

# WANDERS LUST

The Naked Designer Explores a More Intimate Side

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**I**t is an hour past my appointed 30 minutes with internationally acclaimed designer Marcel Wanders when I finally hear his voice on the other end of the line. "I am so sorry for being so long," he apologizes. "I was sitting with the main curator of the museum and things just ran off. It's the crazy world I'm living in, but I'm here now."

The museum in question is Amsterdam's Stedelijk, where Wanders will mount the largest-ever presentation of his work in February. As his perennially calm voice, perfectly tousled hair, and open-collared crisp white shirt attest, the self-proclaimed "Designer of the New Age" and *New York Times*' heralded

"Lady Gaga of the design world" is both a masterful juggler and consummate performer. Like any self-respecting entertainer, the product that Wanders is most intent on pedaling is always himself: his logo is his own face sporting a golden clown nose. "It's the quality of who you are as a person, as a brand, that goes into the thing," he says. "This gives me an absolute obligation to be fabulous."

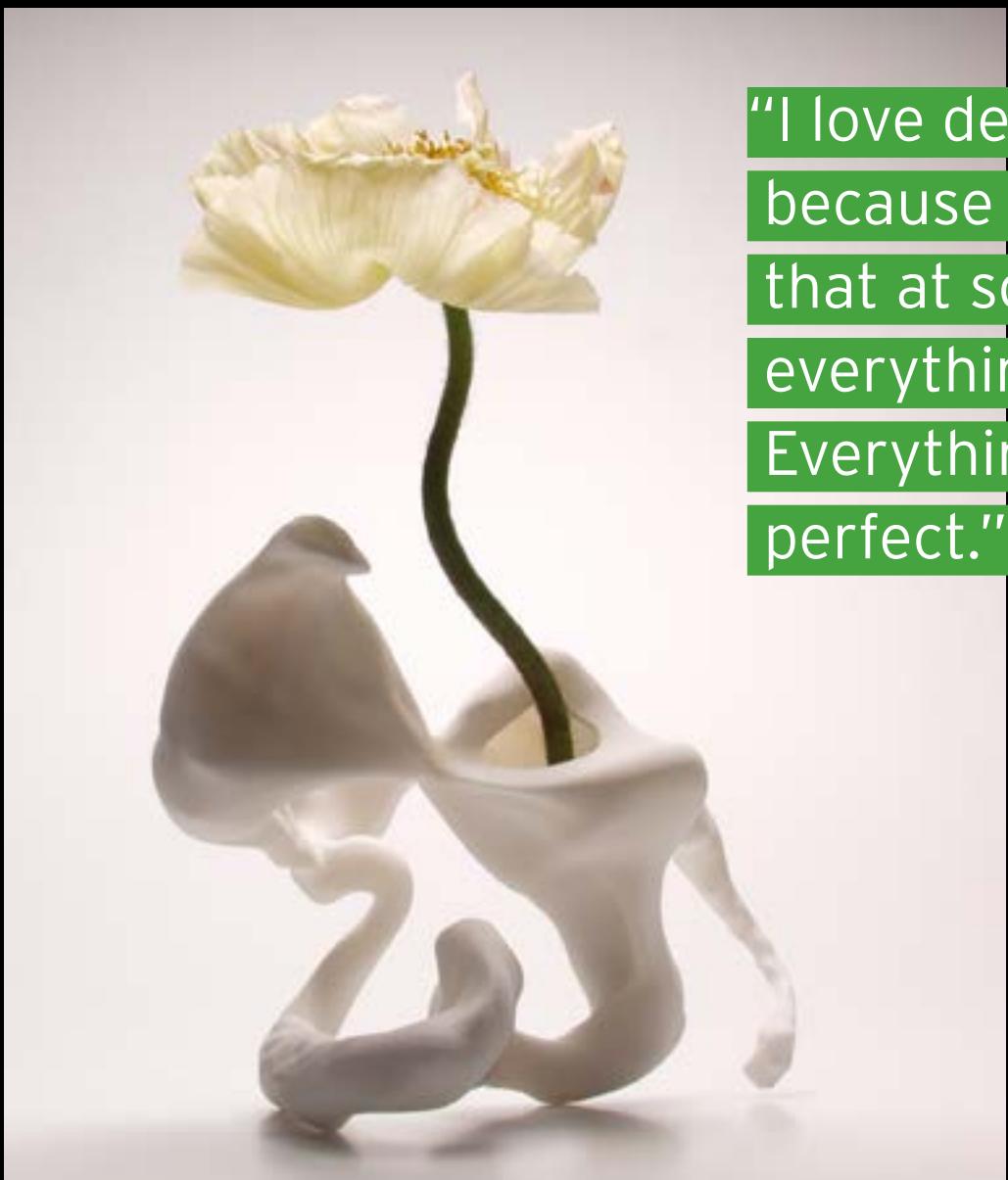
With a reputation built on the kind of product launches at which guests find their glasses filled with champagne by a woman suspended upside down from a chandelier, it comes as little surprise that Wanders was raised by a businessman father with

a theatrical streak and a penchant for singing operetta. "I learned from him the ability to stand out, to enhance life," the designer explains. In August of 2003, a freshly 40-year-old Wanders delivered an address for Industrial Designers Society of America entitled "The Naked Designer" in which he outlined 10 insights for designing without fear. Stepping onto the stage in his typical dandy attire, Wanders began by recounting a recent nightmare of finding himself standing naked before an audience. "It's hot in here!" he exclaimed midway through the first of his 10 points. "I hope you don't mind if I take off my jacket." With each subsequent presentation slide, the designer removed an item

of clothing. By number nine, he was down to his boxer shorts, and ten found Wanders exiting to applause, wearing nothing but a towel. Moments later a new slide appeared above the empty podium: "Rule No. 11: Always Give More Than Expected." That was when a naked Wanders streaked from the back of the auditorium onto the stage with just enough time to throw candy into the audience before the auditorium was plunged into darkness.

Proclaimed as the next Philippe Starck—by Starck himself—Wanders' touch extends far beyond mere product design. With the design heavyweight's high-gloss,

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**"I love design because you feel that at some point, everything can fit. Everything can be perfect."**

Wanders' Snotty Vase (Influenza), based on 3-D scans of airborne mucus

(CONTINUED) semi-subversive/semi-sweet sex appeal now gracing everything from MAC cosmetics to the Mondrian hotel in South Beach, it seems only fitting that his favorite film is *Rocky*. Like his work, the designer is never lacking in razzmatazz. Describing himself as "super curious, extremely passionate, and very energetic," the designer forbids his studio employees to work if they are having a down day, reasoning that the emotion with which something is created is felt in the design. "I want to make sure that we live in a world which is

superfantastic," he says. One thing is certain: Wanders' world is super successful. Since first entering the spotlight with the Knotted Chair in 1996—a macramé-like design made of epoxy-soaked rope with a carbon-fiber core—the designer has built a reputation on work that fuses technology and artistry with a personal love of what Wanders likes to call the "off-side." "I want to make things more beautiful than perhaps they are," he notes, which is precisely what he has done with his celebrated Snotty Vases, derived from 3-D

scanned images of airborne mucus. Snotty was followed by Egg, a series of vases inspired by filling condoms with hard-boiled eggs. "I love design because you feel that at some point, everything can fit," Wanders says. "Everything can be perfect." But that perfection is far from effortless: a consummate storyteller, Wanders is one of the savviest businessmen and marketers of his generation. Besides serving as creative director for Moooi, the home-and-office design powerhouse that he co-founded in 2001, the bejeweled Dutchman has run the gamut

of global brand collaborations from Alessi, Kartell, Poliform, B&B Italia, and Target to Swarovski, Marks & Spencer, KLM, and Puma. With numerous awards and ever-increasing popular demand for his brand of entertainment, there is no denying that the Dutch dynamo leaves much of the design world gaga. Wanders admits that there are aspects of his personality that never have come out in his professional work. "If I am really honest," the 50-year-old says, "in the last five years, I have begun to feel that, after



For Andaz Amsterdam Prinsengracht, the first Hyatt hotel in the Netherlands, Wanders was tabbed to reflect the history and unique characteristics of the city throughout the building's interiors.

such a long time of trying to always be positive, sometimes I'm not being real. Life is not only great." Despite his carefully crafted sunny self-assurance and effortless cool, the designer has not always tripped through the tulips. When a 17-year-old Wanders set his sights on becoming a designer, he enrolled in Design Academy Eindhoven—the Netherlands' most prestigious design school—only to flunk out nine months later. Failing to persuade his teacher to give him a second chance, Wanders transferred to the smaller ArtEZ Institute of

the Arts in Arnhem, where he vowed that for every assignment, he'd do double the work: one version to please his teacher and one for himself. By the time he graduated, the cum-laude student had won three design competitions—including one in which each of the 33 other contestants were from Eindhoven—and had his final school project featured on the cover of a national design magazine. Maintaining that there is no place for negativity and cynicism in design, Wanders has started expressing what

he calls his darker, more uncertain side through painting. "They may not be as happy as you would expect a Marcel Wanders piece to be," he says of his artwork, "but they are more intimate." The designer's solo exhibition, *Marcel Wanders: Pinned Up* at the Stedelijk—25 Years of Design, will mark the first time that Wanders puts this more nuanced, unvarnished side on display. The exhibition will shed light on the designer's mind through the White Zone, a "left-brain space" that presents a thematic analysis of the Dutchman's

work, and its contrasting "right-brained" Black Zone that is described as being more theatrical, intimate, and personal in nature. In playful acknowledgment of the way in which the man himself will be laid bare in the exhibition, Wanders' press release depicts Marcel pinned to a board above a label that reads "Large Wingless Butterfly." Now 50, the naked designer is again facing his fears and revealing himself in newly intimate and nuanced ways. The result seems destined to make Wanders—as man and brand—both more real and more interesting. ■