



RIGHT NOW WHO
Words by HARRY ROBERTS

Culture clash

Benjamin Shine's designs marry unlikely icons.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Designer Benjamin Shine. 'Egg Letter Box'. 'Analogue' side table. 'Changing States' single US flag woven through nylon mesh. 'Box Lounger'. 'Taxi Elephants'.

BURSTING FROM A LONDON telephone booth, a three-metre giraffe in the midst of Leicester Square is just the kind of culture clash that delights Benjamin Shine. The installation titled 'Long Distance' was part of the city's 2012 BT Artbox exhibition and, as the young artist explains, "reflects today's communication technology, where distant worlds are seemingly transported to our own". It's an idea that resonates for Benjamin who divides his time between London and Canberra, two very different corners of the globe.

"Lego, Transformers, Rubik's Magic and the magnetic paperclip holder definitely have a lot to answer for," says Benjamin of the sparks that set him on the design path. Since then, his work has moved in similarly unexpected directions. He first studied fashion design at The Surrey Institute of Art and Design and later Central Saint Martins in London. Having masterminded a dazzling array of projects, including large-scale public sculptures, privately commissioned portraits, furniture, toys, sportswear and accessories, he has proved to be a versatile virtuoso. "I have a constant desire to develop ideas that are worthy of existing, timeless in design and always memorable," he explains. "If my work can provoke the reaction 'How?' or 'Wow!' then I'm satisfied."

"My early work was based on the idea of bringing the painted or drawn line to life through fabric," continues Benjamin. "Mixed-media portraits constructed from fabric, woven through eyelets on various materials." These arresting photorealistic images, seemingly "painted" with single sheets of fabric, remain the artist's trademark, immortalising the likes of Elizabeth Taylor, Princess Diana, Barack Obama and Margaret Thatcher in a gossamer cloud of tulle (or in Obama's case, a shredded American flag). Working from photographs in his Canberra studio, Benjamin conjures these polarising figures, much like Andy Warhol, as pieces of iconography.

It's no wonder the artist has charmed audiences with his work, especially when wearing his heritage on his sleeve. "This theme has grown unintentionally," he says of the Anglo motifs so gleefully channelled in 'Long Distance', as well as its companion piece, 'Box Lounger', and the design that is perhaps his best known, 'Egg Letter Box'. Created for London's 2012 Fabergé Big Egg Hunt – a public exhibition also headlined by Sir Ridley Scott, Zandra Rhodes and Diane von Furstenberg – the crowd pleaser was infamously stolen from its Carnaby Street location. Following public outcry and a police investigation, the ovoid postbox was returned and later auctioned for charity.

Another charity piece, 'Taxi Elephant' sees Benjamin again playing visual mixmaster. The cross-pollination of London cab and Asian elephant is both a poignant reminder of the endangered species' plight, and a nod to the social network's triumph over the tyranny of distance.

"Living in Australia has allowed me the luxury to work in my studio uninterrupted by daily business demands of the UK and overseas," says Benjamin. "Only in the evening, do I switch to UK time to respond to enquiries and have meetings via Skype." Set to expand his practice in Australia, while also developing projects with LVMH and London Design Week, Benjamin's inventions reflect a curious cultural standpoint in our ever-shrinking world.

For more go to benjaminshine.com.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MELISSA ADAMS (COURTESY OF THE CANBERRA TIMES)