



THE THINKER

For Oki Sato, the clean-cut posterboy for top Japanese design firm Nendo, the unexamined life is hardly worth living.

BY MAX CROSBIE-JONES / PORTRAITS BY DAN CARABAS





When posing for photographs, Oki Sato – the bespectacled *wunderkind* of Japanese product design – is given to propping his index finger and thumb under his chin. Is this a foppish affectation? A controlled response to a nervous tic? Or is he just a big fan of Rodin's *The Thinker*?

During our interview I never get around to asking him, but I do come away with the impression that this posture, hokey as it may be, is apt for someone so deeply contemplative. Oki's products, more than those of other designers, seem to be a distillation of pure thought, his creations typically stripped of aesthetic fat until all that remains is a sleek, refined, elegant expression of some clever or witty idea. Very often, his high-concept creations – be they big or small – challenge you to think anew about the everyday, garnering what he likes to call a small “!” or “aha” moment. “Whether I’m designing a house or packaging for a piece of gum, I try to incorporate surprises that relate to everyone,” he has said.

Before we meet on the sidelines of Milan Design Week, I potter around an exhibition of products by his design firm, Nendo, in search of these surprises.

True to his word, they come thick and fast. Bowls made of silicon quiver and shudder before my eyes as a fan blows wind over their smooth surfaces. A thin, sculptural stick of wood unravels to create a pair of chopsticks. A pair of eyeglass frames has magnetic, rather than screw, hinges. And upstairs, in a daylit nave of the building, sits an ethereal installation commissioned by normcore high-street clothing brand COS: a train of crisp white shirts that gradually take on darkening gradations of colour as they pass through hollow steel cubes of imaginary paint.

“Surprise and humour are the things that create connections between people and objects,” he tells me later, as we sit in the showroom of Emeco, one of the many design brands lining up to

work with him. For him, surprise and humour also distinguish Nendo's output from that of other Japanese minimalists such as Naoto Fukusawa, who tends to favour an unsmiling rationalism over playfulness. “When you do it too minimal or too simple, Japanese design often gets cold,” he says. “It becomes almost like an art piece – it's beautiful but it's almost something you don't want to touch. It's something remote. I don't want that to happen in my designs.”

A recent example, he says, is his stout reworking of Emeco's classic Navy Chair. Available in a range of different materials and finishes, it has a seat that can be detached and reattached using nothing more sophisticated than pocket change. “The Emeco stool is very technical, but I didn't want to put something technical in someone's house. So it was important that we used the coin, not another new tool or mechanism; the coin is the thing that connects people with the stool.”

Nendo's world teems with such canny touches – and what a fast-expanding world it is. “We're working on close to 300 projects right now,” he tells me while taking a big slurp of coffee, as if the success

of them somehow depended on it. “I have no idea how we do it.” How Nendo does it – how it flits from creating mystically-inspired store designs and exhibition spaces to sculptural furniture, cutlery, stationary and even bedding for dogs – surely has something to do with its proven ability to shape-shift to suit a client's needs.

In Japanese, Nendo means “clay.” This name is apt for a design firm – 30 staff and 12 years strong – that is nothing if not pliable, turning its hand to interiors, architecture and installations, as well as furniture, products and graphic design (or cross-pollinations between them). It's apt also because, as well as the eclectic range of projects Nendo takes on, pliability



Emeco's Navy Chair.

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is common also to their execution. Nendo might just as easily turn out something handmade by a Japanese craftsman as industrial. And while some designers and architects tend to become focused on one or two materials – think, say, of Tadao Ando and concrete – Nendo has no such fixation. “It’s not the object that’s important,” he once said. “I really don’t care about colours or materials or the form itself, but it has to have a nice story behind it. The story is what moves people.”

Sketches are integral to how Oki tells his “stories.” Or rather, bad sketches are. Before our interview, I am handed Nendo’s new release sheet and find it covered with drawings that could have been the work of a five-year-old (and a cack-handed one at that). Each sketch is tied to a new product, from a ‘Lampshower’ for Axor (a stickman under a raining umbrella) to an island-inspired sofa for Casamania (another stickman, this time dreaming of an archipelago). To those not familiar with Nendo, these might seem like faux-naïf sketches, drawn by some freelance illustrator in an effort to imbue the studio with a certain cuteness, but that’s not the case. These are the best sketches Oki’s hand can muster. And one of the most effective weapons in his design arsenal.



Axor's Lampshower.

The worse, the better, as far as he’s concerned. “If you’re a good sketcher, it’s too perfect,” he says. “You imagine the final output in a way; but in my case they are so awful that you don’t know how it’s going to be in the end and that leaves a lot of space. It’s open and it’s easier for us to understand, all of us, including the designers that work with me, my clients, and the product development team. They start imagining things themselves. It’s not like I show them the finished thing and just tell them to make it. It’s not like that.” Perhaps herein lies part of the Nendo appeal – this is a design studio that openly courts open-endedness.

As intriguing as Nendo’s designs are, it would be a stretch to call Oki a dream interviewee. There are no indiscreet tirades, no gotcha moments, and, when researching him, I dig up no dirt. “I am,” he says not even half-jokingly, “a super boring person.” But among his champions (and there are many), Oki’s being boring is exactly what makes his work *far* from boring.

“Beyond the obvious elbow grease involved, the real magic in Sato’s ‘!’ moments is the hard-won fruit of a lifestyle devoted to careful, constant observation,” writes Anna Carnick in *Nendo 10/10*, a 2013 monograph of Nendo’s work. “He is inspired by quiet, everyday moments, and the subtle yet impactful differences that can occur from one day to the next.”

A routine that borders on the ascetic heightens his sensitivity to these quiet, everyday moments. When not travelling the world to meet with clients, something he does for roughly two weeks each month (“My office is my suitcase”), he is committed to it. Each day he walks the same way to work, eats lunch at the same restaurant, and visits the same Starbucks the same amount of times (three). Evoking Nietzsche’s concept of eternal recurrence, and even, at a push, *Groundhog Day*, this uncomplicated existence allows his brain to spend less time processing the unexpected, and more time monitoring his environment for patterns and anomalies. “When someone asks me, ‘What inspires you the most?’, my answer is ‘The things that inspire me the most are the things that don’t inspire other people the most,’” he says. “It’s the boring things.”

One can view Oki Sato as many things – including a distant relative of Socrates (“The unexamined life is not worth living” could easily be Nendo’s tagline) – but one of the most illuminating narratives paints him as an alchemist who turns the mundane into design gold. “When he comes across a simple, yet evocative





Cabbage Chair.

instance, he dissects it, so that he may conjure it anew for the rest of us to enjoy in more permanent, solid forms,” explains Anna. And so it is that, in Nendo’s world, the patterned wings of dragonflies end up on hand-knotted wool rugs; ruler increments find their way onto watches; and the simple action of rolling or folding paper inspires elegant lamps or a futuristic computer mouse. One of Nendo’s most commonly cited “!” moments is a series of furniture known as Dancing Squares. Comprised of square, simple planes, each item appears to be about to topple, its structure seemingly freeze-framed mid-tumble. Oki came up with the idea while balancing a glass of water on the edge of a table.

Over the years, he has also proven himself a dab hand at turning waste into things wondrous. In 2008, the avant garde Japanese designer Issey Miyake asked him to create an item of furniture out of the pleated paper that is produced in large amounts during the making of pleated fabric and, being an unwanted by-product, usually tossed away. What he came up with – the Cabbage Chair, with its peeled-back layers that envelop the user – is a primitive response to 21st-century sustainability, one that’s found its way into the collection of New York’s Museum of Modern Art. Of the

experience, he told *DAMn Magazine*: “What Miyake taught me is that you have to stop somewhere and not complete the object. It allows for a sense of *ma* [the Japanese word for negative space]. This leftover space allows users to imagine for themselves.”

He doesn’t stockpile ideas, preferring to serve them up fast and fresh, like a sushi chef. “Some designers prefer making design like a soup,” he says. “They take their time, add many things, and with that create flavour. I like to keep things very fresh. The quicker, the better.” Which is not to say his work is slapdash. He uses 3D printers – several of them – to create prototypes for each design (the expense “almost bankrupted Nendo several times”). And guiding his process are 10 key design principles, or “small recipes” that, he says, help him find “new perspectives on boring things.”

Q uite where Oki – who was born in Toronto, Canada – got his love of design is a mystery, even to Oki. Our conversation goes a bit meta when I ask him to recall when he first became interested in making things and he replies, with a dizzying circularity, “I didn’t have any interest in design until I became a designer, actually.” Ok then, but surely design was on your list of dream careers? “No, I wanted to be a petshop owner,” he replies. “But at a certain point I noticed that I would have to sell the pets so I gave up on becoming a pet shop owner.”

And so it goes. On further prying, Oki says he doesn’t think growing up in Toronto influenced or informed his career path in any discernable way, but that moving to Tokyo, at the age of 10, most definitely did. “Everything was totally different,” he says. “I was enjoying things that other kids thought normal. For instance, in Japanese schools we have four different types of shoes. But when I was living in Canada, I had only one pair that I could use wherever I liked. The fact that I had to change shoes according to activities or the space was so funny to me. That was the moment I noticed that by just changing the perspective, your way of seeing things, ordinary



Dancing Squares.

things could become something that is interesting or funny.”

The brevity with which he broaches his upbringing and private life – “Basically, when I’m not designing I do nothing” – suggests that Oki isn’t particularly interested in dissecting himself. But then, you could argue that neither should we be. Certainly, few of his fans in the industry are. In the same way that the work of some film directors connects deeply with other film directors, and the question marks surrounding their personal lives are often brushed aside, Oki is considered a designer’s designer whose work stands for itself.

“I love the simple and effortlessly genius way that Oki tells stories that are easy to understand for all through his design, no matter whether its interiors or products or art installations,”

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says Amata Luphaiboon, co-founder of Thai design studio, Department of Architecture. “Oki has a curiosity that never stops. He is interested in everything, and always has something to say,” says Jana Scholze, curator of contemporary furniture and product design at London's Victoria & Albert Museum.

For many, especially young Asian designers looking to break into the hyper-competitive world market, Oki is an inspiration. And understandably so. Established by him and his business partner in 2002, the same year he graduated with an M.A. in architecture from Tokyo's Waseda University, Nendo's rise was rapid. Toyko is its home, but Milan is where it cemented its position as a sought-after company that straddles continents. He met the Milanese furniture moguls Giulio Cappellini and Maddalena De Padova there in 2002, and set up an office there, which speaks volumes about the extent to which Nendo has been welcomed into the still Eurocentric design world.

From his lofty perch (*Newsweek* named Oki one of the “100 Most Respected Japanese People” back in 2006), he can see the design world's centre of gravity shifting away from Europe towards Asia. “I think there will be tons of young Asian designers within less than five years. Maybe two or three. I think there's going to be a big shift in the design market towards Thailand, Singapore, Korea, Taiwan, and, of course, China, because everyone is studying at the European schools now,” he says. “Now it's still – not exactly copying – but really influenced by European design. But I think the next generation will be more original. They're very aggressive and energetic.” Meanwhile, Japanese design he finds complacent, to its detriment. “Japanese designers feel they are one of the leaders of Asian design, but I don't think so anymore. Because design is linked with the economy, there are a lot more powerful countries in Asia.”



Walt Disney Japan's Winnie the Pooh Collection.

What is the secret of Nendo's success? And how would, say, a fledgling Thai design studio looking to break-out go about emulating it? Though its work process and aesthetic has played a large part, another factor that sets Nendo apart might well be its approachability. Many design enthusiasts are familiar with the way in which Nendo fuses a Japanese take on minimalist form and function with an almost child-like sense of humour, one that recalls European schools such as the Memphis Group or the witty, site-specific designs of Dutch designers Droog. But fewer are aware of its client-friendliness. Despite travel not being conducive to his creative process (“I don't see new things when I travel too much” he told the *Wall Street Journal* recently), Oki goes to meet each new client in person. Visiting them allows him to “find ideas within the client.” As he puts it, “by exploring the brand, the history, the factories, or just by discussing things, I notice interesting things and interesting materials and then try to use them as much as possible.”

No design firm is infallible; some of Nendo's eye-catchingly simple designs get more love than others. More often than not, though, design blogs and magazines lap them up with all the gusto of cats around a bowl of cream. And even if they don't go down well, a new Nendo design is still a talking point. No wonder, then, that firms want to be them and mass-market brands such as Camper, Häagen-Dazs and Walt Disney Japan are queuing up to tap into the Nendo imagination, be it by asking them to create a transcendently elegant store design, a seasonal ice cream cake, or a line of abstract furniture inspired by Winnie the Pooh. It is an ascent that looks destined to continue. Recently, Oki curated his first exhibition, at Singapore's National Design Centre, and opened Nendo's first dedicated stores. Nendo will also play a key role in the Japanese pavilion at the forthcoming Milan Expo, which will run between May 1st and October 31st. All of which will only further cement Nendo's enviable market position, and leaves one wondering, “Boring? Oki Sato? Really?” ✱

