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Background Context (Statement from Jenny Nguyen)

I visited the show right after the press preview on Wednesday. Massimo Adario's showcase was the first room to view in the Campo Base exhibition curated by Federica Sala and I was shocked when I first saw the glass figure depicting a stereotypical Black character and as I walked around the glass cabinet I realized there were more characters each representing stereotypical versions of a broad spectrum of minority cultures - Asian, Middle Eastern, Indigenous, Pacific Islander etc.

I immediately sought out the curatorial statement and saw that they were from the 1920s and were called "ironic" pieces, which is something I still struggle to understand.

Over the next few days I showed various media and influential industry people, all of whom were shocked as well. Yet more still published "must see" stories about the show on their platforms and IG without looking more closely at the contents and messages they were ultimately promoting. (As the owner of a PR firm it's certainly awkward to call out the media, but press are certainly culpable in this circumstance for posting before reviewing more carefully - also press can definitely play an important role in making sure this doesn't happen again!)

When I showed Stephen Burks he and I decided, along with our mutual friends Anna Carnick and Wava Carpenter of Anava Projects, that it was important to speak out. We have also been in contact with Federica Sala, the curator of the show, and have had a number of conversations about how we can use this unfortunate situation to progress an industry wide conversation. Sala was receptive, and ultimately removed the pieces from the exhibition on the show's final day.

The Instagram post that we wrote in collaboration has been shared by many in the industry that share our views and this gives me hope that we can effect change. We made a choice not to tag and call out the designer and the curator on Instagram because we didn't want this to become a witch hunt; instead we want to create a conversation about how the industry, and each role within the industry can work together to not only stop this from happening again, but also to eradicate racism and look at ways we can level the playing field for BIPOC folks. Stephen, Anna and I talked at length about this show in Milan and realized that the only way we can combat this is through communication, dialogue and education. All of our roles as designers, curators, PRs and the media are so important in that quest.

Problems it outlines

After seeing the installation I talked with a number of European people tied to the show and many of them did not fully understand why the figures were so offensive or deemed racist. It's true that the topic of racism is not discussed as widely in Europe as it is here in the US, and while the US is far from perfect I do believe that by talking about these forms of racism, we understand what's so offensive about it. Without spelling it out, the figures are depicting minority races as sub-human. For example, their features are distorted and made to look foolish (re: Blackface) or nefarious (re: Yellowface), which is not only demeaning and hurtful but it reinforces white culture's notion of superiority. And in this case, placing these figures in such a rarefied context as Milan Design Week, which is so celebrated in our design industry, it sends a damaging and negative message (which has been amplified by the media).

Statement from Stephen Burks

The racist figurines on display during the Milan Furniture Fair last week at the Campo Base exhibition curated by @ladedess and collected and presented by @adarioarchitects are a reminder to us all that design does not exist in a vacuum.

Design is popular culture and our actions shape attitudes and opinions that reflect where we are as a society.

The unfortunate message this exhibition has sent is that people of non-European origin do not have the right to exist outside of a Eurocentric, often racist, frame of reference.

We must acknowledge that the historical objects on display in the exhibition originated from violence. We must understand how their creation in the 1920's was derived from an unequal system of cultural exploitation borrowing directly from European colonial practices of dehumanizing "othering".

At Stephen Burks Man Made we believe everyone is capable of design and that all people should have equal access to its transformative potential.

As designers we must call out all symbols of oppression and discriminatory practices, tokenism, and stereotyping that continue to take place within our field.

Thank you @anavaprojects and @hellohuman for helping spread the word.

Where we go from here is of critical importance.

Let's open the dialogue.