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Chilean-born designer/artist Sebastián Errázuriz

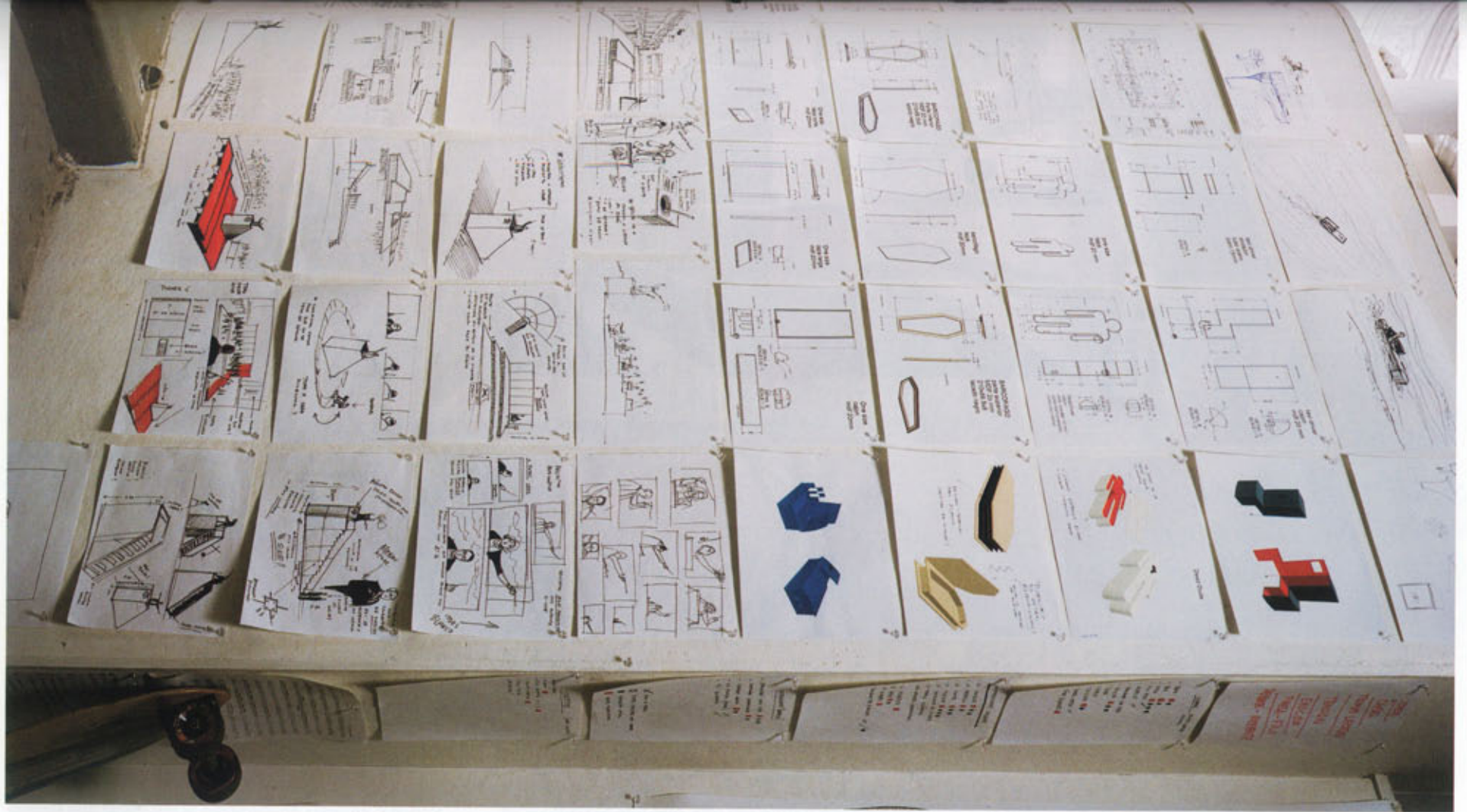
Chile Yesterday, Hot Tomorrow

Since relocating from Santiago, Sebastián Errázuriz has coped with anonymity for a whole year. It's beginning to get old.

By Christopher Bollen / Portrait by Doron Gild



Sebastián Errázuriz's NYU studio is hung with sketches, but at least here he uses paper. At home, he says, "I wake up in the middle of the night with a thought and I scribble it right on the wall."



"I'M A REALLY WEIRD PERSON," Sebastián Errázuriz says with an elegant British accent. Thin and handsome and wearing a slim-fitting rumpled suit jacket, he sips coffee in a cafe inside one of the labyrinthine gallery buildings of New York's Chelsea district. A few floors down is the Sebastian + Barquet gallery, for which Errázuriz curated a Nakashima furniture exhibition last spring. He pauses a beat. "You'll find I'm filled with contradictions."

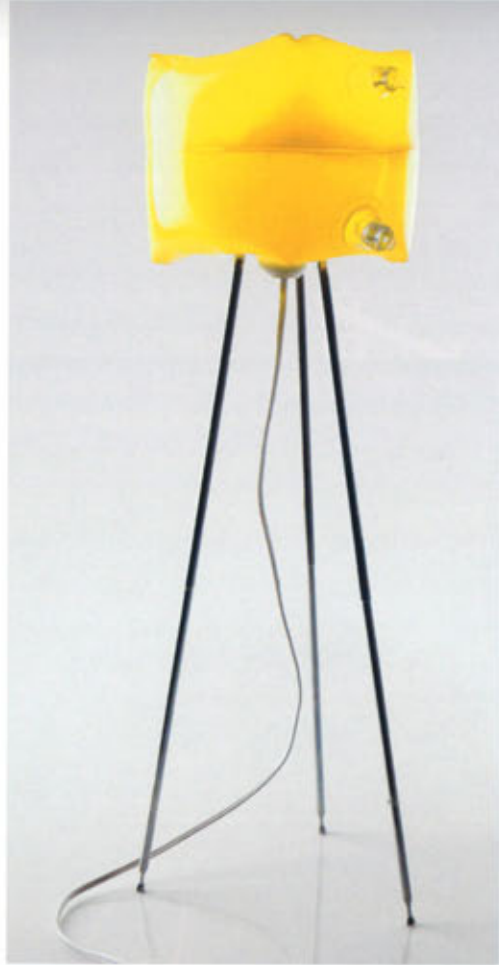
The declaration sounds pompous. But it begs for hard questions, and that takes guts. Confidence is not lacking in the 29-year-old Chilean designer, who, with one touch of his laptop, presents a body of work that could sustain a midcareer retrospective. Errázuriz was a star in his native Santiago, achieving—through a series of public-art stunts and a television-hosting gig—the kind of fame that here is

reserved for designers like Yves Béhar in a Target commercial. True, when he arrived last fall with the intention of earning a master's degree in studio art at New York University, he sank back into a state of near anonymity. But that will soon change.

Over the past few months, Errázuriz has seen his sleek plywood Mesa table sell for \$17,000 at a Sotheby's auction, he's been asked to design the interior of the first New York branch of Korea's Gana Gallery, and he's received commissions from several private collectors who saw his products exhibited during Art Basel in June. In a reversal of the conventional poles of celebrity, the northern hemisphere is finally catching on to what South America already knew, and Errázuriz is set to experience a second burst of notoriety before he even turns 30.

This time, it's happening in a city with the whole world watching and in a market where design has become a prized collectible. Errázuriz is primed to seize both advantages. A descendent of an influential Basque clan that included presidents and archbishops, he moved with his family from Santiago to London at the age of five while his father completed a Ph.D. in art theory. "When I was a child," he says, "I was placed in front of a Turner painting and asked to critique it." His upbringing turned him into a cerebral aesthete, but it also discouraged him from working at an easel. "Artists were these superior beings that I didn't think I could ever reach," he explains. "So when I got out of school, I chose to be a designer."

Even so, Errázuriz's work has the wit—and utter market impracticality—of conceptual art. He perverts utilitarian



objects and pokes fun at conventions, creating “couture” one-offs like his Glove Dress, for which he hand-stitched hundreds of latex surgical gloves onto a silk pattern to produce a quivering silhouette that alternately reads as feathers and grabbing hands. He’s also designed a 13-foot-long wool tie, a dress made of 120 zippers that spiral around the body from neck to knee, and a coat made from 30 unstuffed teddy bears. (“I was playing with the connotations of fur here,” he says. “If it looks cozy, people will smile at it instead of throwing blood.”)

For Errázuriz, humor is the great leveler. “Everyone can agree on a joke,” he says. Objects turn on themselves in displays of self-parody or assume ludicrous aliases: A lampshade is knitted from the light’s own electrical cord. Golf clubs morph into umbrella handles. A taxidermied duck transforms into the decapitated base of a task lamp. Even



left and below Upon installation, Errázuriz must individually “tune” each bar of his handmade Repisa shelf like a piano key to ensure proper alignment. The shelves are currently selling for \$40,000 at the Cristina Grajales gallery in New York.



air is collected and sold. This last project was for a Japanese design contest with a green theme: “I figured you can’t beat the Japanese at ecological design,” Errázuriz says. “So I packaged nothing.”

But not all of his work hinges on clever distortion. Among his more sophisticated experiments is Repisa, an organic wall shelving unit whose 450 foot-long wood bars can be individually raised and lowered to form a surface of variable length and topography. The Colombian-born design dealer Cristina Grajales, who represents Errázuriz through her New York gallery, hauled the \$40,000 shelves to a design adjunct of Art Basel with satisfying results. “I had so many requests, I stopped taking them,” she says.

Still, this kind of attention doesn’t compare with Errázuriz’s celebrity in his previous life. Only last year he was hosting *La Hora 25*, a popular weekly television show about

Chilean culture. For 15 minutes each broadcast, he traipsed around Santiago pointing out design flaws in everything from public restrooms to coffins. It was an ideal gig for someone who aspired to solve a few municipal problems on his own. In 2005, for example, he installed a 25-story construction crane in a lower-middle-class neighborhood of Santiago and covered it with 1,200 light bulbs strung with almost two miles of cable. “It was like one giant protective *espanta cucos* (fear of cuckoos)—that’s what we call those nightlights for children,” he says. For seven days, the cross-shaped structure illuminated the dangerous neighborhood, fending off monsters that disturb the dreams of adults and children alike. That same year, Errázuriz rescued a 15-year-old cow from a slaughterhouse, driving the animal through the city in a converted white VW bus that looked like the Popemobile—“I did buy the van off of



some nuns," he admits—then hoisting it onto the roof of a 10-story building in Santiago's financial district, where it grazed for week inside a white fenced corral. (The cow became something of a celebrity itself and was eventually allowed to live out the rest of its days on a nearby farm.)

But it was "The Tree" that secured Errázuriz's homeland prominence. In June 2006, two weeks before the World Cup soccer games in Germany, he planted a 45-year-old magnolia in the center of Santiago's National Stadium, a location the late dictator Augusto Pinochet notoriously used to imprison and torture political dissidents. "When we dug the hole, we were afraid we'd find bones," Errázuriz remembers. It took two years to secure the proper permits, and he nearly went broke in the process. But eventually the stadium, which is currently used for concerts and sporting

events, was opened as a public park for a week. On the last day, a match between Chile's star teams was played around and against the tree trunk. "It was an attempt to reunite everyone," Errázuriz says. "It's a place where heroes usually stand. Now everyone was welcome."

This December, Errázuriz will return to Santiago to assemble a 50-piece orchestra in front of an empty podium at four key locations throughout the city: The National Palace, The National Cathedral, the Central Market, and the National Opera House. Passersby will be encouraged to step up before the musicians and conduct. However inept the directions, the musicians will be obliged to follow them. The idea, Errázuriz says, was born out of a childhood spent watching his father direct imaginary symphonies. "He was so crazy about classical music that I was named

Juan Sebastián, Spanish for Johann Sebastian," Errázuriz says. "I was lucky he wasn't a fan of Mozart. Wolfgang Amadeus... I would have got my ass beaten up as a kid."

Next year, the designer plans to take his esoteric hijinks to Manhattan or Madrid. Though it won't be easy to persuade civic leaders there to endorse projects on such a grand, disruptive scale, Errázuriz says it'll be a breeze compared with establishing a professional foothold in New York. "At first, it's like banging your head against the wall," he says. "The competition level here is so high. You need a ticket to run. I think I'm getting mine." ✦

Christopher Bollen is editor of V magazine and VMAN.