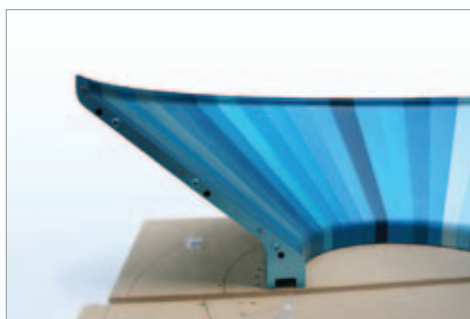


EYES FOR DETAIL

As acclaimed furniture and industrial design studio **BarberOsgerby** launches its limited edition Iris range, Christopher Kanal meets the London practice's founding partners.



Barber and Osgerby, both 39, sit opposite me in their office, a converted Shoreditch warehouse, surrounded by prototypes and bits and pieces of some of their 20-odd ongoing projects and a selection of completed items – a red De La Warr Pavilion Chair and a Saturn Stool are just two of the instantly recognisable pieces from their back catalogue tantalisingly on show.

'We have really good fun,' says Jay Osgerby. 'We love what we do so much.' His partner in design, Edward Barber, is showing me pictures of their stunning Iris furniture being created, a series of five limited edition designs for British brand Established & Sons. On his laptop screen we see sleek ribs of metal emerge from a smoky cauldron. 'We took the metal down to its finest, lightest, strongest form from a solid mass,' says Osgerby.

Barber and Osgerby are an engaging and humorous pair. Considering how accomplished and feted their work is, the designers are remarkably down-to-earth. Their portfolio ranges from furniture and lighting to drinks bottles. Sister Company, Universal Design Studio, founded in 2001, recently completed the exterior of the H&M store on Sunset Strip in Los Angeles.

The Iris tables have been crafted from a colourful spectrum of segmented aluminium that flickers through a glass top like a seductive eye.



Iris photos by Mark C O'Flaherty.

The concept behind Iris is simple, yet required a long process of engineering and design refinement to achieve its aesthetic simplicity. Using a process derived from metal milling techniques for creating aircraft and Formula One cars, the material was machined from solid aluminium and individually anodised, giving each segment a unique embedded colour. Barber believes anodising is more of an art than a process, where time, the strength of dyes, and the temperature all affect the final result – ‘like photography exposure,’ he says. One degree out can make all the difference.

The experience sums up the work of BarberOsgerby perfectly: simple ideas crafted into subtle and refreshingly original designs through extraordinary refinement. ‘There is a modest quality to much of their work that both recalls mid-twentieth century design and is a particularly British character trait,’ Gareth Williams, 20th-century furniture and product design curator at the Victoria & Albert Museum, tells me. ‘The Iris table is in a newer, more assertive direction, but has the same notion of simplicity of means to achieve an end.’

‘We are not architects,’ says Barber. ‘We are bogus,’ says Osgerby, as he explains the advantages of their background both in design and architecture. ‘We tried to shortcut the process but it has taken us twice as long,’ he adds. They tell me that their collective background has manifested itself in the way they interpret space and its relationship to an object. ‘If you think about space rather than just the object, you can see how the object fits into that space,’ explains Osgerby. ‘A lot of our furniture pieces have volume of air or space around them.’

Like any great duo – think Morecambe and Wise or Pete and Dud – the two designers spark off each other. There is also a marked physical resemblance: the tall, straight-talking Barber and shorter, cheerier Osgerby could be brothers. They have been friends since meeting in the mid-1990s as MA students in architecture at the RCA. After graduating, one of their first projects was a restaurant-interior commission. One piece of furniture, the Loop Table, went on to become a 20th century classic, with a place in the permanent collections

of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was exhibited at London’s 100% Design furniture fair in 1997 and snapped up by Italy’s then most progressive furniture maker, Cappellini. The success of Loop Table meant that other Italian manufacturers started calling and the pair embarked on projects with some of the best in the business, including Magis, Flos and Venini. ‘We are quite picky when choosing our manufacturers,’ says Barber. ‘We only work with ones that we really believe in.’ Some like Cappellini are institutions. Others like Isokon, are smaller. ‘It’s about their thinking,’ he says. ‘There is nothing more frustrating than working with a company that does not really get you or understand your work.’

Separate interiors and architecture company, Universal Design Studio, has designed flagship stores for Stella McCartney and Paul Smith, as well as Virgin Atlantic airport lounges and Damien Hirst’s now defunct Pharmacy restaurant. With success came awards, including the revered Jerwood Applied Arts Prize, which they won in 2004. They put their successful working relationship down to the fact that the two friends have never worked for anyone else. ‘We literally just got in there straight from college,’ explains Barber. ‘When you get a studio and meet new clients together and receive recognition and win awards together, the whole thing grows quite organically.’

Is there an identifiable BarberOsgerby style? ‘As a practitioner you can’t see it,’ says Osgerby.

‘If you take our Filo Sofa and RIBA Desk, they are very different in their language,’ adds Barber. ‘Someone might be able to connect the two, but I can’t see it myself.’

Their work blends art, craft, technological savvy and postmodern enquiry. Perhaps the only consistency is the quality and intense attention to detail that led one French magazine to describe their approach as ‘Slow design’.

‘Fundamentally, we try to design things which have longevity,’ says Osgerby. ‘We are not into transient pop products.’ Barber adds that they are both fascinated by the intricacies of the design process. ‘We like the ways

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The Loop Table (1997).

things come together,' he says. 'When we were kids we were always hacking things together like planes or stuff out of wood.' Iris could be said to be a culmination of that approach. 'Iris is mechanical, the way it is machined out and bolted together. The whole concept was to turn the idea that the colour always comes at the end of the design process on its head.'

Each Iris table in the series is constructed from a single geometric component, which has been repeated to form a tessellated ring – the largest of the series, Iris 1500, is made up from 60 individually coloured pieces. They are shaped to show off the hand-picked colour combinations to their best advantage. The hand-finishing process means that no two pieces are exactly the same.

'If you look at the finished result of Iris, it is a physical thing that you can use,' says Barber. 'It's a bit indulgent. In a way it's conceptual because we start with colour and reverse the normal process of design, but it's not blue sky.' Osgerby agrees: 'It's not challenging you in the way that much of the design art scene is. It's useful and has lots of different layers of meaning, but it's not a fairytale made in clay.'

All the projects that the designers undertake are collaborative. They are as comfortable working together on mass production projects for big manufacturers like Flos as they are creating edition pieces such as Iris and one-off commissions. 'We do a lot of commissions for wealthy individuals,' reveals Barber. 'For us it is a really good time to experiment.'

Do they prefer working on one-off editions? 'They are a catalyst,' says Osgerby. 'Special commissions are much freer because normally the budgets are grander and you can look outside your material frames of reference to do something really quite extraordinary.'

BarberOsgerby has a studious appreciation of detail and technique that sets it apart from brasher contemporaries. 'We do not shy away from craftsmanship and hand beating a design out of metal,' explains Barber.

'For us that adds incredible value to a product. It doesn't have to be mass-produced plastics and injection moulding.'

'Virtual design is big at the moment,' reflects Osgerby. 'You set up a computer program that says 'make a chair', press a button and the chair is created. There is a place for that, but it's not our thing.' ■

For more information, visit www.barberosgerby.com



Jay Osgerby, left, and Edward Barber.

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Edward Barber

The Filo Sofa (2009).

