

# LAURA STRAßER

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Product Design



“ I was never really good at drawing  
but anything that involved my hands  
I was interested in and good at.

# LAURA STRAßER

DESIGN FRIENDS



COVER:  
**VONRIBBECK**  
*porcelain pendant*



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***What was your path, both academic and personal?  
How did this love of craftsmanship develop?***

I think as a child I already worked a lot with my hands. The first thing I started doing was sewing when I was maybe 9 years old. I learned from my grandmother. At 10 I got my own machine and made some clothes for my little sister's stuffed hedgehog. That was my starting point. I was never really good at drawing but anything that involved my hands I was interested in and good at. Later, I got into weaving, which I loved and could spend hours doing. The pattern was always in my head and I would directly apply it to the material, without drawing it first.

That's still the case by the way. I am not a big drawer. Anything I put down in my sketchbook is actually something only I can read. My sketches don't make sense to an outsider. It's more something that reminds me of what I was thinking. The details are in my head and I have to directly apply it in 3D unto a material that I can form with my hands.

Sketching is not my preferred way of designing things. I have colleagues who have sketchbooks and it's like a treasure for them. It's a tragedy if they lose it somewhere. I know though that it comes with training. Sketching is not a natural gift, it is something you can learn, but I never really needed to.

*Laura Straßer and the art of crafting stories with white gold.  
The German designer talks about the creative journey  
that turned her into a passionate porcelain maker.*

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***It's interesting though because, going back to your childhood, you started with clothing design, and then weaving. How did you end up in porcelain design specifically?***

Well, I was first interested in stage and costume design. I started working in the theatre for a year, beginning as an intern. I got to know a director who really liked what I was doing, so we started working on a piece together. Later, I felt that the theatre world was too small and I didn't like the fact that for about 6 or 8 weeks things are really intense. You get to know the actors and the director really well. You become like this close-knit family and then after 8 weeks it's all gone. That felt weird.

I had friends who were studying product design at the time and it seemed broader. It still gave me the chance to work as a stage designer but also in many other fields. So that's what I decided to do, especially because the Bauhaus university was doing projects with the theatre, which left my options open.

The first two semesters after I started I felt really lost and that was definitely also due to the drawing aspect of it, because while they did not train us in drawing, they were asking us to deliver our ideas that way.

When I went to New York for a semester and took a class in moulding it was like a revelation. I thought *wow, there it is again* – I had rediscovered my love for working with my hands. We went directly from the first little sketch, which was more for myself, into working with the material and crafting in 3D.

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***So it was a more practical approach right away?***

Exactly. And this fit my style much more. I did not have to sketch a lot. The idea was to work with the material because sketching does not allow you to know how it will feel in your hands. And that's really important when you talk about ceramics, porcelain and objects. You do your first experiment in plaster, and I really liked that.

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***And that's where your porcelain moment came.***

Yes. I chose that course by chance. It wasn't something I had always wanted to do but I did want to do something practical while I was there. The school really focused on 3D skills. I also had courses like abstract 3D plaster object. And that's when I had my *AHA* moment, when I did my first piece. In the beginning it was really hard but then I realized that my hands are really skilled. I knew how to touch the material, not to put too much pressure on it so it wouldn't break.

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***That must have been a really beautiful moment, because it sounds like the accent on sketching which you initially experienced was discouraging, and here coming face to face with your strength must have given you a real sense of fulfilment.***

That's true. It was the first moment when I felt that I really enjoyed what I was doing. The issue was that I knew I could do it then in New York but I did not know how to bring that back with me to Germany. I had done three semesters in Germany, the first of which was the foundation and the second and third focused more on the management of production. So I had never really been inside a workshop before New York and was afraid that I could not bring that back.

Before I came to New York I actually had many doubts about what I could do, about whether I was really good enough to be a designer. Being there really changed that for me. I not only really enjoyed it but I really worked hard inside the workshop. Once I came back I had more confidence and I knew I could do it.

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***You have said that with every piece you create, you want to tell a story. Often you go back to the history of porcelain making to find inspiration, but have you ever thought about what is behind this urge you have to tell a unique story?***

I remember when I did one of the first pieces which is Milchkomente (milk moments) which actually was an idea I brought back from the States, I was showing it to a friend and saying "I am not sure about it because in a way it's just pretty." And he said, "Being pretty is enough for an object, a thing you want to have around." That's definitely true, but I always felt that it wasn't enough for me, for the things I was doing. I can appreciate a really pretty piece of design if it's not mine. But if it's mine I want there to be something more behind it and I think that's also a reason why I want to share stories. I want to have a pretext – why am I using energy, materials, workers, worker's time? It gives meaning to the product, and then maybe people will appreciate it more or keep it longer, have a deeper connection to the piece.

Of course I also want my products to be functional. If it is dishware, I want it to be dishwasher safe, not to break easily, etc. But I also want there to be a story, even if it is just a story about how it was made.

A lot of my products have that, but of course sometimes I have to leave these considerations aside. The pieces I prefer, however, are the ones where there is a narrative, where I maybe even saw something and thought *ok I really want to make something with that technique or with that shape.* It's about the meta level. Maybe people would still want my products because they think something is beautiful but as far as I know when I go to a fair for example and meet the people who are interested in my products, most of them want to know more and they appreciate the story behind it. So I believe it makes a difference.

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*I wanted to talk about the idea of something ornamental. When I think about porcelain or the old conception of it, I would think of old figurines I would see at my grandmother's house. Now when I think about what I have around my home, I want there to be an explanation behind each object because it makes it exciting to talk about and share it with the people who come to your home.*

Definitely and I think a few years ago, even though it was after the industrial revolution and objects were duplicated people were attached to their figurines because it was important where they came from. It was important what they represented and who made them, because they were so expensive. So it mattered that it was made in a proper way and painted nicely. Now there is a disconnect between where things are made and how they end up in your place, but people still care. You can see it with the interest in Japanese knives. People want to know who made it and how it was made.

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*Do you ever design anything with an imaginary client in mind?*

Of course I think about the person who is going to use it, especially when it is about the function. I think about what could be the problem of that person, what he or she might want to change.

When I design something with a story in mind, I hope to design for somebody who is interested in a production method or a historical story, and goes through the world with an open mind. Somebody who is sensitive to his environment.

“Now there is a disconnect between where things are made and how they end up in your place, but people still care.

**MILKMOMENTS**  
*porcelain bowl*





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***Let's talk about Frenchknicker.  
What's behind the name?***

It's funny that you mention it because it's actually my longest running project. I founded it with my close friend Milia Seyppel while we were still studying. We wanted to do a small porcelain collection but we were pretty naïve in a way. I came back from New York and knew a little bit about the material but there were no workshops at our university so we were starting without knowing anything. With what I know now I think what we tried was totally insane because a lot of these products were not made correctly, though in the end it worked out. The name refers to underwear. Porcelain is related to all these kitsch figurines in the area where our university is located and where they are still produced. We just thought you can imagine them wearing frenchknicker underwear under their big white skirts. We were trying to be ironic.

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***Speaking of irony, how important is it in your work?***

We wanted to make products that were fun, which is tricky in a way with design, because it may work for that moment and then be gone. It shouldn't be too big or too strong because it wears off easily. Being ironic or funny can be really difficult when you make a design because it doesn't last long if it's too strong. So we tried, and I think some of the products still work, which is great. It was an experiment. One of the reasons we did that was because porcelain was seen as something super conservative. We were maybe 24 or 25 and wanted to have fun.

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***Was it a short cut in making porcelain appealing to younger generations?***

Yes, but we didn't do it on purpose. We didn't think about it then. It was more the fact that we made something we liked and thought was missing. But of course we did it with the eyes of someone in their mid-twenties who only has IKEA things at home or maybe things that were passed down from the grandmother or found in the flea market. So it's not like we did market research. We just designed from our point of view.

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***With Love from China was an interesting project, playing with people's prejudices and the dominant narrative about China. Can you talk about that?***

This was actually part of my diploma, but if we rewind a bit when I came back from New York to Thüringen where the Bauhaus university is, I didn't know that Thüringen is actually a production place for porcelain. I realized that there were a lot of companies I could approach, and since there were no other people at my university who were doing that, I was a bit naïve going in. They really opened the workshops to me. I learned that porcelain was there for 300 years but came from China originally. I always wanted to go to China and when I started my diploma I thought I wanted to talk about that. I didn't know much though but during my research I found some interesting things. Europe brought back a lot of knowledge from China and Japan, through industrial espionage. They sent monks to China for example to spread Christian principles but the real purpose was to spy. They learnt how they made glasses or monocles. I thought it was funny because at the time the Chinese were trying to copy us, and it seemed that it was just history going full circle. The idea of *With Love from China*, was not to point a finger at the Chinese but to tell the full story and question what is copying in general. Copying in Chinese culture also means something different than it does here.

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### ***Is it flattering in Chinese culture?***

In a way, but it is also the process of learning, because you have a master and you imitate his perception as long as you are not perfect yourself. It's really strong in Japan for example. If you learn how to potter you potter the same cup for three years until your master (hopefully) says one day, *ok now you are a master yourself, now you can do your own thing.*

Of course there is a difference between copying the crafting of a bowl or copying an Iphone.

Going back though, I had not been to China at that time. I just figured out that a lot of companies that sell their products in Europe or in the States actually produce in China and then turn around and blame the Chinese for copying their designs. So I asked myself how they do it. Back in the day, they sent something via the Internet, via a platform to small companies to say this is what I want to have. Let's say a spoon or a cup. They never actually got in touch with the people in person. These platforms, in this case it was Alibaba, became so big. China essentially became a production factory for the rest of the world. Now it is changing and the Chinese are in turn moving some of their production facilities to Africa. So there is always one place that is producing

for the rest of the world under really bad conditions and destroying their environment in the process.

I wanted to talk about all of these issues, but I had to narrow it down. I thought about making my own copies but using all these different tools to tell the story in a simple way that people understand. I made copies of myself. I made busts.

Back in the day when European traders brought back porcelain from China, for Kings and Dukes, when it wasn't made here, if they wanted their own pieces what they actually did was to send wooden samples to China. They gave it to the trader who took it on their boat and went to China for three months. Once they got there, they gave it to the model makers for another three months and then it took them another three months to get back. After 9 to 12 months they got their porcelain piece, and sometimes there were misunderstandings. For example they sent a beer mug to China as a wooden sample but the wood was cut without an opening, it just showed the shape. Back in China of course they had no idea what that was, and they did not know that it was supposed to be open on the top nor did they understand what the handle was for, so they sent back a beer mug out of porcelain which was closed on both ends.

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### ***That's hilarious.***

Yeah, it's funny. But it just shows that even though we are so connected in the world there can still be so many misunderstandings because of our cultural background. I think that's a really interesting thing to talk about.

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***It's interesting that you had not been to China at the time, because later you introduced your Rice project which involved an ancient Chinese rice grain technique and brought about a collaboration with a Hong Kong based manufacturer. You now have extensively travelled through China and followed old production techniques that you have documented along the way. The obvious pull is that China is the birthplace of porcelain so there is a lot to learn and a certain mystique to acquainting yourself with old traditions. But what else is there for you, what fascinates you in the Chinese context?***

I think when I did the diploma; I thought I am going to go the easy way which all the European manufacturers go, which is also ignorant in a way because you don't think about the production. It's more like *"I want to have this. This is the price. Do it!"* That was my approach when I did the bust, even though I got

in touch with the guy in a really friendly and nice way. I thought, *ok, this is too easy via the Internet*. Then I connected with this company from Hong Kong and of course I realized that, or rather they showed me, and it was actually a bit embarrassing, that I had no clue about their history and about their sensitivity towards porcelain as a material and what it means to them in their culture. In Japan, in Korea, in China and Taiwan. So I thought, *ok if you want to go on and if you want to work with porcelain which has such a rich history, you need to go there, otherwise it is embarrassing and you are just not credible*.

I can definitely say that it was really worth it and I can attest to how narrow-minded we can be as Europeans.

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***Why do you feel the need to keep going back?***

Because I only know a little, and every time I go back I learn more. I meet more people and see different things. Maybe it's not just about my work but it is also understanding that we are a little part of a greater thing and talking about your cultural identity to realize that we should be more open, recognize our limitations and come out of this mindset that we are the centre of the world.

Actually most of the time when I am in China or in Asia, I am just quiet and I listen, I look and I observe. I want to learn. Especially in Asia, you have to be patient because it is not part of their mentality to tell you how it goes, you have to be silent and wait.

I really enjoy this learning process.

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***Are there other cultures that inspire you and where you find unique methodologies that you can then apply to your own creative process?***

I went to Iran back in May and this definitely opened up a new chapter. The whole history of ceramics in that region is huge. It was amazing. So many things were developed there. It's got such a rich and old culture, and it's interesting to realize how developed they were while Europe was in the deepest Middle Ages. So I was really fascinated. I was there for four weeks and it was not enough.



**NOTRE DAME**  
porcelain pendant





**RHOMBE**  
*porcelain dinnerware collection*

“For a lot of people it’s important and that often goes with having a nicely set table, which is the part that is witnessing a revival.

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*Did you see other forms of application? When I look at the pictures of the Shah mosque in Isfahan for example it looks like ceramic.*

It is in fact. But in this case how they apply and how delicate it is, is comparable to porcelain. I saw things there that are amazing, not only the painting but also the shapes, especially in mosques and the houses of rich traders. The decoration is incredible and so pretty. Some of it is just white and it is like a graphical ornament, all made by hand. I was really impressed but I haven’t really interiorized any of it for my own work. I need some time to digest it all.

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*Would you say that porcelain is going through a revival? And if so what are the characteristics of this revival?*

I think so, but in a completely different way from what it used to be. Back in the day, you would buy porcelain, a whole set from the same company or the same pattern, and maybe you would buy it over your entire lifetime and then you would have it, and finally you would pass it on to your grandchild. This is something, which I believe will change because we are increasingly putting things together by mixing and matching. It’s a different way of buying things and actually the traditional porcelain companies need to adapt to that. In fact some of them already have.

On the other hand there is one aspect that I don’t think is a trend: We always eat and we always want to eat good food.

For a lot of people it’s important and that often goes with having a nicely set table, which is the part that is witnessing a revival. I think people always want to buy porcelain, but the companies that complain about people not buying enough just continue to produce in a very old-fashioned way.

The numbers are interesting. Some years ago I met with a company and we were talking about the porcelain crisis in the industry in the 1990s. There had been two big reasons for it. One was that China was opening up and they were massively exporting cheaper porcelain to Europe, and the second was that IKEA entered the market. They actually instantly took 25% of the market. IKEA besides being super cheap also allowed people to buy little things that would all somehow go together. It was a very modern idea of how you buy porcelain or any piece of design in general.

Now the companies who are doing well, are those who have adopted this model. They will eventually win back market share from IKEA, not because they are necessarily cheaper but because they now understand that people don't want to buy a whole set of 60 pieces, but mix and match.

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***When I think about IKEA, I think it's purely functional. It's cheap, it looks decent, is not tacky and it serves a purpose. It's somehow commodified and I won't care if it breaks. Places like ZARA Home however, present things with a touch of the old idea of a table set, more ornamental.***

The interesting thing about these big companies like ZARA Home and maybe IKEA – it's starting with that in a way, they actually imitate the handmade. But of course the person who made it is paid very poorly otherwise the pricing makes no sense. That's why the traditional porcelain companies that are still producing in Europe need to be better and they need to tell the story behind the production.

Even in China there are production facilities, which are really great, where the workers get paid well and have a nice working environment. They have breaks and there is light; because there are actually people who appreciate the mastering of this craft, that value porcelain as a material and what is behind

it in terms of traditions and know-how and as long as this connection exists, local production will stay alive. I hope that will also happen in Europe, where people understand that it is worth it to pay a little bit more. Transparency in production maybe is needed.

One thing I realized about local production is that there are a lot of design firms with fast ideas. We want to have this in red, or we want to have it smaller or we only want a hundred of these in blue. If they produce it in China they always have the transportation cost and time, but more importantly they need to order more than a hundred because otherwise they won't start production. So a lot of these companies are going back to Europe, or staying in Australia or wherever they are from because they realize that if they produce locally, they can make smaller amounts and then it's worth it because they can react faster.

I hope this movement will expand because it would be good for local production.

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***A shorter run of production also means limited edition pieces. Do you find that people are increasingly into the idea of having something again that is considered precious? Having a dining service as part of your dowry in the olden days, had an almost ornamental quality, a way to demonstrate to the world your "worth" and certainly your taste. Over the years the notion itself became archaic or old-fashioned, and a dining service served a more functional service, at least for a certain cross section of society. But now if you go to any design shop, there is an important selection of beautiful or innovative dining services, which, while functional, seem to be going back to the ornamental aspect of it, where it becomes a symbol of taste.***

Definitely.



**WITH LOVE FROM CHINA**  
*porcelain bust*



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***Are you interested in creating things that are timeless?***

Well, in a way of course I would like to. But I believe that even if you look at designs that are considered timeless, they are always a child (product) of their time. I believe you can't design outside of the time you are designing in. You cannot step out of that. Even thinking of the future and imagining something, you always do that within the context of your present time. If you try to create outside of current trends you might be able to survive just a little bit longer. I believe that that's not in my hands and also depends on the production company. In fact, some companies, even if you bought something 40 years ago, they are still willing to produce it for you. This is something IKEA would never do. If it's broken, in 20 years it will never be a part of the catalogue, maybe not even in two years. So it depends on how strongly the production company believes in your designs and takes them seriously, and is not just interested in presenting new trends at a fair each year.

That said, of course I try to do something that isn't just a joke for a day and which lasts longer.

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***You talked about how in your production process you always go straight to a 3D model but with the advent of 3D technology did your approach change at all?***

Well, it didn't change but it expanded the possibilities, because what you can do now: You design your pieces with a paper sketch or 3D model in plaster, which you do by hand then you make a 3D drawing from that and you can send that to a client. That allows your client to look at it from different angles and even print it out. So it is a really easy way to communicate with people who are not in the same city. But in the design process I still think it is best to do a 3D model by hand and not on the computer, because you can play around and instantly recognize if there are any problems. If it's too round or too big in one part, etc. On the computer there is still an abstract level in between.

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***You have chosen a very challenging material to work with, as porcelain during its production process can be very whimsical. But over the years you have developed a know-how that works around and with that knowledge, always perfecting your craft. Where and how do you seek your challenges today, since you came a long way from that experience back in New York, which initiated your love for porcelain?***

I don't always seek to challenge myself because I think over the years you become lazy in a way, or rather you become practical because at the end of the day you need to make money. But every year I do have one or two projects where I experiment. Often, it is driven by a client who wants something and I know what is possible and what isn't, so I try and find a solution as to how to work around the problem. So yes there are still challenges, but they are more in the details and in the process of making something. From project to project there is always something new you learn or have to figure out.

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***But you have also used porcelain in unconventional ways, for example in making a table. Is that a recurring challenge? Trying to find new ways of application that surpass the role it's been confined to over decades and even centuries?***

Yes, definitely but the idea behind it is also to expand the possibilities or the fields where one can apply porcelain. It's the material I work with so of course I want to figure out what more can be done with it. Traditionally porcelain is a material for figurines and tableware and bathrooms, but for lights for example it's not such a big market, or tables or other fields. Light switches used to be made out of porcelain but not anymore. Why? It's such a pretty material and if you put a porcelain light switch in your home it will stay there. There are so many fields where you could try and apply it, and this is definitely something I want to push further. That thought process often brings you to a new product and a lot of times it is just going back to the way things were, like with the light switches. Same with the table, in China for example they use porcelain to make stools, or to make bridges.

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***Bridges?***

Yes, they make part of the beams in porcelain, because it is such a strong material.

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***How did choosing such a specific niche serve you?***

The niche served me because people can easily put me somewhere. They can say this is the porcelain Laura. She is a porcelain product developer. She's an expert.

The fact that I chose this niche was a bit naïve because studying at the Bauhaus university I was the only working with porcelain. Later I realized that there are of course a lot of schools like the RCA in London, or the Burg Giebichenstein Kunsthochschule in Germany who have a heavy focus on porcelain and ceramics. Anyway, I never experienced competition, which is also why I am open to sharing my ideas and my technology because I never experienced anyone stealing my ideas.

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***How did it play against you?***

Well, of course, especially production-wise, it's a material that can be tough to work with, and there aren't that many jobs. There are definitely areas in the design field, which pay better. It's hard. It's hard to find jobs. My partner for example is a media artist and designer and right now everyone wants to digitalize their portfolio. I on the other hand am working with one of the most old-fashioned materials, and there is already so much out there, so it's difficult to find your space.

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***So earthquakes are good news for you.***

Yeah, in a way, if nobody gets hurt!

**MOSAIQUE**  
*porcelain dinnerware collection*





**RARE SPECIES**  
*porcelain bowls*

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***You seem to navigate seamlessly between creating pieces that are functional and ones that are more artistic since your work has been exhibited in galleries. What's behind each of those outputs, is the creative process the same, or more specifically what is the mental framework at the time of conception of the idea?***

I think it's the same, because in both, if it's going to be a more conceptual piece, a more arty piece, a piece which is going to be in a gallery and have a book next to it telling the story or a film or whatever, or an object, it's the same mindset. It always goes back to telling a story. That said I wouldn't call my artistic pieces art, I would say they are "communicators", they communicate a story I found interesting and I want to share with people, and I need a piece reflecting that.

My other products still have that quality but in addition they are functional for everyday life.

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***In your personal design story how does the environmental narrative come into play? Is that something you think about?***

It is. That's why the place of production is so important to me. Using porcelain consumes a lot of energy. It needs material and time. So it's important for me to have a product that I can stand behind. My way of taking responsibility is to say that I want to be a part of the entire chain of production and know exactly how something is produced. At the end of the day I want to be able to say that my pieces were made under good conditions and the people were treated well.

“ Even thinking of the future and imagining something, you always do that within the context of your present time.



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**PUBLISHER** Design Friends  
**COORDINATION** Guido Kröger  
**LAYOUT** Hyder Razvi  
**INTERVIEW** Afsaneh A. Rafii  
**PRINT** Imprimerie Schlimé  
**PRINT RUN** 250 (Limited edition)

**ISBN** 978-2-9199462-2-8  
**PRICE** 5 €

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This catalogue is published for Laura Straßer's lecture at Mudam Luxembourg on November 22nd, 2017, organized by Design Friends.

## PUBLISHED WITH THE SUPPORT OF



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 DU GRAND-DUCHÉ DE LUXEMBOURG  
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