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Before attack in Boston, an American dream lost

BOSTON

Boxing career cut short,
older Tsarnaev brother
took path to a violent end

BY DEBORAH SONTAG,
DAVID M. HERSZENHORN
AND SERGE F. KOVALESKI

It was a blow the immigrant boxer could not withstand: After capturing his second consecutive title as the Golden Gloves heavyweight champion of New England in 2010, Tamerlan Anzorovich Tsarnaev, 23, was barred from the national Tournament of Champions because he was not a U.S. citizen.

The cocksure fighter, a flamboyant dresser partial to white fur and snake-



U.S. faces dilemma in support for Syria rebels

CAIRO

Islamists predominate
as Obama weighs action
on chemical arms issue

BY BEN HUBBARD

In Syria's largest city, Aleppo, rebels aligned with Al Qaeda control the power plant, run the bakeries and head a court that applies Islamic law. Elsewhere, they have seized government oil fields, put employees back to work and now profit from the crude they produce.

Across Syria, rebel-held areas are dotted with Islamic courts staffed by lawyers and clerics, and with fighting brigades led by extremists. Even the Supreme Military Council, the umbrella rebel organization whose formation the

Culture

DESIGN BOOKS

Bringing an industrial vision to the home

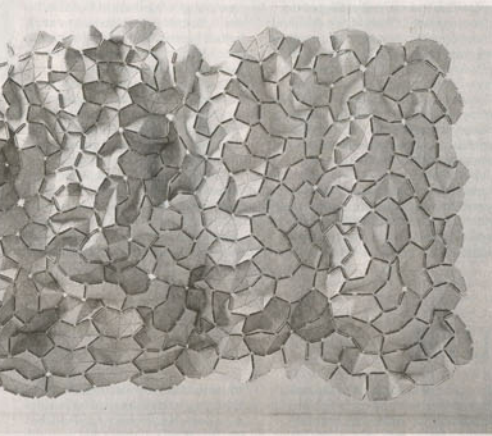
PARIS

Retrospective shows
Bouroullecs' restrained
but subversive style

BY ALICE RAWSTHORN

Hanging in the sumptuous Grande Nef, or Great Nave, of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris are nearly 1,500 spindly strips of black plastic slotted together to form a gigantic screen. Each one resembles a short strand of seaweed, which is why its designers, the brothers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec, named it *Algue*, the French word for seaweed.

Unprepossessing though an *Algue* looks on its own, when several pieces are combined they create a gently surreal visual effect, which is doubtless why Vitra, their Swiss manufacturer, has sold nearly 8 million pieces of that



algae-like plastic in the past nine years. Not bad at €63, or \$125, for a pack of 25. It seems apt that a giant ensemble of *Algues* is among the first things you see when walking into "Momentané," the retrospective of 15 years of the Bouroullecs' work, which opened Friday at Musée des Arts Décos and runs through Sept. 1. Not only is it one of their best-selling products, *Algue* embodies the defining qualities of the brothers' designs. Formally elegant, technically ingenious, disciplined, yet flexible, it has the air of something that belongs to the present, and could only be the result of the latest technology and design thinking.

Like many bastions of the decorative arts, the Paris museum has traditionally seemed ambivalent about technocratic objects like *Algue*, and has rarely addressed industrial design on this scale. Yet it chose the subjects of this exhibition wisely because Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec, 41 and 37 respectively, are the most important French industrial designers of their generation, and among the most influential worldwide. Even if you haven't slotted a couple of *Algues* together, or used any of their other products, there may well be traces of the brothers' work in the contents of your home and workplace.

Several exhibitions have been devoted to the Bouroullecs in recent years, notably at the Art Institute of Chicago and Centre Pompidou Metz in eastern France, but "Momentané" is their most ambitious show so far. The Musée des Arts Décos gave them carte blanche to present their work as they wished.

It is tempting to interpret their re-

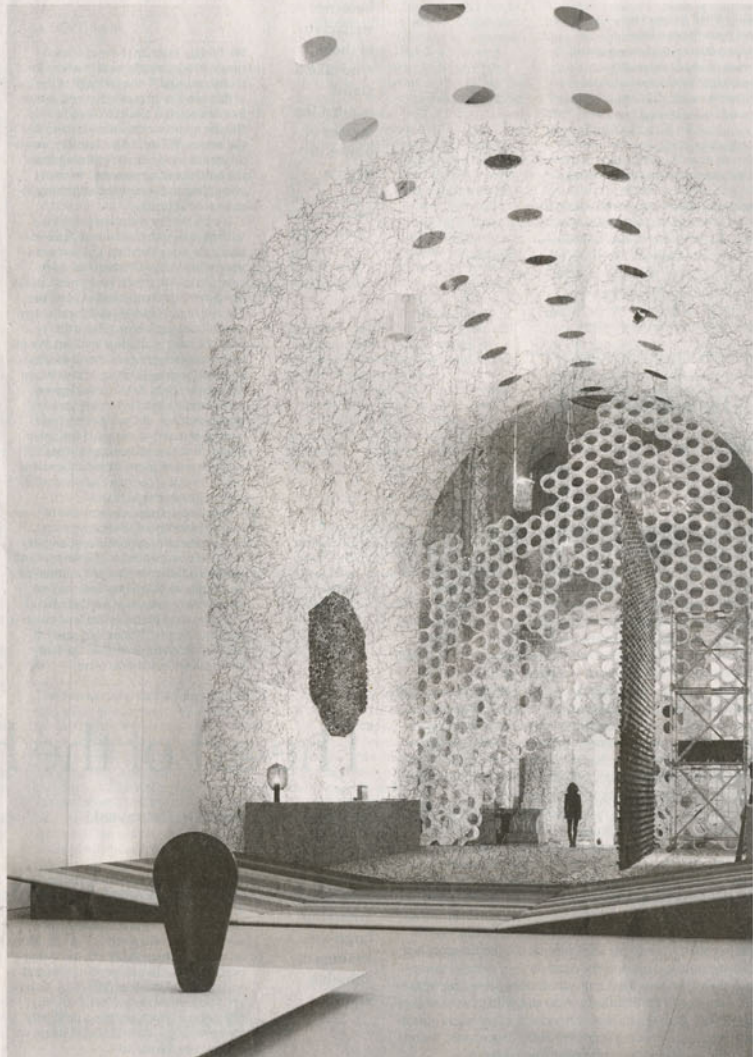


Clockwise from right: A view of the "Momentané" exhibition in Paris; Ronan, left, and Erwan Bouroullec with their Vegetal chair for Vitra; the Clouds screen, designed in 2009 for Kvadrat; Copenhagen furniture, designed in 2012 for Hay.

sponse as a subtle commentary on the historic frostiness between the decorative arts and industrial design. Having been given temporary custodianship of the Grande Nef, the brothers chose to disguise its ornate interior behind a translucent white tented structure and the ceramic floor tiles they developed for Mutina in Italy. They then divided the space with giant screens constructed from *Algues* and *Clouds*, the interlocking felt tiles they designed for the Danish textile company Kvadrat.

Gently, yet deftly, the Bouroullecs have transformed the western wing of what was once France's royal palace into a neutral, modern setting. There is even a quietly provocative subtext to the exhibition's title. "Momentané" translates into English as "momentary," which alludes to the speed and frenzy of contemporary life, rather than the monumentality traditionally prized by historic museums like this one.

Not that there is a hint of aggression: that isn't their style. Before the Bouroul-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY STUDIO BOURULLECS; BOURULLECS; TAYLOR (LEFT CENTER)

lecs, French design was dominated by the Post-Modernist prankster Philippe Starck, whose work is as showy and boisterous as theirs is restrained. Yet their designs are more subversive than his. Rather than devising new versions of existing objects, they question what sort of things we need at a time when digital technology has wrought dramatic changes in the way we live and work, and then develop them.

Brought up in Brittany, both brothers went to college in Paris, where Ronan studied design and Erwan art. Ronan opened a design studio after graduating, and Erwan joined him, initially just to help out. After a brief period of working independently, they have since signed everything jointly, and only ever release a project if they both agree to do so.

Even when Ronan was working alone, he produced objects that could be customized by their owners as their needs changed, typically by adding different components to, say, a series of vases or a kitchen unit. He and his brother have since applied a similar principle to a dazzling range of other products.

Recognizing that workplaces now need to accommodate constantly changing casts of employees, interns and visitors, executing diverse tasks, they have designed desk systems for Vitra inspired by the multiple activities carried out on the kitchen table in their grandparents' farmhouse, where a child might be doing homework at the same time as other people ate supper, and someone else did the farm accounts.

Their products for the home are equally versatile. Rooms can be divided into different spaces by constructing screens of *Algues* or *Clouds*, and then dismantling them. While anyone living and working in the same place can create an enclosed area for a bed, without sacrificing sorely needed floor space, in the elevated Lit Clos sleeping cabin.

"Momentané" shows how the brothers began by developing such objects on an experimental basis, and have since deployed the technology and engineering resources of manufacturers like Vitra and Kvadrat to make them more sophisticated. The show is organized thematically with monumental projects,

There may well be traces of the brothers' work in the contents of your home and workplace.

like *Algue* and *Clouds*, clustered in the Grande Nef, while their work for offices, schools and other public spaces is in another gallery, and their designs for the home in a third.

The brothers offer glimpses of their thinking and way of working by displaying the rough sketches from which they develop their ideas, and photographs tracing their work over the years. Seeing Erwan groaning over a glitch in a project, the mammoth machines that shape their products, and Ronan's daughter Mette toddling around their home brings the Bouroullecs' designs to life by reminding us of how challenging it is to create something that seems so calm and refined, and how pleasing it can be to live with.

ONLINE: MORE ON DESIGN

Read previous articles by Alice Rawsthorn at global.nytimes.com/arts

At the psychic periphery of East and West

Tiger Writing, Arts, Culture and the Independent Self. By Gish Jen. 201 pages. Illustrated. Harvard University Press. \$18.95.

BY WESLEY YANG

A group of students at Cornell, born in Asia but raised in the United States by immigrant parents, were instructed to keep a diary. They struggled to recall the events of their own daily lives when they were later quizzed about them, remembering fewer details about their

BOOK REVIEW

experiences than their Euro-American counterparts. Qi Wang, the Cornell scholar of "cross-cultural" cognition who conducted the experiment, speculated that Asians were not more forgetful but that they had, perhaps, filtered out the contents of their own stories, deeming them unworthy of being encoded as memories in the first place.

The novelist Gish Jen cites these findings in her curious new book about Asian and Asian-American narratives, "Tiger Writing," as an explanation for the "notably un-self-centered" approach of her father's memoir. The account, which he started writing when he was 85, offered few details of his own

grandfather's "appearance or personality or tastes — the sorts of things we in the West might include as a way of conveying both his uniqueness and his importance as a figure in the narrative."

It instead described at great length the number of doors in the house where her father grew up and whether they were open or shut — concentrating not on his individual self, but on the context within which that self was situated, and by which it was constrained. The world he describes is not, as Ms. Jen puts it, "a modern, linear world of conflict and rising action, but rather one of harmony and eternal, cyclical action, in which order, ritual and peace are beauty, and events spell, not excitement or progress, but disruption."

Like the young Asian students at Cornell, Ms. Jen's father had been born into a culture whose parenting style explicitly intends the humbling of the self in favor of the needs of the broader collective. (Parents engage in short, selective conversation with their children, emphasizing "proper behavior, self-restraint and attentiveness to others.")

What this "low elaborative" parenting style aims at instead is the creation of an "interdependent self," defined not by its sense of inner autonomy, but by its sensitivity to the social roles it must

play depending on the context in which it finds itself. The scholars of cross-cultural cognition, who reject the universality of Western models of the mind, maintain that this emphasis on social context translates into a measurable divergence in how Easterners and Westerners literally see the physical world.

Ms. Jen cites an experiment in which a group of old Singaporean men were shown images of a changing figure on an unchanging background. The men were so fixated on the background at the expense of the figure that fMRI readings failed to register any change in perception when the figure changed from a bucket to a guitar to a vacuum cleaner to a house plant.

Ms. Jen maintains that this interdependent self finds its expression in practices as various as Chinese landscape paintings, which depict the individual as dwarfed by the magnificence of his surroundings; Chinese writing, which tends to revolve around the recurrent and the typical rather than the unique and specific and dramatic; Chinese medicine, which treats the body as a single holistic system in pursuit of harmonious balance, rather than a collection of discrete parts to be fixed in isolation; and the communal Chinese meals that offer no option exclusive to any individual diner.

For Ms. Jen, Chinese ways both ancient and enduring, prosaic and arcane, confirm the proposition made by Richard Nisbett, a University of Michigan psychologist, that "Westerners are protagonists of their autobiographical novels," whereas Asians are "merely cast members in movies touching on their existences."

The interest in all this is not that these blunt and ahistoric generalizations rest on solid philosophical grounding — in fact, the more closely

Ms. Jen wonders how a person raised in an "interdependent context" came to practice the art of fiction.

one examines the broad assumptions of cross-cultural psychology, the cruder they begin to seem — but that they should feel so intuitively persuasive to so keen an observer of Asian and Asian-American lives as Gish Jen, who works at the psychic periphery of East and West.

Ms. Jen is acutely conscious that to affirm that Asians have a strongly reduced sense of individuality in relation to their Western counterparts risks en-

dorsing the view that Asians are "robot, or sheeplike." She is therefore eager to assert that her father made significant innovations in the scientific field in which he worked, that he was "strikingly — my mother would probably say maddeningly — unconventional," and to cite research that finds the interdependent self can still become a "fiercely enterprising, un-self-conscious, navigational self."

Moreover, she points to the excesses of Western individualism — "It has promoted decontextualization and isolation; it has promoted narcissism. It has promoted arrogance. It has promoted a disembodied reason. It has promoted a culture that so celebrates uniqueness that people are driven mad trying to prove themselves unique" — as she strives to vindicate the emotional wholeness and belonging available only within the framework of Eastern interdependence. She concedes that interdependent selves can produce "group policing" that is "intense and ruthless" but insists that "the joy of a functioning interdependent relationship can be tremendous, too."

Ms. Jen wonders how a person raised in an "interdependent context" — that is to say, as the daughter of two Chinese immigrants — came to practice the art

of fiction, which she calls the "sanctuary of the independent self." At times her narrative reads like the archetypal Western narrative of liberation from the constraints of tradition, as when she celebrates the influence of Western literature and her Jewish classmates in Scarsdale, whose conversation was "so funny, so gory, so exactly blow-by-blow." But in "Tiger Writing," which transcribes the Massey Lectures she delivered at Harvard University last year, she always draws back to criticize what she has just affirmed, and affirm what she has just criticized.

She concludes that "we need both the interdependent and the independent self" and calls each one to recognize the claims of the other, while silkily suggesting that interdependent selves, more accustomed to striking balances, may be better equipped at finding the unity in apparent polar opposites, and thus at effecting this reconciliation of East and West.

Wesley Yang, a contributing editor at *New York* magazine, is writing a book about Asian-Americans.

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