

TAR

H
I
R
S
T



KATE
MOSS
BY DAMIEN
HIRST

HE DESIGNS SEX TOYS FOR THE DISCERNING LIBERTINE

BY COREY SEYMOUR

and doorknobs worthy of an architectural historian, and curates jewelry made with faceted, exotic gems. Such strange bedfellows make up the empire of E. Rhett Butler, an apostle of tradition-steeped

hardware—residential, erotic, ornamental—in the age of mega-chains. Butler is world-renowned as the designer, manufacturer and distributor of rarefied gilded hinges and latches, brass door pulls, millefiori and mercury-glass doorknobs that conform strictly to pedigree; *Marie Antoinette* director Sofia Coppola has cited him as a beloved resource.

Butler merges the craftsmanship and production standards of old masters with the technological advantages available to modern-design engineers. “We don’t do reproductions,” he says, with a degree of politesse that belies his firm convictions. Rather, with his staff of 25 or so artisans and several SUV-sized machines, he continues to work off original archival designs (when he’s not creating his own). In fact, he has purchased several hardware companies with roots in the 18th century. “We’re part of a lineage,” he says proudly of his business.

For almost ten years, E.R. Butler & Co. has sold mostly to the architectural trade via sumptuously appointed showrooms on Charles Street in Boston, in Milan and, most recently, at the Prince Street Works on a prime stretch of real estate in SoHo. This newest location, in the building that housed the silver manufacturing department of Tiffany & Co. from 1868 until 1897, is a gallery/showroom/store that is now open to the public. The back of the space is devoted to the decorative ornaments, while the front showcases Butler’s other muses, either for sale or as mere exhibition. On any given day you can find vintage taxidermy, hand-turned seven-piece silver candlesticks (the work of his friend, jewelry maestro Ted Muehling), one-of-a-kind porcelain plates by artist Hella Jongerius and, of late, necklaces of fossilized coral and earrings laden with milky lunar diamonds.

The latter is the work of Maria Beaulieu, one of a handful of artists Butler cultivates. “Rhett only does things perfectly, whether that takes him one day or ten years,” says Beaulieu. She’s talking about Butler’s painstaking five-year renovation of the Prince Street Works but could easily be referring to her own dedication. Beaulieu, who apprenticed under Muehling for nearly a decade, creates 18K “green” gold (recycled rather than newly mined) bijoux set with aquamarine, Brazilian amethyst, heliodor beryls and other precious and semi-precious stones. Beaulieu tends to highlight, rather than disguise, the inclusions in her stones—with “just enough metal around them so you can wear it.” Her process is akin to an archaeologist’s. She tells of touring an ancient castle in England a dozen or so years ago: “I spent more time rooting around the tiny rocks surrounding the castle, just fascinated by the colors and textures I was seeing, than I did looking at the castle,” she says. “People thought I was nuts.”

Butler escorts us to his own castle, a 100,000-square-foot brick warehouse—Butler and his wife live on the top floor—in Red Hook, Brooklyn, a 15-minute cab ride from the Prince Street Works. Erected between 1887 and 1893 as a bottling facility and can-making factory, the complex

encompasses machining and finishing shops, archives, inspiration and inventory. Endless rows of library-stacks-like shelves hold gray boxes with alluring labels: KEY ESCUTCHEON, AMERICAN PAUMELLE HINGE, OLIVE KNUCKLE TRIM RINGS. Elsewhere is plenty of curio-shop intrigue—meandering rare cats known as Savannahs (Butler refers to them as “half-leopard,” which is about half-true), a foosball table, a room filled with reclaimed card catalogs, a 14-foot-tall assay scale from the Denver Mint and a handful of antique coining presses.

As the eye scans, it encounters other boxes yielding hardware of a rather different employ: MEDICAL-GRADE SILICON RUBBER, VAGINAL JEWELRY, DISASSEMBLED VIBRATORS, MECHANICAL VIBRATORS. With the same equipoise as when he speaks of distributing centuries-old Nymphenburg porcelain, Butler explains how an idle conversation at the high-end boudoir retailer Kiki de Montparnasse, just around the corner from the Prince Street Works, led to his masterminding solid gold and silver cock rings, black onyx restraining chains and other “instruments of pleasure.”

Butler betrays no sense that dildos are much different from doorknobs; his is the standpoint of an aesthete, and he is confidently blasé about the supposed *scandale* of what he designs for Kiki de Montparnasse, with the object’s intended usage assuming less importance than the quality and materials. “It’s easy to forget these days, when everything is about producing more things, and producing them faster and faster, that there was a time when printing and hardware and production in general was something approaching an art.”

He wanders outside, past what appears to be an orangerie-in-progress surrounding a pool-in-progress, and across a gangplank leading into another building on the property. Inside, a small team is supervising the highly precise work being performed by a multifunction mill-turn center machine (you give the machine raw copper, say, program it according to your detailed designs, and it churns out a perfectly turned piece of hardware). In the next room is a five-axis water jet, which can focus 60,000 pounds per square inch of water pressure into a beam the width of a hair; this beam can then cut through virtually anything, including six inches of solid steel. The effect on the psyche is that of time-traveling disorientation, of rapidly evolving from the dawn of the Industrial Revolution to the age of nanotechnology on a short jaunt from one building to the next.

Walking back across the gangplank, past the pool-and-orangerie and into a cobblestone courtyard/parking lot, Butler points out two piles of rubble that are soon to be transformed into two small outbuildings. By his own admission, there’s no actual need or intended purpose for the buildings. Asked why he’d rebuild them, Butler communicates his very worldview with a mere expression, which seems to say: Because that’s how it should be done. ●



Butler Scroll Lever Handle;
E. & G.W. Robinson GE
Series Black Crystal Knob;
Carnelian Ring by Maria
Beaulieu; Jet Beads by E.R.
Butler & Co. for Kiki de
Montparnasse, 2009

BY ROBIN
BROADBENT