



Kilgour Creative Director, Carlo Brandelli, and L'ArcoBaleno's Ambra Medda in the Kilgour flagship space

Carlo Brandelli in Conversation with Ambra Medda

Carlo Brandelli talks with Ambra Medda, the co-founder of Design Miami, which in its time was arguably the most important independent show for design. Medda is now creative director of her own design consultancy, L'ArcoBaleno.

CB: Ambra, I want to talk about Gabriella Crespi first because for me, she is a very underrated talent. What makes her work interesting to me is that she would effortlessly blend something very contemporary and seemingly minimal/cold - such as a metal or stone - with a natural influence. There is a luxury in her materials but there was also a luxury in her thought; it's not indulgent, it was really a very smart, balanced thought.

AM: I met Gabriella when I was asked by the Italian ministry of culture to write a forward for a book based on a retrospective show they were planning at Palazzo Reale in Milan about three years ago. She was well into her eighties but was still immaculately dressed and elegant. What I like about her is the ease with which she designed and mixed materials. She could take brass and mix it with ratan and produce something very modern, at a time (in the Sixties and Seventies) when the rules of design were really being dictated by men.

CB: There really are only two or three books that even mention her, although at auction her work reaches very high prices - and for people who know what to look for, her pieces are really desirable.

AM: She was a very strong woman, and it was clear that she had a way with her patrons. Her clientele were the international jet set and within that world at that time, designers worked in a more discreet way. Her influence will be significant, but it may take time.

CB: I first saw a piece of her work about 20 years ago, and it was a picture of a desk

called 'Yang Yin', made from steel and Plexiglas - a sculptural, free-standing piece that served as a desk and bookcase. What struck me was the diverse juxtaposition between the materials, the form, and where she chose to photograph it (in a Florentine Palazzo). At a time when the word 'eclectic' wasn't yet part of an aesthetic vocabulary, Crespi had already established a standard. It is very clear when a creative person is working ahead of their time, and actually brave - I use that word as if it was a risk, but actually, as you know, the creative person doesn't make a conscious choice - they just have to get that work out...

AM: That piece was great. Actually, it reminds me - I was recently sent some pictures of her furniture for L'ArcoBaleno. They are all rare works and still look really modern today. The lines are sharp but her eye was fluid.

CB: Why do you think that of the many design greats that came out of Italy from the Forties to the Eighties so few were women? In fact, out of several dozen names you could site - from Castiglioni to Gaetano Pesce - really only Crespi is female, yet perhaps one of the very best.

AM: I'm not sure. I think it was simply the fact that it wasn't an area women could easily get into. There are a lot of young female designers coming through now, though, and from all over the world - Asia, Japan and South America.



CB: The people we are discussing - Crespi, Gio Ponti and Carlo Mollino - all acknowledged in some way a feminine side to their work. Whether that was because they were feminine or they were influenced by women, or wanted to say something about power is not important. Actually I use the word feminine to refer really to the acknowledgment of 'nature' and the influence that this has consciously or subconsciously had on their design. If we focus on Carlo Mollino for a while, for me he was a voyeur and it is very clear that this comes through strongly in much of his work. Beyond that he was also very gifted, with a genuine drive to want to modernise design. What, as a woman, did you see?

AM: For me, I see nature and the mountains, curves, his love of skiing and how that influenced the furniture. If I think about nature as a woman - which the world does - then it was feminine.

CB: That's interesting, because almost all of my male friends who are involved in design and art and have an interest, saw this fascination with the female form, but it was overt. For example, there is a well-known photograph that Mollino took of a woman who was kneeling with her back to the camera and next to a typewriter. He had typed his initials, CM, on her bottom - one initial on each cheek...

AM: I just see that side of things as him just being a man. In some pieces his love of skiing influenced the work, for example the tracks that the skis made on fresh snow were evident in some of his furniture.

CB: That was there, but the underlying feeling was where the drive or influence came from, and that is the masculine part of the ego that I think Italian design does very well.

AM: The sensuality was there, but I never thought about it being more sexual. But I may be really naive! Actually, as I think, yes, I suppose I focus so much on the end product that the thought behind the process isn't my priority to look at.

CB: Sorry Ambra, I didn't want to sully your idea of his work. It's an interesting topic because, as you say, he was a man from a specific region and he was very enigmatic, and with that charisma comes power. He took a lot of photographs of women naked at the flat where he lived in Torino (now a museum and private estate). It is littered with 'sensual' messages; every room is set up as a vignette to take an orchestrated image - have you been?

AM: No, not yet, I have to go and look!

CB: It is very clear that his behaviour influenced his work and he was thinking about his work during his behaviour. Mollino could move from architecture to art to engineering but the signature is very strong. The point I want to get to involves what you do as a woman in design and how you work. When you started and what you did with Design Miami from 2005 was enter a very masculine design world and applied a feminine eye to the curation, and a feminine approach to the behaviour of the fair and how it was perceived, which gave the whole thing a balance. Women and the female form obviously inspired Mollino, pieces such as the Arabesque table were very obviously sensual - have a look again Ambra...!

CB: We are running out of time, so I want to just ask quickly about Gio Ponti... some of your favourite pieces are by Ponti - why?

AM: His use of bold colour in a tasteful way, the modern approach to form are all in Ponti. It is as if he has no boundary for colour but is very focused on taste. You could say it is a very eclectic mix of taste, which formed a new refined aesthetic - and that is rare to do.

CB: He is eclectic, and what I like most is the hotel he designed in Sorrento - Parco dei Principi - which overlooks the cliffs. Every detail was Ponti... you look at it now and it is a little quirky, but everything has been given attention. The hotel has not changed, it is a time warp.

AM: He was one of the first men to design in colour that didn't have to appear as masculine. The lightness in the pieces was always good.

CB: Lightness in his thought too?

AM: Yes, for sure, that word is interesting Carlo, how you use it. Do you think people know what that means?

CB: It's interesting you say that, because for me many of his pieces thought about proportion from a fair point of view, not leaning towards masculine or feminine. He would have very slim legs on furniture, and elegance was something that ran through the work. Restraint and taking away was not something that was commonplace in a world that wanted more, after years of austerity.

AM: It's a big topic Carlo, we need a part two...