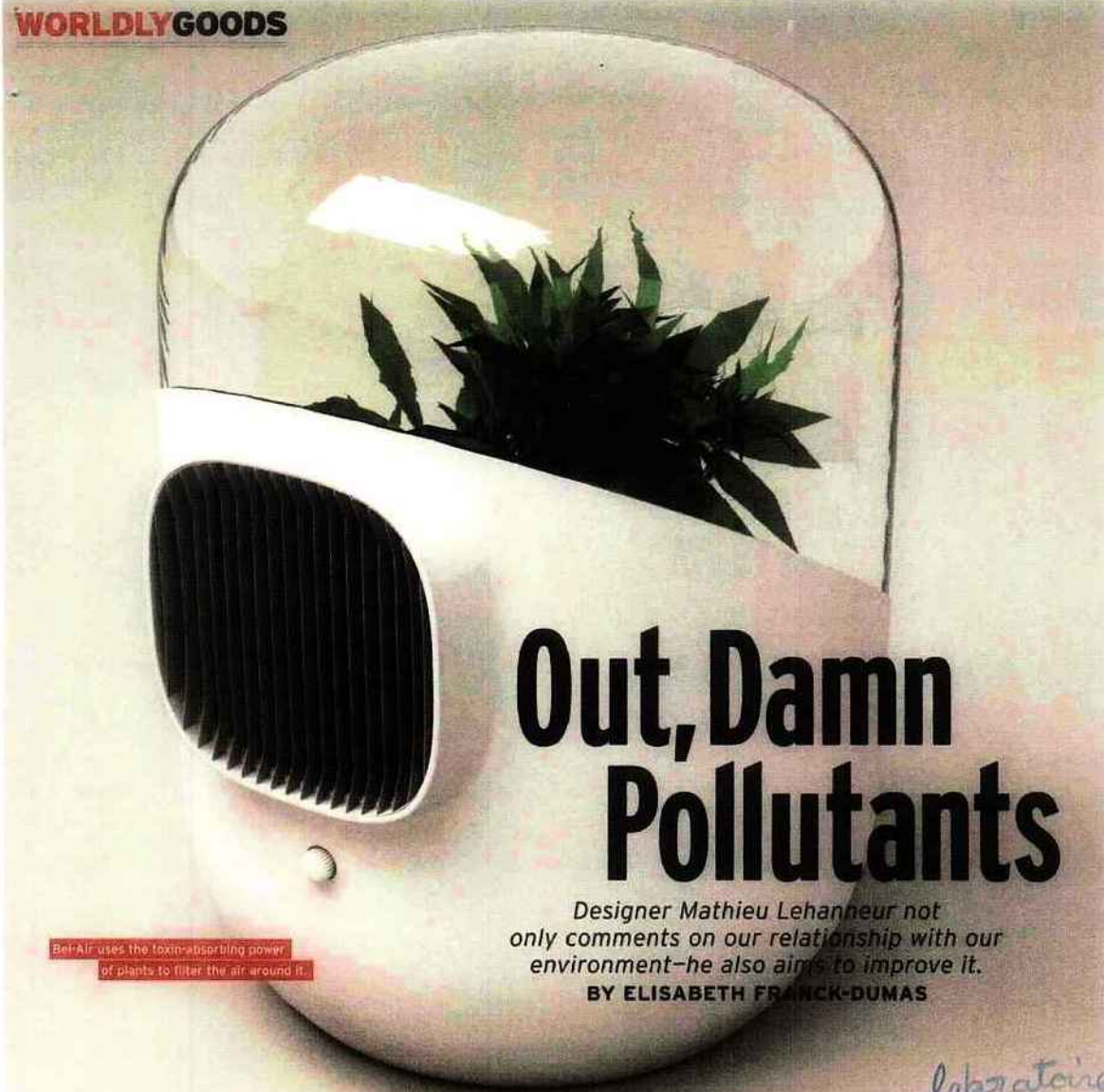


**WORLDLYGOODS**



# Out, Damn Pollutants

*Designer Mathieu Lehanneur not only comments on our relationship with our environment—he also aims to improve it.*

**BY ELISABETH FRANCK-DUMAS**

*laboratoire*

**A**t the opening last fall of Paris's Le Laboratoire, an exhibition space devoted to collaborations between artists and scientists, the unquestioned hit was a revolutionary air filtration device called Bel-Air. Conjured up by French designer Mathieu Lehanneur, with the help of Laboratoire founder and Harvard biomedical engineering professor David Edwards, Bel-Air uses "smart" plants like gerbera and chlorophytum—both proven by NASA researchers to absorb toxic compounds—to rid homes of pollutants such as formaldehyde, a potential carcinogen used to make plastic, and pentachlorophenol, a fungicide commonly found in wooden furniture. Looking like a cross between a tiny space capsule and a greenhouse, Bel-Air is also stylish enough to sit in your living room. It offers a real solution to two very of-the-moment concerns: reducing domestic toxins and using cleaner, greener technology. And the device instantly cemented the 34-year-old's reputation as a promising designer for the 21st century. "Bel-Air appeared on blogs and suddenly we were swamped with e-mails saying 'Where can I find this in Tokyo?' and 'Where can I

Bel-Air uses the toxin-absorbing power of plants to filter the air around it.

COURTESY: BUREAU MATHIEU LEHANEUR/CH

"find this in Milan?" remembers Lehanneur on the February morning I visit his studio. Before the show he hadn't given much thought to commercializing Bel-Air, but he is examining several possibilities now.

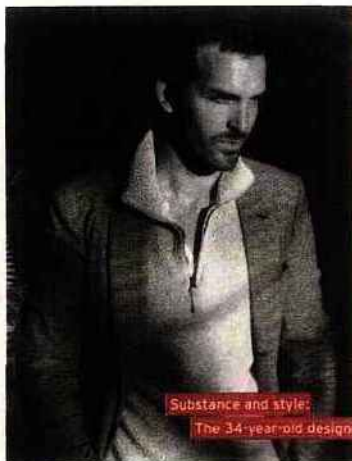
"I went from being ahead of the game to falling behind," Lehanneur adds.

Bel-Air is on display until May 12 in the Museum of Modern Art's "Design and the Elastic Mind" show, along with other Lehanneur creations from a series he calls "Elements." These include *K*, a spiky light, meant to prevent SAD, that detects winter darkness and brightens to compensate; *C°*, a pyramidal thermal radar that emits heat when the device senses it is needed; and *O*, a glass contraption filled with a mesmerizing green mixture made from the alga spirulina, which gives off pure oxygen when plummeting levels demand it.

Though Lehanneur has devised many press-friendly products—perfume packaging for Issey Miyake, a neon-light dome for Christofle, beehive-shaped showcases for Yohji Yamamoto—it is the futuristic projects such as "Elements" that have earned him prestigious grants in his home country and made him a rising star.

"Mathieu chooses themes that are socially meaningful and sometimes really complex," says MoMA senior curator Paola Antonelli. "But in the end he is also able to distill all these ideas into truly beautiful objects."

In person, Lehanneur exhibits none of the mad scientist traits I had vaguely imagined he might have. And though his inventions appeal to our ever-growing environmental concerns, he is not a health nut himself.



"I hope my objects don't convey paranoia," he tells me. "They're neither paranoid nor anxiety-driven nor *bio* [French for "ecofriendly"]."

Lehanneur works with typical materials (wood, glass, plastic, metal), but his primary inspiration is our immediate surroundings: the sounds we hear, the oxygen we breathe, the temperature on our skin. "We're in constant interaction with the air around us," he says. "So why aren't we taking that material into account instead of working on how comfortable our butts feel on a chair?"

**B**orn in the coastal town of Rochefort, Lehanneur attended the prestigious Paris industrial design school L'Enseigne Les Ateliers. There his graduation project, now archived at MoMA, focused on what he terms Galenic design: the creation of medications whose form would actively engage patients in their treatment. Breakthrough

drugs are useless, his thinking went, if, as so often happens, a patient refuses or forgets to take them. So he developed a handful of clever aids. The most appealing, to my mind, is an asthma medication dispenser named the Third Lung, a Tamagotchi-like device that becomes dangerously full if the medicine it contains is not taken, thereby transferring the dependence from the patient to the apparatus itself. It is often more pleasing, after all, to take care of someone (or something) else than to take care of oneself.

Like Bel-Air, the Third Lung is one of the only Lehanneur projects that are under active research and development and stand a good chance of seeing the light of day. Few of his works have been commercialized, and Lehanneur says this is because he hasn't bothered to make the rounds of design editors or pharmaceutical companies. "I'm in a bulimic phase of experimentation right now," he says with a smile. "The day I find myself a bit tired, that's when I'll start thinking about editing all this."

For now Lehanneur is focusing on an exhibition—running through June at Artists Space in New York's SoHo—with the theme of food sourcing, for which he is envisioning "a Garden of Eden-type dream": an aquarium-and-greenhouse combo that achieves a perfect, self-reliant ecosystem. "There is not one specific thing I dream of doing today," he says. "I am happy to go from one assignment to the next and naïve enough to believe there is no territory that design cannot infiltrate."

Prototypes of Bel-Air are available at Le Laboratoire in Paris for \$20,000 each ([lelaboratoire.org](http://lelaboratoire.org)).

## Top Models

**Medicine by the Centimeter, 2001** Part of Lehanneur's Ensci graduation project, this string of beads is geared toward patients who see illness as a menacing entity that must be expunged from the body. Each bead contains a dose of medication, so the duration of the treatment is converted into a length of string. As it shrinks, so—presumably—does the illness.

**dB, 2006** Attuned to the noise levels in your home, dB rolls toward the source of the most egregious sounds and emits white noise to drown them out.

**After Thonet, 2003** Created for a Paris menswear collection, this coatrack is a reinterpretation of Michael Thonet's famed bentwood designs. It's made from wood that has been compressed in such a way as to remain pliable when humid. The stand is kept in this soft state while in transit, so that upon arrival it can be bent to fit its immediate surroundings.

**Q, 2006** Meant to be placed just inside the front door, Q is triggered when people walk in or out. It sprays microparticles of a serum called Quinton (composed of marine minerals known

to boost the immune system), which the body absorbs both by inhaling and through the skin.

**O, 2006** O is equipped with an oxygen sensor and when ambient levels are low, a light turns on, activating oxygen-producing photosynthesis in the spirulina algae mixture. As soon as levels return to normal, the light switches off and the spirulina particles fall back to the bottom of the container.

STILL LIVES: VÉRONIQUE HUYGHE (S)