

# FRAME



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# THE EXPRES-SIONISTS

Individually and collectively, Yael Mer and Shay Alkalay (aka Raw Edges) design furniture with a difference.

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Yael Mer and Shay Alkalay are literally bouncing around with anticipation, excitement, fatigue, and the knowledge that their to-do list shows no signs of shrinking. We meet at the beginning of the London Design Festival, on the day before the launch of Okay Studio's collective exhibition, *Under the Same Roof*, and two days before the opening of *From Now to Eternity*, two shows in which Mer and Alkalay are taking part as London-based design duo Raw Edges. The venue for our meeting is London's Aram Gallery, where they are showing some of their latest inventions as part of the Okay Studio collective.

Okay Studio is a group of nine designers from around the world who all graduated from the Royal College of Art (RCA) in 2006 (Frame 46 page 71 features one of Alkalay's student projects). 'We don't work together,' explains Alkalay. 'We all do different types of design. But we share a space and we're great friends, like a family.' Indeed, as they mill about this large gallery space swapping jokes, materials and tools, they do seem remarkably

close-knit. The fact that they come from places as diverse as Israel (in the case of Alkalay and Mer), the Netherlands, Japan, Spain, Germany and Norway seems to intensify their feeling of a common purpose, as well as typifying the melting pot that makes up the RCA and, indeed, London as a whole. 'If you go to Milan, you realize that most of the people are Italian and you are a foreigner,' says Alkalay. 'If you come to London, you're like—where are all the English people?'

At the Aram Gallery, the pair will be showing, among other things, a new version of their Tailored Stool, this time covered in a thin veneer of bamboo instead of paper. The Tailored furniture series relies on a technique similar to that of the clothing industry: a pattern is created and assembled, and the resulting void is filled with expandable foam. The result is a seat (or bench) that looks from a distance as though it might be soft, and that bears the folds and warps of a one-off. 'It creates all these wrinkles, and you get this really strange shape, which is not something that you're >



Yael Mer

Shay Alkalay

cold

hot

'Without a workshop, being a designer becomes an office job'



**01** In their studio-cum-workshop, Yael Mer (left) and Shay Alkalay share a practical, hands-on approach and a love of the straightforward. 'We don't like having to explain too much,' says Alkalay. In the background (between the designers) is Plastic Nostalgia, a red and natural-wood cabinet for Arts Co, constructed using original parts from Fisher Price toys of the 1970s.

**02** Cavities is a series of chairs made from folded sheets of polypropylene sheets covered in felt and attached to a wooden base. After this photo was taken, Mer and Alkalay opted for a white base, because 'it looks much lighter and up to date.'

**03** Work in progress: Alkalay sits at the computer, watched over by paper prototypes of Cavities, a new chair design that continues the duo's fascination with folding forms. It is in place.

familiar with in wood,' says Alkalay in his expressive, if idiosyncratic, English. 'The idea is that the seat can be custom-made to fit the user—whether tall, short, skinny or fat—just as a suit or other garment can be tailored to fit a person.'

'I don't think we're at the end of this project,' says Mer, with an enthusiastic smile. 'I think we're going to take other flat materials and see how they react with the foam.' The construction process is unconventional in that there is no mould; the pattern itself becomes both the external surface and the mould. The other pieces Mer and Alkalay are showing at the Aram Gallery include Tug, a lamp with an on-off cord pull attached to the shade itself—creating a far closer 'connection' between switch and light than you get with a conventional wall switch; and Cavities, a series of chairs made from folded sheets of polypropylene covered in felt and attached to a wooden base.

Raw Edges has been around only since 2007, and the pair—partners in life as well

as work (they have been together 'for a long time' and got married in 2006)—are still very much finding their way and trying to define an individual design language. Yet it is clear that experimentation is in their DNA. It is deeply revealing when Alkalay confesses that he spent most of his six months as an exchange student in Milan, where he was enrolled at the city's famed Politecnico, travelling around with Mer (who was based in Stuttgart at the time). He made it to the university on only four or five occasions. 'It's very engineering based, and I'm more into experimental design,' he explains. Later, he rather contradictorily admits being fascinated by pieces that move and by how things work: his Pivot cabinet, manufactured by Dutch firm Arco, features two hinged drawers that open simultaneously. Yael, he tells us, 'is into how things are made—creating the shape and the folding part. She's also attracted to a mathematical way of thinking.' His partner laughs: 'It's the most boring stuff,' she says, 'like when we're looking at a piece and I say, "Maybe it needs to be more like this." >



Mer's fascination with folding is very much in evidence in the Volume series of sofas and divans (also on show at Aram), the result of pouring polyurethane foam into folded pieces of patterned paper or wallpaper. It also emerges in her series of milk cartons, which change shape according to the fat content of the skimmed, semi-skimmed or full-fat milk inside.

Whatever 'it' is, the unique Mer-Alkalay alchemy is working, and the combination of their thought and work processes is a winning one. This was never more evident than at the 2008 Milan Furniture Fair, where Alkalay showed Stack, a floating chest of drawers designed for innovative British firm Established & Sons. Rather than being housed in a frame, drawers varying in colour are arranged in a tower, each 'storey' of which can be pushed and pulled from either side. On display at the show was a chest of drawers of normal height alongside a 30-something model rising above it. (Stack is currently available as an 8- or a 13-drawer model.) The piece was an instant hit. When I ask Mer what there is of her in the piece, Alkalay answers before she's even collected her thoughts: 'The proportions and the colour.'

Yet, as Alkalay readily admits, it is often Mer who comes up with the concept. She is the originator of the slightly unsettling Head bag (a head-shaped handbag of moulded felt, inspired by the grisly biblical story of Judith and Holofernes and perhaps soon to be produced by a gallery) and the Evacuation skirt (a transformable skirt that functions as an inflatable kayak in an emergency—it explores the notion of evacuation, glamour and one's 15 minutes of fame). When the inflated skirt turned out to look something like 'a huge vagina', and Mer had to discuss it with RCA staff members, eight male and one female, she took it in stride, ultimately 'embracing' the turn of events. Though both Mer and Alkalay claim to be apolitical, these two pieces have a strong feminist undercurrent, reinforced by Mer's remark that 'sometimes it's just more difficult for us women'. An explanation accompanying the bag, which alludes to the decapitation of Holofernes by the lovely Judith, 'allows users to experience a sense of victory without the need for violent action'. The Head bag takes on an empowering persona. ▶

**04–05** A new version of Raw Edges' Tailored Stool, covered in a thin veneer of bamboo instead of paper. 'You get this really strange shape, which is not something you're familiar with in wood,' say the designers.

**06** Yael Mer works on a Tailored Stool—a paper skin filled with expandable foam. First produced for FAT Gallery, Paris, the Tailored Stool is now available from Raw Edges in a wide range of colours; half the current edition has already sold.



04



05

'I believe everything can be explained in one sentence. It shouldn't be more complex'



06

**07** Raw Edges' family of products share a playful but practical—not to mention economical—approach. At the back of the group is the Volume sofa, made from wallpaper and expandable foam.

**08** Shay Alkalay contemplates Pivot (featured in Frame 61, page 206), a set of drawers that do exactly that, hinging rather than sliding open like traditional drawers. The design allows both drawers to remain open at the same time. Produced by Arco in solid oak or walnut, as well as with a painted finish, Pivot leans nonchalantly against the wall with the aid of a single screw to hold it in place.

Now that they are officially Raw Edges, the two plan to work on things together. Clearly, their working styles are different: Alkalay likes to use table saws and routers, while Mer carries on a love affair with her computer and printer; Alkalay loves to work with MDF (it's not something you say, though,' Mer points out), whereas Yael is partial to 'non-woven flat materials made out of fibre, like paper, felt, leather'. They do share some fundamental core values, however. Rather than 'fancy technology', they prefer simplicity, honesty and straightforward design; above all, they're not into spoon-feeding their audience. 'We don't like to have to explain too much,' says Alkalay. That's why descriptions of their work on the Raw Edges website or in show catalogues are always short and to the point (although

Mer says her dyslexia is also a reason). 'I believe everything can be explained in one sentence,' says Alkalay. 'It shouldn't be more complex.'

They also feel very strongly about making their own pieces, or, if someone else is making the product, being involved in its development every step of the way. 'If you build something yourself, you know how it works,' says Mer. The number of designers without workshops is huge, she says, but she and Alkalay don't like the idea. Without a workshop, they agree, being a designer becomes an office job. And they certainly aren't interested in that. [raw-edges.com](http://raw-edges.com)

