

DESIGN, CREATION



Jo Caird celebrates a London design partnership that is on a quest to capture moments of creation



The name 'Stairwell G' doesn't exactly ring with possibility, but Tim Simpson and Sarah van Gameren, aka design studio Glithero, knew the moment they came across it that this innocuous-sounding location at the Victoria and Albert Museum would be the perfect spot to make their London Design Festival (LDF) debut. Their work, *The Green Room*, created in collaboration with the Italian luxury watchmaker Panerai, transforms the staircase into a sort of giant clock that visitors can experience from a number of different perspectives. Playing with notions of time – a single hand in the dome at the top of the building controls curtains of colourful string that move through the space as the minutes tick past – the installation explores a subject that has fascinated van Gameren and Simpson since they met and started working together while studying at the Royal College of Art.

The immersive nature of the piece is also something of a trademark. "We find having an audience is very exciting," says van Gameren. "If you're trained as a designer, you're drilled to learn about serving your client. We like to break that open and think not so much of the consumer, but more of the audience." Much of their work, explains the designer, is about getting across the "moment that something becomes something". *Big Dipper* from 2007, for instance, is an installation that takes the form of a machine that creates candle-wax chandeliers by dipping wicks into molten wax. A more recent piece, *Luminaries*, which was made for a museum at a decommissioned coal mine in France, plays with light and reflection to make geometric forms appear, as if by magic, in mid-air as visitors walk by.

FOLLOWING A CONCEPTUAL PATH

Though it might not be immediately obvious from looking at it, this obsession with process and change extends to Glithero's more conventional design work,

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too, which often sees the duo working with bespoke techniques and machines. Their gorgeous Blueware ceramics, for example, are created using light-sensitive chemicals, and their bench-moulded furniture is built up from layer upon layer of plaster put through what's known as a 'running mould'. "We're really interested in machines, especially older machines, because they explain how something is made," says van Gameren. Transparency of process is key, however. "You wouldn't see us design a machine where everything happens inside a box and it's just a button pressed. There's always some kind of clarity about how it works and that's what we find very exciting."

Materials are also crucial – van Gameren and Simpson tend to play with materials and techniques in their north London studio for a long time before turning what they've learned into a finished piece of work. Prototypes and ideas "often end up on a shelf, unused for a while, until they evolve into a new collection of some sort", van Gameren says. Over the years Glithero has built up an "archive of techniques that we're interested in and tools that we like", which might then find their way into all manner of projects. They're lucky, van Gameren admits, in that when it comes to working with clients, whether they are big institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum and LDF or individuals, they "almost always have carte blanche". People "come to us not with an idea, but with an idea to collaborate". Each new project can therefore build on what has come before, allowing Glithero to create a body of work that has a remarkably strong shared identity.

The LDF was a particularly tempting prospect, not just because it's a fantastic showcase, but because the festival's relationship with the Victoria and Albert Museum offers an interesting counterpoint to the ideas of time and process that inform Glithero's practice. "The Victoria and Albert Museum is a very historic and slow-moving institution in the sense that the projects that it stages there are often very old and have happened over many years. LDF is a relatively quick and fast-evolving vision that you can present as a designer," says van Gameren. "It's a very beautiful opportunity."

BLUEWARE TILES PANEL & BLUEWARE VASES © PETR KREJCI

