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DESIGN REVIEW | 'SAFE: DESIGN TAKES ON RISK'

## If You're Going to Be Safe, May as Well Be Stylish



Museum of Modern Art

Cute but vicious: "Mr. Smash & Madame Buttly Razor Wire" (2003).

By [NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF](#)

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"Safe: Design Takes On Risk," which just opened at the Museum of Modern Art, sounds like the kind of show that might probe dark psychic territory. It was not to be. A pleasure to the eye, this show's beguiling array of objects floats just above the surface of its subject. And the result is as comforting as warm milk.

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Museum of Modern Art

"Peter Pin, R. Bunnit and Dadoo," whimsical railings by Matthias Megyeri.

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The first major design exhibition to be organized since a vastly expanded MoMA reopened last year, "Safe" was conceived in early 2001 as an exploration of advances in rescue and emergency equipment. After Sept. 11, museum officials decided that the show should have a more positive emphasis, given the depth of the city's anxiety. The result is an array of exquisite design objects that are meant to make us feel secure, some as luxurious as exotic stuffed birds. Somewhere along the way, the show lost its edge.

What could have been an intense exploration of one of the richest subjects in contemporary design - the heightened desire for safety in an increasingly terrifying world - seems strangely sentimental and breezy. Beautifully installed, the show never gets inside our heads or hearts.

The exhibition does open on a wonderful note: a canvas teardrop-shaped "Treetent" designed for environmental activists by Dré Wapenaar. Hanging from twin brackets on a

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Robbert R. Roos/Museum of Modern Art

"Treetent" by Dré Wapenaar, originally designed for environmental activists protecting trees by allowing them to keep vigil among the branches.

wall just outside the main gallery, the sagging canvas sack evokes an enormous swollen belly. It suggests both vulnerability and a need to retreat within the womb, as well as the psychological territory yet to be mined.

From there, visitors glide along rows of rarefied objects, some of which hint at the collective trauma the city experienced on 9/11, and its subsequent struggle to maintain the illusion of normalcy in an era when simply riding the subway could be considered an act of defiance. A cluster of sleek stainless steel security bollards, now a staple of the New York streetscape, for example, drive home the extent to which the constant fear of terrorist attack has been sublimated.

The Medusa-like security cameras of "Securitree," by the Mexican artist Raúl Cárdenas Osuna, suggest both the elusiveness of that security and the creeping encroachment on our personal freedoms -the competing fears of violence and

oppression.

Some of the most striking products are the simplest, like the lurid graphics on a set of cards warning clubgoers against sexually transmitted diseases - with the word gonorrhea melting in front of a red sun.

The most powerful objects are those that draw us out of a sheltered reality and prod us to examine threats to daily existence in much of the world, like boots mounted on spiderlike prongs for walking through minefields and a lightweight mine detector that can be packed away in a handbag. An innocent-looking plastic pup tent plugged into a bright yellow air filter, designed by an Israeli firm to protect infants from chemical and biological attacks looks as though it could be on display at Target.

A more selective show would have delved deeply into these themes. At times, it seems, we are surrounded by images of death. We live with a mounting sense of dread. Exploring creative responses to this reality from sublimation to defiance to rage would have made for a more provocative show.

Instead, many of the objects here were seemingly chosen for their standard of beauty. Created by the legendary designers of Pininfarina, the gorgeous podlike car body of the Nido evokes the high era of Italian style but contributes little to the show's main theme. One might also question the inclusion of a curved plastic phallus designed to hold a banana. By the time you get to the Fresh Kiss Breath Checker in a pink-and-white plastic case and a colorful selection of "soft-bite safety spoons" by Gerber the show has lost its interest and focus.

If anything, the department's emphasis on aesthetics has only become more extreme in recent years as the boundary between art and industrial design has faded. The closest thing to social commentary in this show are some conceptual projects by various artists - barbs on a coil of deadly razor wire designed to look like little butterflies, for example, or an enormous padded vest conceived as protective gear for street protesters, complete with a hidden video camera to catch nightstick-wielding policemen.

There are some who will perceive a confounding desire to gloss over the apocalyptic anxieties that grip the American consciousness, from ground zero to the Gulf Coast. But the show's focus on formal aesthetics does plant it firmly within the Modern's tradition. When Philip Johnson, the founder of the museum's department of architecture, first introduced the International Style to an American audience in the 1930's, he famously stripped the movement of its social and political meanings.

That agenda continued through the cold-war era, when critics charged, with some justification, that the museum's support of abstraction fit neatly within a broader government agenda to project a progressive image to the world.

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But in some ways, the show also brings to mind the bent-plywood furniture of Charles and Ray Eames, which became alluring emblems of the postwar American dream. "Safe" seems to be shaped by the innocent belief that good, clever designs can lead to a more enlightened world.

Today, that notion seems naïve. It's hard to remember a time in American history when the unnerving effect of world politics on daily life has been more palpable. A sign in the subway alerting passengers that the police are checking bags and knapsacks triggers a sequence of emotions: fear, repression and, finally, denial. That sign - mounted on a cheap board, with simple lettering - is more likely to leave a lasting imprint than the most beautiful objects in this show.

*The show continues through Jan. 2 at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, Manhattan.*

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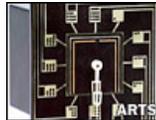
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