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One up

Michael Anastassiades' state of independence



The

waiting

OPPOSITE Michael
Anastassiades with
his Rochester sofa,
designed for SCP

game

WORDS BY **Helen Parton**

*Known primarily for his
lighting – beautifully balanced
in glass, metal and stone –
designer Michael Anastassiades
has brought the same order and
discipline to a new sofa for SCP.
As he prepares to move to a new
studio in Camden, it seemed a
good time to converse*

PORTRAITS BY **Andy Lo Po**

RIGHT Opalescent spheres and metal rods characterise the IC range for Flos



design,” he says. “I lived without a sofa for many, many years simply because I never liked any that were around. I was always challenged by comfort and aesthetics.”

Taking its name from Rochester Place, the street in Camden where the studio is relocating to, the sofa marks a departure in another way for Anastassiades, being the first he has created. Sheridan Coakley, founder of SCP, commissioned Anastassiades as part of an exhibition, Sofa in Sight, held during this year’s London Design Festival (LDF).

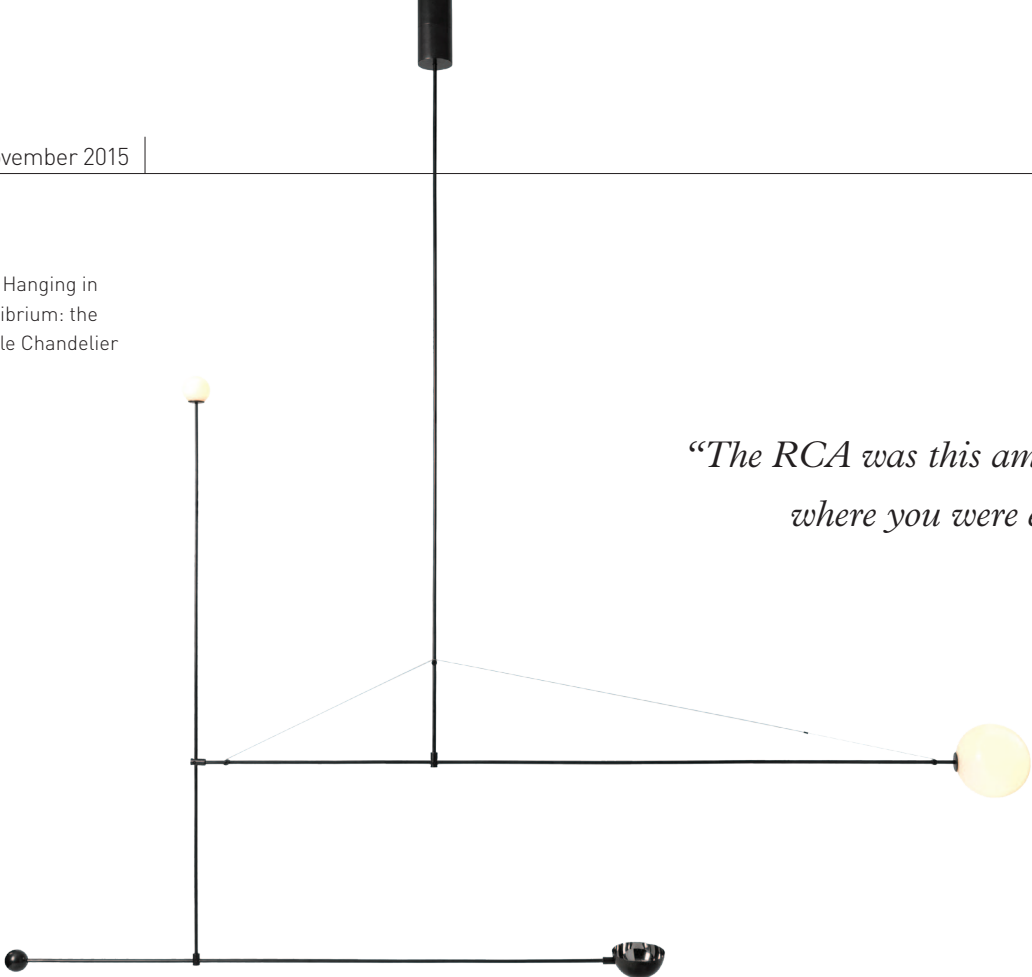
“I remember, in 1994, going to Sheridan with a very conceptual project I was doing at the time,

together with Dunne & Raby,” says Anastassiades. “I wanted to know what he thought of it, but of course it was very far from what he was doing. I was interested in his feedback because he was so well respected in that world of design. Over the years I kept bumping in to him at trade fairs and then, about six months ago, I said ‘I’m ready, this is the time’. That’s when I accepted to do this project: it made sense.”

“I could never find the perfect sofa I would be happy to live with,” says designer Michael Anastassiades. While the photographer sets up for this month’s shoot in Anastassiades’ Waterloo home-cum-studio, we’ve nabbed some time in a nearby cafe to discuss one of his latest pieces, the Rochester sofa for SCP. “To me, the sofa is one of the most difficult things to

LEFT The IC floor light, playing with geometry, balance and mixed materials

RIGHT Hanging in equilibrium: the Mobile Chandelier



“The RCA was this amazing, completely new world where you were encouraged to try everything”

BELOW Copper Mirror, a sculptural chunk of shiny metal



LEFT Tube wall light, a reinvention of the traditional strip light



Coinciding with SCP’s 30th anniversary, the exhibition is intended to showcase modern upholstery, each one having been made at the company’s Norfolk factory, Coakley & Cox. As well as Anastassiades, five other studios created sofas: Konstantin Grcic, Faudet-Harrison, Matthew Hilton, Lucy Kurrein and Terence Woodgate. Anastassiades’ design took the question of how to define a

public sofa in the modern world as its starting point. “I wanted to explore that sense of informality and formality in a sofa. And I started to look at how this evolved over the years and what is different now. People are texting and talking on the phone, so there’s this idea of feeling like you’re on a pedestal. That’s what sitting on a Barcelona chair does, and I wanted to find something that does something different, providing this kind of enclosure.” Nowadays people are more likely to be attempting to cram in a crucial email or two as they work on the move and this well-proportioned design, with a high

back and arms and enough room for two people, is intended to address this contemporary need in working culture. The frame sits on a wooden base, with a small gap between these two elements to save the resulting design looking too bulky, and instead adding a certain lightness to the aesthetic. There’s a triangular wedge cushion, three quarters of the height of the back, for support. An accompanying ottoman can be

used as a seat, a foot-rest or a side table. Anastassiades had a few other notable events at this year’s LDF. Visitors to the Aram Store in Covent Garden could have seen his lighting designs, which were launched at this year’s Euroluce lighting show in Milan. These include Happy Together, a curved and linear design in black lacquered brass with mouth-blown opaline glass spheres; and his To the Top series of table lamps,



which take their cues from the classic Bauhaus-era design of the MT8 lamp by Carl Jacob Jucker and Wilhelm Wagenfeld. Anastassiades was also part of an LDF show at Atrium, the UK showroom for lighting manufacturer Flos. Further launches from Euroluce were shown here in the expansive Shoreditch space. These included Captain Flint, a handsome, freestanding luminaire composed of polished brass and marble. The head of the fixture cleverly rotates around the stem allowing it to function as an ambient uplight, or twisted the other



way around to make an effective reading light. Copycat consists of two spheres, one large, one small; the smaller sphere, available in finishes such as 24-carat gold, black nickel and copper, hides an LED light source that radiates the light into the neighbouring larger sphere of opalescent glass. Also keeping the sphere as its aesthetic starting point is Extra, where the light source gently rests on a rectangle of either gold, brass or aluminium.

I catch up with Piero Gandini, Flos' effervescent CEO, at the show's opening night. He recalls first seeing Anastassiades' work at design entrepreneur Murray Moss' New York store. The story then continues across the Atlantic when Patricia Urquiola, a mutual friend of both Gandini and Anastassiades, introduced the pair during the Salone del Mobile in Milan. Five months after that, Gandini

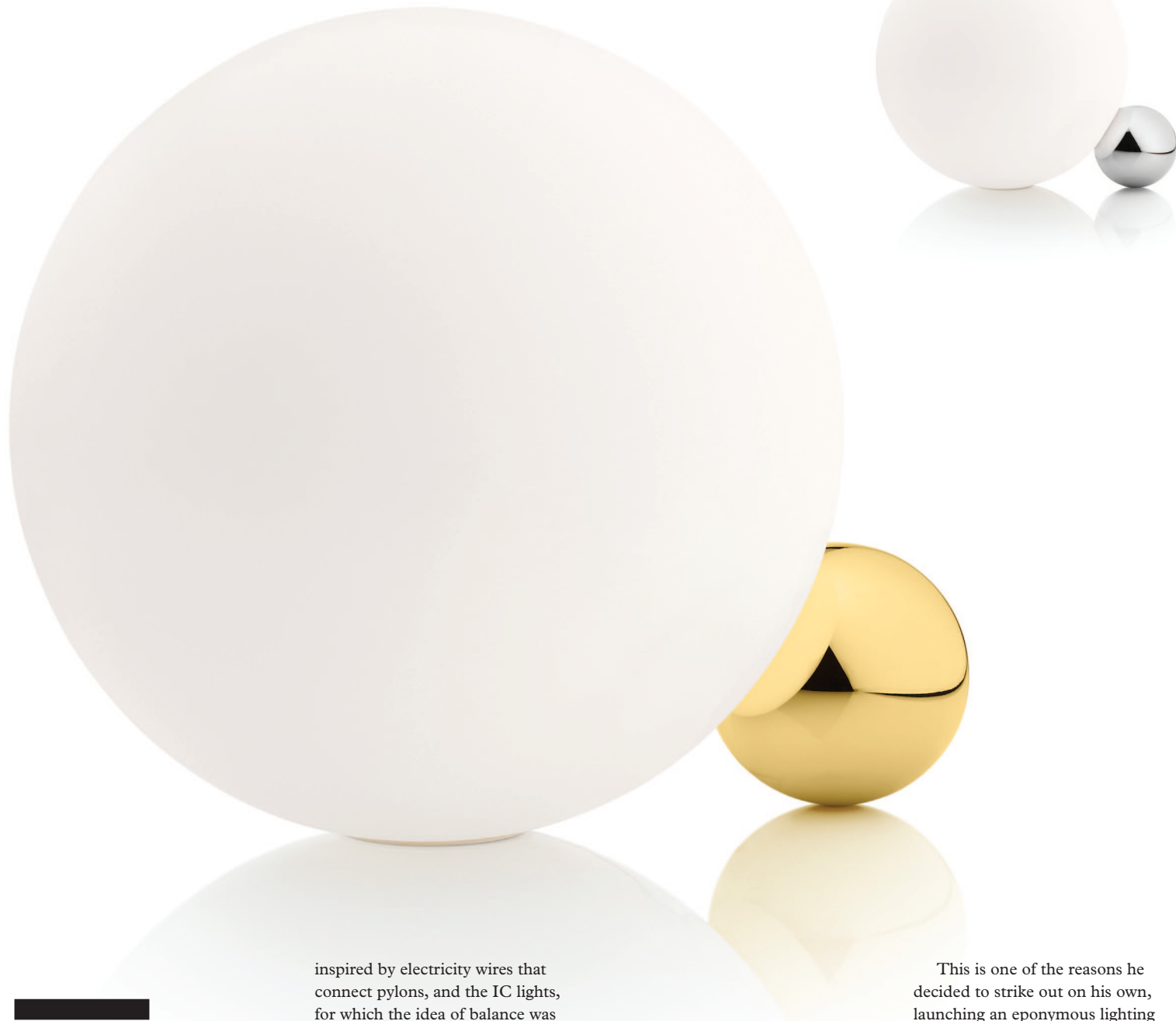
ABOVE Rochester's seat seems to hover above the base



BELOW New work, showing in October at the Nilufar gallery



BELOW AND RIGHT Copycat, for Flos: the LED source is concealed within the smaller sphere



happened to be in London where, over the next 20 minutes in the back of a taxi, the deal was sealed. “My schedule kept changing; I kept delaying meeting him, which he was very patient about, and that was the only time I had,” says Gandini, describing their fortuitous meeting. “We worked out how we were going to work together, how we could produce his designs and he could still run his own company. Among the designs Flos has produced for Anastasiades are the String lights,

inspired by electricity wires that connect pylons, and the IC lights, for which the idea of balance was the aesthetic starting point.

“The guy is unbelievable,” Gandini continues. “I like him personally and intellectually and everyone at Flos loves him. He’s humble and severe at the same time; his designs have this balance between innovation and elegance.

“Every project is extremely rigorous. What we as a company can provide is the technical knowhow and capacity where he can’t necessarily do that himself.” Watch this space for further collaborations as Gandini revealed they’d had a chat

that very day about more products in the pipeline.

Anastasiades, while enormously complementary about his work with Flos, doesn’t share the same view on all potential commercial collaborations. “In the beginning, you’re trying to convince somebody to invest in your designs or invest in you as a designer, and it’s quite a draining process,” he says. “You’re constantly frustrated and you become a victim of the politics of a company or financial situation.”

This is one of the reasons he decided to strike out on his own, launching an eponymous lighting brand in 2007. “I needed to get my designs out, so I said ‘OK, the only way to do it and move forward is to do it myself.’” Bold career moves such as this have been something of a trademark, beginning with a switch from civil engineering to design in his higher education. “A lot of people say it’s a natural progression but really it was a great frustration. It goes back to my upbringing; there was nobody really in the family that could help or encourage me to head towards a creative direction. For them, being a designer was

“I’m in search of timelessness”



“I’ve never liked boundaries”



ABOVE The String light, inspired by the way electricity pylons and wires shape the landscape

really like being an artist. They were very scared of the failure of an artist so they were not really that encouraging. They said ‘why don’t you go and study something more practical first? Then at least you will have a degree that you can get a job with.’ I tried my luck, I finished at Imperial College and I said ‘this is not working.’ I couldn’t see myself doing it for a long time.”

And so, the Royal College of Art, which was around the corner, beckoned. “I went to visit this amazing, completely new world. I had a portfolio of some things I was doing in my spare time and I applied for a masters there. When I started, there was all this inter-disciplinary activity – you were encouraged to try everything.” Anastasiades’ designs nonetheless have a precision to them that might be attributed to his engineering background. As well as the Rochester sofa’s perception-defying quality, many of the designs appear to defy gravity: spheres balance at all sorts of angles, Anastasiades acting as master magician as much as designer. Surprisingly, he talks of many of his designs having a mundane quality, which, when they often use such opulent materials, seems

somewhat at odds. “I’m in search of timelessness: what makes an object or a piece of furniture timeless? There needs to be an absence of too many references, you simplify it, strip it down to the bare basics, remove information from it.”

His Waterloo base, completed in collaboration with his friend, Belgian architect Wim de Mul, is filled with his designs and the attention to detail is clear from the door handles to the intricately made staircase in this south London abode. As well as his LDF presence, he is working on a lighting show at London gallery Nilufar, timed to coincide with the Frieze art fair. So how does he define himself then: engineer, designer, artist? “I’ve never really understood the need for the separation. I’ve never liked boundaries.” ■

Giuseppe Brancato

ABOVE The String Cone light: its cable is up to 22m long