

LA FILLE D'O

31

Murielle Victorine Scherre reflects on the feminist principles and the dedication to craftsmanship that took her on a journey to create La fille d'O, Belgium's fiercest lingerie brand.



Fashion Design



La fille d'O
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IS NOT ALL ONE

Cover
Rita Lino for La fille d'O
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LA FILLE D'O

DESIGN FRIENDS



A new brand of feminism through design

Devoid of frills, practical yet beautiful La fille d'O, the brainchild of creative director Murielle Victorine Scherre, has carved a niche for itself in the lingerie market. Putting the fashion game on its head, La fille d'O tackles branding from a different angle while in the process reviving an industry that could have all together died out in Belgium.

Here Murielle talks about what drives her relentless passion for craftsmanship, bordering on activism, and the inner workings of her Gent-based brand.



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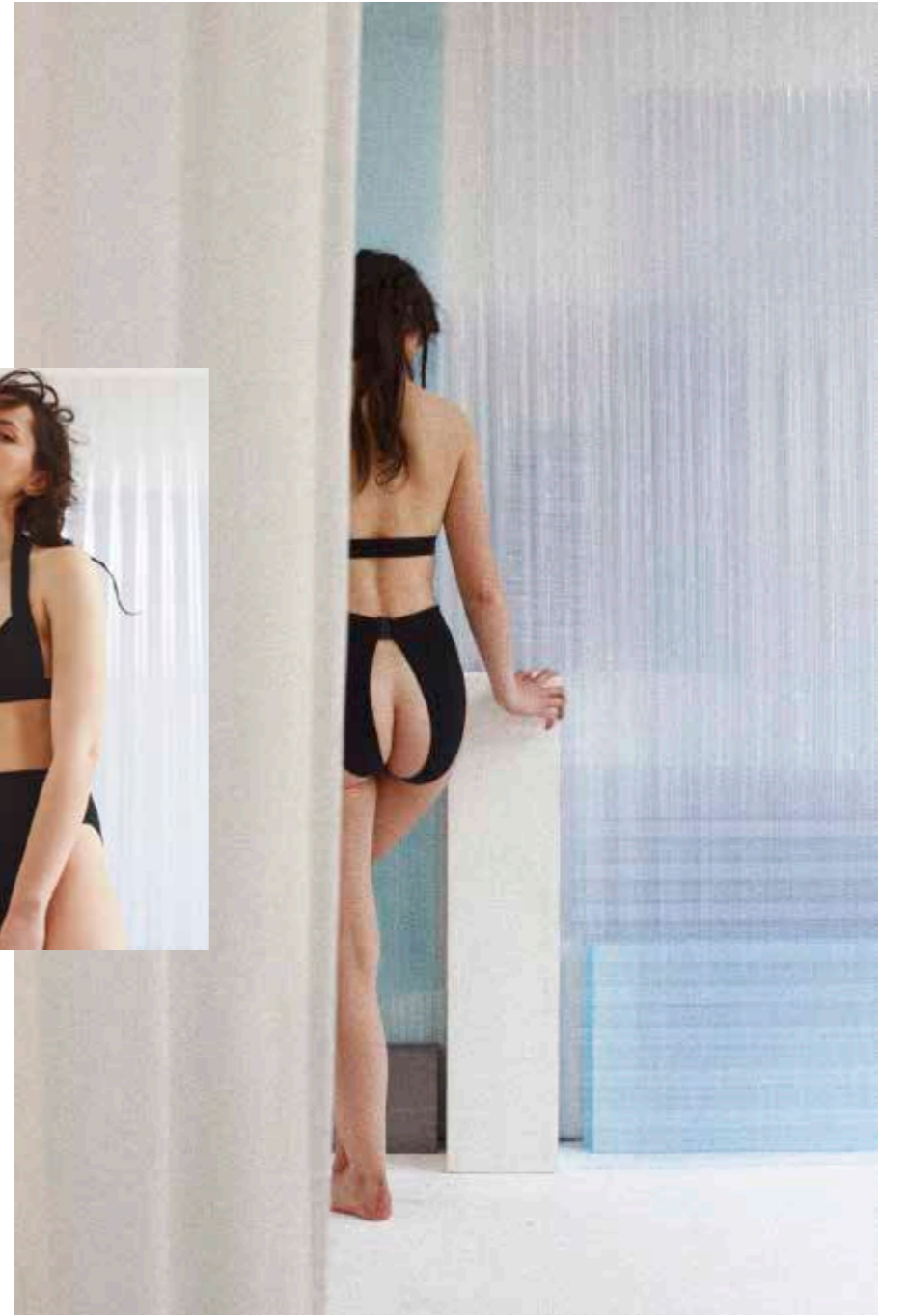
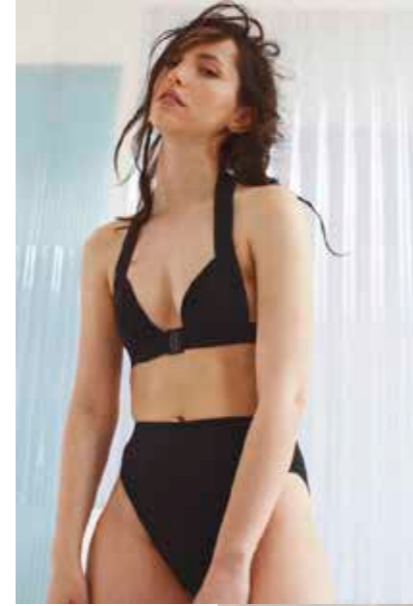




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Murielle Victorine Scherre
AW15
UNCONTROL

Rita Lino for La fille d'O
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It is really nice for me to be able to project my ideals of design into this specific field of demand. I love working like that and I really would love to do it more and ask people what they are looking for and then create according to that. Otherwise as a designer it feels like a monologue.



There are so many monochromes in beauty ideals. It's always either a fashion beauty standard or a pornographic beauty standard.

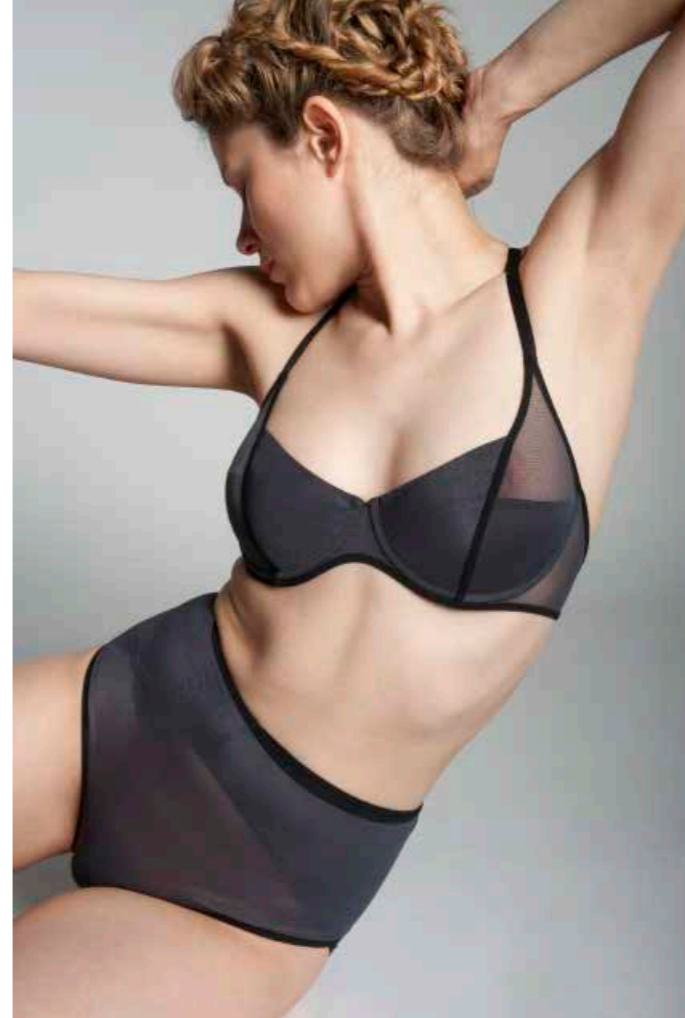


I see so many beautiful people that are left out because you can't place them into either beauty model. There is a lack of variation in beauty.



There are a lot of feminists who hate me for saying that but I don't think there is anything wrong with looking at somebody and just admiring their beauty and objectifying them even.

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MURIELLE VICTORINE SCHERRE

in conversation with
Angelina A. Rafii

Can you describe la fille d'O in five words?

This is actually a difficult question. It's hard to describe, because if you asked me this question every day, I would probably give you five different words each time.

So what are your words today?

Well, if you want me to describe the main thing about la fille d'O, we always describe it with a triangle in mind, because we have three main points that are very important to us: the hair, the rope and the yarn. Those are the three basic elements.

What do you mean by the hair?

Hair is like the line on the body. We use it in our branding as well. It represents the human part of it.

Then the second idea- that of the rope, constitutes the other part of the triangle, representing sexuality. It's not just about

sex, but mostly about the energy, as a human, as a woman and specifically as a woman interacting with your partner. We are after all making lingerie, which also means that we are supporting women's bodies and minds.

And I think it's really important that we show a different role model, that we show identity in beauty, because there are so many monochromes in beauty ideals. It's always either a fashion beauty standard or a pornographic beauty standard. I see so many beautiful people that are left out because you can't place them into either beauty model. There is a lack of variation in beauty. So the rope part comes from a very sexual, energetic drive that we have as a brand. We want to show women that we love to support them and that we see their beauty.

The third part is the yarn, and that represents the product. It is super important for me to make an innovative product and I look into the craftsmanship of making lingerie. The better I know the craftsmanship in lingerie, and the pattern-making, the more innovative I can be in the brand. When you bring these items together

it's just really something that is not out there yet because it demands a highly technical knowledge. It demands a freedom in your mind to try and create a product that's free from any compromise. How do you do that as an ethical human being: being an entrepreneur, while holding up all these ethical and aesthetic decisions?

A lot of times, especially in the fashion world, when you talk about sustainability or think in terms of the environment, it almost comes out as a gimmick. The product itself doesn't always manage to trigger the same level of desire. Then there are brands like Edun that try to be sustainable and manage to keep a balance between that idea and presenting beautiful designs.

On the other hand it is also important for you to produce a Belgian product. As you just mentioned it's a learning process. It breeds new ideas and you are promoting a local know-how, which unfortunately in a lot of countries has disappeared in favour of increasing profit margins that come with cheap labour. So how do you resist that pressure? And do you feel the pressure?

Yes, for sure. It is out there every single day. On the one hand I have my customers who see my product in the store next to Stella McCartney or Marlies Dekkers or La Perla, and they only see the price tag and the product. They don't know my story or the other brand's story, and whether the product is marked as being sustainable-or whatever label they want to give to their products.

It's very hard for me to show that there is no other brand in the world doing what I am doing. We are in a league of our own. Even if they claim to be ethical, sustainable, green, ecological etc nobody does it like we do, because we produce in Belgium, we are based in Belgium. We do everything here. It's not with minority outcast workers. It's just regular working-class people in Belgium. Our sourcing is done in Belgium, France, Germany and Austria. So we don't have any fair-trade things running, or eco tags made in China. The whole of my story, from my home, to my studio to my sourcing factory, to my manufacturer is within a 70 km radius. That alone is impossible to recreate and it doesn't even have anything to do with being fair-trade or teen moms who are

knitting hats or making sweaters, which of course are noble things. But in your native country there are people who are capable of sewing and knitting as well and there are all these skills that are just not used. Of course the fair-trade label makes trade with a number of "Third World" countries more interesting but we can't forget that the reason we went there in the first place was because of cheap labour. Then later came a label for it, to make it cool and better than a local label.

To justify it basically?

Yes exactly. They try to market it. It's good that wages are now getting better and higher than they would be if they worked for any local companies. The working conditions are also improving but still the main reason people are there is to take advantage of cheap labour. I am convinced that I can do this differently, because these skills and these craftsmen are right here in my country. So why would I not work with them? Of course every time I talk to investors or customers, there are always people that think my price-point

is too high. Then I lay out what we are offering and the reaction changes to: "Oh my God you are too cheap".

Even more expensive brands that sell at double or triple the price don't offer what we offer. That really motivates me to keep going. Also because if I were to take my production to another country these women that I am working with now would be out of a job, and their craftsmanship would just go to waste. All this knowledge would just be gone.

Is this something that became important to you throughout the course of your business, like once you started you realised how amazing it was and you wanted to keep it up, or did you have that idea firmly in mind when you started?

Belgium is so small and we always have the worst things happen to us and that always gets horrible publicity. We have the worst rapists, the worst ISIS fighters. We also have chocolate and beer and whatever but we have so many good things and such a rich history. For some reason though, we

are not taught to be proud of what we do. When I travel to America every single hamburger place has a sign that says “The best hamburgers. The best hamburger sauce. The best bun. The best tomato.” Or whatever. They claim to be the best in everything and it suits them and they get away with it because they are so shamelessly proud. And we are the opposite. “Ah, em, there is this hamburger we make. Wanna try it?” (Subdued voice). It’s really sad. So for me, having these amazing craftsmen, here, is like a good excuse, because I am so proud of what they do, that I love to show what we are capable of. It is really nice for me to have them on board because it makes me less ashamed when I have to engage in the promotion aspect.

They come with specific traditions and a know-how. You are said to be quite obsessed with the design and the technical side of creating. How do you go about keeping yourself informed about the new things that are possible in terms of innovation? Or is it more a question of an idea popping up in your mind, and you as a result investigating whether it is possible?

It depends. Sometimes when I am in the factory I see an old machine that’s covered under a blanket and I ask what it is for. Or I find an old sample of lingerie in a flea market and I look into a weird seam or finish, then I take it to the factory and ask them how this is made. Or I can find innovation in new materials that are developed by our supplier or I can hear about something online like recycled polyamide. It really depends. There is such different input that goes into my product that it can come from any field basically. I am very curious at heart, so I never really have to do research per se; I am just constantly looking at things. I love combining really old techniques with really new materials.

Sometimes I get inspired for a whole collection from seeing a machine that can do one particular seam. I go to tradeshows; I look at trends, colours, finishes, fabrics etc. If I were to compare it to cooking I would look into making bread with butter and cheese, something really simple but I would look into making really good butter, really good bread and cheese, while someone else would be looking into making a seven-course dinner.

That’s not what I do. I try to look at the ingredients and work my way up from there. Nobody seems to be doing that in lingerie, which is good for me.

Speaking of innovation, your sizing is different from the conventional model. How did you come up with that idea?

Most of the things I come up with are fundamentally logical. All the women I know, wear the wrong size bra and nobody wants to buy an extra large. Also you tend to change in size, the fabric wears out, you never really know what size you are and if you do, it may be different depending on the brand. Basically a lot of practical challenges that don’t explain why one would abide by the traditional sizing. In the old days it was actually much simpler. You would just buy the cup size, then the length of your back would be adapted by the woman who was running the shop-so more like a small boutique. Later, when department stores came along they had to create a prefab version of it. That’s when they started going with the A,B,C,D,E sizing. It’s just not working though, because it’s not a logical

system. It’s not uniform. So I started thinking about how I could find a system that would combine what it used to be like with what it’s like today.

Can we talk about materials? A lot of times what is considered pretty or sexy comes in a material that you don’t necessarily enjoy feeling on your skin. While la fille d’O also uses new materials.

Yes, Magic Curve. That’s an invention from our supplier in Belgium. Normally, materials stretch in one direction and their elasticity is different when you pull it in the opposite direction. This material reacts like your skin. Your skin stretches in every direction. So when you wear it, it feels like second skin. It’s very comfortable and feels nice to the touch. It was also developed specifically for lingerie, so the quality is really resistant to washing and maintenance.

There is another material that we started working with now, from our factory in France that specializes in silks. They developed a nylon that is made on the silk-making machine. Silk

has a very high density of yarn per centimetre because it is so fine, and they made a nylon on that machine. It looks like nylon stockings, very light-weight, and it dries very quickly. But unlike nylon stockings where you can always see the structure if you stretch it out, here it stays like a really nice flat surface because of the high yarn density. The first time I touched this material it felt like make-up powder. It was so soft.

I started thinking about what I could create with this because you cannot put a lot of pressure on it. It is so unique that it demanded a whole new approach. So I came up with a whole range that is like a second layer, one that goes between your lingerie and your garment. With all these sheer clothes and plunging backlines or necklines you don’t want to walk around with your bra showing because it looks silly.

The ideas of overlapping layers and materials that don’t inhibit movements are reminiscent of the world of performance dancers. It’s the idea of fluidity. Is that a world that inspires you?

Yes of course. The human body is my biggest inspiration. It’s just a never-ending story. There are so many different body types. I love seeing people that use their body as an instrument and of course performance artists do exactly that. I find that very inspiring.

Fashion is always about covering up. Like hypocritical armour almost, sometimes there is a dichotomy between the clothes that people wear, and what they are trying to represent which actually contrasts with their personality. Or people who try to hide behind their clothes. While dancers represent almost nakedness, because they communicate through their bodies. There is such freedom and energy in it.

So do the right kind of undergarments really boost a woman’s self-confidence or is that just a cliché we are fed by advertising?

Well, the French word for bra is soutiens, which means support. I think it is really important you support your body, because without it your brain

doesn't really go anywhere. That said, I think in media they have a really weird way of showing that. The sensuality they portray shows women who are very attractive of course, and very willing and able. I am always worried that if you would confront these women with what they are trying to offer, they wouldn't really be able to continue and deliver. If I am attracted to somebody and I start talking to them and they have nothing to say then they can wear whatever they want it just doesn't matter.

Of course that's a much more personal image that you would have to look for in media and I understand perfectly well that this would rule out so many customers. One image has to be able to talk to everybody basically. I have the luxury of creating a niche product so I don't have to worry about any of that. I can design a product that would only appeal to maybe a hundred women. That's a freedom that I have created. And that's why I love working with women who have strong and specific beauty traits, with particular backgrounds, that are artists or musicians. I find that much more inspiring. Because you would be attracted to them as role-models.

So your idea goes beyond that of a Dove commercial that just shows women in different shapes and forms?

Well, usually there is a black girl with curly hair, an Asian girl with straight hair, a bigger girl etc. So anybody basically can relate to them. It's like the Spice Girls, there is the sporty one and the posh one and whatever. It's not like that though. In real life I may just be drawn to redheads, or may not have a Posh Spice in my repertoire but I can't care because it's not just about listing whatever is out there and trying to appeal to as many women as possible but rather staying true to what draws you and you find appealing.

That's the cool thing about being a niche brand, you don't have to please a lot of people but you do have to please these few people a lot more. I don't care if in the process a few people are left out.

Let's talk for a minute about your specific designs, such as the mastectomy bra or the breastfeeding bra.

Well again it has to do with observing what is around me and listening to what the demands are. I know that these products don't stem from a general need but if people that I am inspired by ask me to create a breastfeeding bra or a mastectomy bra, then of course it is really nice for me to be able to project my ideals of design into this specific field of demand. I love working like that and I really would love to do it more and ask people what they are looking for and then create according to that. Otherwise as a designer it feels like a monologue. I would sit alone come up with a design and then go and talk to my publicity and marketing team to see how we can create a demand for a product that people don't feel like they want yet and make them feel like they need it. Then you launch the product and because people have seen it featured in magazines they start buying. To me that is a weird chain of events. I don't find it logical. But that's what's happening every single season for every single brand.

I read this statement from you and I found it particularly interesting. Could you elaborate on what comes

to your mind when you talk about the stigmatization of beauty? "Sometimes it seems as if beauty is like a disease, as if appreciating female beauty does not align with feministic ideals. Yet you can go to a museum to admire beautiful paintings. For me it's the same thing as admiring the beauty of a real woman. I regret that beauty is stigmatized in this way sometimes."

That's really the idea behind la fille d'O. If you read the book Histoire d'O that's where the inspiration comes from. Looking back, we had the feminist vibe and then we had the androgynous millennium, followed by the 50s pinup, etc. Today women are a product of all these precedent generations. I find that a lot of women are having problems with displaying beauty or being a feminist and wearing high-heels or not being a feminist but having armpit hair. We are constantly being bombarded with ideas and it is very hard to position ourselves within all these influences. There are a lot of feminists who hate me for saying that but I don't think there is anything wrong with looking at somebody and just admiring their beauty and objectifying them even.

I am always honest about this. When I see a very good-looking man, I sometimes tell him that I am not even paying attention to what he is saying because I am just staring shamelessly at his looks. Of course by saying this as a woman to a man you can get away with it, but as a man to a woman today you would get crucified as a sexist.

On the other hand it is also why we dress up and take care of ourselves because everybody wants to be attractive. I don't understand how we take care of our appearance and then take offense if someone acknowledges our efforts. I don't find it offensive at all, even if it is generally regarded as offensive. I mean if a dog is barking at me, I don't expect anything different from it because it is a dog, that's how he says hello. I am not going to expect Shakespeare. Every situation and every person speaks differently, whether it is a poet, an entrepreneur or a construction worker they might express themselves differently but the message is still the same. It's one of appreciation. I am not offended by either, though I may react to them differently. It's a fun game to play. I love people's honesty.

That's the women I want to celebrate with la fille d'O. We have had all these struggles and fights, feminism, sexism, equality, racism... I don't find it necessarily degrading to be "objectified" and I think there is so much power to claim there. It's hard to explain but in essence it boils down to how you respond to it and whether you let it reduce you to objectification. Just take the compliment and that's it.

Other brands sell the dream of sex, you sell the reality of it. The lingerie is used for seducing and then you get down to business. Whereas your approach seems to be that you want your lingerie to remain part of the narrative and not just be the amuse-bouche so to speak.

Yes of course. The other day we were being ironic about the Victoria's Secret fashion shows and how you could possibly incorporate the wings into the action. All of us would probably end up stuck in the doorway with the wings on our shoulders not being able to move. (laughs)

I mean the sexuality that we are interested in as a brand is everything that is pure, raw and real. Good sensual energy is something that you cannot buy. It's something that is very precious and that you want to protect. You can't let that be commercialized. That's why I would much rather create a product that puts you in a strong powerful mood on a daily basis, then if you happen to have contact with a partner, it would happen naturally because you are already in that mode. I would hate to be in a situation where you wear crappy lingerie every day because it is more practical, and not itchy and then you meet somebody and think "Oh no, I have to be in a sexual mode now" and it would be such a performance like going to wear "the sexy costume" and walking into the bedroom. I could never do that. I would just make a big fool of myself.

You have a core collection, a yearly collection and then a bespoke collection. Can you talk about each of those?

Basically, we have three layers or fields that I play in. One is the basic layer,

which is called La fille d'O Greatest. If you have these items you are covered in the lingerie department. It's both swimwear and lingerie. The designs are very practical and these are items you can wear every single day.

Then there is the Masters Collection just on top of that, where I do my experiments with new materials and new shapes. That's more like a lab for innovation.

Then there is a newer collection, which is called Not Suitable for Work and that's our more erotic collection where you have the cupless bras or backless panties.

What are your aspirations for the brand going forward?

Well something that I would like to do right now is see if I can apply the same principles of creating the highest quality and most ethical design to garments made in Belgium. I'd like to create a basic wardrobe of very well made and beautiful and fair-made clothes. I want to also look into adapting my

business model more to what my needs and my customer's needs are and not just try to fit my ideas to the existing formulas that are out there. One that is more in line with our brand's needs.



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PUBLICATIONS

01	CHRISTOPH NIEMANN	Illustration	2009
02	MICHEL MALLARD	Creative Direction	2009
03	FUN FACTORY	Product Design	2009
04	ANDREAS UEBELE	Signage Design	2010
05	HARRI PECCINOTTI	Photography	2010
06	KUSTAA SAKSI	Illustration	2010
07	5.5 DESIGNERS	Product Design	2011
08	NIKLAUS TROXLER	Graphic Design	2011
09	JOACHIM SAUTER	Media Design	2011
10	MICHAEL JOHNSON	Graphic Design	2011
11	ELVIS POMPILIO	Fashion Design	2011
12	STEFAN DIEZ	Industrial Design	2012
13	CHRISTIAN SCHNEIDER	Sound Design	2012
14	MARIO LOMBARDO	Editorial Design	2012
15	SAM HECHT	Industrial Design	2012
16	SONJA STUMMERER & MARTIN HABLESREITER	Food Design	2012
17	LERNERT & SANDER	Art & Design	2013
18	MURAT GÜNAK	Automotive Design	2013
19	NICOLAS BOURQUIN	Editorial Design	2013
20	SISSEL TOLAAS	Scent Design	2013
21	CHRISTOPHE PILLET	Product Design	2013
22	MIRKO BORSCHÉ	Editorial Design	2014
23	PAUL PRIESTMAN	Transportation Design	2014
24	BRUCE DUCKWORTH	Packaging Design	2014
25	ERIK SPIEKERMANN	Graphic Design	2014
26	KLAUS-PETER SIEMSEN	Light Design	2014
27	EDUARDO AIRES	Corporate Design	2015
28	PHILIPPE APELOIG	Graphic Design	2015
29	ALEXANDRA MURRAY-LESLIE	High Techne Fashion Design	2015
30	PLEIX	Digital Design	2016

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