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## THE FANTASY FACTORY

In **Paris**, in the 10th arrondissement, the creative agency **Art Recherche Industrie**, helmed by **Ramdane Touhami**, a place of historical charm, and a personality outside the box

*photos and article Mark C.O'Flaherty*

*Ramdane Touhami, born in 1974, in the agency he founded in Paris in 2013. Art director, fashion and product designer, DJ and entrepreneur (he has two apparel brands, RT and Résistance), is known for having regenerated the historic Cire **Trudon**, and – with his wife Victoire de Taillac – the Paris based fragrance and cosmetics company **Officine Universelle Buly 1803**. He was named Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres in December 2020. On these pages, the entrance space with the italianate vintage coffee bar and the staircase in bright colors connecting the levels of Art Recherche Industrie.*





*The large open-plan area on the first level, which was a dance hall and restaurant in the 1800s in Gothic style, where around a carved wooden desk and a central custom-made glass bookcase the A.R.I. team work on projects in the world of fashion, art, cosmetics and fragrances. With two guidelines: zero outsourcing and promotion of in-house activities. The firm has satellite offices in Lausanne and Tokyo.*

It's impossible to put a price on what Ramdane Touhami creates. Mostly because he rarely sells it. And yet his work across numerous platforms in the world of design is shaping the way the world looks. The 48-year-old doesn't even want to be called a designer. "Not what I want on my tombstone," he says. "I want to be Ramdane. I'm doing podcasts on food and music, I have a bookstore, we are launching a publishing company for novels, we are also about to open a restaurant with the only Michelin-starred sushi chef in Paris." The non-designer has, of course, designed every aspect of it.

When I arrive at the Paris HQ of his Agency Art Recherche Industrie, someone is working on the plans for the prefabricated wooden furniture of the hotel Touhami is opening on a mountain in Switzerland (the Hotel Drei Berge opened October). Someone else is tweaking a tiny detail on a screen for the interior of a new Moynat store. "We are doing everything for them, from A to Z," says Touhami. "It's the only way I can work. If a brand wants to be a Ferrari, I can't drive them to where they want to be with the engine capacity of a small Ford. We do the art, the graphics, the furniture for the stores, everything." When Touhami was brought on board to revitalize homeware brand Christofle in 2021, he hosted a launch at L'ange volant, the 1920s house that Gio Ponti designed for the founders of the brand. Ponti is one of the few designers he reveres. "He did everything. He was a genius." While Touhami likes to create all his own furniture, his apartment in Milan includes a row of Ponti Leggera 646 chairs with rope seats from the 1950s lined up around the dining table.

"Ramdane is able to see the DNA and the soul of a brand at first sight," says Emilie Metge, CEO and President of Christofle. "He is a visionary." For Christofle – perceived globally as high luxury but staid – Touhami went on a safari into their archives. Retrofuturism was the goal. Last year saw the launch of the Infini range, a 15-piece silver-plated, pared-back cutlery set, and a range of pieces from the Gallia collection, first released to coincide with the World's Fair in Paris in 1900. "I'm still not happy," says Touhami. "For me to be content, everything must be my idea. But we got their new branding perfect. I found a green in their archive and changed it slightly, then redid their typography." There are also two pieces from the Objets Miroir collection that Touhami feels

represents his vision 100%, which sit on a glass shelf in his HQ. One is a silver-plated coffee carrier, the other is a similarly mirrored magnetic sneaker box. Spending £3450 to store your £100 Nike AF1s might seem ostentatious, but there's something Duchamp about it. And it's a gorgeous object. Totally Touhami.

To understand the man's work, and his seemingly limitless energy, you must know his back story. He is French-Moroccan and a nomad, constantly moving city with his wife (Victoire de Taillac-Touhami, who still looks after Buly post-sale to LVMH) and their three children. He was once a homeless skateboard obsessive, navigating the streets of Paris with no fixed abode. He worked in reality TV, was director of menswear at Liberty, and rebooted Cire Trudon with fresh fragrance formulas. While at boarding school, he launched a T-shirt line that 'corrupted' the Timberland logo. It led to a runaway financial success for the precocious entrepreneur, who was subsequently kidnapped by gangsters and robbed of €50,000. Just a regular day for Touhami. Currently, he runs his empire from what was once a vast 19th-century Belle Epoque dining room and club – the Marguery restaurant – surrounded by a trippy mix of gold







tiling, battered wood, marble, gothic ecclesiastical detail and mirrors. He has turned it into a kind of Warholian factory for his fantastical ideas. It was derelict for years, its wonders boarded up, a playground for rodents. Now there's a central gallery that serves as an open plan office and visitors gasp on entry. There are cuboid chairs and curved sofas covered in colorful Kvadrat fabric – originally made for his old Tokyo home – a Moroccan lounge, and an Italianate vintage coffee bar with two 1920s Milanese phone booths at either end, “for Zoom calls.” Spiral stairwells have been painted in bold colors to stand out against the weathered wood. There's also a full-sized orange-floor tennis court. “I was planning on working on a sports brand with someone, but it didn't happen,” he explains. “I liked the color, so we kept the space. Now I store my bicycles in there, hanging on the walls. I've got over 42, including one of the three surviving ones that Prouvé made.” Touhami's wit and charm are infectious, which might sound surprising given the vanity project he

realized last year, to promote the historic printing presses he invested in, and the series of fonts he designed. “An Ego Centric Magazine” was a hefty glossy magazine full of typographic experiments, with a Gucci advert on the back cover featuring Touhami himself in a shearling coat, surrounded by sheep. “Alessandro [Michele] is a good friend of mine,” he says. “We did a lot with Gucci, but I can't really talk about it. But I can tell you he's really happy now.” There's a contradiction in Touhami's tastes and how he likes to live. He is both a classicist and futurist. On the one hand, he loves the ascetic nature of all things Japanese, and says he will never work on another heritage brand again. He wants to look forward. Yet he is perhaps most famous for relaunching part apothecary, part beauty brand Buly in 2014. The very definition of heritage style. Craft and sensations bridge the contradictions. His new Paris home, which his family was readying to move into when I visited, contains – as he puts it – “ten different worlds.” Is Touhami now home? Is his extraordinary HQ,

*Above, the workspace created on the loft at the upper level, equivalent to the floor below in terms of layout and historical charm, amidst original elements in Gothic style and gold mosaics. In contrast, iconic furnishings of the **USM Haller** system and, in the foreground, a seat from the **Eames Plastic Chairs** series by **Vitra**. On the facing page, upper right, the Moorish former boudoir, now a space for brainstorming in lively rainbow colors. Right, the space of the semi-basement set aside for a tennis court and recording studios. Cuboid chairs designed by Ramdane Touhami and covered with **Kvadrat** fabric.*

with its roaming sheepdog Tonton and mouse-killing kitty ChatARI, now a permanent mission control? His mind works too fast to second guess. I ask him how he thinks our lives are going to look in the future. “Well, take the role of the TV,” he says. “Our living rooms used to be configured around it. Now that doesn't happen. It's ugly. The Bouroullec brothers designed the Serif TV (a smart TV for Samsung, ed.), and it's the only nice expression of the form, but as an object the TV is disappearing. I think in the future we will all be living in single rooms, whether it's a small space like in Tokyo, or a New York loft. Because more people are living alone.” When he was working on his 2021 book, “The Beauty of Time Travel”, he mentioned how the detail on Buly's toothpaste was crucial. “When you wake up in the morning and have a beautifully designed tube of toothpaste in your bathroom cabinet,” he wrote, “this mundane act can bring you a moment of exhilaration. When your first activity of the day delights you, your whole day looks different.” ■

