

THE OFFSPRING OF KAJ FRANCK



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Photos Eero Aarnio Archives

It is black and shaped like a ball, and, if need be, it provides its occupant with a hiding place. Inside you will find two red buttons and nothing else: one makes a flat computer screen slide out, while the other causes it to disappear back into the chair again. Music is played by hidden loudspeakers. The chair is elegant and a touch dangerous, though safe for its occupant. The one thing unfortunately missing here is Pierce Brosnan or Sean Connery.

The chair itself – the latest version of the classic *Ball* chair – was on view at the retrospective showcasing the work of interior designer Eero Aarnio

at Kunsthalle Helsinki this past summer. The Bond girl, too, had received a chair of her own: a transparent, ultralight *Bubble*, which hung from the ceiling, swinging softly in the breeze. Being seated in it calls for style, for keeping your legs gracefully together, preferably veiled in slightly futuristic silver overalls.

Eero Aarnio is one of the most internationally famous Finnish designers. His most celebrated designs, *Ball*, *Bubble* and *Pastil*, were created in the 1960s, a time of technological progress and rapid economic growth. Structural change and urbanisation were then

transforming Finnish society and the

importance of everyday consumer goods was growing fast. The new forms and the new colours introduced at the time were playful, free, and futuristic.

The distinctive features of Aarnio's design have been sculptural fibreglass furniture, brightly coloured body-tinted plastics, innovative geometric shapes, and good ergonomic design. Alongside pop classics, Aarnio created "sensible" general purpose chairs, which are less known but widely used by the public from schoolchildren to spectators at ice hockey games. In addition, Eero Aarnio has designed interiors, exhibitions, and small objects such as pulls and knobs.

Characteristic of Eero Aarnio's style is his phenomenal ability to rethink the very concept of a chair, where needed: *Bubble* (1968), *Ball* (1963), and *Pastil* (1968), were followed by *Pony* (1973), *Elephant Boot* (1961), *Tomato* (1971), and the *VSOP Chair* (1966) shaped like a brandy glass, among many others. The year 1991 saw the creation of the *Screw table*, the shape of which is also suggested by its name, and new ideas continue to flow fresh from the drawing board of the designer, who recently celebrated his 70th birthday.

Aarnio's unconventional pieces tempt you to touch them and to try them out in their sensuality. In spite of

their spirit of the atomic age, the round shapes evoke an image of safety and an embrace. *Ball* and *Bubble* create a space of their own, which is public and private at the same time. *Pastil* is a result of a light-hearted brainwave – a visual gag that succeeds in defying time. In *Pony* on the other hand, an element of childlike play is juxtaposed with an eroticism reminiscent of Botero. In fact, Aarnio's chairs are first and foremost semiotic exclamation marks, and only secondarily pieces of furniture, as was suggested by researcher Harri Kalha in *Pop Fantasies and Sittable Daydreams*, an essay included in the exhibition catalogue. The unfamiliar shapes of these pieces are an invitation to experiment, a source of surprise – and an object of desire. They are perfect design products.

ANNE VEINOLA

TRANSL. J.A.

Eero Aarnio, open until 10 August 2003 at Kunsthalle Helsinki, Nervanderinkatu 3, FIN-00100 Helsinki. www.taidehalli.fi

A book entitled "Assume a Round Chair", edited by Harri Kalha, was published in connection with the exhibition. Kunsthalle Helsinki, University of Art and Design, Helsinki 2003. ISBN 951-97509-8-3, ISSN 1459-4641, UIAH ISSN 0782-1778, UIAH Publication series B 72

