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HUBERT VERSTRAETEN | PLASTIC ACCESSORIES REVOLUTIONIZED

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Hubert Verstraeten and his brand **Tamawa** have created a range of bright and bold, yet sleek and stylish, **plastic accessories**. Verstraeten and Tamawa owe their identity to an early generation plastic, Bakelite. Along with a chic design aesthetic of course.

We are very pleased to have Verstraeten as a guest at our Design Talk at **In bed With Designers** at the end of the month. As part of the run up to our unique designer sleepover, and as part of our ongoing cooperation with **Belgian Spirit** ahead of **Business of Design Week** in Hong Kong next month, we caught up with the designer to find out why Tamawa is responsible for much much more than your standard plastic accessories.



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Your products center on Bakelite. What is the appeal of this material in your work? We often here about designers love of natural wood, or blown glass – where does your love of plastic come from?

To be totally honest, I don't have any special love for plastic – it's more that I was looking for something special, unique. After research I found Bakelite, a snooker ball manufacturer in Belgium and I found they made beads of various sizes.

I therefore had something very unique, very elegant, very pleasing. Although it is a synthetic material, there is no reference to what we call plastic. It is a plastic but it doesn't feel like a plastic. Based on that, I decided to develop a line of accessories. The material has a very high quality – you can wear it as jewelry without it becoming scratched or worn. The material is also very important for our brand. With Bakelite we have something unique that marks us out as different from all the other many brands out there.



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What do you think it takes to make a truly innovative designer, where do original ideas and designs come from?

This is a very difficult question. Before we pretend to be innovative and to make a revolution there is a very basic need to survive. For example, Tamawa's designs are not innovative in the way that its products that people will have seen before: watches, jewelry etc. But we are innovative in the way that we work; we have a fully integrated structure from design, to production, to packaging, to display. We believe in "le savoir faire". We take a very hands on approach to every part of the design, development and manufacturing process.

So much of design goes through the same hands these days that objects end up looking the same, but we control every process. We also believe that the added value of a product should go back into the product, not into marketing and advertising. I prefer to invest in product development. These are things that make us original, innovative.



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You've chosen a Japanese name for your brand and your watches do boast a Japanese aesthetic. How are you influenced by Asian designs and how do you think they differ from Europe?

Actually I think design is pretty universal. We mostly have the same design education, read from the same design books. We chose the Japanese name, Tamawa, because we wanted something that can be said easily in every language. Also, 'Tama' means bead and 'wa' means ring so it is symbolic in this way too. We do feel close to Japanese aesthetics: love of handicraft, love of detail, love of material, love of quality. Most importantly, we have a strong name and a strong identity that we want to work worldwide.



What's your plan entering the Asian market, how do you think it will differ from what you do at the moment?

Our design is very universal and very appealing, it's not aimed at any particular market. However, it's a simple design with a strong identity – I think the Asian market is sensitive to that. It's very original, yet very simple, not huge or eccentric or showy. I think that product will work well in Asia because they are able to recognize originality and appreciate something they have not seen before. Our collection is surprising and unexpected, that is one advantage.

One difficulty is that as we have only been around for 5 years it takes time to build trust with new buyers and partners. That's why we are coming to Hong Kong as we believe it's a good start to enter the Hong Kong and China market. We are also lucky that we do not have to worry so much about copyright infringements: as the beads are only made in Belgium, it would be very difficult to copy our products.



What trends excite you in the world of design at the moment and what do you foresee in the future?

I don't care about trends. I just do what I believe I have to do. That is the advantage of the way we work– we are free to do what we want and go where we want. We can realize what ever we want internally, so we don't need to follow any trends. I'm not saying we will work with Bakelite for the rest of our lives but I think for the moment the most important thing is to establish the brand.

I've been doing shows for over ten years and you just see so many new brands and they are often just based on one good idea, but with no real knowledge or structure. Tamawa is different – we have a real story and originality.

What do you think are the features of Belgian design, how do your designs align (or not) with these?

Belgian design is very hard to define. As a country, we have different languages, different cultures, and different regions. Therefore, Belgian design is very free – we are able to work very free of any influence or any external judgement. We not care so much about other people's points of view. We are not shy and we don't care about our image like the French and the Italians do – if people like something, it is OK and if they don't it is also OK. We are not afraid to be ridiculed. This gives us a lot of freedom and liberty.

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