

Compiled by THE VOGUE LIVING TEAM  
Written by ANNEMARIE KIELY

# WOMEN in DESIGN

PATRICIA  
THE FORCE OF NATURE  
URQUIOLA

The *irrepressible* influence and *unsurpassed talents* of these design powerhouses, who REBEL against the under-representation of women in museum collections and academic literature, reminds that *CREATIVE GENIUS* does not favour one gender.

W

hen design great Patricia Urquiola recently took to the podium at Sydney Modern, Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), as guest of honour at the inaugural VL50 awards presented by Mobilia, she waxed lyrical about an exhibition encountered within that explained the lives of all creatives in attendance.

“It is about the controlling of cows,” she effused in a jetlagged stream of Spanglish that posited rhythm and structure as stabilisers for the tremulous steps taken by designers into the dark terrain of night. “Always keeping the sanity.”

Her impassioned delivery drew applause, but the connection between bovines and Australia’s best designers begged further elucidation. And so, days later, when meeting the Milan-based Spanish architect and aesthetic all-rounder in Mobilia’s Melbourne showroom, a series of *mise-en-scène* rooms artfully set with her sensual experimentations for Cassina, Moroso, Kettal, Glas Italia and CC-tapis, the question ventures about cows and designers perhaps both scaring easily and sharing a wide field of vision.

Urquiola, wearing a happy clash of black-and-white stripes and cobalt colour blocking, turns to her life and business partner, Studio Urquiola co-founder Alberto Zontone, and plaintively asks, “Cows?”

Moments pass as they exchange in Spanish-Italian while I enumerate the cattle-centric artworks in the AGNSW collection, then Zontone cracks up and corrects ‘cows’ with ‘chaos’ — a word that with Urquiola’s Spanish elision “makes a nice misinterpretation”.

There is a laugh-out-loud milking of the mistaken metaphor — designers also synthesising sun, air and cerebral pasture into nourishing form — followed by Zontone’s email send of a screed entitled, *The controlling of chaos — “not cows”*.

Taken from a text enlightening a section of works by the late Louise Bourgeois, whose art Urquiola saw surveyed in the AGNSW exhibition *Has the Day Invaded the Night or Has the Night Invaded the Day?*, it nominates ‘reliable, regular’ geometry as the stabilising device for the messy contingency of relationships and emotions always waiting to engulf Bourgeois.

“By giving that chaos a rhythm and structure,” it explains, “she could quell and temporarily dispel it. This, for Bourgeois, is the gift that artists are lucky to possess — the ability to tap into the unconscious and reshape fears and unsettling emotions.”

“Art is a guarantee of sanity,” says Urquiola in repeat of Bourgeois’s famous words. “She was describing how important creative people are, how we must have gratitude, because they have the possibility to control the ‘kay-os’, to find a new equilibrium, new metrics to share with others, and that is fantastic.”

As one whose moves have been thoroughly mapped from the birth of Studio Urquiola in Milan in 2001 to the receipt of the Spanish government’s highest honour, the *Medalla de Oro al Mérito en las Bellas Artes* in 2011 (joining Goya and Picasso in the hall of greats), Urquiola has a history laid bare.

Thus, we gloss over awards, appointments (adding creative director of Cassina in 2015) and exhibitions — from MoMA in New York to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London — and go for some undeclared personal likes and proclivities.

“I am very private, and if something is private, I will protect it,” Urquiola brick-walls. But Zontone attunes to the media want for ‘bites’ that codify process without defiling a confidence. “If I may,” he says with a deferential nod to his wife, “she was born in Oviedo in the Asturias, a green region, more like Ireland, near the ocean in Spain, and when she sees and hears the ocean, it has a magical effect on her.”

“Si, si, you need an energy and that is my music,” Urquiola approves. “The land is very, very green... and the culture is, how you say, very essential, women have to manage as many things as men. My mother, who is Asturian, always say ‘you’re as Basques as your father’... the [design] rigour comes from my culture, it is not folkloric.”

According to Zontone, Basque country boasts more Michelin stars than any other like-sized region in the world (33 across 23 restaurants in 2024), counting Eneko in Bilbao, a fine dining establishment in which Studio Urquiola manifested chef Eneko’s conviviality and the wider Basques culture in a textured mix of stone, ceramic and rope.



It prompts the ask about a personally preferred dining tone and taste. Urquiola requires no time to reflect, citing the Édouard Manet painting *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1863) as a masterful manifestation of her ideal, from which it is presumed she likes picnics in the park, not lunching publicly in the nude.

“In the last two days we were going for long walks in the [Royal] Botanic Gardens [Victoria],” she says of Melbourne’s 38 hectares of extraordinary horticulture. “The second day we went with a salad, a plate and a blanket, possibly for me this [the garden] is the first and best room.”

As for literary works that have rocked her world, Urquiola calls Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (Remembrance of Things Past) a lifelong companion and “fantastic obsession” that has, arguably, impacted her take on time. “When people say I am doing this project that is timeless, it is not a valid way to approach work. You can be putting a lot of energy into your work, but you always relate it to the time you are in. There is not a formula [for timelessness] your answer has to be connected with the time you are in.”

She echoes German filmmaker Wim Wenders, who maintains that you “cannot intend to make a film that matters,” but sometimes something miraculous happens and “a film that is dear to somebody’s heart, like the filmmaker, becomes dear to other hearts.”

“I loved, loved, loved his *Perfect Days*,” she says of the 2023 Academy Award nominated film by Wenders about a public toilet cleaner in Tokyo who leaves a life of luxury behind to revel in the ‘holiness’ of seemingly meaningless tasks and sanitary terrain. It is an ode to solitude and the happy certitude of rituals that speaks to Urquiola who credits the auteur director with the reason she first came to Australia in search of the central desert location featured in his sci-fi epic *Until the End of the World* (1991). “A woman pursues a man in possession of a device that can bring dreams to life and it ends in the middle of Australia, but I could not find this place,” she says of seeking a location that was nothing more than a cinematic metaphor, a visual echo.

But such is the power of the creative to tether fictions in implied facts that chaos temporarily dissipates, and the cows come home. “I keep coming back to find it.”

PHOTOGRAPHER: SEAN FENNESSY (PATRICIA URQUIOLA)



# KELLY

THE OLD SOUL, NEW SPIRIT

# WEARSTLER

She may hail from subtropical South Carolina, design-schooled in Ivy League Boston, and interned with graphics-guru Milton Glaser in New York, but Kelly Wearstler was always destined for the showbiz state. “California aligns with my design ethos because it fearlessly challenges convention,” she has said of opening her namesake studio in 1995 in Los Angeles — “a crucible for the continual emergence of fresh talent”. For nearly three decades Wearstler has crafted spectacularly furnished fictions through its blockbuster lens; art-directing her clients’ stories with an overlaid aesthetic and object clues to their characters. The pastiche is hard to pin, but her contrast of high-end contemporary art, campy form, straight-back rigour, antique curio, fearless colour, and look-at-me glitz could only emanate from L.A. Just don’t call her portfolio eclectic; a cliché undermining her ‘old soul, new spirit’ philosophy, and falling short of her far reach across design (from high-end hotels to homes), products (from seating to ceramics), partnerships (from Hummer to Maison Margiela), social media (counting 2 million-plus on Instagram), and fashion (endorsed by front row vantage at the best shows). Oh, and did we mention art? Wearstler not only curates with a finger-grip on the cultural pulse but shares her divination of talent in a digital gallery that exists in the reachable ether.



# NINA YASHAR

THE ORACLE

With her predilection for turbans, precious gems, and Prada cloaks (courtesy of her fashion bestie Miuccia), Milan-based gallerist Nina Yashar looks every part the gypsy queen as she holds court and crystal-ball counsel within the three-level dream world of her Nilufar Gallery. Named after the Farsi word for lotus flower, symbol of Yashar’s birthplace Iran, and nestled into Milan’s golden fashion thoroughfare Via della Spiga, the gallery configures Yashar’s yardsticks of design greatness into suggestive scenographies that run the reference gamut, from Italian realist cinema to women’s rights. Whether it’s the anonymous hand of history next to an ascendant contemporary star, all design sits with an equal weighting and a wild adjacency to flush out new readings of form. The artful incongruities spill into the ‘great void’ of Nilufar Depot in Milan’s industrial Derganino district, where 2000 square metres of exhibition space make more emphatic point about reward offering in design antagonisms. “I am reckless, I take big, big risks,” Yashar has previously confided to *Vogue Living* in relation to her Milan home — an extraordinary amalgam of “atmospheres” realised by Giancarlo Montebello, the haute-jeweller famed for collaborating with the art-world likes of Luciano Pontana in the 1960s. But the alternative of bare white walls is “a boredom” she says no one should explore. Hence, the new Nilufar Open Edition, a series of 100-plus pieces of Italian-made furnishings and lighting that makes her artful frissons accessible to everyone.

PHOTOGRAPHERS: SARA LORUSSO AND ONETTANO GONZÁLEZ (NINA YASHAR); JOYCE PARK (KELLY WEARSTLER)



THE BOUNDARY BUSTER

# INDIA MAHDAVI

As a trained architect who prefers to describe as a 'polychrome polyglot', India Mahdavi flies high above the perimeters that cleave design into categories. "All my life I have tried to get rid of the borders," she explained in public address before the launch of *Pierre Bonnard: Designed by India Mahdavi* at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in 2023 — a meet-cute of two master colourists across the divide of time. She told of being born in Tehran to an Iranian father and an English-Egyptian mother, moving to Cambridge Massachusetts for her father's Harvard posting and absorbing in America's technicolour optimism, then living in the monochrome quiet of Heidelberg, Germany "where the sky was low and grey". "We moved 11 times all together and I switched languages three times," she said of wide-ranging cultural exposures that explain why she colours structure, space and scenography through the rose-tint of childhood. It's a design intuition that delivered Pierre Gagnaire's three-Michelin-starred restaurant and gallery Sketch in London as an 'essentialism' of pink. Arguably the most Instagrammed interior project on the planet, it has latterly recast in champagne gold — a life-affirming fizz that Mahdavi made fit Gagnaire's agenda to serially switch it up. More recently the designer has rocked Rome's Villa Medici with bold geometrics that force a re-reading of its Renaissance art. She was named in *Architectural Digest's* 2019 Hall of Fame, declared winner of *Frame Magazine's* 2022 Lifetime Achievement Award, awarded Designer of the Year 2023 by *Wallpaper* magazine and described as a "virtuoso of colour" by the *New Yorker*, and *Vogue Living* rates Mahdavi as the maestro of tangible memory.



THE CHANGEMAKERS

# ARMADILLO

Founded in 2009 by social changemakers Jodie Fried and Sally Pottharst, Armadillo, like its namesake armoured creature, burrows protective niche around the regional business of hand-crafting traditional rugs. Not only are the philanthropic duo delivering on aesthetics with natural-fibre flooring that tells the sensorial story of specific place and people, they also dish on the ethics of disposable culture, advocating for a conscious consumerism that sustains age-old artisan practices and gives girls from marginalised backgrounds a leg-up into early learning. Now counting showrooms in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Los Angeles, New York and San Francisco, Fried and Pottharst prove that you can run a game-changing business that rates as a 'Best Place to Work' (so says the *Financial Review*), from the bi-poles of London and Los Angeles (for Fried) and the Adelaide Hills (for Pottharst) while grounding life in works of beauty that give back. Recently launching their 'take two' LA showroom in the city's design-heart La Cienega, where Aussie architect David Goss delivered on their ask for a high-fashion boutique vibe, the pair keep singing the song of mindful sustainability. Only now it's in Staccato — the so-called rug weavings of lustrous silk and random linen loops that we're rating a hit!



THE MEXICAN NEW WAVE

# FRIDA ESCOBEDO

There must be something in the water south of the Mexican border because a flood of Latin female talent is filling our inboxes and alerting to the architecture of Tatiana Bilbao, Fernanda Canales, Gabriela Carrillo and the fabulous Frida Escobedo, who was recently named the recipient of Le Prix Charlotte Perriand for 2024. Issued by the Créateurs Design Awards in memory of the iconic French architect and designer, the prize accompanied with praise for a body of Escobedo's work including the 2018 commission for the Serpentine Pavilion in London (a Mexican courtyard made of roof tiles by the youngest ever recipient of the honour) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art's contemporary wing expansion in New York. The jury eulogised Escobedo's 'daring concepts, visionary approach, and profound impact on the field' that has long been dominated by men. "To find myself acknowledged by this remarkable jury is an honour that resonates deeply within me," said Escobedo, whose eponymous practice continually seeks to restore community in ruptured urban fabrics with low-cost housing expressed in local language. "It serves as a testament to the enduring legacy of Charlotte Perriand, a legacy I am humbled and overjoyed to perpetuate."

PHOTOGRAPHERS: ANTOINETTE DOVEN (INDIA MAHDAVI), CLÉMENT PASCAL (FRIDA ESCOBEDO), VICTORIA ZSCHOMMLER (ARMADILLO)





THE FREE RADICAL

# ANNA KARLIN

Try pigeon-holing the British-born, New York-based discipline-defying Anna Karlin into a style or specialty and taxonomies will quickly twist into a knot as convoluted as her Squidge Table Lamp, a sculpting of gloopy cast and crisp blown glass that electrifies the debate over what constitutes art. 'To hell with the separation of siloes,' shouts her creative folio; a dazzling compendium spanning fine jewellery (think Harry Winston-big baguette rings spliced with Studio 54 disco sass), furnishings, fabrics, and interior fit outs that, at times, tether folkloric Swedish classicism with *Flintstones* prehistoric fun in a fizz of biophilic futurism. In short, Karlin is an anarchic autodidact who, though schooled in visual communications at London's Central Saint Martins (Art Foundation) and the Glasgow School of Art, delights in not designing to first principles but letting fantasy build from inert materials into a mise en scène of quizzical parts. It all happens in what she calls a Willy Wonka factory; a studio singing to the candy man credo: 'There is no life to compare with pure imagination'.

# YASMINE

THE MIRAGE MAKER

# GHONIEM

Long before Yasmine Ghoniem appeared on our screens as the amiable co-host of the ABC's *Grand Designs Transformations* — the show trained on Australian renovators realising their dream homes through the realities of construction — she was beaver-ing away in her namesake interiors practice YSG, known for its left-of-field 'cool'. She still is, but new-found screen fame (she's a natural on camera) affords the freedom to fall more selectively and spectacularly into wild concept, as captured in the Sydney home of beauty entrepreneur Zoë Foster Blake and her broadcast-star husband Hamish Blake featured in *Vogue Living's* November/December 2022 issue. It pulses with Ghoniem's trippy mix of oasis fertility and full-tilt rock 'n' roll and clues you in to the designer's early drift between Kuwait, Dubai and Saudi Arabia as the daughter of an Egyptian chemical engineer and a red-headed Australian mother, who found her paramour living next door in Libya. Ghoniem dodged bombs during the Gulf War, formed a cover band in Kuwait, won scholarship to the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) in the deep south of America and volunteered as an aid worker in Africa; all of which delivers in an electrifying mirage of memories that makes you want to ditch sober minimalism.





## THE ASCENDING STAR JOSÉPHINE FOSSEY

Hailing from the Paris bureau of auction bastion Christie's, where her research built around specialties in Impressionism and Modern Art, Joséphine Fossey recalls the magnetic pull to collections that were the sum of strange parts and periods. Most notably the art and objects assembled by fashion greats Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé, who often cited Duchamp's advice that "the most important thing in art is not always the result, but the artistic act". Fossey left the auction giant in 2013 to follow in their instinctive curatorial footsteps, opening a consultancy dedicated to the elevation of art in luxury homes and hotels, including the likes of the Lutetia in Paris, the Rosewood in Vienna and The Woodward in Geneva. Her expertise was fast availed by the brand elites of Cartier, Perrier-Jouët and the Orient Express, but by 2021 she had axiom-flipped her advisory edge from 'living with art' to the 'art of living', addressing the entire aestheticism of occupying space with her team of artistic directors, interior architects and curators. Call it a return to the Bauhaus precepts of 'Gesamtkunstwerk' (total work of art) or the application of fastidious French taste — whatever the tag, Joséphine Fossey Office is balancing history with ad hoc contrasts, from chalet to chateaux, with an edgy holism that has us begging to see more.



## THE ONE TO WATCH HOLLIE BOWDEN

Moved by the wabi-sabi imperfectionism of Axel Vervoordt and the cultivated high classicism of Jacques Grange, UK designer Hollie Bowden is a comfortable contradiction in terms. Though it could be argued that her "maximal minimalism" is a rational response to this era's pull to the polarities. "I am drawn to natural pieces and finishes and artisan craftsmanship," she says with the add that she is just as much a curator intent on telling a story as she is an interior designer. "I believe deeply in the integration of old and new," taking architectural history and context into full consideration and forever sourcing "extraordinary pieces that might otherwise go unseen or unloved." She's a Brit-grit blend of vintage romanticism and rock 'n' roll luring the likes of FKA twigs, whose style Bowden synthesised into an eccentric ambience in the artist's London home. For eschewing the generic and embracing the oddball in interiors, we raise our glasses to Bowden.