

TAKING THE CH

Eight design disruptors flipping the script on the equality debate.

By Victoria Woodcock

If there were a future where you never had to call me a female designer again because designers were just designers, I would be all for that," says New York-based lighting designer Bec Brittain. Right now, however, she concedes that the label is far from redundant. "It's really important to look at the work of female designers, as well as black designers, because our eyes have become so used to seeing what white men make that, consciously or not, this has defined our taste."

In 2018, a UK report by the Design Council revealed that although women make up 63 per cent of students on creative arts and design courses at British universities, only 22 per cent of the design workforce is female. In the "male-dominated sub-sector" of product and industrial design, however, the number drops to 5 per cent. And the picture is similar in the US, where a recent survey of 10,307 industrial designers by the online design community Coroflot suggested that only 19 per cent of the workforce is female.

New thinking is helping to balance the scales. "We founded Design Can based on those Design Council statistics," says London-based design PR director Sabine Zetteler of the diversity and inclusion campaign she launched in 2019 alongside advocates such as Priya Khanchandani, head of curatorial at the Design Museum, and multidisciplinary artist Yinka Ilori. "They backed up how I felt about visiting design festivals in London and Milan and seeing exactly the same white men on every panel event. Now, I get an extra 200 emails a month from people asking for advice on who they should commission to design a new furniture collection, or who they should have on their panel discussion to make sure it is representative. There's been a shift."

Part of this shift can be attributed to the focus on previously overlooked female designers who have received posthumous retrospectives – the Charlotte Perriand exhibitions at Paris's Fondation Louis Vuitton in 2019 and at London's Design Museum in 2021 being a primary example. This year, Carpenters Workshop Gallery will champion the cause in New York in its exhibition *The Female Voice in Modern Design: 1950-2000* (20 April to 3 July). Meanwhile, the 2021 Phaidon publication *Woman Made* by Jane Hall (a founding member of the design and architecture collective Assemble) "flips the script on what historically is a patriarchal industry", according to Laurent Claquin, president of Kering Americas, which backed the project and will now launch the Women In Motion Design Scholarship – an award of up to \$25,000 to support a woman undergraduate student in the US.

At the same time, a new clutch of creatives is shaking up the design world. In Rotterdam, designer Sabine Marcelis was chosen by skincare brand La Prairie to be the mentor of its latest art initiative: a collective of five female graduates who will be realising new Bauhaus-inspired works to be shown in June at Art Basel. In New York, female design trio Egg Collective have been hosting *Designing Women* exhibitions at their SoHo showroom since 2017. "It's about being able to visualise a path into design," says Egg co-founder Crystal Ellis of creating new platforms that might be a source of inspiration. "I think they are proof for the younger generation of women that they too can do this."



Sabine Marcelis in her Amsterdam studio with a prototype custom light installation for the new Galleries Lafayette in Annecy, France

AIR

Portraits by *Chris Brooks*
and *Adama Jalloh*

ROOMS STUDIO

Tbilisi-based design duo Nata Janberidze and Ketil Toloraia refer to their joint practice as a "confluence of energies". They launched Rooms in 2007, creating furniture as a "narrative of personal experiences of womanhood", which has been enriched by both becoming mothers. "I have three daughters and Ketil has two sons," says 40-year-old Nata. "I don't think our work is gender-specific, though – it's more about using feminine intuition." Consequently, their ongoing Wild Minimalism collection is a modern take on archaic forms in roughly hewn, almost black reclaimed oak. Their brass-topped, scooped-base Triple Coffee Table (POA), meanwhile, is a favourite of interior designer Kelly Wearstler, and the range is evocatively showcased at the Rooms Hotel Kokhta – their third hotel project in Georgia, in the ski resort of Bakuriani – alongside their illustrated CC-Tapis rugs (their Night Of A Hunter Deer At Night rug is \$8,600 at 1stdibs.com) and a huge metal fireplace covered in hieroglyph-like symbols.

Below: Rooms Studio designers Ketil Toloraia (left) and Nata Janberidze with (from left) their Sculptural Chair I, Half Moon Coffee Table II and Sculptural Chair III



PHOTOGRAPH: ADRIANNA GLAVANO

"OUR WORK ISN'T GENDER-SPECIFIC – IT'S MORE ABOUT FEMININE INTUITION"

SABINE MARCELIS

In her Rotterdam studio and workshop, Dutch designer Sabine Marcelis's approach to materials continues to be influenced by her engineer father. "He worked in these crazy factories and would come home and tell my sister and I about the machines as he showed us photos of a screw being produced or whatever," she recalls. "I always found it super-interesting: understanding how existing processes can be used in new, unexpected ways and how material properties can be manipulated. I just keep exploring."

One of her signature materials is resin, which is cast into tables or stools then intensely polished to create a finish that appears to glow from within. Her

multipurpose Candy Cubes (from \$4,424, mattermatters.com) are a mainstay, produced in saccharine shades such as candy-floss pink – the colour chosen by the Vitra Design Museum for the version that is now part of its permanent collection.

Marcelis also focuses on glass, which is fashioned into iridescent tables and mirrors, the latter in foiled ombre effects and colour-block designs that she creates in collaboration with fellow Rotterdam designer Brit van Nerven. In May, she will open a site-specific installation at the new Galeries Lafayette store in Annecy – including a huge yellow-toned mirror (pictured left) – while a still-to-be-revealed collection for Ikea launches in October.

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MIMI SHODEINDE

British-Nigerian Shodeinde believes it is vital that women in the industry help each other. "Fashion designer Roksanda Ilincic, for example, has been such a huge help and mentor to me," says the 27-year-old designer, whose furniture pieces include the sinuous bentwood Dip Lounger chair, initially created for her interior design practice, and her semi-circular Howard Desk, which was shown last year in the Design Museum exhibition *Discovered: Designers for Tomorrow*. She works with two craft studios in Greater London – one on woodworking, the other on lighting collections – to realise designs that include her large-scale art-deco-inspired Jude pendant and wall lamps in brass and smoked glass. She is currently working on two interior projects in Lagos, Nigeria, that are evocative of her pared-back, refined aesthetic.



Mimi Shodeinde in her London studio with a section of her Rina cabinet (£58,850)

**"ROKSANDA ILINCIC
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Bec Brittain with her pendant lights Helix Short and Long, from \$7,800

BEC BRITTAIN

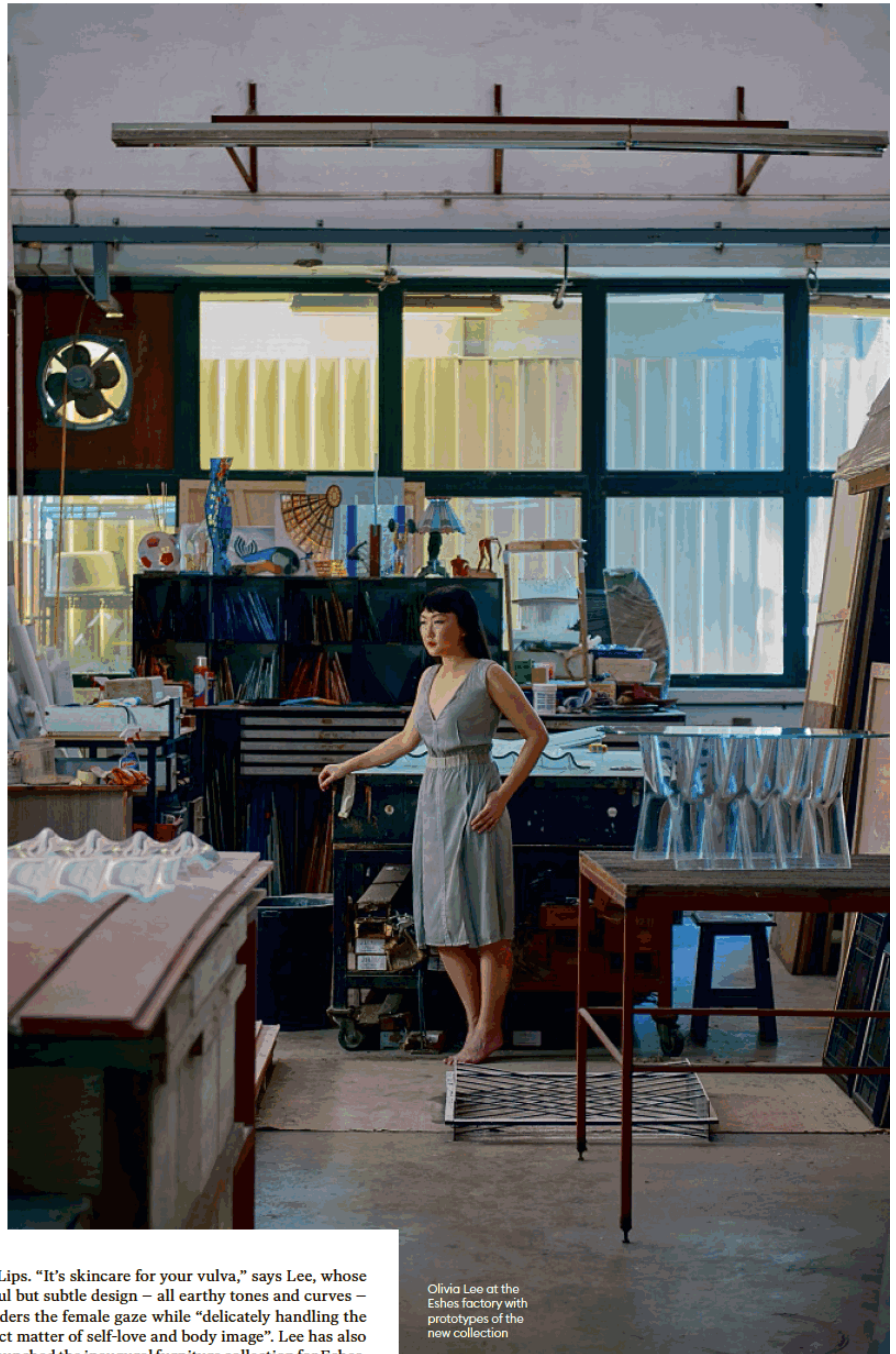
Brittain's lighting design studio was born of a love of working with metal. "There's a geek side to metalwork in figuring out the hundredths of an inch required to fit things together," says Brittain, who designed luxury door hardware before finding a mentor in lighting designer Lindsey Adelman, and then striking out on her own in 2011. "Lighting is fun. Yes, it's functional, but it's also sculpture." This approach manifests itself in a collection of pendants in geometric forms crafted in brass, bronze, pewter or nickel, with glass elements. Her more experimental pieces include a limited-edition pair of breast-shaped wall lights with floor-length tassels and the bespoke Aries Rising Capricorn chandelier – a mass of coloured fibre-optic rods that bend and intertwine. "It's the direction the studio is going in," Brittain says. "I'm doing weirder things, more messing around – I'm currently trying to create magical inflated sculptures with parachutes."

OLIVIA LEE

For Singapore-based industrial designer Lee, a fusion of ancient Greek mythology with modern technology was the starting point for her Where Athena Lives furniture collection, conceived in 2017 to establish her studio internationally at Milan Design Week. "It's rebelliously feminine," she says of her work, which is future-proofed with details designed to complement a tech-reliant world. The Altar vanity table, for example, is topped with a ring light and smartphone holder to take the perfect selfie. "Being in the world of industrial design doesn't mean having to sacrifice your femininity," she remarks of the soft pastel palette. "When I first started my practice, I thought, I'm just going to go for it. I'm going to be as whimsical and humorous and impractical as possible."

There's whimsy in spades in one of her latest projects: the flagship Singapore store for intimate skincare range

Two Lips. "It's skincare for your vulva," says Lee, whose playful but subtle design – all earthy tones and curves – considers the female gaze while "delicately handling the subject matter of self-love and body image". Lee has also just launched the inaugural furniture collection for Eshes, a new brand founded by a local glass manufacturing firm, all while teaching design at the National University of Singapore. "Half of my students are female, and I always aim to empower them, particularly by telling them they can be as good at technical aspects such as 3D modelling as the boys," she says. "The prevailing sentiment is, 'Women, you handle colour, material and finish; let us handle the structure.' But you know what? We are good at colour, material and finish – and then some. As a female industrial designer with an eponymous practice in Asia, I know how important representation is."



Olivia Lee at the Eshes factory with prototypes of the new collection

"I'M GOING TO BE AS WHIMSICAL AND HUMOROUS AS POSSIBLE"

EGG COLLECTIVE

A year after establishing their studio in 2011, friends and former architecture students Crystal Ellis, Stephanie Beamer and Hillary Petrie received the Best New Designer award at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York. This led to a commission by the New York City Ballet and the realisation of their Georgie ottomans (from \$2,500), which consist of modular trapezoid and hexagonal seats that can be placed together in different arrangements – like dancers joined together in a performance – or teamed with the triangular Samuel side table, in satin or blackened brass finishes.

Their understated aesthetic focuses on the beauty of raw materials such as walnut or maple wood, as shown in the minimal Densen armchair (from \$2,400), its seat woven from natural Danish cord; or the ebru-coloured woollen fabric collection created in collaboration with textile artist Hiroko Takeda on the softly structured Howard sectional sofa. “Our business has grown organically and we’re about to move the manufacturing side to significantly bigger premises,” says Beamer, adding that as a trio, they’ve also created a built-in support structure. “We’ve got one another to bounce ideas off and that helps to push us forward.”



From left: Stephanie Beamer, Crystal Ellis and Hillary Petrie of Egg Collective, behind their Isla coffee table

“WE’VE GOT ONE ANOTHER TO BOUNCE IDEAS OFF”

Eny Lee Parker with her Twist Column Light from the BC Collection



PHOTOGRAPHS: SEANDAVISON, ANDRIE LUTICA, SILVIA RIVOLTA/STUDIOPEPE

STUDIOPEPE

Since setting up as Studiopepe in Milan in 2006, Arianna Lelli Mami and Chiara Di Pinto have established themselves as innovators in both interior and product design, collaborating with well known brands as well as envisaging more artistic limited editions and conceptual spaces. In June, they will launch a new collection for Italian furniture brand Baxter, including a series of chunky sculptural outdoor pieces in concrete, and a Studiopepe-designed Hermès pop-up store is set to open in Rome this month.

Also in June, their first range of collectable design pieces will be unveiled by Galerie Philia at a renovated factory building in Milan’s Baranzate district during Design Week. Inspired by anthropological research, the sculptural chairs, tables and lamps are a mix of burnt wood, concrete and marble.

They have one bugbear about being known as a female duo: “I really don’t like it when people suggest that because we are two women our work is more decorative,” says Di Pinto. On the whole, however, they see being women in a male-dominated industry as an advantage. As Lelli Mami says: “Heritage brands want to work with us because they recognise we can bring fresh air to a project.”



Arianna Lelli Mami (left) and Chiara Di Pinto of Studiopepe

ENY LEE PARKER

New York-based, Brazilian-born Korean designer Eny Lee Parker saw her double-pronged Oo Lamp (from \$5,000) become a social media sensation when it first appeared in 2018 and was picked up by influencers such as the Swedish model Elsa Hosk. Now, Lee Parker has transformed her apartment into a showroom and events space, where she’ll host food-artist dinners and other creative gatherings alongside her work, which includes the towering Rope Column light (POA) and her simple, curvy upholstered Stitch Stool (\$2,800) – a design she came up with at college “when my mom taught me how to do a cross-stitch”.

Many of the pieces are handmade predominantly in clay with five other team members. Her work reclaims traditional craft processes with millennial verve and ambition. “I think that handcrafted methods are what makes an object special,” she says. “We also work with small local businesses on upholstery and woodworking.” A video on her Instagram account shows her boiler-suited and barefoot, brandishing an angle grinder to smooth off a chunky ceramic Cell table (\$6,000). ■ HTSI

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