

Johanna Grawunder's Glowing Design

ZOOMING PAST BRIGHT LIGHTS AND BILLBOARDS ON AN EIGHT-LANE FREEWAY IN SAN DIEGO HAD A GIDDYING EFFECT ON JOHANNA GRAWUNDER'S THREE-YEAR-OLD EYES. NOW, AS AN INNOVATIVE DESIGNER, SHE MAKES ULTRA-MODERN, COLORFUL FURNITURE THAT INCORPORATES ARTIFICIAL LIGHT.

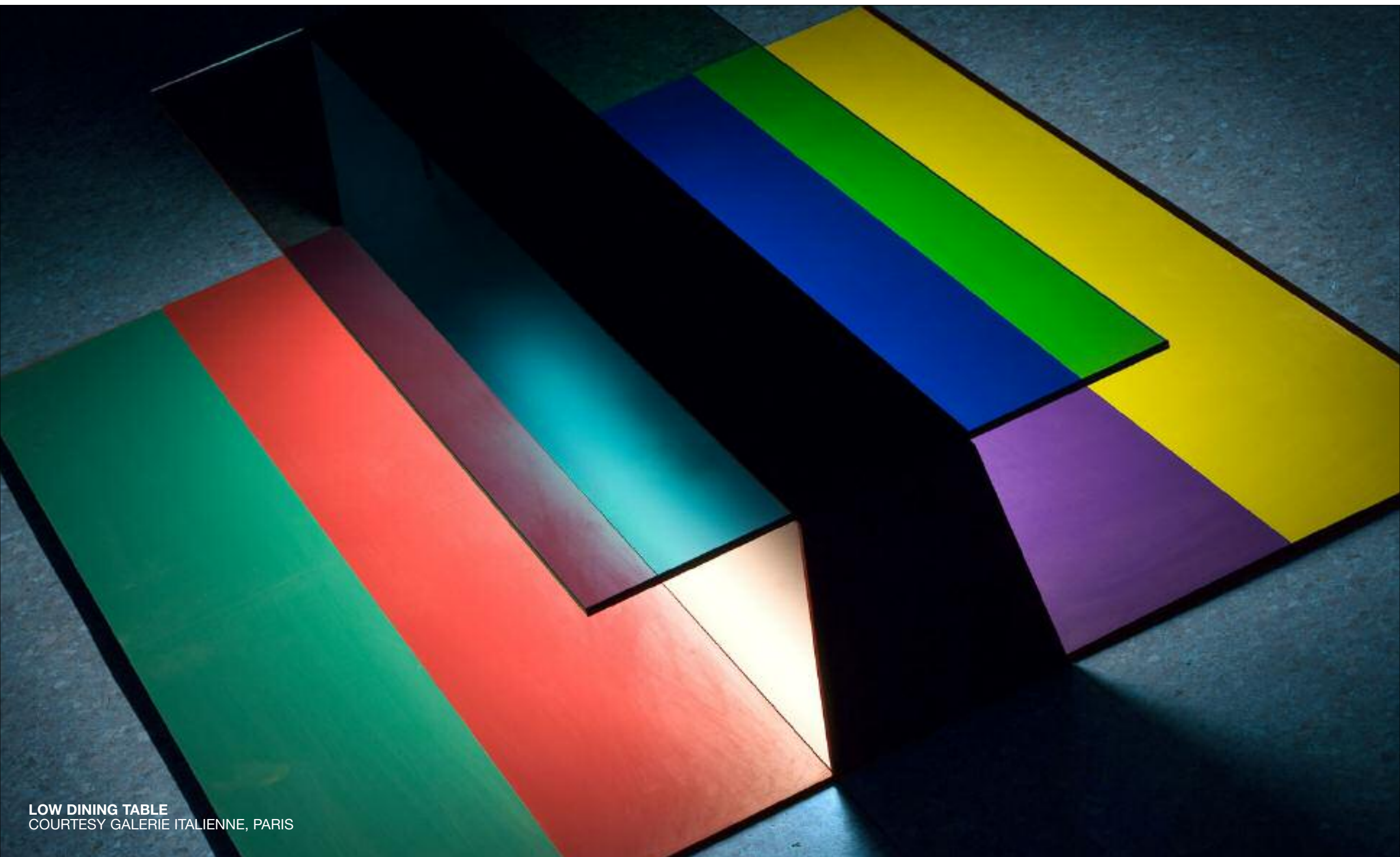
PERF BENCH

COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN
ACADEMY IN ROME,
PRODUCED WITH ROBERTO
GIUSTINI & PARTNERS



LASTRINI ROSA
PHOTO © SANTI CALECA, 2005
COURTESY GALERIE ITALIENNE, PARIS

Johanna Grawunder, 45, trained under the Memphis design czar Ettore Sottsass at Sottsass Associates in Milan, working mostly in architecture and becoming a partner in 1989. She launched her own design line in San Francisco in 2001 after concluding that design offers a scale that can be controlled more purely than architecture. From benches and chaise longues to domestic bars and mirrored paravents, her pieces marry strong, uncomplicated forms with startling, bright lights.



LOW DINING TABLE
COURTESY GALERIE ITALIENNE, PARIS



PORTRAIT COURTESY OF
DESIGNER'S GALLERY,
GABRIELLE AMMANN, COLOGNE

Johanna Grawunder's definition of luxury:

“Luxury, for me, is not about using precious materials or about something looking expensive. It's not about snobbery or rarity. It's about the intention. For instance, I use plastic and metal, not diamonds or gold, to make things that look luxurious. ”

If luxury were ...

An object:

For me, it would be a beautiful, rich, pinkish or reddish light like a sunset.

A moment:

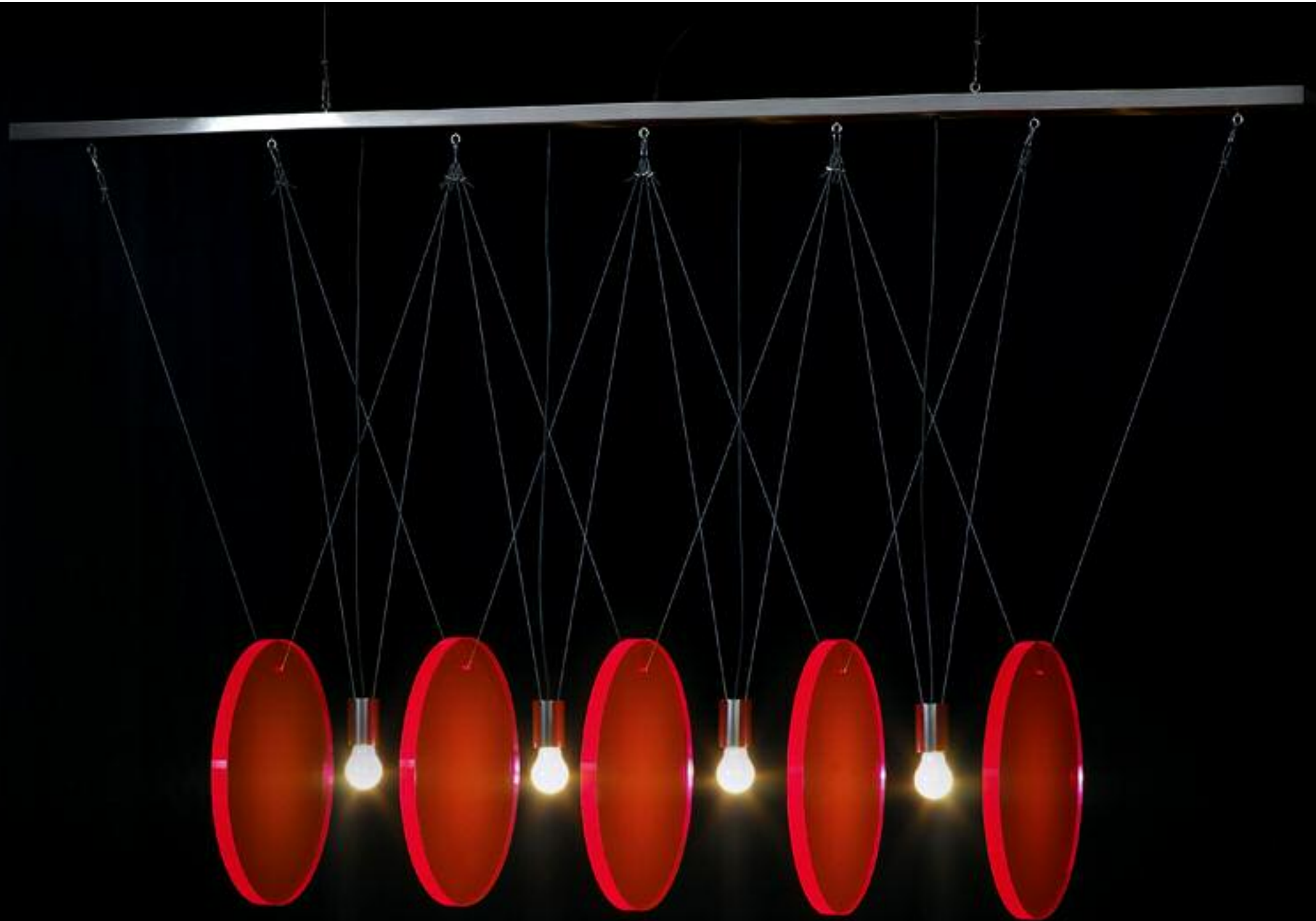
A sunset or a sunrise.

A person:

Barack Obama pops into my mind because I'm really political right now!

A place:

For me, a blooming desert is an extremely luxurious place. In California's deserts, wildflowers bloom for three weeks. People often think that there's not much visible life in deserts, but they are amazingly full of life, from the rocks and winds to the insects and flowers. The bar of the Four Seasons Hotel in New York is also luxurious, but obviously in a completely different way.



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DISKY
COURTESY GALERIE ITALIENNE, PARIS



SPECCHIOLIGHT
COURTESY GALERIE ITALIENNE, PARIS

What are the important lessons you learned working with Ettore Sottsass?

The main lessons that I have taken into my work are the intimacy of spaces, how to create spaces that are about the people using and living in them, and the sensorial quality of objects. By the time I left Ettore Sottsass's studio, in order to move to San Francisco to be with someone there, I'd been working for him for 16 years, longer than anyone except Marco Zanini. Ettore Sottsass was very supportive about me setting up my own design company, and we kept in touch constantly. He was my master in so many parts of my life. His passing away left a huge void that will never be filled by anybody else.

What were the first pieces you made?

Some small jewelry boxes, but I couldn't find a gallery during the Milan Furniture Fair to show them. So I rented a truck and parked it around Milan to show the little boxes. It was my de facto gallery. That was my first exhibition, called "Trucks," in 1993. Even those first jewelry boxes had light on them.

Where does your attraction to incorporating light into furniture come from?

Artificial light has always attracted me. I grew up in San Diego, and I remember, as a child, being very impressed by the brightly lit freeways in southern California and the bright lights of Las Vegas. Later on, I visited Hong Kong, Beijing and Ginza in Tokyo, which are amazing places in terms of artificial light. I was curious about how the whole history of architecture has been about natural light – windows, porticos, skylights – and how none of these architectural devices have been about artificial light. But what happens when it gets dark? My idea was to give this question more consideration and make hybrid pieces of furniture and walls that would be luminous.

How do you approach a piece and consider how light might be integrated?

If I'm making a piece of furniture, I start by figuring out the function and think about how light can be added in a functional and decorative way. It's also about attributing colors. When I'm picking colors for my furniture pieces, I look at the greens, blues, pinks, reds and grays in the Pantone book, and I'm always thinking that there should be another one in the section. Well, the colors are there; you just have to put light with them.



DOMESTIC BAR
COURTESY GALERIE ITALIENNE, PARIS



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VUVANITY
COURTESY DESIGNER'S GALLERY
GABRIELLE AMMANN, COLOGNE

Do your galleries help you produce your pieces?

I'm actually producing my pieces with my own artisans in northern Italy, whom I've been working with for 20 years. Then a gallery pays for them and sells them in five or six editions. This works out better for me, because I can control production better than working with different galleries that all have their own producers. I like working in limited editions rather than for big companies, since it offers more opportunity and freedom.

How does living in San Francisco influence your approach to design?

The main influences are the environmental issues, such as green design, in which San Francisco is extremely active. I've been working with materials like acrylic and steel, which are not considered green, but using them so the pieces will last a long time and become heirlooms. If you're using these materials in a sustainable way, then it's OK and preferable to Ikea furniture that you throw away one year later. It's also about using the least amount of materials for the object. For instance, using wood would be more ecological in some respects, but I would need to use more of it. It's a nuanced, complex discussion.

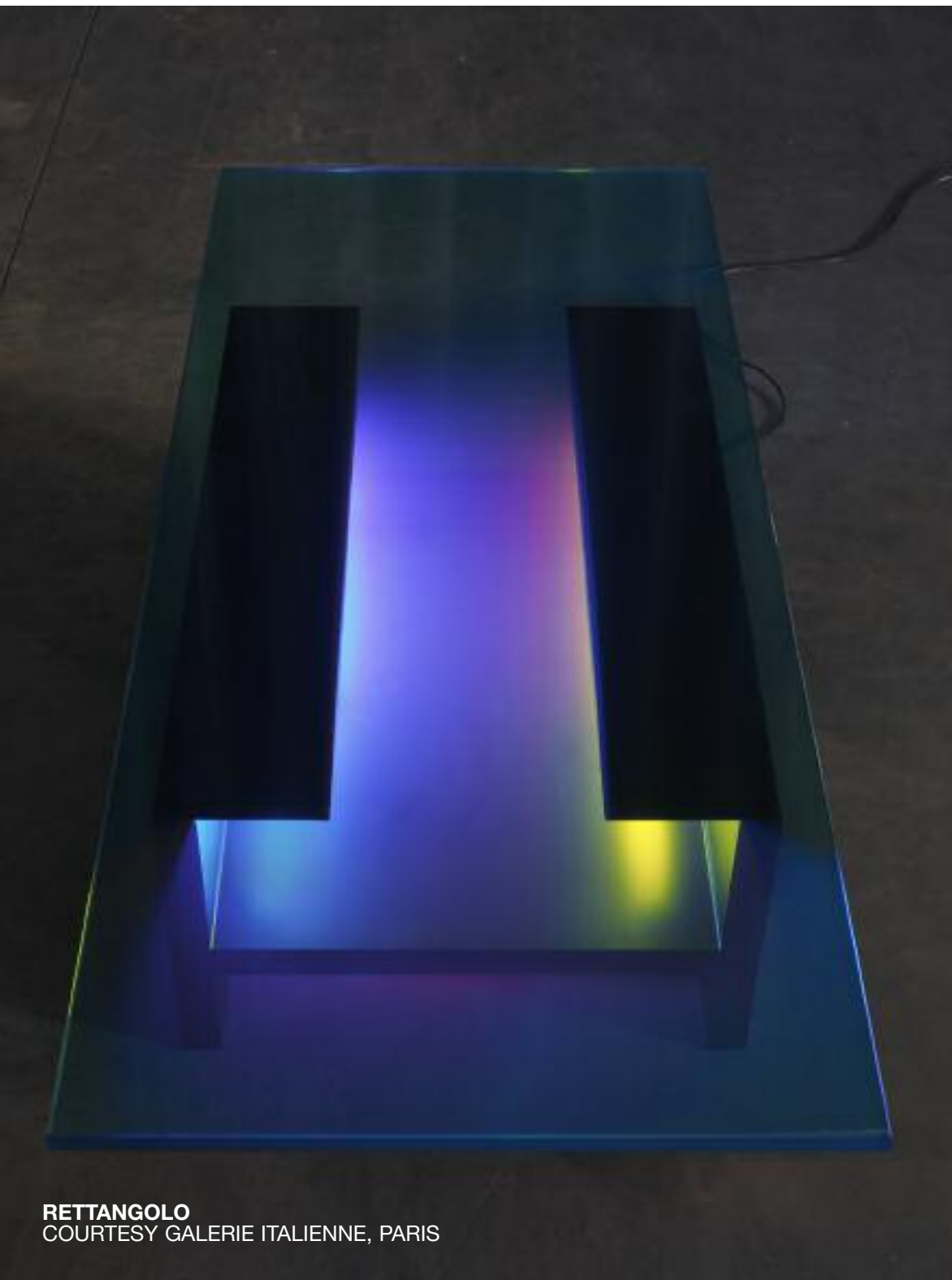
Over the last two years I've also been integrating a lot of LED light, which is very energy-saving, into my work. Although San Francisco is not necessarily developing LED lighting, the city's discussions about ecology are encouraging me make more careful selections.

How has your work been received internationally?

Different cities and cultures respond to it differently. It's been more successful in Latin American-inspired cities like Miami and European ones like London, Paris and Milan. But in San Francisco, people are more interested in classical "good taste." Everybody has these wild sport shoes with flashes on the side but if you ask them to put a pink light that gives a beautiful light in their room, they tend to be very scared. That's kind of what my battle is about: mixing furniture and light up so people feel a little bit freer.



INSTALLATION VIEW, 2008
COURTESY GALERIE ITALIENNE, PARIS



RETTANGOLO
COURTESY GALERIE ITALIENNE, PARIS

How did you come to design the house of the Italian painter Enzo Cucchi in Sicily?

He'd seen my work in an exhibition in Rome. Enzo had bought a 15th century house in Siracusa, which is an ancient, beautiful town. It was in ruins and had no water or electricity. He asked me to do all the restructuring and the furniture and lights, and he wanted everything made using local materials. So we used plywood from local trees and Sicilian fabrics. The only things that weren't produced locally were the bathroom fixtures. He liked the idea of having exposed wood and only a few pieces in each room. He was an ideal client as he pretty much said, "You decide."

What personal projects are you involved in?

I'm designing a house in a village out in the desert near Palm Springs. It's actually for my husband, who is an architect, and me. I'm doing the design and his office is helping me with the technical drawings. The house is designed to be simple and austere; you don't need much out there except for shade and a pool. I'm trying to use solar energy throughout. We'll be using solar panels in the house and on the roof, and hopefully there will be a well for water. We started planning it three years ago, but so far we've only done pre-construction drawings. That's the problem when you're always taking care of clients! Hopefully we'll begin constructing it in December.

What ideas informed your contribution to the Streetscape public art and design projects in Roppongi Hills in Tokyo?

A few years ago, 11 male designers and architects, including Ron Arad, Jasper Morrison and Andrea Branzi, were commissioned to design urban benches for this project. And the curators decided to launch a similar one with women designers. I noticed an infant school on the street, and how mothers would take their kids to school in the mornings and collect them in the afternoon. So I wanted to do something that would be educational. The benches have variable heights and are positioned on different kinds of floor materials such as rubber and Astroturf. The children can't hurt themselves because everything is soft and at an incline, and they can master how to go up and down a hill on the colored stripes. It's like a carpet. There are lights underneath the benches so they glow in the evening.



**STREETSCAPE PUBLIC ART AND DESIGN
PROJECT IN ROPPONGI HILLS, TOKYO, 2008**



INSTALLATION VIEW, 2008
COURTESY DESIGNER'S GALLERY
GABRIELLE AMMANN, COLOGNE



CLICK TO OPEN

TRAVEL BAR
THE AMERICAN ACADEMY IN ROME
PRODUCED WITH ROBERTO, GIUSTINI & PARTNERS

What other projects are you working on?

I'm doing some architectural installations, including a big light wall for an indoor swimming pool for a house being built in New Jersey. It's the kind of project I love because the client is pushing me to work on a bigger scale using different kinds of materials. And I'm working on a Freeport for Singapore Freeport. Carmelo Stendardo, a Swiss architect, designed the building; Ron Arad is doing the furnishings, and I'm doing the interior and exterior lighting. The entire façade is a plant wall, so I'm developing a series of panels with Flos using LED light that will be self-energizing by storing energy during the day and turning that into light at night. The idea is to create a bioluminescent glow, like strange plants that glow in the dark.

For More Info:

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