

THE INTERNATIONAL DESIGN MAGAZINE — **Fresh Talent** ... Doshi Levien ... Sebastián Errázuriz ... Xrange ...  
The Boys from Berlin ... Aranda/Lasch ... A New Crop of Curators ... Fifth Annual Student Design Review

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# I.D.

## Doshi Levien, Meet Fame

*(Introducing the latest pack  
of emerging designers)*



Nipa Doshi and Jonathan Levien with their daybeds for Moroso





ALTHOUGH THE BUILDING that houses the Milan Furniture Fair sprawls over 7.5 million square feet, one corner of one stand—belonging to the Italian manufacturer Moroso—attracted a disproportionate amount of attention this year. Peering through the clusters of visitors, one found neither bonbons nor complimentary iPods nor Marcel Wanders's girlfriend swinging from a chandelier in the nude (yet again). Instead, there were daybeds and large floor cushions in brilliantly colored fabrics with quirky embroidery and appliqué.

The crowds couldn't keep their hands off. "They were hugging the cushions!" exclaims Nipa Doshi, 35, who designed the pieces with her partner, Jonathan Levien, 34, of the rising London-based studio Doshi Levien. The daybeds, or Charpoys (Hindi for "four legs"), featured a mattress of cotton and silk embroidered with a checkered game board. The cushions, called Tools for Inspiration, were decorated with self-referential motifs: One depicted the instruments, such as chalk and hand-forged scissors, used by the textile workers



## No Rest for the Worldly

*What a difference a daybed makes—just ask Doshi Levien.*

By Caroline Roux / Portrait by Kate and Camilla



who made them; others showed objects from the designers' own studio, including a computer fan, Italian staplers, and Tord Boontje's TransGlass vases made of recycled bottles.

"I knew the project was interesting," says Patrizia Moroso, the company's creative director, on the phone from Udine, Italy, "but I didn't expect this response." Once the fair was over, the grubby prototypes were marched to the cleaners to get rid of all the handprints. The pieces were installed in Moroso's New York showroom, where the Charpoys were selling for \$4,100 and the custom-made cushions for considerably more. They were also displayed in the Great Hall of the city's Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum this past summer, the first in a series of "Quicktake" exhibitions featuring innovative products before they are widely known. "The tactility, beauty, and lightheartedness were welcome refuges," says the Cooper-Hewitt's deputy curatorial director, Matilda McQuaid, explaining why, among the Milan fair's vast bounty, she and chief curator Cara McCarty picked Doshi Levien's designs to inaugurate the series.

Doshi Levien have worked as a team since 2000. They met at London's Royal College of Art, where both studied product design, graduating in 1997. Together, they have created any number of credible goods—cutlery for Habitat, cookware for Tefal—and some inspiring exhibitions. Now it seems they have met their creative godmother in Moroso, an entrepreneur famous for putting Boontje's woodland romanticism on the map. "I was reading about them in a magazine, and I thought, I want to know these lovely people," Moroso says. "And that day a beautiful envelope arrived from them, made in India. It was destiny. Ten days later we met in London."

What attracted Moroso, as well as hard-nosed design critics and hard-to-please buyers in Milan, was Doshi Levien's cultural cross-pollination with a contemporary edge. There is no sentimentality in these products, which are an assimilation of fine Indian craftsmanship (the textile work is done in Doshi's aunt's factory in Ahmedabad; each piece is signed in thread by the artisans who made it) and the best of Italian production. As in all their previous projects, Doshi's love of craft and narrative combines with Levien's industrial precision. The result is objects with local values and universal appeal. The Charpoy, for example, is an Indian furniture archetype (and the chess-like game of *chaupar*, seen in ancient paintings, is notorious for having incited the epic mythological war called the Mahabharata when a ruler gambled away his wife and kingdom), but its finely turned Italian legs befit a European drawing room.

previous spread  
Nipa Doshi and Jonathan  
Levien in the garden  
at New York's Cooper-  
Hewitt, National Design  
Museum in July left  
Doshi Levien's Charpoy  
daybeds and Tools for  
Inspiration cushions  
launched the Cooper-  
Hewitt's "Quicktake"  
series of innovative  
new products.



Charpoys feature a  
gameboard for playing  
*chaupar*, an ancient  
Indian game related  
to chess. Each bed is  
signed in thread by the  
textile workers who  
made it.



This is not just a design match, however. The two married in 2000 in London's Chelsea Town Hall, and Levien himself says "creativity and love come from the same place." Patrizia Moroso, too, talks about their work being "a fusion underpinned by love." Tom Dixon, the British designer for whom both have worked, says, "They have literally married two diverse cultures. I wouldn't have put them together, probably, when I knew them separately. But couples are strange things, aren't they?" Even their live-work space (built in 1830, it has served as both a print factory and a banana warehouse) sits on the border between the new city finance buildings that are eroding Spitalfields's history and the Brick Lane area that

is home to much of London's Bangladeshi community, like a further metaphor for the pair's cultural elision.

Nipa Doshi was brought up in Delhi and educated at the prestigious National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, where the Ulm and Bauhaus values of form and function were still being heavily enforced in the 1990s. Levien, born in Scotland, had attended the furniture course at Bucks College in High Wycombe, where he learned his love of precision and problem-solving. His uncle Robin Levien, a highly respected British industrial designer, encouraged him to go to the RCA. Doshi was advised to apply by Jasper Morrison when she visited him in London as a starstruck graduate. "I'd left his exact



Left Exhibited at Lisbon's 2005 Experimenta show, this dress was inspired by Indian courtesan fashion and made from cotton hand-woven in West Bengal.

above and right A paper silk "healing dress" and a bejeweled doctor's case were among the objects in Doshi Levien's 2004-2005 window displays for London's Wellcome Trust, the world's largest medical charity.



above and left This tagine is part of the Mosaic collection of Teflon cookware for Tefal (2003). Each product in the line features a distinctive base pattern.

left and below Swallow utensils and Melba glassware for Habitat



address at home," she recalls. "So I had to guess which house was his in the street. It was the one without net curtains."

Doshi and Levien didn't date at college, but they sat next to each other. "One day she said to me, I can't be your friend if I don't respect your work," Levien remembers. Now their closeness allows a continual editing of one another's ideas. "You can be brutally honest when you work as a couple. It's not a hindrance. And you develop a similar sensibility," he says. Doshi, always more pragmatic, says that if design now is about creating more human and layered work, then this combination of masculine and feminine is a way to achieve it.

The couple have not been distracted from their ideals by this year's success. While they are developing a new "office landscape" for Herman Miller, they're also working closer

to home on a project with umbrella manufacturer T. Fox. Established in 1868 by Samuel Fox, creator of the world's first steel-frame model, the company proclaims its presence with a landmark neon sign on London Wall, just streets away from the couple's studio. "The British Council in India asked us to create something for them, and we wanted to produce an antidote to all the bigness now happening in India," says Doshi. "The umbrella is about personality and identity and unites industrial and textile design, and fashion and utility," continues Levien. "And most of our clients are in India or Italy or the U.S., so we thought, let's go local." ★

Caroline Roux is a London-based design writer and editor.