm of mass production without playing with ideas in the studio for so many years,' Gilad insists. 'And I would not have been approached by these industrial companies if they hadn't been able to see my thinking and my skills in a nonindustrial way. I've learned that I don't always need ...





Products old and new animate Gilad's light-filled Tel Aviv space. The large cupboard is the 56 Cabinet for Adele C, which has appropriated miniature Thonet nr. 14 chairs for feet.

The trouser-wearing Butler No1 freestanding shelf shows Gilad at his most surreal.

Ron Gilad

Portrait

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Ron Gilad

Portrait

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The designer's studio 'serves as his home, not the other way around – the two are indistinguishable in his mind'.

... to be conceptual, but I do need a good concept.' For MoMA architecture and design curator Paola Antonelli, trying to distinguish between art and design in Gilad's work is a forced exercise. 'I see Ron as an all-purpose creator in the vein of Bruno Munari,' she says, 'moving without pretension between art and design, pursuing a research that is not only formal but also functional – and using not only talent but also a sense of humour.' Ten years ago Zoe Ryan, now curator of architecture and design at the Art Institute of Chicago, saw Gilad's 2002 Run Over by a Car vase, the scion of two prototypes that fell from an assistant's scooter en route to his then-studio in Tel Aviv and were promptly run over by a car. 'I thought he was a real mischief-maker,' Ryan recalls. Influences that run the gamut from Magritte, De Chirico and Duchamp to the Castiglioni, Sottsass and Mari are visible in his work, she says, and, like them, Gilad works intuitively, understanding design as a vital creative and cultural project.

Pieces so minimal yet so expressive seem to suggest sleight of hand. His Fruit Bowls consist of nothing more than thin metal bars that sketch the outline of a rectangle, with only function (and a bright coat of lacquer) generating their aesthetic. 'I don't invent anything new,' the designer

says. 'I'm just rethinking what a bowl is – what in the structure of the bowl makes it able to hold something? I dissect it into two elements, a surface and a border, and once I have this "mathematical" formula, I'm able to start creating combinations and eliminating my old perceptions of what a bowl should look like.'

The warm asceticism of Gilad's products, then, is partly a function of disciplined editing. 'Being personal, or human, or softer can drag you into the realm of decoration, where shape or styling is stronger than the concept,' he says. 'The idea is not to add but to remove as much as possible, to stay with one line and one dot and yet still be able to express myself.'

Gilad flouts convention because it frames, and then freezes, our understanding of the world. His best work has a koan at its core, a question that provokes doubt yet

ultimately leads to enlightenment – a sophisticated sloughing of sophistication. He poses eloquent questions articulated through intellect and sentiment, serendipity and dexterous manipulation: 'The way for me to talk is through objects, not necessarily through words.' And for someone who asks why so often, he never, ever provides an answer. _

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