

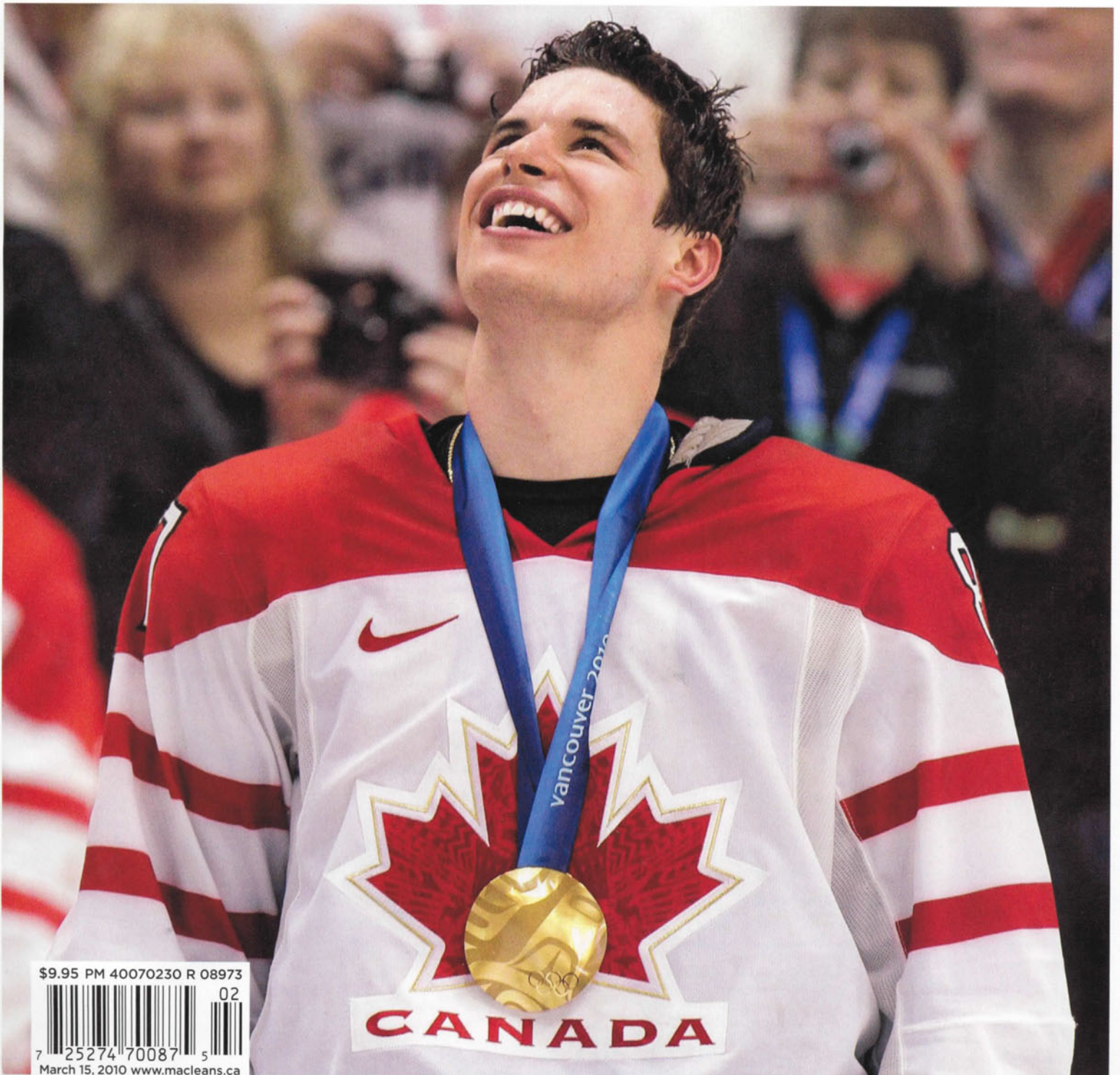
COMMEMORATIVE OLYMPIC ISSUE

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March 15, 2010 www.macleans.ca



DESIGN



**Acclaim:** Omer Arbel knew his submission was 'out there,' but that's how he works

# THE MEDAL MAKER

The Games introduced Vancouver's Omer Arbel to Canada. In the international design world he's already a star.

**BY ANNE KINGSTON** • In 1996, Omer Arbel walked away from the prospect of an Olympic medal when he quit Canada's fencing team to enroll in the University of Waterloo's architecture program. It's a decision, paradoxically, that put the brilliant industrial designer smack dab in the Olympic orbit when he won the commission to co-design Canada's medals for the 2010 Games.

The wavy orbs laser-etched with a stylized orca or raven, created by Aboriginal artist Corrine Hunt, have garnered mixed response: they've been praised for their tactile surface, and the one-of-a-kind pattern on each; critics, meanwhile, have likened them to "micro-waved Frisbees" and "Pringles."

In any case, they mark the first time many Canadians have even heard of the 33-year-old Arbel, who's been garnering growing acclaim internationally for years. Chicago's Athenaeum Museum has his work in their permanent collection, as does the Vancouver Art Gallery. A lighting installation commis-

sioned for the prestigious Italian curator Rosanna Orlandi will be unveiled at Milan Design Week in April. Holt Renfrew's Vancouver store houses another, and his limited-edition "2.4" lounge chair, fashioned from resin and steel, is a coveted collector's item.

"What we're trying to do is reintroduce the idea that objects can be important companions in your life," Arbel says, sitting in the Granville Island warehouse that houses his architecture practice as well as Bocci, the design and manufacturing company of which he's creative director. A thoughtful, eloquent man, Arbel doesn't use the word "design"; he prefers the simpler "make." Born in Jerusalem, he moved to Canada at age 13. As a child, he recalls, he was always building things. Today, his work is all numbered—from 1.1, a shelving system created in 2002, to 34, which is still under wraps. The only one that isn't is the medals. That, Arbel says, is "a story about the process, not only the finished object."

This is abundantly clear as he walks through

his submission, shortlisted by VANOC in May 2008. Arbel has made it a Homeric quest to imbue everyday items with meaning. His practice is focused on creating systems that can mass-produce objects that are tactile, emotive, and even unique. That was his vision for the medals: objects the athletes, and the public, could respond to on an intuitive level without overt allegory or symbolism. But it was also important to him that they interact with athletes' lives in an ongoing, intimate way, not end up in storage or on a wall.

To that end, the medal would be composed of two halves held by invisible magnets. That allowed the ribbon to be fastened between the layers, a more elegant solution than a clasp. Four surfaces permitted less cluttered engraving: the Olympic rings and 2010 logo could be etched on the outside; details of the event inside. When opened, the medal revealed a hidden cavity in which the athlete could place an object of sentimental value; then, like those Russian dolls that go on and on, another locket sat in the cavity that could be taken out and worn as jewellery.

Arbel wanted the cavity of each to be unique, so he figured out a variation on a production technique used to make jewellery. For the pièce de résistance, an idea he cheerfully admits was "sort of hare-brained," he suggested VANOC create a "secret medal mobile unit" to shadow the four finalists in every sport, then record their final 10 minutes before competitions. In the van, an engraver would imprint a recording on the medal, so athletes could put it on a record player and hear moments they'd forgotten. "These athletes are inundated with video cameras," Arbel observes. "But to remember the sounds only struck us as a very emotive way to remember those last minutes." His proposal even included recordings of skates being laced up before hockey players hit the ice.

He knew the submission was "out there." But that's how he works: "I begin at the purest level and slowly work toward a piece that comes into the world." VANOC loved the tactile design and that no two would be the same—Olympic firsts—and the concept of two layers and the interior locket. But they also delivered a reality check: the production technique and recording were no-goes financially; they wanted clearer reference to the host city; and they wanted Arbel to collaborate with Hunt. In June, Arbel came back with solutions: a fabrication technique that would make the medals unique "without spending bazillions of dollars"; an undulating surface



**The prototype:** His original design had two plates with a souvenir locket hidden inside; no two medals were alike

that referenced mountains and waves; and a plan to make Hunt's Haida mosaic a big-scale installation that could later become a civic monument. That would be symbolic, he says: "Every athlete's story is unique but a part of the great whole."

Pragmatic concerns again prevailed. The Royal Canadian Mint's stamping process required each medal to be the same. There went the interior cavity and locket idea. The one-of-a-kind concept was preserved by laser etching Hunt's artwork from a huge format so each medal contains a slightly different piece of the master design. (Medallists are also given a scarf depicting the canvas so they can see where their medal fits.)

The secrecy-shrouded 18-month process is one Arbel diplomatically sums up as the most "layered" he'd experienced. Without VANOC creative director Leo Obstbaum, who died suddenly in August 2009, as a champion, it would never have happened, Arbel says: "He was a true visionary."

The one design feature Arbel had nothing to do with is the one that garnered much press:

the medals being composed of recycled circuit boards. "It's an admirable commitment to sustainability," he says. "But I gather it's less than one per cent."

The fuss over the medals has eclipsed, for now, Arbel's more revolutionary work, like the 22.0 series—a flat-to-the-wall outlet for plugs, cables and thermostats so simple it's shocking. His goal, he says, was to eliminate the "visual noise" of bulky cover plates and protruding thermostats—"things that start to cloud the purity of your vision." The outlets are \$15; retrofitting them into a wall is pricier. It'll take time before they're standard, he says: "As with anything this basic, it takes a long time for people to make a change."

Arbel has a lot on the go: a Toronto furniture store, a house in White Rock, B.C., a commission to design bowls for the Italian glass company Venini.

Even with the demand for his work, being a designer in Canada is difficult, Arbel says: "There's no local market, so we have to rely on markets where we're not part of the larger community." Yet he also recognizes that the periphery is an exciting, even powerful, place to be: "Because we don't have a context to respond to, we are free to form new ways," he says. "Just to survive, you're forced to think of truly novel ideas." M



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