



# the PROTAGONIST

With her self-assured style, an Italian tastemaker  
deftly navigates the design world

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# The world of design

has as its capital the city of Milan—a dominion where shop and gallery owner Rossana Orlandi is both queen and jester. Every April, Milan's Salone del Mobile brings together a global furniture and design community for an over-loaded week of events, exhibits, and parties. At the top of the must-see list is the Spazio Rossana Orlandi ([rossanaorlandi.com](http://rossanaorlandi.com)), Rossana's 12-year-old eponymous establishment that is housed in a former tie factory. There, in the otherwise remote neighborhood of Magenta, Rossana puts together an annual presentation of the 65 designers she deems most prescient—choices that are regularly cited as a bellwether for the industry.

In the past, she has presented unorthodox pieces like Nika Zupanc's lascivious lamp composed of a pair of monumental blown-glass cherries in gold; vintage furniture covered in embroidered textiles depicting vivid tales of politics and immigration from the Beirut duo Bokja; and Alvaro Catalán de Ocón's now ubiquitous basket-style PET lamps woven in the Colombian Amazon from strips of recycled soda bottles. A vision of the current design moment seen through her provocatively witty prism, her exhibition stands apart in location and philosophy, deviating from the rigid, minimalist design that otherwise tends to define Milan.

For our lunch date, Rossana arrives wrapped in layers of functional black wool and nylon, loudly punctuated by accents of her preferred

*Top to bottom: A sofa by Yuya Ushida, a Japanese designer based in the Netherlands, occupies a spot on the ground floor of Spazio Rossana Orlandi. The Milan shop's owner and namesake.*







*Top to bottom:* During the 2013 Salone del Mobile, Rossana hosted a show of Piet Hein Eek's work. A table and chairs by Dirk Vander Kooij are displayed with light fixtures by Jake Dyson and glasses by Gaetano Pesce for Fish Design.

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shade of electric green. Her white hair is pulled into a girlish ponytail, and she is sporting the saucer-sized white glasses that perpetually frame her comparatively tiny face. We are at the design-filled restaurant she opened in 2007, next to her shop/gallery. The eatery is named, in Rossana's typically satirical style, *Pane e Acqua*—which translates to “Bread and Water”—in honor of the prison on the corner. Architect Paola Navone was charged with transforming an old tobacco store into the trattoria, which hosts a revolving selection of works from Rossana's gallery.

A textured tapestry by artist Nacho Carbonell composed of 30,000 multi-hued polyurethane pieces covers the arched back wall behind our table, looking like a landscape picture made of pinecone fragments, and functioning as a sound-absorbing installation for the vaulted space. An acquaintance—an improbable dandy of a man dressed in tailored plaid knickers, a shrunken blazer, a newsboy cap, elfin shoes, and a mushy breastplate of a necklace that





*Clockwise from top left:* Rossana in her Porto Cervo outpost. Maurizio Galante's marble-look armchair and stool for Cerruti Baleri. Porto Cervo is a seaside resort town. A bevy of ceramics in the store. Astier de Villatte pieces.



looks to be made of a partially melted doll collection—stops by to greet Rossana. His sartorial eccentricity strikes a chord with Rossana, and she gushes about how divine he is long after he's left us. In design and in life, she is obsessed with creativity, with beauty, and with construction. In selecting the new designers who will become a part of her hallowed sphere, she looks for "creativity that will last, creativity that will change, but above all, creativity."

Spazio Rossana Orlandi is a warren of rooms filled with innumerable surprises, each hand-picked by Rossana. Among them, there are soap bubble Surface Tension lamps that morph and burst by the Swedish collective Front, ceramic plates that taunt you with images of disturbing body parts by the artist and prankster Maurizio Cattelan, and Dennis Parren's CMYK lamps that cast multi-colored shadows composed of a rainbow maze of lines. It feels less like a retail or exhibit space than an oversized playhouse—a far cry from the all white, sparsely filled industrial spaces of most galleries.

For the past five years, Rossana has also operated a Sardinian outpost—offering design pieces in the seaside town of Porto Cervo, where summertime acquisitions were previously limited to scoops of gelato. The idea of selling during Italy's normally closed-for-business summer months disturbs the sensibility of some, but Rossana revels in the reversal and rejoices in the direct contact with the wealthy, international vacationers who would otherwise send their decorators to pick out objects from her Milan gallery.

Dubbed "the fairy godmother of the design world" by the Huffington Post, Rossana started out on a different path, following her parents into the textile industry. She designed fabrics for the fashion industry in the 1980s, a time when prêt-à-porter was in its creative and energetic infancy. Milan and Paris were exploding with new talents, and Rossana collaborated with many of them: Kenzo Takada, Jean Paul Gaultier, Giorgio Armani, Valentino, Emanuel Ungaro,



*This page: Barbed Wire rug by Studio Job for Nodus. Nika Zupanc's Homework desk and cabinet.*







*Above and below:* In the Milan location's garden courtyard, PET lamps by Alvaro Catalán de Ocón are held aloft on colorful cables. Giant industrial letters mark the territory.



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Thierry Mugler, and the “adorable” Gianni Versace (“He wasn’t the best man at my wedding ... but almost,” Rossana confides). Karl Lagerfeld—then in his Chloé days—and Issey Miyake impressed upon her the significance of the artisan’s contributions in making great creations possible, a lesson that later shaped her appreciation of the design world.

When fashion’s creative boom became commercial success, Rossana grew tired of the big-business atmosphere in the industry. So in 2002, she decided to purchase the abandoned tie factory and pursue a lifelong interest: design. Her parents, whose upholstery textile business serviced Italy’s furniture business, had introduced her to considerable contacts, including Cassina and B&B Italia, which benefited her in those early gallery days. “Always something to learn,” Rossana says of her approach to beginning a new profession in her late 50s. She credits her current success with her tireless research and insatiable curiosity. Spazio Rossana Orlandi, which began as a retail space before expanding into a gallery as well, is now a touchstone of new design, with Rossana as the driving force behind its influence.

At age 70, Rossana is a woman *in gamba*, as the Italians say—capable, confident, unstoppable. She does not suffer from the usual vanities, instead enjoying the freeing impact of letting her hair go completely white and resolutely wearing comfortable flats despite her petite stature. By not focusing on superficialities, she is able to remain authentic. “It doesn’t matter what you’re wearing,” she tells me matter-of-factly. “A dress is not important. *You* are the protagonist.” ●