

A LOU OF INCLIVE

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A HAIRY LAMP SWINGS LIKE A LEGLESS GHOST from a Japanese tale. Tadpoles seem to swarm inside a coaster. A remote control visibly pulses as if breathing and stiffens into readiness when touched. These and two dozen other not-so-commonplace objects are at the heart of “Haptic–Awakening the Senses,” a traveling exhibition launched in Tokyo last year by the eminent designer Kenya Hara to help bridge the gulf between technology and feeling.

Sponsored by Takeo Co., a Japanese paper manufacturer, “Haptic” offers projects by a diverse cast of design celebrities that excite the sense of touch. Lest that brief be interpreted too narrowly, Hara points out that tactility goes hand in hand with the other four senses. And so the master plasterer Shuhei Hasado contributed traditional Japanese sandals (geta) growing moss or slick with white plaster. The artist Yasuhiro Suzuki produced paper-clay bowls molded directly from cabbage leaves. And the architect Kengo Kuma designed hand towels that resemble neatly folded snakeskins. When Jasper Morrison, who

“Everything occurs on the skin,” the 47-year-old designer, a quiet silver-haired cherub, is fond of saying. He is quoting the 19th-century doctor-physicist Hermann Helmholtz, who observed that we pick up diverse sensations through a singular apparatus: the membranes that absorb sights, smells, and sounds. By heightening the senses and blending them into a rich broth through design, Hara aims to restore to us a truer, more direct experience of the world—one that he believes modern technology has diminished. “We cannot attain real happiness by resorting to virtual happiness,” he writes in the “Haptic” catalog (Takeo Co., 2004).

The theories underpinning “Haptic” are as important to Hara as the objects. Although he was once an ordinary graphic designer struggling to stabilize a practice devoted to packaging and poster work within the distinguished Nippon Design Center in Tokyo, today he is, more than anything else, a conceptual leader. In his “Filing” exhibition, also presented as part of the 2004 Takeo Paper Show, he explored how creative people organize their stuff. Among the displays were an editor’s paper-bag filing system, a set of woodworker’s drawers adorned with samples of the iron fittings stocked within, and Issey Miyake’s fabric model for an A-POC dress covered with a checkerboard of thread colors and pattern samples. For the exhibition “Re-design” (2000), he challenged 32 designers to interpret such homely items as matches, stamps, toilet tissue, and paper plates. He wanted people to know there were alternatives to the many ill-designed objects they blithely accept. Even his playful “Architect’s Macaroni Exhibition” (1997) was a thoughtful material exploration, albeit of pasta. Colleagues have called him an idea editor, a designer of meaning.

humidity's effect on one's sense of touch to scientific explanations of the colors found in beetles and pearls to comparisons of onomatopoeia in non-Romance languages. ("The Turkish express a hard rain as sakir sakir, while we express it as zaa zaa in Japanese," the architect Masayo Aoe notes.) Elsewhere in the catalog, Hara refers to his "Exformation" project with students at Musashino Art University. Conceived as the opposite of information gathering, the exercise "makes clear how little one understands" of familiar objects. "I have prepared a framework, through which my students would come to realize how ignorant they are of a coffee cup, or how heavily mixed up with preconception that object is," he explains. Relieved of contextual baggage, the beholders are more dependent on sensory perceptions for insights into their environment. Or, in Hara's crisp summation: "Ignorance is power."

Hara's own power today springs from his insistence that the idea be primary. His leadership role at Muji, the "no brand" company that famously strips away the husk of designer labels to concentrate on a product's essence, is a remarkable fit. First conceived by the designer Ikko Tanaka in the 1980s, Muji's restrained vision was expressed in sans serif type and maroon and manila colors. But by the millennium, the company had lost its way. Its bulging product line included 5,000 items, and its international voice was vague. Having accepted the job of art director from Tanaka in 2002, shortly before the master died, Hara needed a concept that would appeal to board members, manufacturers, and customers alike. He began editing Muji's products and revamping its corporate image, paring both down in accordance with another of his key design principles, emptiness. His catalog images and ads may be stripped of products or stuffed with them. They may feature the horizon of the Uyuni Salt Lake in Mongolia dwarfing a figure standing on light blue sand, or two plain Muji toothbrushes in a Muji glass. But they all whisper

Also the amount of labor. Hara is a workhorse, keeping, alongside his staff, among the longest hours in the business. For the “Haptic” catalog, which he co-designed, he spent 10 full workdays directing a half-dozen photographers to ensure that the pictures not only expressed the products’ three dimensions, but also seemed to exude scents, tones, and tastes.

Hara’s graphic and signage design for Issey Miyake, Ginza Matsuya, and the Organizing Committee for the XVIII Olympic Winter Games show equal attention to detail and a remarkable sense of texture. But his mind seems made for collaborating and anthologizing. “Haptic” masterfully probed 22 unique brains yet presented a single vision. In middle age, Hara says he’s just beginning his real work, a matter of defining and explaining his trio of design obsessions: the senses, exformation, and emptiness. Like an ad set in a Mongolian landscape—like Hara himself, for that matter—they are stark, yet bursting with meaning.

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