



Sibling Revelry

by Jen Renzi

Fernando and Humberto Campana, the Brazilian brothers who've given us snake-shaped sofas and inflatable tables, celebrate their latest accolade — Design Miami's coveted Designer of the Year award.

It's half past noon and the Campana brothers are getting a late start today. "We had a party last night to launch our Fall collection for Brazilian shoe-maker Melissa" explains Humberto, recounting a festive evening fueled by avant-garde footwear and one too many caipirinhas. "It's been a slow morning. Fernando only just rolled in!"

Lest you think that a typical day in the life of the maverick Brazilian design duo involves partying late and sleeping in, it turns out that quite the opposite is true. The two usually arrive at their Sao Paulo studio at the crack of dawn and work at an unrelenting pace — often tweaking designs they've already completed. "I'll spend an entire day weiding just the right curvature into a piece of metal," Humberto explains. "And then see it in the shop the next morning and think, No! Destroy it!" The Campanas are unapologetic perfectionists. But they also relish the exquisite torture of the design-development phase, which — like all aspects of their practice — is a team effort. "Prototyping is the hardest part, but also the most liberating and exciting since we don't yet know where we want to arrive."

One place the Campanas have arrived is at the apex of the contemporary design scene. They are critical darlings with populist appeal. Their furnishings have been exhibited at the Museum of Design and Applied Arts in Lausanne, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Vitra Design Museum, to name a few, and their long-term collaboration was the subject of a 2004 retrospective at the London Design Museum. They have also played guest curator, organizing the Cooper-Hewitt's Campana Brothers Select earlier this year. Their breakout show was a 1998 exhibition at New York's MoMA, where the duo's infamous bubble-wrap chair, inflatable side table and other witty creations were shown alongside Ingo Maurer's lighting; that same year, Edra began producing their Vermelha armchair, a loop-de-loop of red cotton string on a tripod base. It was their first manufactured piece.

The duo has since designed vases for Alessi, a chandelier for Swarovski, injection-molded thermoplastic flats for Melissa, stage sets for the Ballets National de Marseille and the Guggenheim's upcoming production of Peter and the Wolf, and even a hotel, which opens next spring in Athens. Add to this list of accolades: Design Miami's coveted Designer of the Year award for 2008. "It's an honor to receive the prize, but it demands much more from us!" Humberto jokes.

The two have come a long way from their humble beginnings as an aspiring architect (Fernando) and a reluctant lawyer (Humberto) who painted woven baskets to pay for their classes at the Brazilian Museum of Sculpture. They started making one-off and limited-edition pieces in the early '80s, and have since stayed true to their hands-on process, which begins with an investigation of a particular material (garden hoses, PVC tubing, cardboard) — the more quotidian or offbeat the better. "It is only after exploring the material that we start to construct the shape and develop the function," Humberto explains. "Design goes so much deeper than form and function, but it has to have both elements. Otherwise, it's just sculpture."

The Campanas design exclusively for a handful of clients with whom they enjoy

close relationships, like Edra creative director Massimo Morozzi. “Massimo is so interesting — he is like Fellini! Full of humor,” says Humberto. “We have spent a lot of time in each other’s homes. Fernando and I like people who share the same chemistry, so we can concentrate all our energy on dreaming up new ideas and creating them.” The fruits of their 10-year collaboration include some of the Campanas’ most iconic pieces: Boa sofa, a French braid of plush velvet snakes; Corallo, a sort of three-dimensional doodle sculpted from a tangle of colored wire and a mass-produced version of their Favela chair, crafted from wood scraps salvaged from the Sao Paulo streets. Because their designs require so much handcraftsmanship, the two are active participants in the production process, occasionally training factory workers.

Today, the Campanas’ own workshop is busy creating installations for Design Miami, a perk of the awards program. For the pavilion designed by Aranda\Lasch, they are envisioning a version of their ongoing TransPlastic series, which interweave sustainable Brazilian apui fibers with objects like plastic lawn chairs or, in this case, tree branches and rough-hewn crystals. It is a microcosm of their hometown. “Sao Paulo is a chaotic, oppressive city; you must seek beauty in hidden corners. Whenever I need to decompress, I visit this huge crystal supermarket near the studio, sometimes for hours at a time. Going there is like penetrating the earth,” Humberto says. The two pieces — each is 10 feet long and supported by a metal armature — will share a similar inward-looking sensibility. “They go deep inside themselves, like human organs.”

The Campanas’ scheme for the VIP lounge also exploits weaving techniques: a cocoon of raffia sourced from Madagascar, a special fiber they first experimented with for the 2004 Cologne Furniture Fair’s Ideal House. It will be “contaminated” with a selection of their designs for Edra, including Vermelha chairs and Brasilia tables topped in layered shards of colored, mirrored glass. “It is very baroque — sort of the new art nouveau,” Humberto explains. “Our work always derives from nature, but we like to create these shocks between two different worlds: city and countryside.”

That same duality — a little urban, a little pastoral — is what attracts the Campanas to Miami, where they have hosted workshops at the Design and Architecture Senior High school, performed public glass-blowing at last year’s Design Miami and enjoyed frequent vacations. Humberto, for one, is excited to eat at his favorite Cuban restaurant, Versailles, and ride his bike along the Venetian Causeway. “I love Miami! It is impossible to be stressed when you are surrounded by water and sunlight” And when your brain is filled with brilliant ideas just waiting to hatch.