

Freshness Feature: PT3 - Interview With Johan Liden

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Freshness Feature



Photos and Interview by Poe
Produced by Poe

As the 3rd season of [PUMA Table Tennis Tournament \(PT3\)](#) wound down after the excitement of April 28th. A few lucky participants received the limited edition paddle and balls sets, designed specifically for PT3 by New York-based creative agency, [aruliden](#).

The firm, established in 2006 by 2 well-known figures in the creative industry: Johan Liden and Rinat Aruh. Johan Liden's works have featured in the [Copper Hewitt Museum's Design Triennial](#), within the permanent collection at the [San Francisco MoMA](#), and as "2001 - Best Invention of the Year" by [TIME Magazine](#). Rinat Aruh, who was instrumental at the creation of BMW's [MINI_motion Lifestyle Project](#), as well as all marketing aspects for GAP's [Forth & Towne](#) label. Ms. Aruh also served as a juror at the prestigious [Business Week IDEA Award](#) in 2006. The essence of [aruliden](#) is quite straight forward, to create the quintessential experiences between a brand and its audience, a process which they called "producing".

Prior to [PT3](#), Freshness had an unique opportunity to talk with [aruliden's](#) Johan Liden, in regard to design, branding and the process that went into the [PT3 ULTRAMAGNETIC COLLECTION](#).

Tell us a little bit about yourself

I was born in Gothenburg, Sweden. Shortly after, moved to a small city on the east coast of Sweden. Went on to Linköping for high school and college, before attending Stockholm's [Konstfack College of Arts Crafts and Design](#). I moved to San Francisco during my Senior year, where I lived and worked for 5 years before coming to New York.

And of your creative agency, aruliden?

Sure. The official formation of the company was June 1st of last year (2006). But Rinat and I, worked on several projects, like the [MINI_motion](#) lifestyle product line for BMW, prior to opening our own firm. Its been great ever since. We got the name [aruliden](#) by the combination of Rinat's last name and mine.

What influenced you to become an industrial designer?

When I was young, I always loved to make things. Even before my degree in industrial design, I got a degree for education in woodcraft/furniture making. So, I actually have 2 degrees: one in teaching and one in design.



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Then do you still make your own furniture?

Occasionally. As soon as I have some free time I would love to continue. My dream one day is to have a little wood shop in my basement.

There is something very nurturing, something very satisfying about making something with your hands and having a tangible end result to show for it.

What made you decide to acquire a second degree in industrial design after you received the first degree in woodcraft/furniture making education degree?

Actually, I thought of industrial design even before going for the first degree. But, without a portfolio or design pieces, you can't get into industrial design. Remember, unlike here in the US, schools in Sweden are free and I love school. Konstfack has an exchange program with San Francisco's [California College of Arts](#) (CCA). I decided to finish part of my Senior year at CCA. I finished my Senior thesis project here in the U.S. But it was for my degree back in Sweden.

And that was SCOOT, the portable hydrogen-powered scooter concept, which won TIME Magazine's "Best Invention of the Year" in 2001.

Yes, and while I was at CCA, Yves Béhar was one of my professors there. When he started his firm, [fuseproject](#), he offered me a position there.

How was your experience at fuseproject?

It was great! Obviously, I had a chance to work on a lot of fun projects together with Yves. I worked with him for 5 years when I decided to move to New York and try something new. Around the same time Estee Lauder/[MAC Cosmetics](#) approached me to move to New York as the Design Director for MAC Cosmetics. 2 years afterwards, another offer came, this time from Nike's [CONVERSE](#) division. I worked with many great people there as well and gained exposure to an area I knew very little about.

You worked in both realms. In comparison, what are the advantages of working at a small firm versus working for a corporation?

For example right now, we're working on everything from high tech to high gloss. That is something I want to emphasize. I think that is one of the beauties of working at a small firm. While at [fuseproject](#) back then and today, I have opportunities to work on different projects. Meaning you're into fashion one day and technology next. Working with hard and soft materials, different fabrics, different manufacturing processes. Not only it makes your day more fun. It gives you the opportunity to see the correlation and cross-pollination opportunities. Such as integrating materials and manufacturing technique of cell phones, into something like the PUMA paddle and ball case. Those opportunities will not expose themselves naturally, so you need to be able to see the possibilities. I don't think that is possible if you're in a corporate environment.

To be an "expert" of one thing, especially in the creative field, might limit you. Because, if you know everything there is to know, it is hard to look outside the box. If you come in as someone who never work on the project before, you'll realize how much there is to learn. You can also think of ways to do things more efficiently. There is something beautiful about not being an expert at times.

Since you are from the Scandinavia:n region, which is Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, there is a so called Scandinavia:n school of design, which has been one of the driving forces of contemporary designs since the mid-20th century. The Scandinavia:n concept concentrates on modernity, simplicity and functionality. Is that a fair assessment of it or there is something more to?

Actually, Finland is in that group too, but I would agree with that definition. I think too that these days, there are a lot of things happening with the design concept that is at the very forefront. The designs are still based on those 3 principles. But, I think technology, such as cell phone and communication device, is a big influence now in Swedish design.

Another would be a user's interactions with the design. People interact more with designs these days. I think it takes cue to those 3 basic principles: modernity, simplicity and functionality.

There is another characteristic of Scandinavia:n design that has to do with the understanding of production process and materials. Swedish winters are really cold. There aren't much materials to work with. So, a concept to make the best of what is available, to make something very simple and yet elegant at the same time.

To differentiate themselves from generics, corporations are placing a greater importance on industrial design, which they as "added value" to their products. As an industrial designer, your point of view on this is...

There are lots of people who look at designs that way. To be honest, I don't think that is exactly accurate. It is "added value", but it is not the whole picture. Today, anyone can make a car, a cell phone, a computer, or any products. There are no mysteries on the manufacturing processes. It might not be on the cutting

edge of technologies or designs. But the product will work. So how do you set yourself apart? Two things: First, is the product itself. Second, is how do you communicate to your audience. For us, it is about making product to be the ultimate marketing tool. Meaning designing the product that goes inside, like the OS, to how the user interact with it, like how a user use and carry it? Another word, how do you create a relationship between the user and hardware? Take [Apple](#) for example. It has done a great job with its product. And I think this is where industrial design can make a huge difference, not just styling but in creating that whole experience with the product.

You mentioned creating the “ultimate marketing tool” before. How is that different from “added value”?

I think you do add value to the product, absolutely. That is part of what we do. But overall, I think we try to create an experience between the user and product . Take [Q TONIC](#) we're working on right now. We try to touch every aspects from the consumers' view. From the bottle, the box, the press kit, to how they open the bottle, how the temper seal will work. All these details would add to the overall experience of drinking it, I believe.

How did the idea of PT3 ULTRAMAGNETIC COLLECTION come about?

It was just a bunch of us sitting around at lunch time one day, trading cool ideas on what we can do center around the upcoming [PT3](#) tournament. The whole thing came together in about 2 months, extremely quick. We wanted to create some fun objects in support of the tournament. To create something we would use ourselves. We did a couple of sketches and renderings. Obviously, we showed the concept to [PUMA](#), who was very excited about it. Then, we worked with a company out in New Jersey that specialized in acrylic forming for production.

Were there challenges? If so, what were they?

When you start a project, any project, once you dive into it, there will be obstacles. If it was easy, then everyone would do it too. Projects are not easy and most of the time, it is the smallest, mundane thing that becomes the biggest challenge. Take the paddle case, there are no standard ping-pong paddles. They are all different in some ways. If you're going to make a hard case for them, how do you make it in a way that works for all the paddles? So, you have to go to ping-pong shop, buy all the paddles out there, sketch the outlines and find a shape that will fit most paddles on the market.

Time line was also a big challenge, to get something out so quick. If you have time, you can pretty much do anything.

With all challenges mentioned before, why a hard case then?

Because first of all, most of cases out there were soft, fabric based. We wanted to incorporate the whole magnet idea, have something that didn't have a zipper, something that just snap together. Plus, it was how we designed it in the beginning. I think there is something iconic about the shape of the paddle too. Everybody would know that it is a ping-pong paddle case. You see someone that plays the bass (string bass) in an orchestra, when they jump on the train, you know exactly that it is a bass (string bass). That wide, hard case with a little wheel on the back.

Also, the beauty of hard case, versus a soft one, is it is easier to control. The thing about soft case, which is equally good, is that it's difficult to portrait an icon. It takes a sport and doing something fun with it. Obviously, it is a huge sport, but also it is somewhat forgotten. People played back during high school or college. You go to a sporting good store and there is no ping-pong department. So the sport doesn't have the same presence. The project adds a little fun also adds a “face” to the sport. If you ask anyone, what is the “face” of ping-pong? Most likely you would not get something glamorous.

Any other interesting project that arulden is currently working on?

[Q TONIC](#), which I mentioned about before. It is new tonic water label that will be available in the coming weeks. The label returns to what tonic water used to be. The use of all natural ingredients, including natural quinine from Peru, which no other tonic water has. All these people ordering cocktails insisting on the best alcohol, like Grey Goose and Bombay Sapphire Gin. Then, they go and add some regular tonic water with artificial quinine. It just doesn't make sense. So [Q TONIC](#) will change that kind of habit. You will find it soon in lounges and restaurants that care about what they serve to their customers, like Milk and Honey, Gramercy Tavern and etc...

Much thanks to Johan Liden and arulden