



Elisa Ossino, left, and Josephine Akvama Hoffmeyer are launching tile brand H+O with an installation in its new showroom in a Milanese apartment. *ARK Journal* met them there during renovations in March.

INTERVIEW

IN AN IMMERSIVE APARTMENT INSTALLATION, ELISA OSSINO AND JOSEPHINE AKVAMA HOFFMEYER EXPLORE THE ARCHITECTURAL POTENTIAL OF TILES.

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TILE FILES

THERE IS a special synergy when Elisa Ossino and Josephine Akvama Hoffmeyer come together. Ossino, an Italian architect and designer, and Hoffmeyer, the founder and creative director of Danish tile and wallcovering brand File Under Pop are long-time friends and collaborators. They met over their shared love of beautiful tiles, and now they're launching a joint brand, H+O, focusing on tiles and combining their individual expertise with a mutual desire to do something less obvious. "We see H+O as a mix of our ideas, exploring more deeply, and adding extra dimensions to our individual contributions. We want to encourage excitement and joy, exploring like curious children and making a point about using tiles in new ways and in places where you don't normally see them," they say. For their first collection, they are turning the recent trend for bigger tiles with seamless surfaces on its head and thinking small. They want to celebrate the beauty of the grouted joints, using tiles to make patterns rather than putting patterns on the tiles.

"There is a forgotten potential in small tiles, and we love how you can make geometric patterns, beautiful stringent grids by placing small squares or rectangles next to each other," says Hoffmeyer. To demonstrate their architectural approach, they've opened a showroom at via Solferino 11, a design hub in Milan's Brera district. They are launching the showroom and their first collection with a curated installation, *Perfect Darkness*, during Milan design week.

"I love to explore different ways to create a space, something that is a bit more abstract," says Ossino. "A simple space can have strong

elements that the mind can't forget and it inspires you to go in and makes you curious. It's like entering a 3D-painting. That's what we are aiming to create in *Perfect Darkness*. A living scenery. It's a living space but not a real house. We will add surrealistic elements, a sense of something mysterious. We love tension and attention to tactility and texture." Among the surprises in the installation are tiles used as buildings blocks or between doors, adding function and making them more than just surfaces.

The pair met in 2002, a year after Hoffmeyer had set up her first tile company, Made a Mano. Living in Liguria, she'd come up with the idea of launching a colourful collection of glazed lava stone tiles fusing oriental mysteries, artisan Italian craftsmanship and Scandinavian simplicity. "Elisa had used my tiles in some of her projects, and when we got a chance to meet face to face, the chemistry was strong, and we both wanted to leverage the incredible energy," says Hoffmeyer. They decided to study prehistoric ceramics together at the regional museum in Caltagirone, a Sicilian town famed since ancient times for its ceramics. The pair subsequently created a tableware collection together.

Hoffmeyer set up the Copenhagen-based File Under Pop in 2014, building on her experience and knowledge and with a name referencing her musical background. Her colourful hand-painted wallpaper and poetic glazed and patterned tiles in clay and lava stone were an instant hit and are seen in cool spaces all over the world. Over the past 20 years, Ossino has worked as an architect, curator and stylist

working for renowned magazines as well as designing and collaborating with brands like Salvatori and De Padova. An affinity for reinterpreting a space and artful compositions, often using strong contrasting colours, has earned her a reputation as one of the most exciting contemporary creative voices in Italy. As the pair worked on various projects together, travelling between Italy and Denmark, the idea of a more formal partnership kept brewing. "We are both lucky to come from countries with such important design traditions. It's very exciting to merge the Italian side, known for fashion and art, with the simplicity, minimalism and honesty that characterises Danish style," says Ostino. H+O is built on their equal drive to create something poetic, dreamy, and different alongside continuing their separate endeavours.

"With their textures and clear colours, there is a pure honesty in ceramic and stoneware. A beauty enhanced by the fact that it relates to the four elements fire, earth, water and air. To produce something that is part of such an old, natural and authentic culture and make it look contemporary is fantastic," says Hoffmeyer.

The heart of *Perfect Darkness* is exploring and expressing dark colours but also reminding people enamoured of bold coloured tiles about the power of white. "We are using white as a necessary contrast,

and a reminder that without light there is no darkness. When I first started making tiles 18 years ago, the tiles, walls, ceilings and wooden panels were all white. I felt there was a need to bring in more colours and patterns. Now most people work with colours and texture, and this has challenged us to define and refine ourselves even more," says Hoffmeyer. Ostino adds: "It's going to be an experimental experience. We will add texture and sound to the space. Music creates a huge dimension to the way we react to surroundings, the tiles and the colours, and the connection we have to them."

To furnish the interior, they handpicked mostly Danish and a few French and Italian brands. "We brought them together in what feels almost like a family, and we are making a space where all parts of life can unfold," says Hoffmeyer. It's a spirit imbued in their new home, which she says is the ideal place to unfold the brand, and where they already know many of their neighbours who include Boffi, De Padova, Dimore and Salvatori. "We've worked with many of them, together and separately, and love being part of this community."

Perfect Darkness at via Solferino 11, is open during Milan design week from April 9-14 and then by appointment.



The white tiles are from H+O's first collection.

On the marble floor is a dotted tile from an earlier collaboration by Elisa Ostino with File Under Pop.



Shadow play on the geometric relief of the H+O tiles shows the power of white and light in the *Perfect Darkness* installation.

