

The National
September 9, 2010

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Larry Gagosian pushes the boat out for Marc Newson

Sandra Lane

Last Updated: September 09. 2010 12:39AM UAE / September 8. 2010 8:39PM GMT



Not for the first time, Marc Newson takes the risk of redesigning a legendary or iconic item. Courtesy
Marc Newson

Next Tuesday evening (September 14) New York's heavy-hitting contemporary art collectors, together with the social-media-design crowd that buzzes around them, will descend upon the city's West 21st Street for the opening of *Transport*, a thematic show of Marc Newson's work. So far, so normal for the first night of any exhibition staged by the über-dealer Larry Gagosian.

Not so normal is the fact that the star of the show – and the only work in it for sale – will be a boat. Not just any old boat, though: the *Aquariva* was conceived as a successor to the legendary *Riva Aquarama* of the 1950s and 1960s, this one combines the pedigree

of the Italian boat-builder with the talents of Newson, the Australian-born design star whose work ranges from watches, bicycles and aircraft cabins to Nike shoes for cosmonauts, nickel surfboards and monobloc Carrara marble bookshelves (the latter having been launched at Gagosian at the end of 2007, to great acclaim).

Nevertheless, a boat in an art gallery? While this doesn't mean that Gagosian is adding "yacht broker" to his CV, does it represent a greater blurring of the distinction between design and art that has been such a hot topic for the past decade? Not according to Newson. Despite having been tagged as one of the leading proponents of so-called "design-art" (one example is his aluminium Lockheed Lounge chaise-longue that fetched US\$1.5 million [Dh5.5m] at Christie's in 2007), he has often said that he considers the art-or-design question irrelevant because "the label is attached after the fact", whereas the process involved in producing items is essentially the same.

Talking about the Aquariva, Newson is pure industrial designer, revelling in the fact that it's a series boat – albeit a series limited to 22 pieces. "For me it's more exciting to design a production vessel than a one-off – it's more in sync with my day job; economies of scale are a big part of it."

Yet that decidedly unromantic approach belies the romance of the project. "I was aware of Riva even as a child growing up in Australia – it epitomised the jet-set glamour of the 1960s, the Riviera, Portofino, the Aga Khan, Bardot... If you had asked me when I was 15 what is the most famous and beautiful boat in the world, I would have said without hesitation, the Riva Aquarama."

So would many other people; the Aquarama was instantly recognisable even among those who didn't know about boats, such was its beauty and so strong was its image. But along the way something went wrong; Riva lost its gloss and was never quite able

to replicate the success of its greatest hit.

For Newson, the opportunity to reinvent the icon “seemed like a no-brainer. In a sense [the Aquarama] was a perfect product, but no way could it have worked in a contemporary setup – it just wasn’t good enough for today.” Riva had tried to address that by launching the original Aquariva in 2000; it was a slightly tepid affair – and has achieved somewhat tepid success compared with its illustrious predecessor. “They didn’t do it the way I would have,” says Newson. “Mine is a different answer to the problem.”

His answer looks anything but lukewarm: from 100 paces it’s instantly recognisable as a Riva – but in ways you can’t quite define. There’s the distinctive silhouette, but it isn’t a slavish Aquarama copy; there’s a hint of nostalgia yet it looks utterly modern. The hull is unchanged from the original Aquariva (“we didn’t change things that would have affected its performance and handling”) but the transom [the back of the boat] is completely new.

“I had to identify one part of the boat that I wanted to have as its signature. If you ask old Riva aficionados ‘which part of the boat says the most to you?’ it would be the transom, so it was a slightly dangerous element to take on – akin to a plastic surgeon changing the eyes or nose of a famous beauty.”

But Newson is used to the risk of messing about with legends, for instance giving Dom Pérignon’s iconography a makeover and breathing new life into Jaeger LeCoultre’s famous Atmos clock. “Coming from the outside you can see things in a different context.”

Newson's love of doing things differently is well known, so selling the boat through an art gallery is perhaps not so strange after all.

"I love the idea of putting things in different contexts," says Newson. "The obvious thing to do would be a boat show. We'll be doing that anyway but we wouldn't do ourselves any favours just to do that. Since I have a longstanding relationship with the gallery, why not present the boat to wealthy art collectors?"

Why not, indeed. According to Millicent Wilner, the director of Gagosian Gallery London, there has already been "a lot of interest from all over the world – from our regular Gagosian collectors, from collectors of Marc's work, from boat enthusiasts and from some completely new people". But all of them will have to line up behind the first person to have plunked down the \$1.5 million asking price: a certain Mr Larry Gagosian.

Transport will run at Gagosian Gallery, 522 West 21st Street, New York from 14 September to 16 October (+1 212 741 1717; www.gagosian.com, www.marc-newson.com)