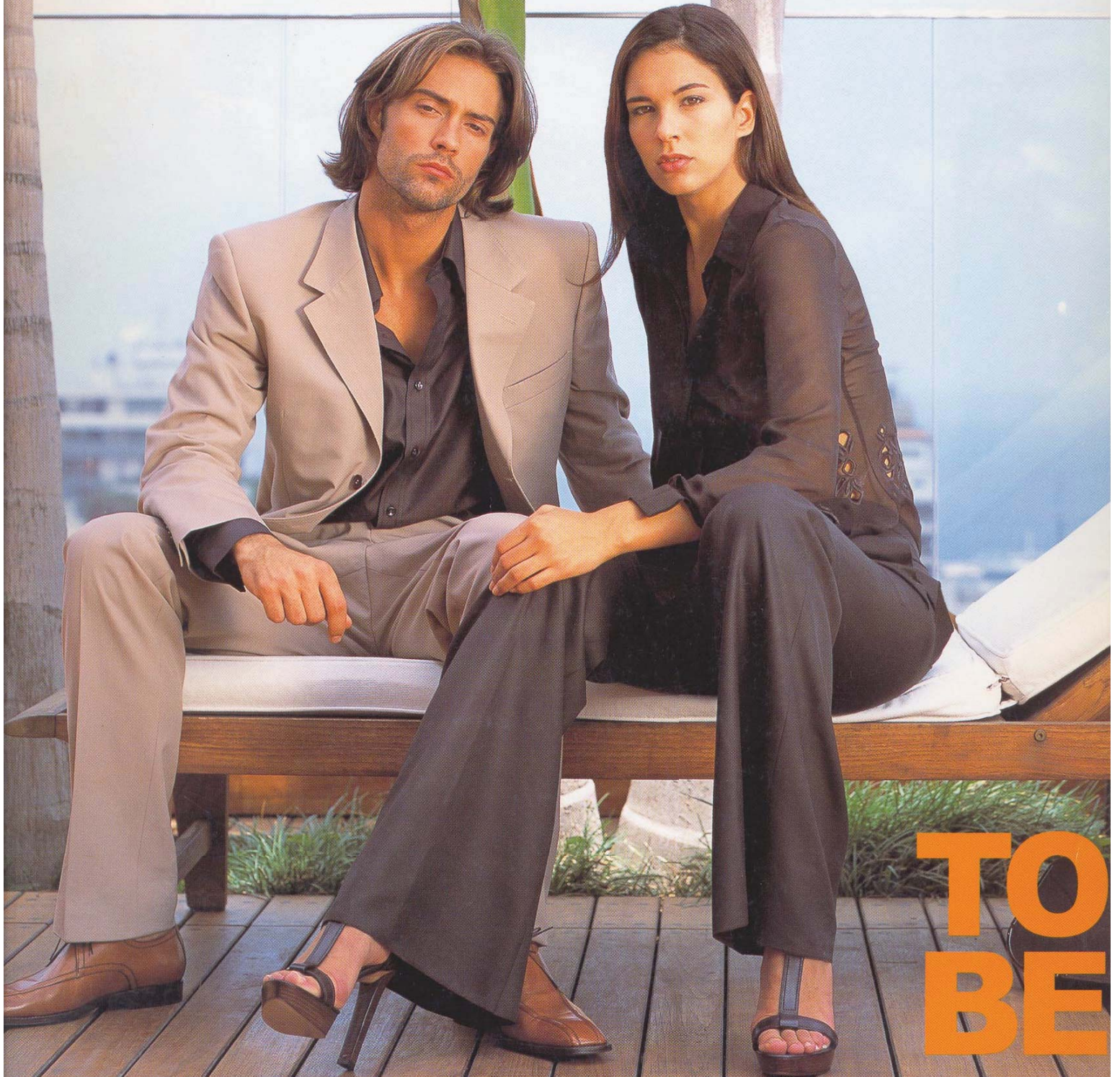




aishtiandyou



**TO
BE**



Sit up and notice: NADA DEBS

If you are born in Japan, 'return' to Lebanon at the age of 18 and then study and live in Europe and the United States, are you an easternized Westerner, a westernized Easterner or are you, in vintage UN-speak, a citizen of the world?

Ask Nada Debs, interior architect turned furniture designer. She knows all about belonging to many different worlds at the same time.

Suitably international in her outlook, Debs' multi-cultural background appears to have made her more, not less, sure of herself. Any geographical ambivalence she might be expected to feel certainly does not spill over into her work.

From nursery rooms and offices to children's furniture and more adult-oriented designs, that work is best described as confident, comfortable, Contemporary Chic.

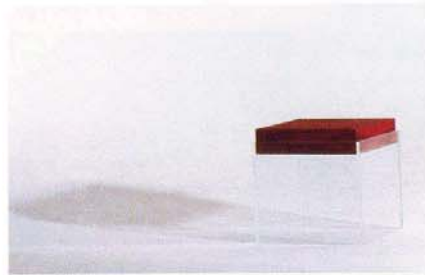
"My designs are simple but sophisticated," she says, momentarily disappearing into the oversized cushions on her sofa as she sits.

Whether Debs is referring to her apartment or to her designs is not immediately obvious, but as her home is furnished with examples of her own work, I'm guessing she is probably referring to both.

Indeed, there are no carvings, few curves and not a gilded curlicue in sight. Sophisticated? Certainly. But hers is not furniture for the Francofussy. Or is it?

Debs thinks so.

"I'd like to see a piece or two placed in a classical home," she says. "I like to see mixing and matching, it's much more interesting, isn't it?"



Whether it was growing up immersed in Hello Kitty culture, her three-year stint at the RISD (Rhode Island School of Design) or the year studying textile design in Osaka that resulted in Debs' penchant for clean lines and bold patterns, it was a move to London in 1992 that took her career off the drawing-board.

At the time, John Major's decidedly pre-Cool Britannia was a Design wasteland. Determined not just to make do, Debs decided to grab the couch by its corners, as it were.

"I couldn't find anything I wanted," she says, "so I started to make my own furniture."

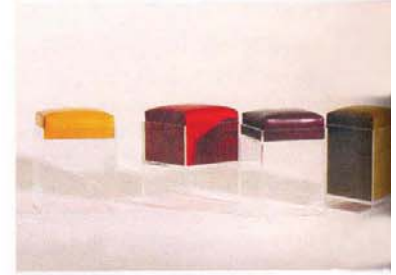
She designed for more than just her home. As word got around, Debs started to get commissions, although she admits that at first, she wasn't taking them or herself very seriously.

It was around this time that her first son was born and as she couldn't find any children's furniture she liked either, she began to design that as well.

It was her children's line that led her out of London and back to the Levant, with a commission for the Jordanian royal family. Then in 1999, she made her return permanent and moved back to Beirut, a city she claims is an ideal space for experimentation.

Perhaps that's why her furniture – which Debs describes as Fusion – is difficult to pigeonhole. The materials and forms are clearly contemporary but many of her pieces subtly suggest the furniture your parents had in the Fifties (or would have had if your parents were Swingers, mixed Martinis and were partial to Astrud Gilberto) while her choice of richly-coloured veneers and richly-patterned fabrics are an even subtler echo of the Louis Seize extravaganza that was your grandmama's salon.

Hence the almost edible Macassar Ebony veneer



applied to her Coffee Bean Table, a slinky slat hardwood perched on recessed metal legs, sinuously carved out in the middle, which appears ready to return to a low earth orbit at any time.

So too the cubic Floating Stool and Floating Table boxes of clear Perspex which come stuffed with Spanish olive-style, with a leather and Puro padded cushion or a walnut wood veneer brick. Viewed from the right angle, the cushion appears suspended in mid-air but is reassuringly so when sat upon.

Thanks to the careful choice and combination of materials and attention to detail and craftsmanship, Debs' furniture is luxurious. It is also ethereal, the result not only of the use of Perspex and glass but also because many of her pieces float on spindly legs and disguise their bulk behind their slender lines. Practical and distinctive and always a focus of attention, Debs' furniture manages to be imposing without being an imposition.

This could almost be a metaphor for the designer herself, who, with her preference for Yohji Yamamoto, Comme des Garçons and anything black, offers proof that it doesn't have to be flashy to glitter and that you can take the girl out of Japan but you can't always take Japan out of a girl.

So her Rocket Age Rustic bread baskets – known simply as Khibbiz – could be straight out of a crumbling Kanazawa craft shop and her stretch leather console and door-like leather mirror (a fully secured with clumsy, outsize Frankentech) would not look odd in Omotesando.

"My design is all form and function," she says, "suppose that's quite Japanese."

Maybe. But it's also sophisticated, seductive and stylish. Zen. And now.

Warren Singh Bartle