A Beautiful Collision

Jessica Agoston Cleary discusses the intersection of art and design. She reflects on the panel discussion that took place at Zenith Interiors Parnell showroom on Thursday 3rd November, and suggests that the fields of art and design are an attempt to make space and light speak to us.

This piece is adapted from our Artfull Sunday newsletter. Subscribe to receive artfully informed content, every week.

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Artists	Bonco, Gerry Parke, Milvia Romici, Karen Rubado

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"*No longer is it a matter of speaking about space and light, but of making space and light, which are there, speak to us.*"

Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Eye and Mind".

This quote from Merleau-Ponty has drifted in and out of my mind since the I first read it some years ago. It has informed and shaped my understanding and contemplation of physical spaces and works of art in equal measure. It helped me realise that these essential things - space and light - which we so often take for granted *because* they are always there (even in darkness) actually have something to say.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy, and the intersection of art, design and human experience have been at the forefront of my mind in recent weeks as we prepared to open our latest show *A Beautiful Collision* at the Zenith showroom in Parnell. The show brings together the work of six of our artists, each of whom address different aspects of sociological and environmental concern; concerns which become amplified when these works are seen in the physical context of a commercial office space. As part of this collaboration with Zenith, a global commercial furniture design and manufacturing business, I had the honour of moderating a panel discussion about the intersection of art and design between two award winning interior designers Keri Cunliffe (Warren and Mahoney) and Anna Manson, (Jasmax), Matt Vescovo (Zenith global brand director) and Paul Nathan, aka Bonco (one of our artists).

Four of Bonco's abstract paintings lend their rich vibrant colours to an otherwise dull space. The geometric lines are an aesthetic contrast between the curves of the furniture and lighting.

Paul Hartigan's 'Brain Child' with its soft pastel colours create a visual focal point in this setting. Neon doesn't have to be bright and in your face. In this setting, it adds to the contemplative calm aesthetic.

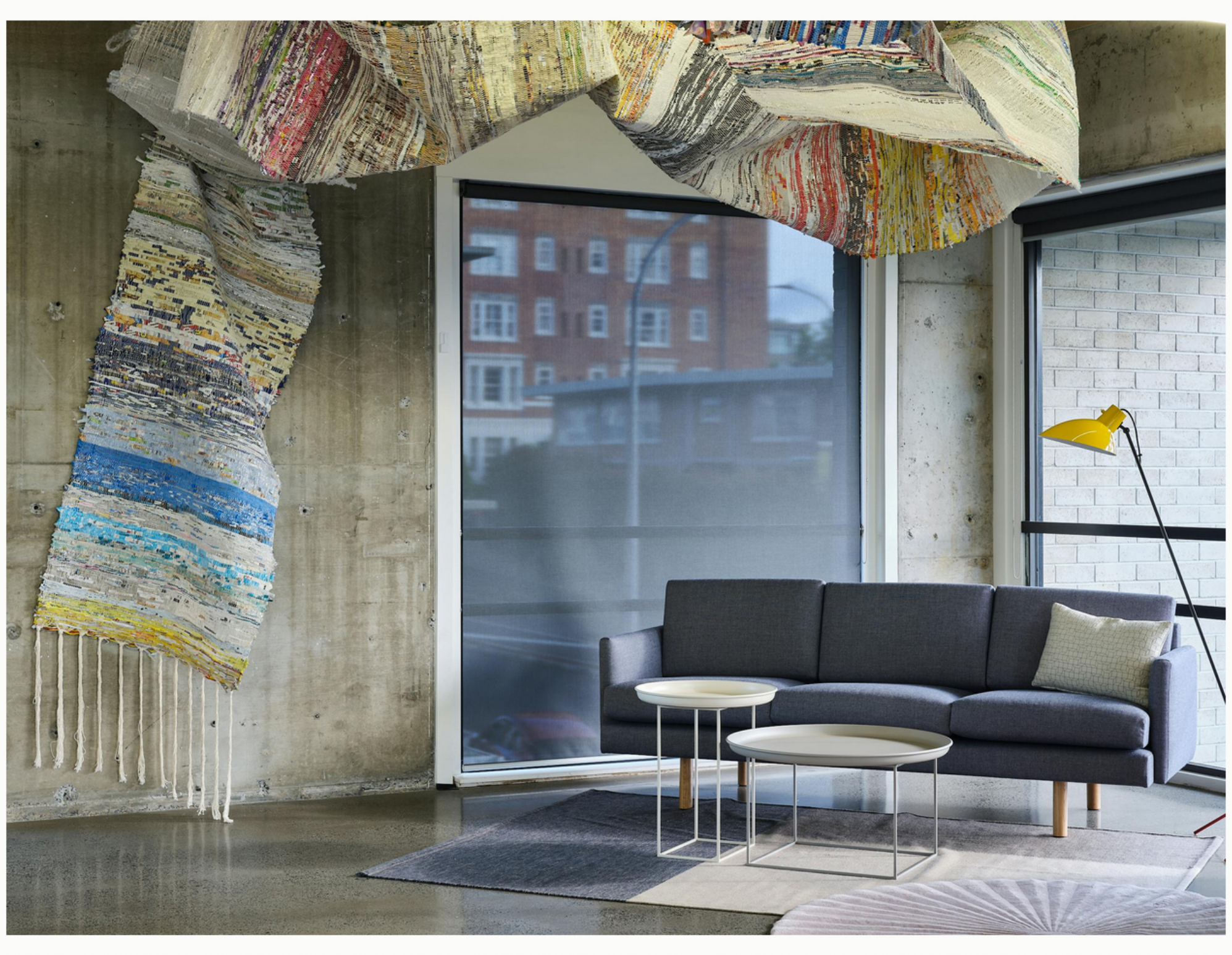
Our wide ranging conversation about a very rich topic started with a provocation to Cunliffe: is there an artwork that you've encountered which has moved you so much so that it informs your way of thinking and practice as a designer? Cunliffe spoke of her grandmothers textile works which filled her home, and how one in particular, an abstract 'Kelp Forrest' made from hand painted strips of fabric, holds a special place in her memory. The way that her grandmother had folded, stitched and stretched each simple strip of fabric together to create a dynamic, almost living forest when glimpsed in right light or caught by a breath of wind, had subconsciously informed her design work.

At every step of the design process, she comes back to the notion of simplicity: that the essential elements of space and light are the foundations for all living beings. That even the most basic materials, depending on how they are used or where they are placed within a space, have the capacity to inspire, calm, provoke, or even directly challenge the people who find themselves within these built environments. What also became evident is that the successful construction (and we can and must consider all artworks as constructions of canvas, paint, plastic, glass et cetera) of any physical thing or space, owes its existence to the ability of the artist/designer/maker to harness the essential elements of space and light - and I might add to this a third element: materials - bringing them together to have a conversation with each other as well as with us.

> *... she comes back to the notion of simplicity: that the essential elements of space and light are the foundations for all living beings.*

As the conversation between the panellists flowed, the evening sun began to set behind us. Soft golden light streamed in through the floor to ceiling windows, casting shadows across the polished concrete floor of the furniture, our seated bodies, and the artworks around us. As more time passed, light becoming dark, I noticed the shadows deepen and morph into increasingly distorted facsimiles. I also couldn't help but notice the way the changing light was subtly altering my perception of the colours, form and significance of Karen Rubado's beautifully poignant recycled plastic weaving *Under Intense Scrutiny* which was suspended above our heads. Right there, in real time, as we talked about the ways that both art and design ultimately exist to articulate in the physical realm that which is often too big to put into words, space, light and materials joined the conversation. Rubado's work shifted from being a brightly coloured, intriguing and almost weightless object hovering above us, to a darker, heavier shroud. Its materials, thousands of plastic bags which would have otherwise gone to landfill, began to shout their warning as the light faded.

> *By making space and light [and materials], which are there, speak to us, art and design offer the rest of us the chance to hear what it is they have to say.*



Karen Rubado's 'Under Intense Scrutiny' snakes above this casual seating arrangement, creating a welcoming zone in an otherwise hard, foreboding concrete office.

This is the beautiful collision of art and design. When they come together they have the capacity to amplify original intent and create an experience that resonates on a deeper human emotional level. Although the starting point for an artist, designer or architect might be poles apart, these creatives are each in their own way the interlocutors for space, light and materials. They give them their voice. It is a universal voice that cares not for the colour of your skin, the language you speak or the pronouns you use. By making space and light [and materials], which are there, speak to us, art and design offer the rest of us the chance to hear what it is they have to say.

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