

PHOTOGRAPH BY CATHERINE FARQUHARSON

# ROOMS OF THEIR OWN

## WHAT IS BEHIND ALTERNATIVE DESIGN?

BY DAVID BALZER

Tiff Izsa



Kathryn Waiter

## COME UP TO MY ROOM

Feb 24-26, Fri noon-8pm; Sat noon-10pm; Sun noon-5pm. Reception: Sat, 7-10pm. \$6. Gladstone Hotel, 1214 Queen W, 416-531-4635. [www.gladstonehotel.com/cutmr2006/cutmr2006.htm](http://www.gladstonehotel.com/cutmr2006/cutmr2006.htm).

The word "alternative" has gone through a number of useful and irritating permutations since the mid-'80s, when it was primarily used to describe a certain brand of music. Now, it seems, it's the art world's turn. Fairs branding themselves alternative are surfacing all over Europe and North America — including our own, the two-year-old Toronto Alternative Art Fair International (TAAFI) — in many cases eclipsing (as alternative music eventually did) whatever entities they initially claimed to be alternatives to.

This weekend, Torontonians are again provided with apparent event foils: Exhibition Place's glitzy Interior Design Show (IDS), which throws its doors open to thousands of trade professionals and tens of thousands of consumers, and the Gladstone's third annual "alternative design event," Come Up to My Room, a comparatively tiny affair where artists reconfigure 12 of the hotel's second-storey rooms as eclectic, site-specific installations.

Is the latter a quirky, bohemian, anti-capitalist riposte to the former? Pamela Matharu, who co-founded and co-curates Come Up to My Room with Gladstone reno-innovator Christina Zeidler, claims that "we never proposed to be competition for [IDS]." And Matharu knows from alternative: also a co-founder of TAAFI, she wants to see Toronto embrace the kind of off-site culture that one finds alongside big festivals and fairs in cities like New York, London and Milan — culture that, curiously enough, usually serves to promote, not to decry, commercial interaction and product innovation.

"One problem with Toronto is that we'll typically have one event, and that's it," Matharu says. "Only TIFF [Toronto International Film Festival] really seems to succeed in creating a culture around itself. It's important to remember that IDS is still growing. All the collective activity that we can provide as a city will help us to develop a more international pull. IDS loves what we do. They even send people our way: there's always direct traffic between the two shows."

What's the difference, then? Obviously, Come Up to My Room is primarily an art event; it began when the Gladstone was still, in Matharu's words, "raw and dusty," and it retains that edgy, experimental flavour. Those involved in the show are not obliged to submit proposals or even to divulge

their installation plans to the curators as the opening draws near. Notably, if Come Up to My Room is a place where artists and designers let loose, it's also a place where ideas, rather than products, reign. This sensibility — call it alternative if you will — underlines the career trajectories of all its participants: interdisciplinarians who, while not entirely rejecting marketplace conventions, aim to test the limits of safe, saleable design.

Tiff Izsa is one of the wilder ones: an almost-singular presence in Katharine Mulherin's stable of drawers and painters (she recently moved to Düsseldorf, where she studied with celebrated conceptual artists Daniel Buren and David Rabinowitch), she favours out-and-out space transformations, such as littering galleries with makeshift forts, construction tarps, cardboard and crumpled up paper. Her goal for Come Up to My Room is "to get some street cred in the interior design world" so that she can begin doing small- and large-scale decor interventions in people's houses.

Izsa is adamant about her, um, offbeat plans: she points out that the "home is a major venue for art" — painting and sculpture have, unfortunately in her mind, predominated — and for an installation artist who wants to get shown, the home arguably offers a more expansive frontier than commercial galleries or artist-run centres ever could.

"In the end, interior designers are picking up all their ideas from artists anyway," says Izsa, "because what artists do isn't necessarily functional, and designers skim bits and pieces from artists' work to make it functional." Even performance and installation, she claims, are starting to be seen as less *outré*. "Look at *Trading Spaces* and *While You Were Out*," she says. "The people on those shows are actually not doing traditional interior design so much as they're just fucking around with a space. I've seen them cover walls with moss and put a fountain in people's living rooms — which is an interior designer being pretty cool in my opinion."

Kathryn Walter, another Come Up to My Roomer, shares Izsa's experimental proclivities, except that Walter, in addition to her extensive experience as a sculptor and material-based artist (she's shown at diverse local venues like the Design Exchange and Zsa Zsa Gallery, as well as nationally), has a flourishing business: the five-year-old FELT, which turns out a range of stylish, modernist-inflected products made out of industrial felt, including lamps, bags and, more recently, wall treatments (a gorgeous example of which can be seen in the

room she contributed to the Gladstone's 2005 overhaul).

Walter's also participated in IDS for the past two years, an experience she found fruitful. "I generated a buzz [at IDS] because I was unique, and it was a shrewd business move," she says. "Actually, my work's always been a bit of a wild card, and I think that's why I tend to get attention in the design world. I come from an experimental art background, and what I'm doing with felt is sort of new — in terms of taking the material on as a whole marketing strategy."

This year, Walter has chosen Come Up to My Room over IDS because it allows her to be, well, artier; the Gladstone's audience is more astute, she feels, with "an understanding of contradictions, as well as a conceptual and historical perspective." Her contribution is a tongue-in-cheek, partly-anthropological take on felt: the room will be done up in pioneer style, with a chair, a cot and a wood-burning stove, and will contain dozens of square and rectangular pieces of felt that have been transformed into fairly utilitarian objects — from candle holders to log-carriers — through a few simple cuts and stitches.

Walter's project reflects the possibilities of a so-called alternative approach. Of course, she is using the event to disseminate FELT's name, but she's also being theoretical: her title, for instance, *124 pieces of felt*, alludes to a 1967 work by minimalist Robert Morris, who esteemed the material for its evocative, ambiguous folds and texture. Additionally, the uniformly right angles of her *128 pieces* are a nod to sustainability: square and rectangular patterns mean maximum yield and minimum waste.

"I like the idea of taking the model of a company and doing something different with it," says Walter. "The private sector doesn't always have to be corporate — there is a possibility for critical, interesting work there, for stuff that's concerned with more than just the bottom line."

The irony, which Walter herself acknowledges, is that this criticality is precisely what provides her with her sales gimmick; clearly, many clients are drawn to smart, left-field approaches. It follows that cynics will see Come Up to My Room's alternative bid simply as a way of commodifying the unconventional (similar arguments have been made about the art world), though the free-form brainstorm the event furnishes — which is, in its own way, indisputably generous — is something that the people at IDS in particular can't afford to miss out on. Not alternative, then, so much as absolutely imperative. EMAIL: LETTERS@EYE.NET.



### ROOM INSTALLATIONS

All weekend.

Textile maven Joy Walker and witty Canadiana collective Motherbrand join featured artists and nine others in a temporary revamp of the Gladstone's second-floor suites.

### CURATED LIGHTING AND SEATING PROJECTS

New this year, Nicholas Waissbluth, Orest Tataryn and more create unique lighting and seating objects throughout the hotel.

### SOFT CITY INTERACTIVE DESIGN WORKSHOP

Saturday, 2-7pm, Gladstone Ballroom.

Yvonne Ng presents a self-aware sweatshop-cum-sprawling metropolis: you design the buildings; the UPBAG collective and three "real" piece workers (paid an artists' salary — i.e., above their normal wage) will construct them out of felt. Live, projected video footage will chronicle Soft City's proliferation.

### LOVEDESIGN PARTY

Saturday, 9pm, Gladstone Ballroom.

Drink, dance and sweat to well-designed beats by Milkaudio.

### PSSST! DESIGN DIALOGUES

Saturday and Sunday, 11am-5pm, Gladstone Ballroom.

Saturday's "Rumours" panel boasts red-hot Ottawa-based designers The Bakery Group, who will discuss their prototype for portable homeless shelters. Sunday's "Gossip" panel includes social design by Toronto's Darren O'Donnell and other shenanigans courtesy of Robin Simpson of the Montreal collective Pavillion Projects, whose delightful mantra is "naturally everything in the world is second rate at best — [we] set out to be first rate for short periods of time."