

## PROFILE Paola Lenti

The textile and color maven looks back on 25 years of her eponymous brand.

By Melissa Feldman



Paola Lenti was born in Italy in 1958 and studied at the Polytechnic School of Design in Milan. Her namesake company, famous for its outdoor furniture and exuberant color schemes, is celebrating its 25th anniversary with new releases and as-yet-undisclosed festivities.



"Color is my legacy," says designer Paola Lenti. "It's nothing I can take credit for, or control. It's just how my mind works," she continues, describing the probing meditations on color that have come to define her oeuvre. Since childhood, Lenti has experimented with striking pigments, many of which she has gradually adapted into her signature yarns and applied to seating, accessories, and rugs for both indoor and outdoor environments.

Born in Piedmont in northwest Italy in 1958, Lenti underwent a classical education

before enrolling at the Polytechnic School of Design in Milan, where distinguished graphic designers Bruno Munari and Walter Ballmer held court. After graduating, the understated Lenti worked for Italian fashion brands as a graphic designer and art director. In 1994, after years of trying her hand at producing objects following her own ideas, she quietly established her self-named brand with an express emphasis on textiles and materials research.

Lenti began collaborating with interior and product designer Francesco Rota in



1997, kicking off a prolific working relationship that continues today. Together, the duo recognized the increasingly blurred boundaries between indoor and outdoor products. "We thought, Why not move the comfort, quality, and design of interior furniture outside?" she recalls. Their joint vision is evident in recent releases like the sleek Oasi and Lido seating systems, which launched this past April during Salone del Mobile in a Milanese warehouse. The pieces are upholstered with Diade, a molded, recyclable plastic that features Lenti's

Opposite page: The Orlando seating pieces, which were exhibited last year at Salone del Mobile in Milan, have an open-ended design that enables various configurations and positions. Their upholstery is available in three of Paola Lenti's signature fabrics: Lutz, Rope T, and Bro.

Middle: The Graitova space-diving panels, composed of stainless steel and Diade recyclable plastic, and the Oasi modular seating system, made with Twiggie Lenti's signature high-tech yarn, were both designed by longtime collaborator Francesco Rota.

Below: Beyond seating, Lenti's collection includes several side tables, including the mandarin-shaped Lever, Sciana, whose top surface is handmade; and the stainless steel Lito. The jali rug is made with Twiggie, one of Lenti's signature outdoor yarns.



The Lido family includes chairs, sun beds, and bistro tables, and is also made of Diade coupled with Twiggie, which makes the pieces suitable for both outdoor and indoor use.

Twiggy yarn, giving them an irregular color structure that produces mélange, moiré, and other patterns that are impossible to predict or replicate.

In 2009, Lenti moved operations to new premises in the well-known manufacturing center Meda, near Milan. Along with her sister Anna Lenti, who handles the company's administrative and marketing functions, she has committed to advancing and utilizing innovative manufacturing techniques, like using Diade for the new Graitova space-diving panels. The synthetic high-tech yarn Rope, the result of four years of intensive research, also epitomizes the Lenti's focus on materials experimentation. The proprietary yarn, now offered in 50 shades that can be combined to create almost 300 distinct hues, has become essential to the company's standing in the outdoor furniture market.

But for Lenti, modern engineering practices and color palettes need not conflict with a local, handmade feel. Her collections fuse several sensibilities and approaches: Among them Lenti lists "protecting our way of working, mixing different worlds, and sharing synergies and desires to that artisanship and industry always meet." (The company also emphasizes local sourcing and manufacturing; except for her line of hand-tufted rugs, all of Lenti's products are made in Italy.)

At this summer's Venice Architecture Biennale, the company sponsored the installation *Freespace*, a foray into the high-minded world of global architecture. In a colorful juxtaposition of old and new, Lenti installed *Float*, Orlando, and Otto contemporary seating pieces—all available in an array of color options—within the centuries-old *Giardini* and *Arsenale* spaces (on view through November 25). And while upcoming trade shows, especially the Monaco Yacht Show, loom large on the calendar, the brand is already planning a celebration of its 25th anniversary next year. (Details have been kept under wraps—a move to be expected, given Lenti's reserved nature.)

"Colors have always been an enormous influence and constant presence in my daily life," Lenti reflects. "I don't remember a time when I viewed the world in black and white." Given her decades-long development of exuberant and surprising color schemes, it seems certain that this studied and highly personal variegation will continue to weave throughout Paola Lenti's work. ■