

## EH & I Interview Questions October 2008

### By Rianne Meijer

#### 1. Can you tell me a little bit more about yourself (age, background, education)?

I am 50 years old. I grew up in an middle class family on the east coast of the United States. Both my mother and father's ancestors are of German decent. My grandfather was a mechanical engineer, my uncle a nautical engineer, my aunt a professional artist, and my father a business professional. Business, engineering, and design were common topics in the family circle. My early areas of interest were motorcycles and carpentry. Before college I worked as a carpenter building residential houses, and I spent many hours building fast motorcycles from junkyard parts. A few years later, I went to college in the mid-west where I received a Bachelor of Science degree from Colorado State University majoring in building construction management. I also studied Sculpture in the Fine Arts Department. After college, I worked for a number of years in the building industry managing the construction of high-end residential houses on the west coast. In my spare time, I welded large steel abstract sculptures. With a growing interest in three-dimensional design, I applied and was accepted into the graduate school of architecture at the University of Washington in Seattle. In December of 1997 I received a Masters in Architecture degree. Soon thereafter, I moved to New York City. I wanted to work with the best. I was employed my first few years in New York in the office of Charles Gwathmey. His passion for architecture and his professionalism has been a great influence on me. After a short period of unemployment after September 11, I was hired for a position in the office of the French architect Thierry W. Despont. I worked as project architect on luxurious residential projects for five years. Mr. Despont taught me many things associated with design, and one of the most important was the power of self-marketing. He was extremely creative, and at the same time, extremely good at selling his ideas. To me, this was unusual for a creative person. With a desire to find my own signature business in the design world, I opened my own office in 2007 with an emphasis on architecture and product design.

#### 2. Why did you want to become a designer?

My interest in design unfolded slowly over time. In my youth I wanted to build fast motorcycles. Perhaps I was trying to find a way to propel myself into the future through speed. As a young man, I enjoyed constructing homes from wood. I loved the power tools, a stack of lumber, and erecting a three-dimensional form-something you could walk around and contemplate at the end of the day. Constructing buildings evolved into designing and welding large steel sculptures, which eventually lead to architecture. So, becoming a designer was a journey of discovery where each event was connected to the next.

#### 3. Have you always been creative?

Perhaps. I was not aware of it as a child but I am certain that it existed in my life. I do know that when faced with a problem I always found a creative solution, and quite often the solution was very unorthodox.

#### 4. If so, how did that manifest itself when you were growing up?

I built a motorized transport out of an old bike frame, a lawn mower engine, and parts scavenged from a local construction site. Every day I rode that scooter regardless of the weather.

5. Why did you decide to work as an independent designer instead of just joining a big label?

I am very happy when I can design freely alone, or jointly with a design client, without the control and constraints of higher management.

6. Have you ever worked for a large label/ are some of your designs part of a collection of a design firm?

I have never worked for a large label nor have any of my designs been part of someone else's collection.

7. How would you describe your work/ what is your personal autograph as a designer?

My design work is a fusion of fluid and linear forms with, quite often, mechanical appendages to balance the alliance. Often my designs appear robotic, and always they are organic in form.

8. What inspires you as a designer?

I find great inspiration in the fluid and interlaced shapes of the natural world, and equal inspiration in the finite fabric of a city street. I crawl on my hands and knees in park and inspect things closely with a magnifying glass. I study tree bark. I study mushrooms. I study insects. I photograph everything and use these images as inspiration when designing. I have piles of nature and science magazines at home I read and re-read. On the streets of the city, I study and photograph strange ensembles that happen by chance. Such things as wooden construction horses wrapped in orange netting, wash-rags hung over a railing, chewing gum patterns on the sidewalk, and graffiti layered on top of graffiti are of great inspiration to me. The idea for the teardrop feet for my Meeraboo designs came from the long drips of paint made by graffiti artists as they paint their logo or designs in great haste. Lastly, from my childhood interest in motorcycles, I am also inspired by motors, mechanisms, and with an awaking interest in robotics.

9. Are there any other designers that you admire or that have the same approach to design and/ or a similar design style?

Yes, I like Jan Kaplicky of Future Systems. His design work is very original and thought provoking.

10. What materials do you like to work with?

I prefer to work with any material that allows me to work fast. If I have too much time to think when designing, the end product is too contrived and weak. So, I choose to work with clay or styro-foam blocks to make shapes and forms. I sand and cut and make quick intuitive decisions. When I am happy with a shape, I make a mould. From the mould I have many options for the finish material. Lately, I have been producing one-offs and mostly working in fibreglass.

11. How important are functionality and beauty in your designs? Which one do you put first?

Many of my designs are closer to sculpture than they are to an actual furniture piece. My light fixtures are meant to be backup lighting for a room. Of course, if I design a chair or table it is essential that the piece be functional. When I first came to New York City, I was fascinated with all the signs in the city advertising businesses. I photographed many of these signs. I quickly realized that most were over-designed, unreadable and worse, they made no distinction as to what kind of service was offered by the business. Therefore, I believe that a sign should be a sign first, and beautiful second.

12. Can you tell me a bit more about the Reboot conceptual house? What was the concept behind it? When did you design it?

For my Reboot house proposal, I set out to design a house that was self-sufficient and super wired for interior environment management. For the exterior form, I wanted a design that had a minimal impact to the ground, that was smooth in form to deflect adverse weather and to collect water, that took advantage of the principle of double curvature for structural strength in form, and that had a large exterior surface area to utilize the new technology of solar cell paint. The interior floor plan is reminiscent of a cross section of a human brain and spinal cord. There are few hard edges or orthogonal surfaces, a central stairway core, and right and left rooms of equal proportion.

13. And how about the Woojuin-collection? Those series are an interesting mixture of high-tech mechanical shapes and organic forms: why did you decide to combine the two? What is the concept behind the series?

Similar to every design I have created, the Woojuin collection began by chance and experimentation. One day in my studio I blew up a large red balloon and covered it with the plaster fabric-the same material doctors use on broken arms. Inspired by a pumpkin, I created a neck on top. Then I cut two ellipses out of each side and made a hanging light fixture. Weeks later, I took the same bulbous shape with the neck on top, turned it upside down, added three stacks for heat vents, and tripod mechanical legs and the Woojuin FL-1 was born. If I had to use two words to describe the concept I would use 'mechanized mushroom'. At that time, I was fascinated about the idea of merging two very different systems into a balanced symbiotic bi-product.

14. Your work has been described as 'Organic Futurism'. Do you think that's an accurate description?  
15. Why/ why not?

I believe that computer technology has liberated all designers. In the past we were limited by the constraints of manufacturing technology. Twentieth century designs were orthogonal and hard edged. Today, computers enable designers to create shapes that are interlaced and fluid in form. I believe the immediate future of design will be predominantly organic shapes. My designs are organic in form because this is what interests me now.

16. Are your designs for sale somewhere? If so, where can people buy them?

Since I opened my studio in 2007, I have been creating one-offs of each design piece. I have not wanted to be bogged down by the business of manufacturing and marketing. For me, one design has led to the next in a journey of self-discovery. I believe that once I am sure I have found my very own language in design, I will seek designs that are capable of mass production and distribution.

17. Have you won any awards for your creations so far? I seem to remember something about the G Pod?

My designs are quite unusual and very different from the current in-style designs. I create what interests me and I could care less what is fashionable and the current trend. I expect what I create may not be well received by the status quo. Nevertheless, I have entered a few on-line competitions to gauge the design temperament of the multitudes of individuals surfing the Internet. I designed and built a small loft space in New York City on a low budget, and placed third (out of about 130 entries) in Apartment Therapy's Smallest Coolest Apartment Competition 2007. Also, I entered Designboom's (with Swarovski) Crystal Vision 2008 contest and I was short listed into the top 100 or so from 4070 international entries. Besides this, I have not received any rewards or public recognitions.

18. What are your plans for the future?

My plans for the future are to work hard to create designs that are original and thought provoking.