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IN HIS LONDON STUDIO, DESIGNER MARTINO GAMPER STANDS WITH SOME OF HIS NEW GLASS DESIGNS FOR CRYSTAL BRAND J HILL'S STANDARD, TO BE SHOWN IN MILAN. ON THE WALLS ARE FOUND PIECES AND PROTOTYPES. THE PORTRAIT WAS SHOT FOR W'107

Heart of glass

The team breathing new life into handmade Irish crystal

PHOTOGRAPHY: TIM CUTT WRITER: ALI MORRIS

At the end of last year, when the Waterford Crystal plant was bulldozed to the ground, it marked the end of an era for Irish crystal. In its heyday, the factory employed over 3,200 skilled workers and its handmade crystal could be found upon millions of mantelpieces across the globe. Today, the brand's name (and a visitor centre in Waterford) lives on but production for the now American-owned firm has been moved to Slovenia, and has long been mechanised. There are only a handful of crystal cutters left in Waterford and, unbelievably, only one lead crystal blower. 'And he's 76', says Anike Tyrrell, founder of J Hill's Standard, a new Irish crystal brand that's set to launch its first collections in Milan this year. Tyrrell, the CEO of Waterford County Enterprise Board and a business strategist by profession, is intent on breathing life back into Waterford's depleted crystal industry and >>





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A MIX OF MOUTH-BLOWN AND HAND-CUT CRYSTAL GLASS PIECES FROM MARTINO GAMPER'S 'CUTTINGS NOT SCULPT' AND SCHOLTEN & BAIJINGS' 'ELEMENTS' COLLECTIONS FOR J HILL'S STANDARD

changing the public's perception of a craft that's now often thought best confined to fusty display cabinets. 'We're taking an old craft that has looked the same way forever and we're reimagining it for a younger audience,' explains Tyrrell.

Despite being a relative newcomer to the design industry, Tyrrell has managed to build herself an

enviable design team: the inaugural J Hill's Standard collections are created by two of the most in-demand design studios in the business – Martino Gamper and Scholten & Baijings; branding and graphics have been created by London-based Made Thought (whose clients include Adidas, Design Miami and Stella McCartney); and to top it off the collections will be launched at >>

J HILL'S STANDARD FOUNDER
ANIKÉ TYRRELL AND DESIGNER
STEFAN SCHOLTEN AT THE
EMERALD CRYSTAL FACTORY
IN WATERFORD, IRELAND



Spazio Rossana Orlandi, one of the most coveted exhibition spots at Milan's annual furniture fair.

The stellar line-up is testament to Tyrrell's infectious quixotism and the emotive story at the heart of the brand. It was in 2007 when, as part of her role at Waterford County Enterprise Board, Tyrrell looked into the possibility of setting up a glass-blowing school in the city. The project would provide a way of harvesting and passing on the skills of former Waterford craftsmen to a new generation before it was too late. However, her research showed that, in order to make the school viable, it would need

to be supported by a functioning crystal business. Enthusied by the possibilities, Tyrrell made the unusual decision of taking on the challenge herself, and so J Hill's Standard was born.

Faced with the daunting task of finding the right designers to work with, Tyrrell enlisted the services of London-based brand consultant Laura Houseley, and together they met with a series of potential collaborators.

'The idea was that none of them had really worked with cut crystal before; a fresh approach was what we really wanted,' says Houseley. »



'We wanted to make it obvious that the pieces were made by hand,' adds Tyrrell, something that the average consumer isn't usually aware of.

They found the perfect collaborator in Martino Gamper, a true interventionist whose hands-on approach is evident in the rough, sculpted markings that decorate his collection. When it came to designing, Gamper took to the cutting wheel like a duck to water. 'You can't really draw glass, you can never get the transparency,' he explains. 'You have to see it for yourself to get a feel for it.' After making the first series of prototypes himself, Gamper encouraged the craftsmen to cut the crystal at different angles to create uneven, tactile surfaces – an instinctive design technique that can't be emulated by a machine.

In contrast, Scholten & Baijings' collection showcases the craftsmen's impossibly precise cutting, sandblasting and dipping skills. 'It's actually pretty difficult to put a straight line on a glass,' laughs Stefan Scholten, who, like Gamper, experimented at the cutting wheel himself. 'Minimalism takes a maximum effort to make perfect. That's always difficult to explain.' Scholten & Baijings' meticulous, geometric designs are inspired by Irish landscapes, which are depicted on the glass through the duo's characteristic use of opacities, textures and grids. Another element

ONE OF SCHOLTEN & BAIJINGS' PIECES FOR J HILL'S STANDARD, DISPLAYED ALONGSIDE SOME OF THE DUO'S PLANS AND A GLASS-CUTTING KNIFE. STEFAN SCHOLTEN WAS KEEN TO AMPLIFY THE CRAFTSMEN'S IMPOSSIBLY PRECISE CUTTING SKILLS

'I want the crystalware to be really usable. If you chip it, we can repair it'

that's ordinarily central to their work is colour; something that is notably absent from their crystal collection. Scholten disagrees: 'If you look closely you see that glass reflects all the colours. Colour is not just about using bright hues, it's about use of texture and perception of colour.'

'Incredible' is how Tyrrell describes the moment when the first pieces came off the cutting machine. 'Like the unveiling of a magnum opus,' she recalls. 'Frankie Power, the cutter, was so proud of them. He has a huge amount of skill, but what they ordinarily do in the factory are the traditional diamond cuts – they don't stretch him like this did.'

The base of each piece is sandblasted with the company's logo – an asterisk, the number three written in Roman numerals and an obelisk – a design conceived by Ben Parker and Paul Austin of Made Thought. Visually, the symbols evoke the cuts in the crystal, but most importantly, they tell the story of the brand's namesake. The name pays tribute to a little-known Waterford crystal pioneer named John Hill, who came to Waterford from Worcestershire in 1783. During his short but effective three-year tenure at the glassworks, Hill's creative talent established the preeminence of Waterford Crystal. He left suddenly in 1786, but before doing so scribbled down his 'standard', a recipe for compounding the perfect glass. Traditionally, an asterisk and an obelisk are symbols used to indicate a year of birth and death respectively, or in this case, the span of John Hill's influential three-year tenure at Waterford. 'The logo brings the story of the brand to the fore,' says Parker.

To prove that cut crystal has a place in the modern home, Tyrrell aims to produce experimental, limited-edition pieces called 'Free' collections alongside core 'House' collections that are intended for everyday use, challenging the common perception that cut crystal is unaffordable and impractical. 'I wanted the crystalware to be really usable and democratic,' says Tyrrell. 'If somebody chips them, we can repair them. I want to build that relationship with the customer. I want them to know there's a human behind the product.'

J Hill's Standard is just the first step in the creation of an entire cut-crystal ecosystem that Tyrrell has mapped out. With her sights set on acquiring her own factory space, and new collections already in development, J Hill's Standard sets the scene for a promising new chapter in the history of Waterford. ★ J Hill's Standard shows at Spazio Rossana Orlandi, via Matteo Bandello 14/16, Milan, 8-13 April, hillsstandard.com