

A Giant Leap

WITH FROG TABLE, *Hella Jongerius* CROSSES A NEW BOUNDARY, THUS RAISING THE QUESTION OF WHAT CAN AND WILL HAPPEN IN THE WAKE OF THIS WORK.

WORDS Femke de Wild
PHOTOS Fabrice Gousset, courtesy of Galerie Kreo

In early April Hella Jongerius's solo exhibition, *Natura Design Magistra*, opened at Galerie Kreo in Paris. In addition to a series of signature Jongerius vases, which she filled with sculptural artificial flowers, three Animal Tables were on display. All eyes, however, were drawn instantly, and perhaps exclusively, to an enormous frog in the act of climbing from his wet, blue world onto a table in the middle of the gallery. The smoothly sanded wooden animal, partially clad in a coat of enamel paint, rendered the relatively large table irrelevant. Although the table did not collapse beneath the weight of a monster measuring 1.5 m in length and nearly the same in width, the frog completely devoured it, figuratively speaking. Jongerius's work is characterized by floral decoration, vintage patterns and, more and more often, animals. But Frog Table goes far beyond any of her earlier pieces.

For years, Jongerius has used decoration as a mediator between observer and object. The decoration on her work seduces the viewer, as it were, thus forging a bond. In the designer's *Animal Bowls* of 2004, the seduction occurs in a gentle, aesthetic way. The fawn resting at the centre of the bowl is sweet, pleasant and, above all, unassuming. Not really in the way, he is simply an inviting figure. In 2006 Jongerius went a step farther with *Props*, which she made for Vitra. In these designs, decoration merges with the functional object, casting a shadow of doubt on the function in question. Jongerius took an even bigger step a year later with *Office Pets*, again for Vitra. It's telling that the idea for Frog Table originated during this period. Someone seeing the piece for the first time is probably reminded of a dining table, but Jongerius's preliminary sketches clearly show the design emerging from the context of the office. Only later, during the two years she spent developing the idea, did the table assume a more general connotative value.

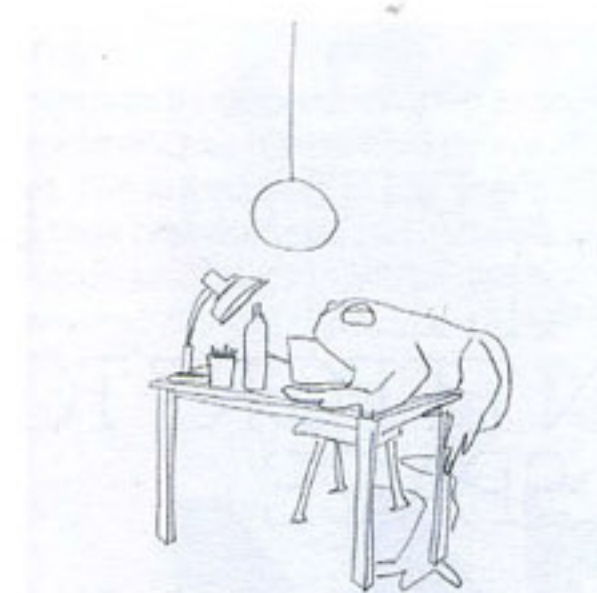
It's stretching a point to call *Office Pets* functional – indeed, their ‘usefulness’ proved to be a hot topic of discussion – but with Frog Table, Jongerius has crossed a completely different boundary. Whereas decoration started for her as a means of achieving the object and later became part of the object, the decoration seen in Frog

Table appropriates the object. Here decoration stands between observer and object, at least in the first instance. You are not going to cosy up to this huge creature, who's apparently risen from the depths of his world to overrun yours, with a plate of chicken and peas – much less sit calmly at the table to work, with a leviathan peering over your shoulder. Frog Table is unnerving, a tad repugnant. And this is new for Hella Jongerius.

The type of decoration also represents a climax for the designer. Jongerius uses animals as decoration because she can give them human qualities. People identify easily with animals; animals are quick to stir the imagination. This makes the animal an ideal mediator between observer and object, and none more than the frog. Everyone associates the frog with one image or another. Within the croaking amphibian are many more personages than the handsome prince. Think of the world-famous Kermit, of frogs in children's stories, of the iconographic significance of frogs in art, of the various meanings of ‘frog’ in language. The English call the French ‘frogs’, and the characters in many folk tales are turned into frogs as punishment. The frog has always intrigued us; his slimy appearance both attracts and repels. It's this duality that we see in Jongerius's frog as well. Although Frog Table has a rather unsavoury air at first glance, it's hard to avert your eyes. Stare a bit longer and you'll discover his almost friendly grin and his elegant pose, which suggests his willingness to sit next to you without making too much of a disturbance. After a while, when you've become almost used to him, you may find yourself setting a place at his corner of the table. Even later, the monster might prove to be a friendly giant.

The animal as decoration is exploited to the max in Frog Table. It will be hard to top. The *Turtle Table*, for instance – also shown at the exhibition – shrinks into insignificance in comparison with its colleague. Seen from this perspective, Jongerius's intriguing frog can be interpreted as an apotheosis, which leaves us wondering what she will and can do as a follow-up.

jongeriuslab.com



THE IDEA FOR FROG TABLE ORIGINATED WHILE JONGERIUS WAS DEVELOPING OFFICE PETS FOR VITRA. IN THE FIRST SKETCH, THE TABLE IS STILL IN THE CONTEXT OF THE OFFICE.



THE FORM OF THE FROG WAS CREATED WITH CLAY MODELS. AFTER SCANNING THE FINAL DESIGN, A COMPANY IN SOUTHERN FRANCE USED A MILLING MACHINE TO MAKE THE TABLE.



THE ANIMAL AS DECORATION IS EXPLOITED TO THE MAX IN FROG TABLE



NAME Frog Table
DESIGNER Hella Jongerius
MATERIAL Walnut and transparent blue enamel
DIMENSIONS TABLE 74 x 180 x 90 cm (h x l x w)
DIMENSIONS FROG 150 x 125 cm (h x w)
PRICE € 55,000
Limited edition 8 pieces + 2 A.P. + 2 prototypes
Numbered and signed
PRODUCER Galerie Kreo Paris

