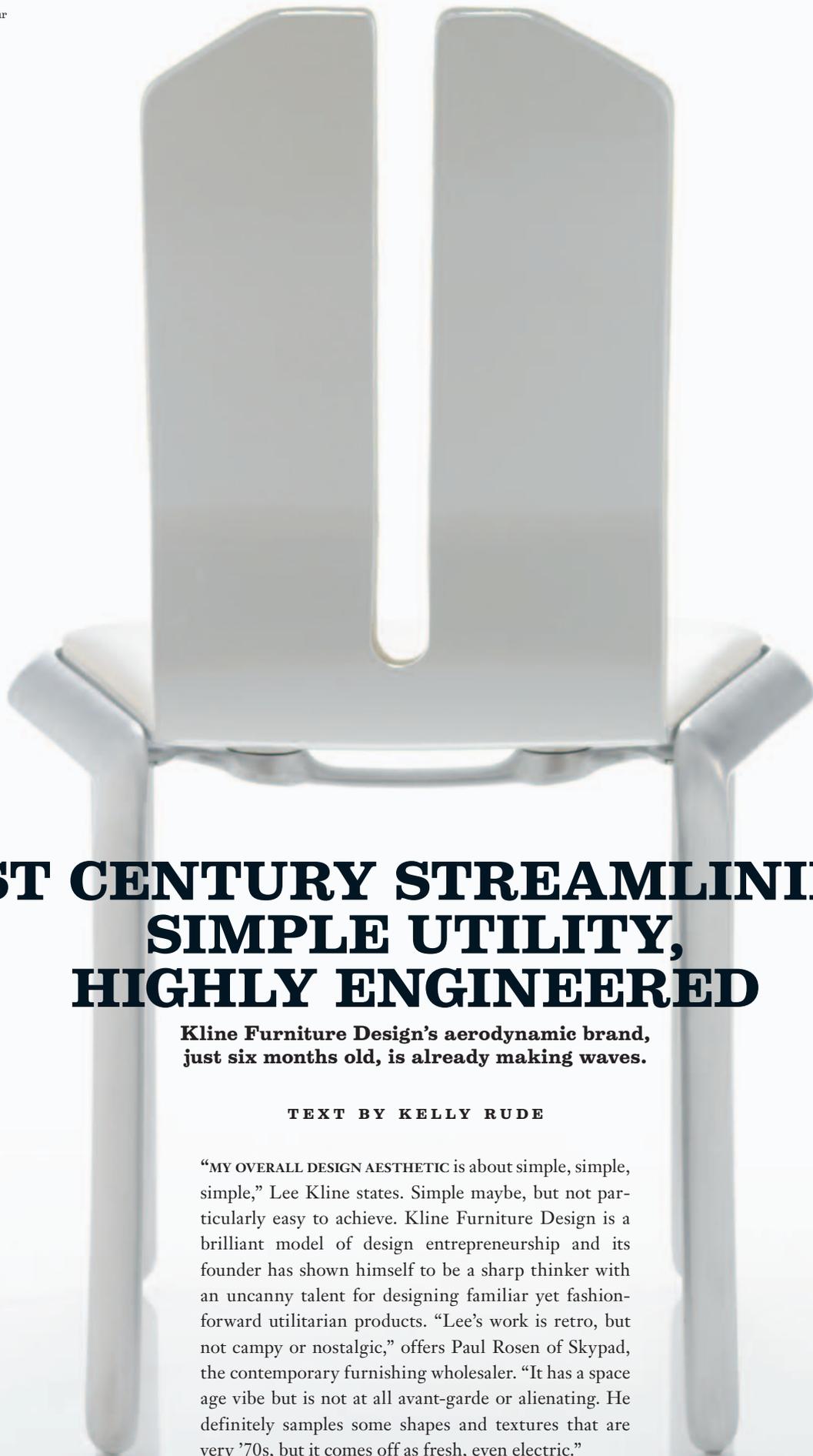


Aerodynamic and simple, the Contour dining chair bears witness to Kline's design principles.



21ST CENTURY STREAMLINING: SIMPLE UTILITY, HIGHLY ENGINEERED

Kline Furniture Design's aerodynamic brand, just six months old, is already making waves.

TEXT BY KELLY RUDE

"MY OVERALL DESIGN AESTHETIC is about simple, simple, simple," Lee Kline states. Simple maybe, but not particularly easy to achieve. Kline Furniture Design is a brilliant model of design entrepreneurship and its founder has shown himself to be a sharp thinker with an uncanny talent for designing familiar yet fashion-forward utilitarian products. "Lee's work is retro, but not campy or nostalgic," offers Paul Rosen of Skypad, the contemporary furnishing wholesaler. "It has a space age vibe but is not at all avant-garde or alienating. He definitely samples some shapes and textures that are very '70s, but it comes off as fresh, even electric."



Kline was fast out of the starting gate at the February 2004 launch of his premiere furniture collection at the Interior Design Show in Toronto, and the intensely focused designer/maker shows no sign of slowing down. His display garnered Kline Furniture Design a gold award at the show, a win that Kline followed up with another: the Best Product design award in the *Canadian Interiors'* Best of Canada competition. Product is flying off the floor in showrooms, and the maturity and sophistication of the first collection is the mark of a seasoned pro rather than that of a new comer.

In fairness to his competitors, Kline is not totally new to the scene. Before successfully launching Kline Furniture Design, he had already been working in the design industry for more than 15 years. He has created large scale glass mosaic installations and co-created mosaic furniture. He's taught himself jewelry design, made electric guitars and designed and fabricated furniture for site specific installations and private collections. From publishing *Creative Source*, a marketing vehicle for photographers and illustrators, to designing and producing his premiere furniture collection, the 37-year-old designer has amassed a unique array of design, manufacturing and marketing skills. "I have been building things since I was a kid," the pragmatic designer says.

Kline is also a shrewd entrepreneur. His furniture production company was created with the assistance of a hand-picked advisory board comprised of investors and industry insiders. Much of the fabrication is outsourced, however, investment leverage has afforded the designer the luxury of handling final finishing, assembly and distribution, in-house.

"When I design, I'm designing with an understanding of manufacturing, and that enables me to design things that are more complex," he cites. "It's not essential that we manufacture the whole product [but] it is essential that we approve everything that's manufactured to maintain the quality of our brand."

The collection, an elegant nod to space age-styling and the speed and optimism of the '70s, could be read as early 21st century streamlining. "There's definitely a sense of motion in everything that I'm doing," he agrees. "Everything I make is aerodynamic. If you stick [my work] on the hood of a car, you probably wouldn't experience much more drag."

Not surprisingly, the designer admits that he's always held a fascination for cars, particularly the engineering that goes into them, and confesses that the automotive and marine industries are big influences. "From the automotive industry comes the sheer volume of colors; from yacht manufacturing, the combination of materials: metal and fiberglass; metal and wood; and fiberglass and wood. All of those combinations are very familiar and have always been attractive to me. But I would say that the streamlining and the materials and colors are more purely aesthetic than anything to do with function and simplicity," he adds.

He qualifies this by saying that he distills things down to bare shapes, diligently ascribing to sketching as the basis for his design. "It depends on the shape, but a lot of times I will start with the front view and then extrapolate backwards from it. Extruded, so to speak. I'll try to go with shapes that are familiar to everybody, that we've seen around us and that we identify with, that integrate into the function of the furniture as well."

The collection is also highly utilitarian. The cantilevered top on the signature Merge coffee table is driven by the need for the storage of magazines and remote controls, as is the Pocket Pill, a circular occasional table. The Solo martini table “is the kind of thing you would put between your legs if you’re sitting on a couch and eating dinner,” Kline explains. “You can put your drink on it, or your laptop, and you can have two or three of them in a living room situation so that if you have a couple of people sitting on the couch they each get their own, hence the name Solo.” Similarly, the Bistro table features a beveled underside “Because that way your knees don’t interfere and you get more surface area on the top,” he adds. “I don’t think anybody would hesitate to compare it to a [Eero] Saarinen table in terms of the bevels and I’m fine with that because it’s a very simple, attractive shape.”

To date, Solo has been Kline’s biggest seller but the greatest commercial potential may yet be realized in a dining and bar height version with three storage pockets. Imagine being in a restaurant when your food is about to arrive and there is actually room to temporarily store sunglasses, car keys and the like. “I think the bar height is where it would come in the most handy, because that’s fast traffic, people are standing, or they’re sitting...there’s not a lot of room, and that’s where they need to have the pockets,” Kline observes.

Similar in intent to the engineered utility of his products, Kline has concentrated on a specific range of colors for the collection. Available in 25 opaque and metallic automotive finishes, he describes the palette as “Color a la carte.”

“Interiors are often expressed in colored walls, then adding white or neutral colored furnishings,” he comments. “And I like white,” he states as a matter of fact, adding that a variety of forms, all produced in white, can be read with even more discernment. “You see the basic architecture of the piece, uninterrupted by the emotion of color.” But, “We selected a palette of colors which are akin to what a [fashion] designer would choose for the season and we feel the colors represent some forward thought in terms of trends. Metallic finishes in furniture are just coming,” he announces. And he surmises that applying a subtle surface, such as a matte finish on a metallic color, will give the furniture greater market longevity.

Images of the furniture photographed in white are sent together with sample charts to prospective clients who are encouraged to determine the suitability of colors and finishes particular to their market. The Jolo showroom in Miami chose intense colors while retailers in Toronto opted for earthier, muted tones. Specific products like the Pocket Pill table are also available in leather, “For the gentlemen’s den, to hold the cigar ash-tray,” Kline suggests, but, he’s quick to add that it’s an expensive option: It uses almost an entire hide to cover one table.

Rosen, who has a sharp eye for marketable product, presented the Solo table to Palliser for inclusion in the company’s line of modestly priced contemporary furnishings, EQ3. Company executives acknowledged that occasional tables were a weak category in their current catalogue, and are manufacturing a less expensive version of the Solo. As well, a series of Solo inspired products including a stool, desk and media unit is in development. “I wanted to start with pieces that are accents because it’s where people can exert their individuality in a splash of design,” Kline offers.

According to Rosen, Kline’s knowledge of manufacturing and production techniques is consequential. “Lee is quite clever and inventive in the use of materials and the need to design within strict cost parameters.” Kline concedes that in the Solo inspired Skypad collection for EQ3, much of the work will probably be done off shore. “But it’s an opportunity for

Opposite Page
The Merge coffee table is as practical as it is sleek. The table maximizes storage space while eschewing needless ornamentation.

This Page
The gaping mouth of Kline’s Solo table invites storage.



people to take a piece of Kline home for a fraction of the cost," he states. "It's like you see the Vuitton purse, but you can walk away with the money clip. Everybody can afford to do something that's cool. Everybody can go modern, but going unique is a different story and going personal goes beyond that. I'm trying to create a vehicle for personal expression by offering customizable colors and things like that so that people can express their individuality with our pieces as well. I'm going to move into soft goods, I'm going to move into bedroom, into dining—I'm going to move into all that...it all helps to define the client's image."

"It's like collecting art to a certain extent right now. You want something that not everybody has or it's got to be something that has a certain perceived value or brand elegance to it," he continues. "We all have our individual expression and it's become a very important aspect of urban culture. It's all about marketing...the marketing of one-self. It's really all about sex, isn't it?" he smiles.

Kline's personal image is casual, yet studied "When I looked at these [Prada] sunglasses, I said, they're like a piece of furniture. They are the sunglass version of what I love: polished titanium and polycarbonate lenses." The rest of his silhouette on a given day could include Hugo boss jeans, a Puma baseball cap and street shoes. "I have the luxury to a certain extent of being able to wear downtown ghetto sportswear, which is a whole language in itself and it's something that I can get away in many, many different environments," he asserts. "But that isn't to say that I don't

like to put on a really nice Italian suit once in a while. If I were in Italy, I'd be wearing more, I'd be wearing more of everything, 'cause I love clothes, I love packaging, I love expression...that's personal expression, what you wear, what you put in your house. Everybody is proud, almost as proud of their interiors these days as they always have been of their car," he asserts.

The designer's home, which he describes as "'80s modern," was sold in order to launch the company. On the outside it looked like a Victorian home—on the inside like a New York loft with a 20 foot atrium. The interior was "All white walls, bleached floors and Berber carpet," he explains, adding that he "put in aluminum baseboards to integrate the wall and floor...all aluminum." He sold the house to start the business and now he and fiancée, actress Michelle Lipper, share a condo in Toronto's Queen Street West district.

The young urban couple's requisite "his and her" laptops and cell phones are prominent on the kitchen island. Furnishings that have moved with Kline from previous digs include an Eames lounge and ottoman, "one of the most comfortable spots in the universe" and a Duncan Phyfe loveseat. "In the past that's always been something that I've played with: a mixture of modern and antiques. I think they work very well together provided there is enough space between them and a neutral palette, and my place was perfect for it," he says. "It was so simple."



Driven by a need for the storage of reading materials, Kline's Pocket Pill is utilitarian yet elegant.