



Rossana Orlandi sits on the raw steel Bush of Iron chair by Nacho Carbonell, €90,000 with the matching table.

The next step is to grow the gallery's presence in India, China, the Middle East and Brazil – not least because it gives her designers new markets to work in.

amazing. I fall in love and I have to touch things. I'm always curious, always learning. When you feel that you're constantly learning, you can only improve."

The owner of east London's Gallery Fumi, Valerio Capo, who met Orlandi at one of her famous Milan VIP dinners during design week (100 top design folk all crammed into that Via Matteo Bandello garden) – and who now has a temporary summer gallery shop at the Porto Cervo resort thanks to Orlandi's recommendation – refutes the idea that she is becoming too commercially driven: "She takes a risk in what she does – she is always pushing hard to find something new or out of the box, or that is not to everyone's taste or their style of interior – such as supporting Nacho Carbonell [examples of his work pictured above and on previous page]. There's no mistaking she's passionate about what she does, and I know a lot of young designers who have had great experiences working with her, who would only say they have benefited – I think she's very courageous."

Is she commercial as well? "We followed her vision to Porto Cervo, and she was right. It has been a huge success for us. Those customers who have found us here now come to Shoreditch to see us too."

Porto Cervo may be one step on from Milan, but Orlandi's agenda doesn't stop there. The plan is to grow the gallery's presence in India, China, the Middle East

and Brazil – not least because it gives her designers new markets to explore and work in. "The important thing for them is to keep working," she says, "and it's often cheaper to take the designer to the buyer than to ship the work." But is Orlandi's star big enough to function without the Salone?

Tom Dixon thinks so, largely because of the reputation and contacts she made during her previous career as a textile designer. Orlandi herself, however, admits the gallery, which now employs 10 people, is inextricably linked to the Salone, and this is still where her business has its heart and purse-strings (Orlandi declined to supply turnover figures but growth for last year was seven per cent, having slowed from the 30-35 per cent growth it experienced annually from 2002-2008). "Don't forget," adds Capo, "the Salone is still the single-most important event in the world for design and furniture." By that assertion, adds Capo, Orlandi is one of the world's most influential design individuals.

Orlandi appears to wear her influence incredibly lightly. Without a doubt she is formidable and has worked hard to befriend the press in her native country, but what she has in spades is authentic charm and energy, and an ability to put people at their ease, largely because, says Dixon, she "really loves what she does". Which, apart from helping young designers, is about being a good host. And she is indeed that. Besides the aforementioned hot-ticket Salone dinners, she is known to serve customers herself – indeed, professes to enjoy it (that bored little girl is still present) – in Porto Cervo. But then Orlandi has hit on several key things that are

very Italian – not least the power of a good meal. She has a restaurant, two doors up from the Milan factory, called Pane e Acqua ("Bread and Water", named after a former jail at the end of the road). It is now run by the chef Francesco Passalacqua, and over a lovely, laid-back lunch there, Orlandi admits she has made dinners a themed part of her work. A recent ongoing series that involved inviting all of Italy's magazine editors seemed like a disaster in the making. "Everyone said, 'Oh no, I'm not sitting next to that person...'" By the end of the dinner we were all drunk and laughing and helping each other out."

On the morning of our meeting, she is feeling a little fragile, recovering from a meal the night before to celebrate the wedding of Patricia Urquiola. "You see, I don't think the living room exists any more. Life, it's around the table. Whether you're there for work or for food, everything happens around the table, and then you go away – it's a magical space."

The same might be said of the Spazio Rossana Orlandi. Each year, the world's design enthusiasts make their pilgrimage to the Milanese gallery, they're entertained, they sit and rest their city-weary legs and eat in the vine-covered courtyard (where the food is as delicious as the goods on show, ensures Jenni Carbins), and then they go away again, until the next time... ♦

LITTLE ITALY

Pane e Acqua, Via Matteo Bandello 14, 20124 Milan (+392-481 98622; www.paneacqua.com). **Rossana Orlandi Store**, Promenade du Port, Via del Porto Vecchio 1, Portocervo, Sardinia (+3907-899 4219; www.rossanaorlandi.com). **Spazio Rossana Orlandi**, Via Matteo Bandello 14-16, 20123 Milan (+392-467 4471; www.rossanaorlandi.com).



Clockwise from top: a corner of the gallery dominated by Maarten Baas's Smoke Desk, price on request. Nacho Carbonell's prototype Resonator, a speaker and musical instrument, €75,000, in the gallery's courtyard. An exhibition of the Botanica series by FormaFantasma for Plart, during the Salone del Mobile, prices from €1,600 to €2,350.

Her summer space goes down a treat with the Porto Cervo yacht crowd, who would normally send their stylists to shop in Milan. Here, they come themselves.

part in supporting home-grown talent. She champions a young Italian design duo called FormaFantasma, whose latest collection comprises "ceramics" made from unfired polymers (€1,600-€2,350, pictured above), as well as Manuela Crotti, who creates tables (€6,000-€20,000) and mirrors (€4,500, examples pictured on previous page) with found objects inlaid into resin. She helps the design houses she knows, too. "We try to join up with the factories and put pieces into production. What I admire most in Italy are the factories – they are still the best in the world. They're serious, generous and open-minded."

The manufacturers are happy to be led by Orlandi. The creative director of Italian furniture company Moroso, Patrizia Moroso, first saw the all-woman Swedish collective Front's work at the Orlandi gallery in 2008 (see the profile of Front at howtospentit.com) and has since collaborated with them on a furniture collection featuring their signature trompe l'oeil textiles. And the British company Established & Sons now produces one of Front's mirrors from that original show. Orlandi was the first to buy prototypes from designer Sebastian Wrong, which were later produced by Flos (which now produces his Spun light series). Before Orlandi had shown the work of Piet Hein Eek during the Salone, he had little global recognition. Now he's a familiar name in design circles, as soon will be Nika Zupanc, whose concertina Homework desk

(€6,900, pictured on opening pages; matching chair, €4,800) and wardrobe (€7,800) Orlandi showed in April. There is not a month that Orlandi doesn't feature in international interiors magazines and she has the power to persuade Casa Vogue Brazil to

follow the Plumbs' entire residency at the gallery.

"Our profile has been raised more than we can fully understand," admits Hannah Plumb. "So many inquiries to us are prefaced by 'I saw you at Rossana Orlandi,' or 'We met in the courtyard at Rossana's'. The calibre of the clients, and journalists, that visit the gallery on an almost daily basis is astounding – we met the princess of Thailand, for example."

Such is Orlandi's influence, that she even had a hand in developing the new Promenade du Port retail village in Porto Cervo, Sardinia, into a seasonal design quarter. Four years ago she received a phone call from Giorgio Busnelli, the chairman of B&B Italia, saying he had visited the opening of the Monte di Mola Museum there "and that the exhibition was incredibly good – it was different to anything you usually find on the Costa Smeralda. But he remarked that it was a shame to see all the shops closed. I was upset at the idea, so the day after I called all my friends to send merchandise." They all did. Within days Orlandi had travelled there with an architect and stylist friend and had transformed the Promenade du Port into a series of galleries full of the work of designers including Tom Dixon, Patricia Urquiola armchairs for B&B Italia, Gaetano Pesce classics and sculptures made from the furniture packaging itself.

Now Orlandi occupies a permanent summer space selling vintage Ercol seating, wire animal sculptures by

Benedetta Mori Ubaldini, special edition re-issued chairs by Paulo Mendes da Rocha – summery offerings but presented in a very Milanese way. It goes down a treat with the Porto Cervo yacht crowd, who would normally send their stylists and interior designers to shop in Milan. Here, they come themselves – her first visitor was the Emir of Qatar. It has been a huge commercial success, admits Orlandi, who spends the summer working, which makes her Italian detractors suspicious.

For not everybody is enamoured of the gallerist. One Milanese artist suggests Orlandi's edits are considerably more commercial and less edgy than they were at the start of the Spazio tenancy. Another – an art gallery owner – suggests that Orlandi's strength is in marketing: "Rossana Orlandi is great with the marketing of design, and Milan right now is about business and marketing... Every cool design magazine features Rossana's space, Rossana's house, Rossana's talent – and so even though I really think most of her clients probably don't understand the young designers' work they are buying, they trust her because she is considered a design guru, and they buy it anyway."

Orlandi herself acknowledges that although there has to be a bottom line ("yes, of course we need money – for us but also for our designers"), sometimes the pieces she loves never find favour among her clientele. "Sometimes we introduce something and it catches on straight away – such as the work by Front – other times things can take two or three years of people looking at it and getting used to it, but this market is slow anyway. Sometimes I don't understand why something I love doesn't sell." She knows several designers' work is more commercial than others. "But I never think consciously from a commercial point of view. Something catches me because it's



paper vases in hyper colours by the Japanese Torafu architects and vessels designed by the Swedish collective Front, made with the help of South African craftswomen whose life stories are told on their sides. It was a mix of the established and the not-so, all styled in her creative, unusual way. Tom Dixon, a friend and some-time collaborator, describes Orlandi as having "a very keen eye, a nose for originality and a powerful talent for persuasion. She is a unique force."

And yet Orlandi only came on to the design scene relatively recently when, in 2002, she opened her shop in a large upstairs room of the factory that is lined with tiny vintage storage boxes to make it resemble some kind of eclectic archive house. In 2008, she took the decision to show design-art pieces as a gallery (she has since started showing at Design Miami/Basel) and over the past decade her influence has grown, to the extent that she now enjoys almost iconic status in the pages of her country's interiors style magazines.

Her credentials may not seem at first to be those of a design expert. Born in the countryside outside Milan, as a girl she was "desperately bored", she says. "I loved nature and I loved my animals, but in a small village, which was not at all exciting, the days were very long." She always knew she was interested in the wider world and so, aged 18, she escaped to Milan to study textiles at

Clockwise from top: Orlandi's Pane e Acqua restaurant, two doors up from her Milan gallery. Trap lights by Gionata Gatto and Mike Thompson, €900. The Manuela Crotti exhibition during Salone del Mobile 2011 at Spazio Rossana Orlandi, prices from €600 to €20,000.

the Istituto Marangoni. When she finally tired of fashion and knitwear design in the 1990s after working for the likes of Armani and Donna Karan ("when fashion was really fashion"), she turned to what her family knew well – the furniture industry, albeit one that looked beyond the confines of Italy for inspiration.

For although she may seem like an outsider, Orlandi was already known to the most famous and influential Italian

designer-manufacturers. Her family had been making upholstery fibre content for the likes of Cassina and B&B Italia for many years. "I remember one summer Piero Busnelli [founder of B&B Italia] rented a big boat, and he invited all these designers, architects, furniture makers and some of his customers on to it – and we were included. I have always dealt with the design factories and always felt comfortable among them."

So, when Orlandi began to sell from her store, which features, among other designers, ceramics by Piet Hein Eek (€1,150) and lamps which glow in the dark by new designers Gionata Gatto and Mike Thompson (€900, pictured above right), there was no back-biting, no jealousy, only support from those she still counts as friends – Antonio Citterio, Piero Lissoni, Rosita Missoni, Fabio Novembre, Patricia Urquiola, the Busnellis, the Cappellinis. This despite the fact that she continues to sell the work of mostly non-Italian

Orlandi tired of fashion and knitwear design in the 1990s after working for the likes of Armani and Donna Karan ("when fashion was really fashion").

designers. "Although I love Italian design – we have had the best designers and the best design in the world – I don't see many young Italian designers today because they are educated into industrial production," says Orlandi. "They don't produce prototypes, we don't have workshops any more, there's no self-production. What we do here is work with people who can self-produce. And I always keep the prototypes – they're my favourites – they're often so beautiful."

As we speak, Nacho Carbonell, one of Orlandi's newest protégés hailing from Spain, is casting unusual, one-off iron seats and tables in a foundry round the corner from the gallery – one later arrives at the gallery and resembles a huge explosion of metal fronds (€90,000 for a chair and table set, pictured on final page). And the Spazio has so many rooms that at the end of last year it acted as a temporary workshop for Hannah Plumb and James Russell (or the Plumbs, as Orlandi affectionately calls them), the British duo who up-cycle antiques and ephemera and who have reinvented Orlandi's own archive collection of furniture – and even parts of the factory roof – into new designs. The results include a wooden sofa frame for which they cast a new concrete seat (€3,500) and a bed fashioned from an ornate window frame lined with antique textiles (€9,580).

Orlandi is aware of the cult of Made in Italy, and the fear many Italians have that their design industry is threatened by overseas production and a precarious domestic economy. But she believes that she plays her

From left: desk from Nika
Zupanc's Self Discipline
collection, €6,900.
Rossana Orlandi sits on a
Tom Dixon wingback chair.



Is Rossana Orlandi a visionary icon or simply a supremely canny marketer? Jenny Dalton meets one of the design world's most influential patrons. Photographs by Guido Castagnoli.

Initially there seems to be little that is typically Italian, and certainly little that is typically Milanese, about gallery owner Rossana Orlandi. As petite as a bird, her tiny face framed by round vintage spectacles that are almost as big as she, Orlandi's warmth and humour could seem misplaced in a city that is usually suited and booted, where flip-flops are a fashion faux pas, and where design is all straight lines – good (but conservative) taste and serious minimalism à la designers Piero Lissoni and Antonio Citterio.

Here, in the warren of *Alice in Wonderland*-style rooms that span out from the central garden courtyard of her international gallery/design shop – Spazio Rossana Orlandi – the proprietor herself is pulling faces and joking about her lack of beauty-queen status. “My husband says my skin is one size too big for me,” she grimaces, as she recoils from the camera that is trying to aggrandise her physicality so that she doesn't disappear entirely into the photograph. “I am so ugly, I take horrible photos,” she apologises.

But Orlandi's appearance is just one of the things that makes her a standout in her home town and beyond. Each year, her gallery's show is seen as one of a handful of Fuori Salone (official off-schedule) dates you really shouldn't miss during April's Salone del Mobile furniture and design week. An antidote to the often corporate aisle after aisle of new sofas and chairs at the fair's exhibition halls, Orlandi's ramshackle, romantic hideaway – a former tie-factory in south-west Milan – acts as a refreshing pick-me-up of international design treats that draws in journalists, design tourists and collectors alike.

“As an Australian, I believe that Australia exported lifestyle to the world,” says Salone-regular Jenni Carbins, founder of UK-based Australian design collective Matilda. “But lifestyle is what Rossana Orlandi's gallery exemplifies. It's the cohesion between design, lifestyle, food, culture, the outdoors. For me, it's a retreat, a place where you can restore mind, heart, body and soul during that week. It's nurturing and comforting.”

Just some of the treats Orlandi showed this April included ceramics by the Spaniard Jaime Hayon, beautiful coloured glass bell lamps that seem to have no light mechanism at all by Daniel Rybakken, delicate



ROSSANA IN EXCELSIS