

FASHION | BEAUTY | ARTS | CULTURE

RESTAURANTS | BARS | TRAVEL | INTERIORS

The GLOSSARY

THE LONDON STYLE GUIDE

WOMEN IN ART

LONDON PUTS
FEMALE ARTISTS IN THE
FRAME THIS SEASON



ISSUE 28
THE SUMMER ISSUE
£8.00

Tracey! Frida! Schiaparelli!

CREATIVE FORCE

From sculptural furniture to interiors inspired by sacred spaces, London-based designer Mimi Shodeinde is shaping a new language for contemporary British design

Words **BUSOLA EVANS**

I'm down to strength and scale," says designer and interior architect Mimi Shodeinde. "But there is a softness that comes from being a woman." Inside her stylish showroom in a quiet pocket of St John's Wood, that tension is everywhere. Sculptural furniture sits low and weighty, and brushed metal is juxtaposed with chunky upholstery. Pale walls and minimalist flooring give a serene, gallery-like feel and yet are contrasted with the deep, woody scent of oud. It is little wonder that Mimi has emerged as one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary British design today. Since she launched her studio Miminat Designs more than a decade ago, she has become recognised for interiors and collectible pieces often described as "soft brutalism", which blends strong forms with emotional warmth. Mimi's furniture blurs the lines between functional design and sculpture – think solid angular pieces softened by clever details and curves. Much of her work is rooted in her British-Nigerian upbringing. Her first collection, OMI, the name of which derives from the Yoruba word for water, was designed with a fluidity that echoes a soft wave and remains one of her best-sellers. The theme of the ocean runs all the way through, so the OMI table, for instance, features hundreds of handcrafted wood veneers that are fused together to create a ripple-like base. Also popular are

her NIN vessels, which take their name (and curvaceous shape) from "Ninrin" meaning female. But Mimi's influences are wide-ranging – she cites Barbara Hepworth and Linna Bo Lund as touchstones ("I admire both of them for being pioneers of their time. It's still a heavily male-dominated industry"). Other design heroes include Gio Ponti and Mies van der Rohe, and her aviation-inspired Howard collection pays homage to the famed pilot Howard Hughes by evoking the forms of a plane. "My pieces are all distinctive in their own right, but the thread that runs through them all is weight and intention," Mimi says. "Even if we use just one material, we work with that material in several different ways. It's all about the layering." For someone who initially saw herself only as a product designer, her following success as an interior architect is nothing short of impressive. Today she has a client base around the world and has worked on everything from the Carlsberg Hotel in Antigua to a private yacht and a glass-fronted beach home in Cape Town. Current work includes homes in London, Thailand and Delhi and a cinema in Lagos, Nigeria. "Commercial projects often allow you to be a bit more creatively adventurous," says Mimi. "With residential projects, it's more personal. You're designing around someone's life." Her showroom, her first standalone, opened a year ago; her pieces were previously only available online and is now the clearest expression of her creative world. "It's been an absolute dream to have this

THEGLOSSARYMAGAZINE.COM

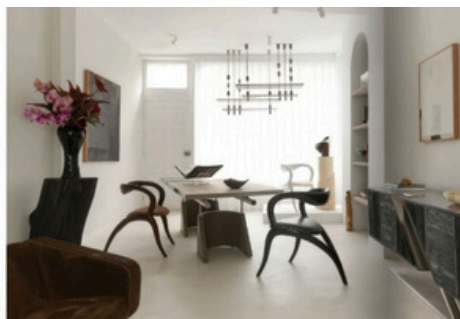
85



because for the first time, clients are able to touch and feel the pieces, which is so important," says Mimi. There is a tranquility to the space, a mood drawn directly from sacred Islamic architecture and the sensory experience of places of worship, which is a constant reminder of Mimi's Muslim upbringing. "For me, faith is all about presence and atmosphere; it is fundamental to how I operate as a person," she says. "Whenever I go to Mecca with my mum, the Grand Mosque – Masjid al-Haram – is so clean and serene. Whether you go to church, the mosque or synagogue, you want it to feel peaceful and zoned out from the rest of the world. That's what I wanted to create."

Musik is also integral to the atmosphere in the showroom. "I am a big enthusiast. I appreciate all genres," says Mimi. "The soundtrack in my studio changes all the time. I love a bit of Afro jazz and R&B and soul. Sometimes it's Afrobeats when the sun's shining." Indeed it even influences her designs – at the back of the showroom, a daybed wrapped in cowhide and horseshair references King Sunny Adé and the tensioned ropes and animal skins of the percussion instruments used by the Nigerian musician.

It is also a space that is constantly evolving, with new installations and exhibitions planned two to three times a year. The latest, *Unearthing nature and brutality*, which



"I definitely have had to push down those doors. I didn't wait for anybody to give me a seat at the table. Instead I built my own table. That's the advice I'd give any Black designer starting out"

cleverly marries two seemingly opposing concepts, was a collaboration with artists including Berlin-based Verena Koch and Japanese photographer and architect Hiroshi Sugimoto. "Our next installation will probably be in October and I am working on the theme now," says Mimi. "We will perhaps do something more dramatic. I love the idea of completely transforming the space."

The gallery function is a key focus for Mimi. "I want it to be a living space more than a showcase," she says. "Going forward, I'd like it to be a place where I can create real conversations between my work and other makers. For dream collaborators, I'm drawn to contemporary artists working in material and form, creatives who are in dialogue with heritage and newness in the same breath I feel I am."

One of her favourite elements of the studio is her materials library, which sits on the lower floor of the atelier. "It is a tactile archive of the surfaces, textures, stones, metals, fabrics and finishes that I work with and am drawn to," says Mimi. "It's there for people who want to understand how spaces come to life from the material up." It would be easy to think that Mimi rarely incorporates colour into her work but that would be wrong. "I love colour," she says. "I think people assume I only work in neutrals because the showroom reads that way, but that's a very deliberate choice for that space. In project work, colour is very much present in its raw form. It tends to be purposeful and considered rather than decorative; the texture of deep terracotta, a brushed green, a flash of something unexpected."

She may be one of few Black women at the forefront of British contemporary interiors but she maintains breaking



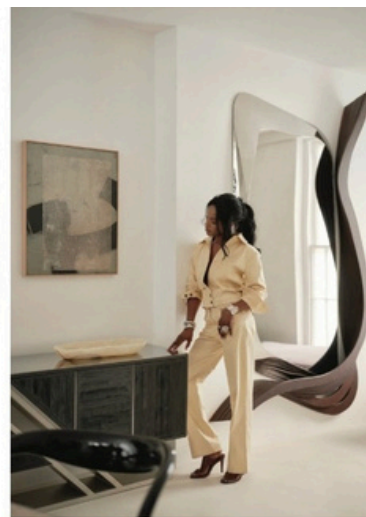
into the industry on her own terms hasn't been easy. "When I first started, I didn't fit in on the African side because I wasn't considered African enough. And I didn't fit in on the European side because I wasn't considered European enough," she recalls. "So I definitely have had to push down those doors. I didn't wait for anybody to give me a seat at the table. Instead I built my own table. That's the advice I'd give any Black designer starting out."

That independent spirit can be traced back to Mimi's childhood. Raised between Hertfordshire and Nigeria, she was the eldest and only daughter among three brothers. "I think there's a masculinity in my designs that comes from that," she muses. "I am a very strong person and don't really take no for an answer." Her entrepreneurial mother, she adds, taught her resilience, while her father, an architect, has an eye for precision. "He has influenced my life in the sense that I'm very disciplined because he was very strict with his work."

She studied fine art and then obtained a degree in Interior Architecture during which she launched her first product line. Her foray into interior design followed in 2018. "I have always been very ambitious," she says. "I was keen to get going." Mimi's work has since garnered significant global interest. "I can happily say my pieces are in someone's home around the world," she says, "whether that's Thailand, India, the States, Africa or Asia. That is something that makes me feel proud." But London continues to be an important anchor for her work and many of her clients often visit while travelling.

Living in Chelsea, she is deeply attached to the city. "I am very inspired by nature and London has some of the best parks you will find, like Hyde Park. I also love walking around Soane Square and Bloomsbury, where you can explore beautiful ceramic shops. But for any design lover, Primrose Road is a must. It has such a mix of great design showrooms from the new to the very old-school ones with interesting antiques. It is underrated and often still feels like an industry secret."

Her favourite stores include Monument, a design practice in Leyton that curates archival furniture, and she's often found in the art gallery Thaddeus Ropac in Mayfair and the V&A Museum. She would like to see London grow its status as a design city in the same realm as Milan. "There is definitely an appreciation for design here but we still have a long way



to go," she says. "There's a certain London look, either very traditional English interiors or very collectible furniture. I think there's still space for more experimentation. London can be very trend-focused, which I think can sometimes be harmful for the design scene. Longevity is what is important." Mimi is the first to admit she rarely has an off switch. But when she needs a break from designing she enjoys an unexpected outlet. "I can listen to political podcasts for hours," she says with a laugh. "My TikTok and YouTube algorithms are all geared to it. I couldn't paint or draw to relax because it is so similar to what I do every day. Politics and history, on the other hand, activates a different part of my brain."

Mimi's insight after lighting collections, which often nod to Art Deco, mix contemporary style with traditional craftsmanship. Looking forward, she is planning on expanding her existing lines. "We're introducing a new cluster of lighting, because lighting is really popular for us. I would also like to do another vessel collection because my last one was in 2023." Mimi's greatest strength may well be her constant willingness to experiment, question and continually evolve. No doubt that will put her in great stead as she charges into her next chapter. As she succinctly puts it: "The work is endlessly generous if you stay curious enough to receive it."

56 Abbey Gardens, St John's Wood, London NW8
miminat.com

THEGLOSSARYMAGAZINE.COM

87