Can the genie escape the bottle?

Scott Lippens on taking the risk of starting Uppercut, the strange economics of collectible design and whether its freedom can survive contact with industry.

INTERVIEWER
Petrus Palmér

GUEST
Scott Lippens
Founder, Uppercut

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Scott Lippens founded Uppercut in Antwerp in 2023. The gallery represents a young generation of designers working between furniture, art and limited production. We spoke about the education of taste, putting all his savings into a new gallery, the strange economics of collectible design and whether its freedom can survive contact with industry.

Learning to look

PETRUS PALMÉR

You did not start Uppercut from a vacuum. Where did your interest in design come from?

SCOTT LIPPENS

I grew up in a small town near Ghent that had an important Impressionist movement in the early twentieth century. At school we visited the studios where those artists had worked, so art was present in a very personal way.

My father was also a collector. In the 1980s he started buying Jean Prouvé, Knoll and Charlotte Perriand. When I was six or seven, he gave me each issue of *Wallpaper* with a pen and asked me to choose five things I liked and five I disliked. On Sunday he would ask me why. Later, when he bought something, he would point to the screws or the form and ask why I thought the designer had made those decisions. That really sparked my interest.

PETRUS PALMÉR

What a dreamy upbringing. Can your father adopt me?

SCOTT LIPPENS

My mother was the opposite influence. She was a fashion buyer with a very decorative eye, interested in antiques, interiors and flowers on the table. My father was the formal collector. My mother taught me how things live together. Finding an equilibrium between them was difficult, but both shaped me.

When I was fifteen or sixteen, I found a lamp at a street market. It was Gae Aulenti's *Rimorchiatore* from 1969. My father did not like it and my mother was indifferent, but I loved its colours and the whole idea of it. I went to the library, found books on Aulenti and started reading. That was the beginning of buying furniture for myself. I still have the lamp.

Going all in

PETRUS PALMÉR

You studied economics, fashion and art history, worked at a gallery and then spent five years in your stepfather's company. How did that become Uppercut?

SCOTT LIPPENS

Economics was mainly to please my father. Fashion was not for me either. I wrote an anti-fashion manifesto as my dissertation, which probably tells you something. Then I studied art history in London and worked at MARUANI MERCIER in Brussels, but at twenty-four I felt intimidated by the art world and I was still the assistant to the assistant.

While working for my stepfather I bought and sold Gaetano Pesce and Gae Aulenti on the side. I drove to Italy and France in a little van, followed auctions and sold mostly to other galleries. Then I discovered Collectible in Brussels. I had no idea that contemporary collectible design was a world of its own. I also realised that reselling vintage gave me no creative outlet. The history and value were already decided.

PETRUS PALMÉR

So what did you do?

SCOTT LIPPENS

I sold my stock of Gaetano Pesce and Gae Aulenti and went fully into Uppercut. It was a very big risk because I had no client base in contemporary design. All my pocket money, all my savings, I put into it.

A few designers gave me the chance to work with them: Wendy Andreu, LS GOMMA, Pierre Castignola, Nick Ross and others. We started in June 2023. The first exhibition brought a hundred of my friends and perhaps two or three collectors I knew. When I look back, parts of it embarrass me, but it was a starting point.

PETRUS PALMÉR

When did it begin to feel like a real business?

SCOTT LIPPENS

I still worked three days a week for my stepfather. After a year and a half, three or four important sales gave me enough room to quit. Those collectors are still among my best clients. The business has good months and quiet months. What mattered was reaching a point where I knew I could survive the next six months without going bankrupt.

What a gallery actually does

PETRUS PALMÉR

What does the gallery take on, economically?

SCOTT LIPPENS

At first I bought pieces from each designer so they could trust me and have money for production. Today the designers usually finance their work, unless I believe strongly in a piece and know they cannot make it without help.

The gallery pays for the space, scenography, transport, fairs and sales. We have shown in Milan, New York and China. We build context around the work and connect designers with collectors, institutions and other galleries. There is a whole business behind the exhibition people see.

PETRUS PALMÉR

Do you want exclusivity from the designers?

SCOTT LIPPENS

I do not believe in worldwide exclusivity. Designers should have the liberty to work with different galleries and institutions. That helps the whole industry. Of course we agree on guidelines. They cannot do everything everywhere, but I do not want the gallery to become a restriction.

When design became art

PETRUS PALMÉR

Is the business of design galleries a new phenomenon?

SCOTT LIPPENS

It started gaining real traction around twenty years ago with Design Miami, although there was still a lot of secondary-market work. In Belgium it has really grown during the last decade. Collectors are beginning to understand that design is a craft and that designers can think like artists.

It is being taken more seriously, but there is also a marketing machine around collectible design. Cool furniture performs well on social media. I hope the work we are building becomes a lasting value, not simply the current thing people like to look at.

PETRUS PALMÉR

I think the ecosystem has proved that it is here to stay. But its success creates another question. What purpose does it serve in the wider design world?

The genie in the bottle

PETRUS PALMÉR

The world is abundant. Well-designed objects exist at every price and in every geography. It is hard to explain why industrial design should keep producing more solutions. Then I look at collectible design and see freedom, creativity and bold bets.

That freedom is also protected by price and scarcity. It is like a genie in a bottle: something brilliant and exciting that rarely reaches wider distribution. Can it escape?

SCOTT LIPPENS

I think you have already proved that it can with Hem, through designers such as Soft Baroque, Max Lamb and Sabine Marcelis. Recently I was speaking with LS GOMMA about whether his language in rubber could work on an industrial scale at a more democratic price. As soon as we discussed it, he already had possible solutions.

These designers are creative and very smart about how things are made. I think each designer can find a way to work at a bigger scale. It is a matter of finding the right tools, the right people, the right craftsmanship and the right factories.

PETRUS PALMÉR

I know it can work in individual cases. The harder question is whether it can become a model. The premise of the gallery is freedom. The work does not need to solve a problem, reach a target price or sell five thousand units. Industrial design reintroduces all those constraints. Often the material or construction that made the gallery work exciting cannot survive them.

SCOTT LIPPENS

For some of the artists I work with, it should not become a model. It would distract from what they are doing. When I started Uppercut I wanted much more work at low prices, but my collectors were not looking for it. They wanted different kinds of objects.

At the same time, we recently made a show of unique works priced between three hundred and three thousand euros. That may be one way to bring collectible work into more homes, even if it is still far from true industrial scale.

Freedom still has a balance sheet

PETRUS PALMÉR

The gallery looks free from the outside, but it is still a commercial business. How much room is there for failure?

SCOTT LIPPENS

I work with around twenty designers. About half are commercially successful. Sales from that half allow us to support exhibitions and designers that sell less. That balance is important because not everything should succeed immediately.

But after three, four or five years with very few sales, it becomes difficult to keep investing unless I have very high conviction. Then we have to find another way: commissions for hotels or restaurants, special projects, perhaps a different market. That is more challenging for me as a gallerist, but it is also more interesting.

PETRUS PALMÉR

That willingness to accept failure may be the essential difference. Much of the established design industry has removed risk from its business model, and the work has become stale as a result.

SCOTT LIPPENS

There are many challenges ahead for the design market. I have always seen the glass as half full. The important thing is how flexible you can be as an entrepreneur and as a gallerist.

What young designers should do

PETRUS PALMÉR

What would you tell a designer starting out today?

SCOTT LIPPENS

Be curious and go out. I receive around five emails a week from young designers. Many stay inside and work constantly, which I applaud, but they never meet anyone. Go to openings, fairs and galleries. Let people know you as a person before they know you as a designer.

And keep re-evaluating the work. Sometimes I tell an artist, "I think you can do better." It can be harsh, but the object might live for the next hundred years. It is worth taking the time.