



STILL LIVES Below: Michael Verheyden and his wife, Saartje Vereecke, in front of their house in Genk, Belgium, which he describes as simple, "like a child would draw it." Left: a group of Verheyden's vessels in cement (with branch), bronze, marble and wood.



Home/Work

The Sacred and the Plain

Using basic geometries and the most elemental of materials, the Belgian designer Michael Verheyden creates objects of sublime beauty and remarkable spiritual power.

BY TOM DELAVAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEXANDRE GUIRKINGER

"EVERY BELGIAN IS BORN with a brick in his stomach," Michael Verheyden says, as we sit down to dinner in what is surely the most fashionable restaurant in Genk, a sleepy town east of Antwerp. Fortunately, for his briefly worried non-Belgian visitor, it turns out that this locally famous maxim has nothing to do with food. "It means that every Belgian wants to own his own home," Verheyden's wife, Saartje Vereecke, explains.

Six years ago, the couple fulfilled their Belgian dream when they acquired and remodeled the modest brick house that now serves as

their home and design studio. But when they set about furnishing the space, they ran into a common problem. "We of course wanted to decorate in a nice way, but we didn't have the budget," Verheyden says. "My wife and I are very picky, not so easily happy with things. So we thought, If we design it all ourselves and have people we know produce it, we can have the perfect pieces without any compromises."

Around that time, Verheyden, a former student of industrial design, who'd turned a brief stint as a runway model for Raf Simons

into a career as a handbag designer, was finding the accessories business constricting. "Handbags are a very traditional product," he points out. Before long, he had made a switch to housewares, including everything from leather baskets to bronze vessels. Verheyden's knack for combining elemental forms with rich materials quickly struck a chord, and his exquisitely made home collection is now sold in boutiques and showrooms worldwide.

"I am not into complicated forms," Verheyden declares later, as he takes me on a tour of his studio. Simple cylinders, round bowls and rectilinear tables and chairs recall John Pawson or Donald Judd, but his objects are rescued from total minimalism by his adeptness with materials. His deceptively simple forms have an uncanny ability to bring forth the singular beauty of a vein in a marble tray or the subtle patina of a bronze vase. "If you work with a material long enough, it will tell you the form it should take," he says. And apparently Verheyden is a good listener; his sensual objects demand to be touched — you can't help but want to feel the weight of a brass tray. "For some people, my work is a bit severe," he admits,



PICTURE PERFECT
The house is filled with artworks from friends, family and colleagues. "We try to make the most out of nothing," Verheyden explains.

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"but the materials make it lively."

Despite the fact that Genk is the birthplace of Martin Margiela and also where Raf Simons studied design, the town is not an obvious home for a high-end design studio. *Allées* of oak trees and quaint brick houses built at

the turn of the century give the city a Hansel and Gretel quality. "Most of my peers go to Antwerp or Brussels, towns more known for their design scene, but Genk makes more sense for us," Verheyden says. Genk's central location makes their frequent travel to Italy and France easy, but when the couple is in town, the quiet allows them to focus on their work.

With his tortoiseshell glasses and dark smock, Verheyden's look is more "studious craftsman" than "rising design star." But his humble appearance belies an ambition that extends far beyond Genk and Belgium. Asked why he turned his focus from fashion to home accessories, he replies, "We wanted to build a business with a worldwide reputation."

Vereecke is clearly an integral part of the plan. A petite woman with fair hair pulled back in an efficient bun, she is an equal partner, weighing in on both aesthetic and business decisions. "We like to



QUIET FRONT
Left: the living room features the designer's sling chair made from sheepskin and saddle leather, and his brass lamp. Right: an arrangement of Verheyden's marble pieces.





OBJECT LESSON
Clockwise from left: Verheyden's pieces, like a hand-finished bronze vase and soapstone bowl, complement a wooden vase designed by the German artist Ernst Gamperl; the couple in their kitchen, where a table from Vereecke's mother was repurposed into a backsplash; the dining area with their oak table and nubuck designs.



say I'm responsible for getting things in — overseeing design and production — and she's responsible for getting things out — marketing and promotion," he explains, adding, however, that many of the initial ideas are Vereecke's and that she often exercises veto power over his flights of creative fancy.

Even as his reputation has grown, Verheyden has been careful to remain close to the process. The leather pieces, including the "G55" sling chair and the bespoke

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leather boxes, are all made by hand in the couple's leather studio. The bronze and brass elements are all hand-brushed. Verheyden creates many of the prototypes himself and works closely with the craftspeople who make

his products. His leather workers in Morocco call him "*un vrai artisan*," says Vereecke, who has spent the afternoon hand-dyeing the edges of a set of leather place mats, a special order to be FedExed to Tom Ford.

It's not easy work, but the effort also lends the finished pieces an aura of spirituality that can be lacking in so much minimalist design. Though Verheyden is not actively religious, his work displays the hallmarks of a certain metaphysical inclination. "I like when people come together in a sacred place and the rituals are done — you get a certain atmosphere," he says.

His aim when he creates a piece is to impart a bit of that feeling of serenity and transcendence. "I hope that people are slowing down when they are using my designs," he explains. "We're living today at a very high speed, reading e-mails every five minutes and traveling the whole world, but to be able to do this you need to slow down and create your own rituals. We need to feel grounded again. So the materials I choose, by looking at them and touching them, I hope they can work in some kind of healing way." He laughs, adding quickly, "I'm not a New Age-y guy, but it's something I strive for, to be very Zen." ■

