

DESIGN

A LIGHT TOUCH

Michael Anastassiades has earned mid-career acclaim for his elegantly minimal designs with one simple rule: Never be a slave to fashion.

BY JEN RENZI

TWO DECADES INTO his lauded career, London-based product designer Michael Anastassiades has found himself in the odd position of becoming a breakout star. In September, the 46-year-old designer mounted a site-specific installation at the Berlin concept store Andreas Murkudis. His ethereal Mobile Chandeliers debut this month at Ralph Pucci's New York and Los Angeles showrooms, while an exhibition of his work opens soon at the Point Centre for Contemporary Art in his native Cyprus. And after years of eschewing collaborations with major manufacturers in his favored medium—lighting—he introduced two buzzed-about collections with Italian company Flos at the Milan furniture fair this spring. All of which is why he's been the object of the kind of fervor typically reserved for neophytes, not cult figures whose clients include fellow British heavyweights like John Pawson, David Chipperfield and Ilse Crawford.

Newfound attention aside, Anastassiades has always been concerned with staying power, both professionally and aesthetically. His mission is to create designs that withstand the vicissitudes of fashion. "I'm not interested in making props," says the designer, whose Mediterranean warmth is tempered by a Zen calm (it's unsurprising to discover that he moonlighted as a yoga instructor for 10 years). His pieces are at once stridently contemporary and timeless—so reductive as to look like abstract studies in materiality. Hemispherical Meditation Stools in statuary marble have the exalted bearing of fine-art objects; his cheeky Tip of the Tongue lamp balances an opaline-glass sphere on the edge of a satin-finish brass cylinder, as if about to roll off; while his Beauty Mirror is a fluid droplet of gold-plated stainless steel, polished to a reflective sheen. "My design language is to

ALL AGLOW A Single Angle lighting fixture by Michael Anastassiades suspends an opaline-glass sphere on a polished brass stem.

COURTESY OF MICHAEL ANASTASSIADES



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: JASPER FRY; STRING LIGHT FOR FLOS; COURTESY OF MICHAEL ANASTASSIADES; JASPER FRY; TIP OF THE TONGUE, COURTESY OF MICHAEL ANASTASSIADES; MEDITATION STOOL, COURTESY OF MICHAEL ANASTASSIADES



BALANCING ACT Clockwise from far left: The Cyprus-born designer; the String Light for Flos, with its super-long cord; his IC lighting collection for Flos, which debuts in March; a Tip of the Tongue lamp; his meditation stool in statuary marble.



eliminate, removing all the excess to expose the idea, so that it comes out in the strongest possible way," Anastassiades says. "By using the inherent quality of the material, you have a greater chance of not creating a pop item."

With lighting, there's the added complication of devising something that looks as good switched off as it does on. "I don't think about lighting as a physical object so much. It has to work in a different dimension," Anastassiades explains. His fixtures often seem integral to their surroundings—take the String series for Flos. The design embodies many of Anastassiades's signatures, including an elemental form whose apparent simplicity belies complex engineering. A spare LED-lit glass globe or triangular pendant levitates from a long black cord, the span of which allows it to be strung from wall to wall to ceiling in any configuration. "It was challenging technologically, figuring out how to transfer the current along an endless length of extremely thin cable without losing power," he says. (He credits Flos with solving that technical conundrum.)

The String light is both high-concept—the cord itself becomes an expressive gesture, drawing calligraphic lines in the air—and practical, enabling overhead illumination in rooms lacking a ceiling conduit. Indeed, even his most sculptural creations are born of function. "I've designed many pieces purely out of need, things I couldn't find for my own home," he says.

That home, a terraced brick building in London's Waterloo district, is a working laboratory—one he's spent the past 15 years gut-renovating into a minimalist modern haven, with occasional assistance from Belgian architect Wim de Mul. Most recently he converted the street-front section of his ground-floor

studio into a little shop, screened by an enigmatic window vignette. It's open by appointment only, but anyone intrepid enough to find the discreetly placed doorbell will likely be buzzed in. "It has become a place where clients can experience the products in context and gain insight into the process behind the design," he says. "It's also become a platform to showcase experiments that I'm working on at a particular time."

Anastassiades moved into the space shortly after establishing his practice in 1994. He entered the design world somewhat through the back door. As a teen, he worked as an assistant in artists' studios near Nicosia, where he grew up, and then moved to London to study civil engineering at the Imperial College. After obtaining a master's degree in industrial design from the city's prestigious Royal College of Art, he had a tough time breaking into the profession. "I was fed up with knocking on doors, with trying to fit within the system," Anastassiades recalls. Becoming his own manufacturer "was the only way to maintain creative flow. I didn't want to just leave my designs on paper."

Like a one-man band, he conceives, develops, produces, distributes and retails his line of poetically minimalist luminaries and accessories, sold through his website as well as prestigious showrooms like Matter, Luminaire and Nilufar. Although he initially relied on local artisans to fabricate components, in 2007 he began outsourcing globally to keep pieces as affordable as possible. It took him two years to set up a network of family-run workshops capable of producing handiwork to his exacting standards: marble sculptors in Italy; glassblowers in the Czech Republic; and metalworkers in India.

Anastassiades's business model is something of

an anomaly in the industry, which tends to favor two extremes: licensing designs to large manufacturers, who oversee the minutiae of production; or making pieces entirely by hand in one's own studio, which generally limits production to small editions with prices to match. Spearheading his own production has offered myriad benefits. "Not having to fit within a certain box, you really have to discover who you are," he says. "It allowed my work to mature and for me to grow the business in a responsible way." It also permitted him to balance commercial pursuits—including products for Puiforcat, Rosenthal, Lobmeyr and Swarovski—with more experimental exercises: His conceptual pieces are part of the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art and London's Victoria and Albert Museum; he's envisioned runway shows for avant-garde fashion designer Hussein Chalayan; and he's mounted site-specific installations at the Hagia Sophia, Vienna's MAK Museum of Applied Arts and Swedish design institution Svenskt Tenn.

Most importantly to Anastassiades, making his own work has allowed him to keep a close eye on quality and craftsmanship. He still personally signs off on every piece, which is no small task; last year alone he produced some 1,000 Ball Lights, his best seller, which retail for about \$800. And he collaborates closely with his artisans to develop and refine the finishes for which he is renowned: laboriously rendered patinas that are the result of a human touch yet have a precision and uniformity that seems almost machine-made. "Fine detailing is crucial; we pay great attention even to parts that aren't visible," Anastassiades explains. "The finish has to be right—even if viewed in absolute darkness." ●