

# NGV MAGAZINE

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*ALSO  
FEATURING*

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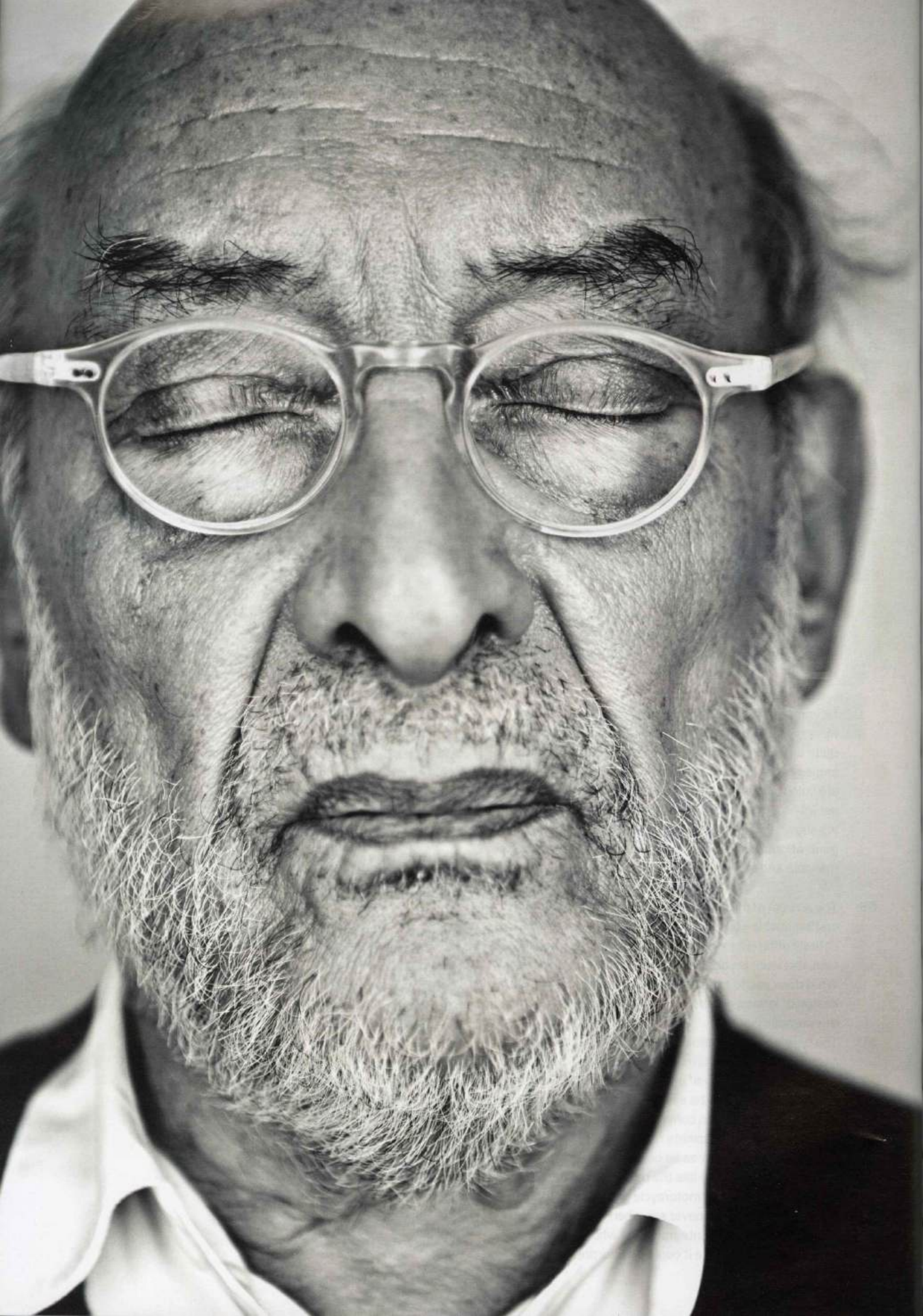
Marlow Moss with  
Dr Lucy Howarth



*The supersized world of Italian designer*

## GAETANO PESCE







## LIGHTING UP DESIGN

# GAETANO PESCE

A larger-than-life lamp by the late Italian designer Gaetano Pesce, *Prototype no. 000-F for Moloch floor lamp*, 1971–72, joins the NGV Collection through the Marjorie Joseph-Wilks Bequest. As historian and curator Juliet Kinchin writes, the lamp, one of only a handful ever manufactured, was created as ‘a piece of provocation’.

Words by Juliet Kinchin

A gargantuan *Moloch* floor lamp designed in 1971 by the great Italian provocateur Gaetano Pesce (1939–2024) can now be found crouching in the NGV Collection galleries, thanks to the generous support of the Marjorie Joseph-Wilks Bequest. This recent acquisition, an icon of the Pop and Radical Design movements in Italy, still has the power to disconcert – or perhaps elicit a smile? Its spring-loaded adjustable armature, extendable to a staggering 230 centimetres, is instantly recognisable as a pumped-up version of the ubiquitous desk lamps that populate commercial and domestic interiors around the world.

The specific starting point of Pesce's design was an *L-1* desk lamp, designed by Jac Jacobsen in 1937 and produced in more than 25 million examples, with only minor variations, including subtle changes to the shape of the shade and position of the on-off switch, by the Norwegian manufacturer Luxo. By enlarging every detail of the *L-1* times four, Pesce came up with a fully functional, powerful object that could illuminate an entire interior. The radical scale shift appears at once playful and unnerving, even a trifle absurd. It was a way of both underlining and breaking away from the standardised approach of industry. Like a praying mantis, the lamp mesmerises everyone and everything that comes into its orbit. It seems to have its own agency and identity, particularly when fired into life by an invisible current of electricity.

Architect and Designer Gaetano Pesce poses for a portrait shoot in Milan on March, 23 2010. (Photo by Max&Douglas/Contour by Getty Images)



Pesce's Pop Art sensibility was forged in the countercultural ferment and political turmoil of the 1960s. While studying architecture at the University of Venice, he had already begun to question mass production, consumerism and the traditional role of design objects. He saw magic at work in the commonplace light bulb and desk lamp, and believed that even the most ubiquitous artefact, much like art, could carry a deeper message.

Like many of Pesce's design projects, the *Moloch* lamp challenges people's indifference to their domestic surroundings. So often lights are undemanding objects that do not impinge on our consciousness. For Pesce, however, design was not about making appliances look elegant, nice and unobtrusive. Rather, he wanted to provoke thought and emotion to communicate things that people don't generally see.

'Moloch', the name Pesce chose for his floor lamp, evokes an ancient, bloodthirsty deity associated with child sacrifice. This title combines with the piece's intimidating stature to create the impression of a totemic sculpture and speaks to the fetishisation of household objects in consumerist society. Pesce's lamp becomes a 'godjet' (a term coined by the architectural critic Reyner Banham) that shapes societal behaviour and exerts an uncanny hold over the user rather than functioning as an anonymous, subservient tool. Moloch references abound in literature and film, from the Old Testament to John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and Fritz Lang's dystopian *Metropolis* (1927), in which workers are sacrificed to a demonic Moloch on the altar of machine-driven capitalism. For Pesce and other radicalised students of the 1960s, another touchstone was *Howl* (1955), the anguished, drug-fuelled rant by beat-generation poet Allen Ginsberg about the state of industrial civilisation: 'Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo!'

The undertow of insecurity and anxiety in Ginsberg's stream of consciousness seemed to capture the spirit of the times and colours Pesce's own iteration of the Moloch. We are not so much consuming household objects as being consumed by them. Pesce forces us to recognise that every lighting appliance, however seemingly inconspicuous, is emotionally and philosophically charged by the rituals of daily life and its mode of production.

In 1972, a freshly created *Moloch* lamp featured at the Museum of Modern Art in New York as part of the landmark exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*. It was placed among a group of objects selected for their 'socio-cultural implications'. The curator, Emilio Ambasz, observed how the designers in this category 'do not invent substantially new designs but rather re-design known objects with new, ironic and sometimes self-deprecatory socio-cultural and aesthetic references'. In many cases their designs had an explicitly ritualistic quality: 'The object is given sculptural form and conceived as an altarpiece for the domestic liturgy'. Another reason for including Pesce's *Moloch* lamp in the exhibition was as a manifesto for the conceptual and experimental ethos of Bracciodiferro, a studio recently established by the furniture manufacturer Cassina. This venture aimed to explore the most innovative aspects of design culture. It was the brainchild of Pesce and his friend Cesare Cassina, an enlightened entrepreneur who dared to go beyond the

immediate interests of the market by producing objects with strong social and political messages in limited editions. Bracciodiferro's interdisciplinary team, directed by Pesce and another friend, the naval architect Aldo Cichero, meticulously crafted six prototypes of the *Moloch* lamp, each with a different surface finish such as mirror polished, anodized bronze or black paint. It is one of these, formerly in Cichero's personal collection, that has been acquired by the NGV. The initial plan was for a numbered edition of one hundred, of which an estimated twenty materialised.

Despite the positive critical exposure generated by the *New Domestic Landscape* exhibition in 1972, only thirteen of the *Moloch* lamps sold by the time Bracciodiferro folded and production ceased a few years later.

The *Moloch* lamp was not a commercial success, but the intention had not been to saturate markets with a new standardised design classic. As a piece of provocation, it continues to spark discussion about the cultural implications of design and the social responsibility of designers, manufacturers and consumers. The surviving *Molochs* have now become expensive and sought after – somewhat ironic given their implied critique of capitalism and escalating consumerist desire. The lamp remains a firm favourite of the permanent collection at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where an example is currently on display. Back in 2018 I had the pleasure of accompanying this and other MoMA treasures to Melbourne for the exhibition *MoMA at NGV: 130 Years of Modern and Contemporary Art*. It is exciting that Australian audiences now have a fresh chance to engage with this ungainly, extraordinary object on a more permanent basis through this eye-catching acquisition.

There is nothing else quite like the *Moloch* lamp in Pesce's oeuvre, although he continued to work with the same disruptive, mischief-making verve for a further five decades until his death in New York last year.

Juliet Kinchin is an independent design historian and curator currently based in Scotland. While working in the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, she was one of the curators behind the exhibition *MoMA at NGV: 130 Years of Modern and Contemporary Art*.

See Gaetano Pesce's Prototype no. 000-F for the *Moloch* floor lamp, on display on Level 3, NGV International from late spring. The NGV warmly acknowledges the Marjorie Joseph-Wilks Bequest for its support of this acquisition.

Gaetano Pesce (designer) Bracciodiferro S.r.l.,  
Genoa (manufacturer) *Moloch* floor lamp  
1970–71. Gift of the manufacturer, 1972. Digital  
Image © MoMA, N.Y.



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