

Design

New departures

Spotting a gap in the market, artists and designers are turning their talents to funerary urns, writes Hettie Judah

Death tends to be a subject treated flippantly by the design world, with the imagery surrounding it co-opted to give works a dark edge. You can buy lamp stands in the shape of spinal columns or a table formed like a coffin. At the recent Design Miami/Basel fair, Atelier Van Lieshout presented a winged seat that closed to create a skull-shaped sensory deprivation chamber. The charnel house is routinely raided for its symbolism. But evidence of death as a simple human experience is barely apparent in most contemporary designers' portfolios.

When it comes to the paraphernalia surrounding the end of life, we seem to have reconciled ourselves to items that speak of another age. We think of caskets in the Queen Anne style (itself a Victorian fantasy of an earlier time), blue-and-white urns reminiscent of the Ming era and statuary with the wistful contortions of baroque church carvings. There is probably something superstitious in this: it keeps death distant and turns it into something that doesn't apply to us.

Might we instead die in the same style we have lived? The artist Joe Scanlon suggested as much last year when he made a spoof Ikea-style DIY coffin and offered it for sale at \$27.50. Yet with burial becoming less common in Europe and North America – the cremation rate in the UK is now 70 per cent, closely followed by Switzerland, Denmark and Sweden – funerary urns, often kept in the home, are perhaps the best place for contemporary designers to make their first forays into this market.

In the dim, somewhat confused hubbub of the Saint-Etienne Design Biennale, it was easy to overlook just about anything that didn't jump about and make a noise but those who saw the mute glass figure in the vitrine – part space-age deity, part tribal fetish – found themselves haunted by it.

The work of French product designer Pierre Charpin, the piece looked explicitly like what it was: a container for human cinerary remains, rendered in white glass for a child, black for an adult.

"An urn should not have to look like any other container," says Charpin, who

was inspired by the lack of established ritual surrounding cremation in France. "It shouldn't just be a pretty, elegant, well-designed box. The form of this urn acts a little like the ghost of the departed. It's a presence in the house, an object that functions at once physically and mentally."

Charpin has worked with glass before – he spent a long period experimenting at Cirva (Centre International de Recherche sur le Verre et les Arts Plastiques), the international glass research centre in Marseilles – and this strong anthropomorphic figure was the result of a commission from a young glass worker he'd met there.

Matteo Gonet spent three years as a glass blower and head of the "hot shop" at Cirva before setting up a studio in Basel, Switzerland. Two years ago he needed an urn for the ashes of a family member but was shocked by the disjunction between the designs on offer and the way he wanted to remember someone he loved. During a trip to Naples he saw Roman funerary urns made in glass and it occurred to him that he might be able to create something for those seeking an alternative style of commemoration.

Gonet contacted artists and designers for whom he had produced works and commissioned each to design a glass urn for him to manufacture. As well as Charpin, the list included artists, craftspeople, glassworkers and former teachers. While Charpin's is the most immediately striking, the 10-piece collection is as diverse as the personalities behind it.

An equally assertive – if more abstract – design was presented by Jean-Baptiste Sibertin-Blanc, creative director of glassware company Daum. Vividly coloured and clear glass is set around a frame of Corian, which in turn has windows cut into it, leaving the ashes visible at the heart of the piece. "Cinders are symbolic after the death," says Sibertin-Blanc. "But maybe after three months I might want to scatter them in a natural setting and keep the object. I wanted to imagine the memory of the person, with all the colours of the glass reflecting on the area inside when the light falls on it."

Alexis Georgacopoulos's urn doubles as a vase because "to give it another function makes it more visible," he explains. "The deceased person has a role in the house. Grandmother is there to keep the flowers."

Hubert Crevoisier's Funerary Urn for a Couple is meanwhile a cocoon-shaped work in translucent glass in which two chambers are joined. Five years ago he gave up a career nursing terminally ill patients to concentrate on his art and this project was strongly linked to his ongoing exploration of death and dying. "The complicated thing for



Finale Memorial designs by, clockwise from top left, Elisabeth Garouste, Marie Garnier, Pierre Charpin, Nadine Jarvice, Alexis Georgacopoulos, Hubert Crevoisier and, left, Jean-Baptiste Sibertin-Blanc

Glasswerks, Matteo Gonet

contained in the USB key and the transformative life created by the acorns."

Her suggestion of new rituals for death finds echoes in the work of young British designer Nadine Jarvice, whose Post Mortem Research project has resulted in three propositions. The first, Rest In Pieces, is a fragile ceramic container tied to the branch of a tree. The string frays over three years or so, eventually leaving it to smash on the ground, scattering the ashes to the wind. The forces of nature are also co-opted in Bird Feeder, in which ashes are progressively released as birds peck at the walls. (The idea that the birds might ingest some of the ashes carries intimations of reincarnation.) The third work – Carbon Copy – uses the ashes as "lead" for a box of pencils, each stamped with the name of the deceased.

For Jarvice, the third work is the most personal. "The pencils pay homage to my granddad," she explains. "He was German and I couldn't communicate with him, so I'd write letters, which he'd translate."

She didn't set out to design for the funeral industry. "This started as a quite abstract look at cyclical processes and materials that degrade," she says. "But then I realised that there wasn't much on offer."

Maureen Lomasney came to the same realisation in the late 1990s after reading a newspaper article about rising cremation rates in California. "I started thinking of what people were making to put the ashes in," she recalls.

She investigated but discovered almost nothing on the market. So, in 2000, she solicited entries from art schools and ateliers for the first juried international exhibition of urns, reliquaries and funeral art. The response – both from artists and from the buying public – led her to create Funeria, a funerary art business that now has a dedicated gallery in Sonoma County and a biennial in San Francisco.

"Our orders have been quadrupling every year in the past three years, so I'd say we were on a very good path," she says. "Something about the west coast liberates thinking about all stages of our lives and people are looking for opportunities to enrich those stages."

Details

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