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A Memphis Group Founder Finally Gets Her Due

Artist Nathalie Du Pasquier's first American retrospective, along with more projects, is on the horizon



ARTISTIC EXPRESSION Nathalie Du Pasquier in her Milan studio. PHOTO: JAMES MOLLISON FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

By Carol Kino

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This is a tray from '84, done with a Danish carpenter," says 60-year-old artist Nathalie Du Pasquier, pointing out a dark wooden box inlaid with orange zigzags and arcs in her studio in Milan's Porta Nuova district. An Italian pottery plate, fired with a blue, yellow and red bull's-eye, is from "a series based on circles, done by me in Naples." Sheets of wallpaper are pinned to a wall like drawings, covered with rectangles that suggest cinder blocks or floral grids reminiscent of the British Arts and Crafts pioneer William Morris. The couch is piled with zigurat-patterned blankets and pillows, some designed by Du Pasquier for the Danish design brand Hay, others in collaboration with her partner of 38 years, the British industrial designer George Sowden, for the Swiss company ZigZagZurich.

Du Pasquier's interest in textile design is unusual for a painter who, after working quietly for three decades, is poised for major art world attention. Following shows at Portugal's Kunsthalle Lissabon in January and Pace London this past summer, her first American retrospective, *Big Objects Not Always Silent*, just opened at Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art, after a successful 2016 run at Austria's Kunsthalle Wien. For years, Du Pasquier has been

celebrated as a founder of the Memphis Group, the collective that upended the design world when it launched in 1981, challenging every tenet of modernist black-and-chrome, form-must-follow-function good taste with its bright colors and asymmetrical lines. One of two female designers in the core Milan group, Du Pasquier created many of the exuberant patterns for which it became known. And today, with Memphis back in fashion, Du Pasquier is too—only now she’s overturning contemporary art orthodoxies, with what Luca Lo Pinto, a curator at Kunsthalle Wien, calls “an expanded approach to painting.”



A composition of artworks, many of which will be shown at her show in London this month.
PHOTO: JAMES MOLLISON FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Seen on their own, Du Pasquier’s paintings aren’t so outrageous: Her early works include luminous oil-painted still lifes—glasses, cups, bricks, detergent bottles—that recall the Italian metaphysicist Giorgio Morandi. More recently, she has painted geometric constructions she builds from painted wood, as well as imagined abstractions. Lately she has shown them as sculptures that often fill entire rooms. Her recent shows have been grand installations, in which one might encounter a painting or vase balanced atop a cabinet or plinth, or paintings layered over wallpaper.

Her retrospective is a multigallery *Gesamtkunstwerk* that includes drawings; rugs; a room-size sculpture broadcasting a sound piece by a friend; and *My Brain*, a large chamber filled with paintings and objects that tell the story of her life. “It’s kind of a city of Nathalie Du Pasquier,” says Alex Klein, a curator at the ICA. “There’s so much work, and it’s exciting to see it singing in concert, to see the hierarchical categorizations dissolve between the design objects and the purely aesthetic objects.”

“Nathalie has a lot of freedom to shift from one thing to another, without thinking too much about the consequences,” says Lo Pinto, who co-curated the Philadelphia show with Klein. “Sometimes you feel a bit disoriented, because you really don’t understand what you have in front of you.”

Also disorienting: Du Pasquier’s multiple projects. On September 29, *Other Rooms* opens at London’s Camden Arts Centre. It features rooms inside rooms, reams of drawings, painted paper shapes layered over wallpaper and seven ceramic vases named for days of the week—



Personal Sculpture, 2007. PHOTO: JAMES MOLLISON FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

all of it new.
“I think it’s
a good time
for her
work,” says
Jenni
Lomax, who
curated the
show and
recently
stepped
down as
Camden’s
director.
“This
collective
way of
working
really
chimes with
the way
artists are
thinking.

And it always makes you feel better when you see it, in the way that good design does.”

Du Pasquier’s ability to fearlessly blend art and design while embracing decoration has also won her a following. As Klein says, “A lot of younger artists are looking for models like Nathalie.”

“There is a bit of a cult around her,” says Tamara Corm, a Pace London director. When Corm told artists about Du Pasquier’s exhibition, comprising a site-specific installation and new sculptures and paintings, “they were all very excited,” she says. “Some knew her Memphis fabrics. It’s word of mouth. She’s cool.”

Raised in Bordeaux, France, where her mother was a historian of decorative arts and her father a virologist, Du Pasquier left after high school, traveling to West Africa, Australia, India and Rome, where she was an au pair for a year, before arriving in Italy’s design capital in 1979. “I didn’t know where to fit,” she says. She was always drawing but had no idea how to make that a career. “In France, if you don’t go through the academy or a course, you don’t get anywhere. I was sure I was never going to be doing anything.”

That changed when a chance meeting with an old acquaintance, the designer Martine Bedin, led her to the party where she met Sowden. Not only was it “love at first sight,” as Sowden says, but it was also creative kismet. Fifteen years her senior, he had been working for Ettore Sottsass, then Italian design’s reigning guru, and had just started his own firm, which was designing elements used in today’s personal computer. (Sottsass is now the subject of several hundred-birthday shows, including *Ettore Sottsass: Design Radical* at New York’s Met Breuer through October 8.) Sowden was also designing textiles, and one day Du Pasquier asked if she could try too. “I came home in the evening, she’d done like a hundred patterns,” Sowden recalls. “It was quite extraordinary—the energy, the sureness. It came from the wellspring of her creativity.” For Du Pasquier, making her first patterns was “like when you first fall in love,” she says. “It was incredible. I had discovered what I was going to be doing.”

For a year she collaborated with Sowden on various projects; then



A work in Du Pasquier's Milan studio. PHOTO: JAMES MOLLISON FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Memphis launched in critic Barbara Radice's living room. Although others contributed during its six-year run, the core Milan group comprised Sottsass and seven of his much younger associates, including Sowden, Du Pasquier, Bedin and Radice, his wife-to-be.

Today Memphis is often described as a zany style involving wacky patterns and a jumble of angles and lines. But its founders reject that notion. "They keep thinking it's jazzy—that we amuse ourselves," says Radice. "No! It was an updating of the architectural alphabet."

"There was no style," says Sowden. "It wasn't a planned aesthetic. It was a mess—a collage that created an extraordinary amount of positive energy, which just about everybody in the world picked up on. Everybody asked, 'What's going on?' We asked that ourselves."

As Sowden explains it, fashion and music had gone pop in the 1960s, but design and architecture were stuck in prewar formalism. "If it wasn't black, it wasn't design," he says. "We were saying, Surely there's something else." In 1980, at the tail end of punk, "Sottsass told everybody that he had this opportunity to create this exhibition. It was kind of, Why don't we just do what we want?" They met to look at each others' drawings. "It was usually done in the evening, with a bottle of white wine," Sowden says. Their furniture involved plenty of plastic laminate—then disdained by designers—because it was a great pattern vehicle. And they scrapped the idea of form following function and embraced design for its own sake—a move whose repercussions can be seen today.

Their first collection was unveiled in 1981, during Milan's Salone del Mobile. People went wild: Karl Lagerfeld snapped up every piece, and the group became superstars. For Du Pasquier, it led to countless commissions, a designing stint with the fashion label Fiorucci and a crash course in manufacturing. She was the only one with no training or experience to rebel against, so for her it was all about discovery. "Everything seemed possible," she says. "I designed jewels, dresses, textiles, carpets, furniture, cities, street furniture." Just before Memphis disbanded in 1987, Du Pasquier says, "I felt a little bit trapped into the design Memphis girl. I preferred to explore something I didn't know at all, so I started to paint."



A work in Du Pasquier's Milan studio. PHOTO: JAMES MOLLISON FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Inspired by postmodernism's jumble of styles, Du Pasquier experimented with cityscapes and figuration before settling on the still life. For years she showed primarily with a Hong Kong dealer and did everything—making artists' books, painting on walls at poetry slams, visiting artists' retreats—until the art market crashed in 2008 and her modest sales dried up.

That's when she was rediscovered by a younger generation, drawn by her connection to Memphis but also by her independence. The change began when Miu Miu used her Memphis prints, uncredited, in the spring 2006 collection. "They never paid anything," Du Pasquier says. "But it turned out to my advantage. It put the things into fashion again just as everything collapsed." (Miu Miu has declined to comment.)

New design projects arrived. Aided by the internet, so did new admirers, like Omar Sosa, co-founder and art director of the Barcelona-based interiors magazine *Apartamento*, who was entranced when he discovered Du Pasquier's 2005 painting *Bricks and Orange* on a blog, realized her Memphis connection and put her in the magazine in 2011. Iris Alonzo, then creative director of American Apparel, says she found Du Pasquier's paintings online and asked her to design a limited-edition clothing line, which came out in 2014, as did a line of tote bags for Wrong for Hay. "It's crazy but somehow these things made me famous," Du Pasquier says. "Then people went to my website and discovered that I am also a painter."

'I preferred to explore something I didn't know at all, so I started to paint.'

—Nathalie Du Pasquier

Meanwhile, Sosa had finally persuaded Du Pasquier to make a book of her 1980s patterns—although he'd had to tread carefully. "Nathalie's somebody that lives today in the present," he says. "I didn't want to push her too much to show me things that she did 30 years ago because I knew that for her that wasn't relevant. But, of course, when I

would see those illustrations, it was like, Wow!” Published in 2015—the first edition sold out and is now a collectors’ item—the book (*Don’t Take These Drawings Seriously*) fueled the fire. That’s how art insiders such as Corm and Lomax first learned of her paintings.

A decisive moment for Du Pasquier’s career came in 2014, when Lo Pinto became a curator at Kunsthalle Wien and soon after offered her a show. “I had an intuition,” says the curator, who’d discovered her work in a gallery and watched it for years. “She’s a person who’s not following any trends. She never wanted to be in a safe place. She always wants to look forward.”



Aspetta! (Wait!), 2007 PHOTO: JAMES MOLLISON FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Meanwhile, Du Pasquier’s art career is rocketing forward—the show at Pace London sold out—and the design projects haven’t stopped. Only now, instead of being a designer who paints, she’s increasingly seen as an artist who

designs. Take the two silk scarves she created with Hermès. One reached stores last spring, and a second was just released. The house loved one of the designs so much that it used it for two dresses in the current women’s ready-to-wear line. Rather than asking Du Pasquier to create patterns, however, Hermès based the scarves on paintings. “Normally we work with illustrators,” says Christine Duvigneau, the label’s graphic design studio director, who has a Du Pasquier painting hanging in her office. “But Nathalie is an artist, so we bought a piece of art.”

That’s fine with Du Pasquier. For while she loves designing textiles, when she started painting 30 years ago, she says, “I understood that was the real adventure that I would go on until the day I die.”

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