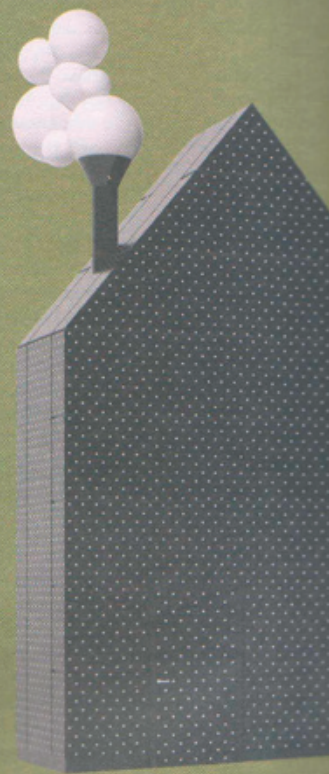


Slovenian product designer **Nika Zupanc** Doll House was a hit at Milan this year.

John Stones grapples with her 'surreal femininity' and 'slightly twisted' outlook, as she is finally being taken seriously by major manufacturers



For someone who presents herself as 'disturbing' ordinary life, Slovenian product designer Nika Zupanc comes across as remarkably focused and together. Her giant, polka-dotted Doll House at Superstudio Piu, replete with pearlescent smoke pouring out of its chimney, was one of the stars of this year's Milan furniture fair. Typical of her work, it's surreal and slightly twisted, but not facetious. It captivates and provokes you in an unusual way.

From her saucy feather-duster (now sold by 'erotic boutique' Coco de Mer), through to a bizarre toy car and the intriguing Sofas in C-minor, the products displayed inside the doll's house all share a concern with what Zupanc terms 'feminine archetypes'. 'The design profession has often considered these naive or not serious enough, but that is just because they haven't been properly articulated yet,' she explains. 'I try to use them in a very restrained way, so they don't seem very girlish or frivolous and so they change their symbolic value.'

Virginia Woolf's 1925 novel Mrs Dalloway, charting a day in the life of an 'ordinary woman', is the unlikely source of inspiration. 'I will buy flowers myself' is the installation's title, echoing the novel's opening line, and the hot-plate she designed for Slovenian kitchen company Gorenje in the shape of a powder compact is named 'Mrs. Dalloway' in tribute.

'Design is still very stuck in a Modernist phantasm of form follows function. It's a universe that's very masculine,' Zupanc says. 'But it would be a big mistake to think she is a feminist. It's a suggestion that evinces emphatic laughter. 'No, no, no, no. I'm very far from being that. I try personally to maintain my feminine outlook. I like to wear high heels or very feminine clothing, for

We are building our own identity with the objects we buy and put in our apartment.' While she says this is similar to our relationship to clothing, she doesn't want her design to be seen as throwaway fashion, but rather as elements to add elegance to our lives.

'Emotional ergonomics' is how she now chooses to define her approach, rather than the slightly clumsy 'communicative product design' label she says her copywriter previously came up with. It's a case of concentrating on the first emotional message you get when you encounter a product. She describes her ingredients succinctly: 'Not too much function, a lot of elegance and a little provocation or questioning.'

Some of her earliest designs were of nursery products – including a weird acrylic cradle that challenged the formal language expected for the genre. Finally, at the age of 35, she is being taken seriously by major manufacturers. Her Lolita lamp, which seems like a somewhat kinky refugee from a fairy tale, was launched in production-ready form at this year's Milan fair by Moooi.

At the same time, Moroso presented the Tailored chair, whose mannequin-referencing form quickly evokes the surreal femininity that is her calling card. Zupanc is working on developing it into a family of products that would include a bar seat and a lounge chair.

Northern Italy is just a short drive from the Slovenian capital Ljubljana, where she studied and is still happily based – even if she believes it puts her at a slight disadvantage. 'It is difficult to be a Slovenian designer, because that has no image,' she says. 'If I were from Paris it would be much easier, because I would



- 1 Feather-duster, with box
- 2 Phonique B sofa, part of the Sofas in C-minor collection
- 3 Tailored chair
- 4 Doll House
- 5 Nika Zupanc

All work by Nika Zupanc