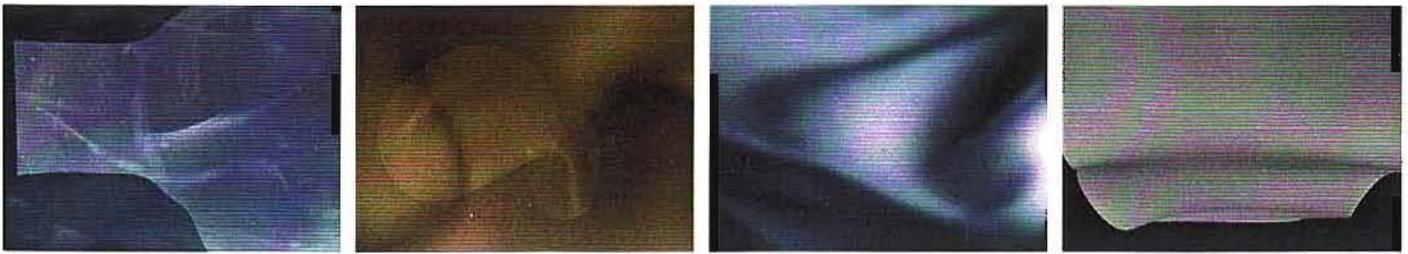




LIPSTICK

# LANDSCAPE

THE WORK OF IN-HOUSE DESIGNERS, THE SOHO OUTLET OF COSMETICS FIRM MAC HOUSES A SOFT LANDSCAPE OF DISPLAY ISLANDS THAT INVITE CUSTOMERS TO TOUCH AND TRY. BY JAN-WILLEM POELS. PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG DELVES.



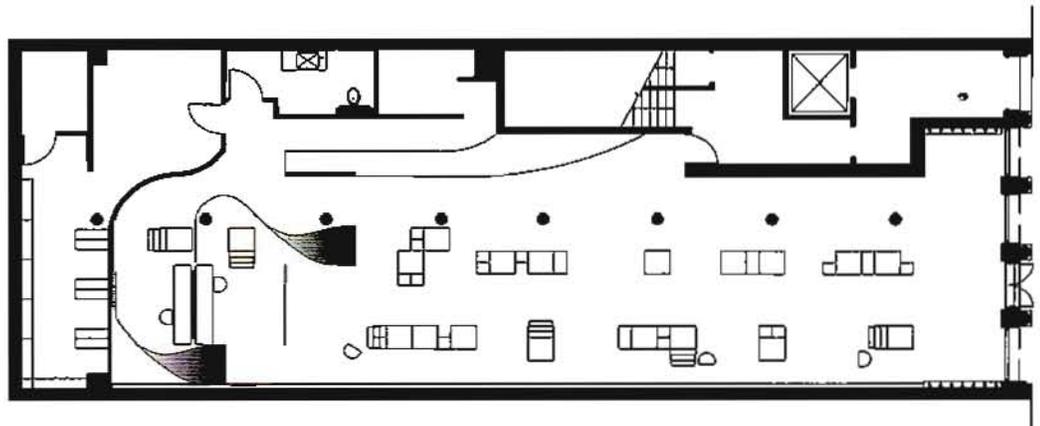
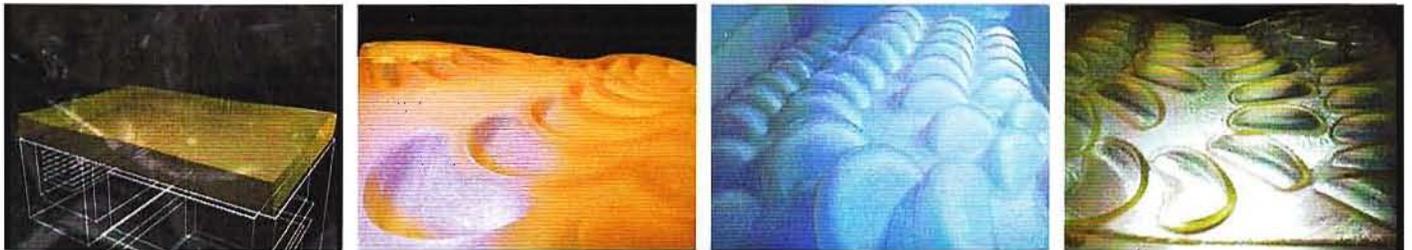
## SPONGY, TACTILE PRODUCT DISPLAYS PRACTICALLY BEG CUSTOMERS TO REACH OUT AND FEEL THE MATERIAL

A major cosmetics retailer that uses its latest outlets as a testing ground for experimental design is something of a rarity. Even more remarkable is that these interiors are the work of an in-house design team and not the creation of celebrated architects brought in to craft a new corporate identity. The retailer in question is Make-Up Art Cosmetics or MAC, as the outfit is more popularly known. Set up in Toronto in the 1980s, MAC has always cultivated an alternative profile that stands out from the mainstream. Selling a brand associated more with drag queens and wayward rock stars than with fashion models, MAC shops have attracted a clientele keen to project an off-the-wall image. The company has also been quick to promote the socially conscious aspect of its activities. Every cent spent on the VIVA GLAM Lipstick range goes directly into its own AIDS fund.

The first of the new shops opened its doors in New York's SoHo district last summer. 'It's a lab for the infusion of new ideas and a "playscape" for our designers – a place where we can truly experiment,' explains creative director James Gager. Future outlets are planned for sites in Tokyo, London and Paris. 'They won't replace the modernist look of other recently opened MAC stores,' he says. 'The new series will run in tandem with our existing shops. Our idea is to recharge the taste buds of MAC customers by offering up a variety of design solutions.'

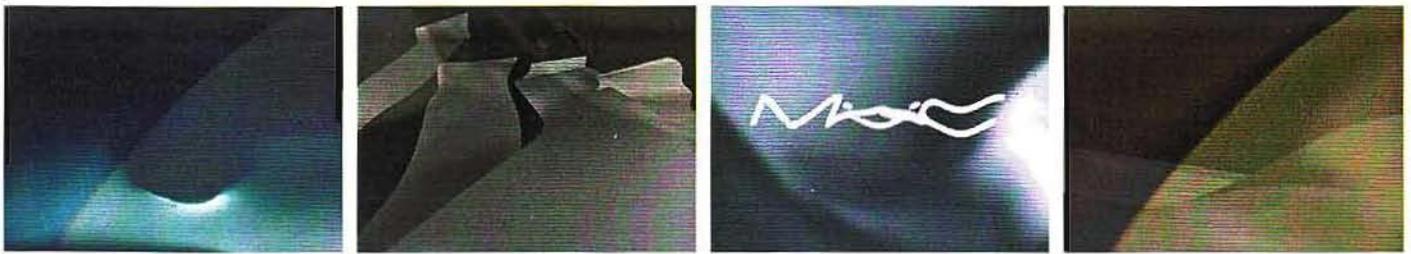
Colleague Régis Péan, head of the in-house design team, started developing the concept for these stores two years ago. Having cut his experimental teeth working for that most progressive of architecture firms, Coop Himmelb(l)au, Péan has sound credentials. He's convinced that modern retail design has limited its scope by confining itself to visual and audio aspects. 'Our target is to create a sensual experience and to trigger emotions with our design. This new store is as much about how you feel inside the space as how it looks.'

His words apply directly to the most intriguing part of the redesigned MAC store: the display counters. The cosmetic products are embedded in translucent, pewter-coloured mats, which are back-lit and glow like mineral deposits. The soft forms are recessed into amber-coloured slabs on the display counters. Cut into the surface of each mat are countless tiny indentations for holding all the different products. The organically undulating countertops have a pleasantly warm feel and respond to the touch. The spongy, tactile displays practically beg customers to reach out and feel the material – an invitation that makes perfect sense in a shop whose business is the sale of powders and potions that pamper the skin. When fully stocked with a kaleidoscopic array of packaged products, the mats present a colour-saturated retail landscape arranged against a glowing golden backdrop.





HAUTE VOLTAGE



**'YOU CAN'T EVEN DESCRIBE THE MATS IN TERMS OF TRADITIONAL, TWO-DIMENSIONAL DRAFTING, NEVER MIND BUILD THEM'**

Moving around the space, customers perceive these fields of colour in constantly shifting combinations. 'If we had assembled the product in straightforward geometric patterns, the eye would assimilate it easily,' says Péan. 'But with the kind of complex curvature we're using here, you have to walk around the objects to experience and explore them.' No less than 18 different mat designs were created for the project. They are based on an animation process that was superimposed on the originally allocated space. 'You can't even describe the mats in terms of traditional, two-dimensional drafting, never mind build them,' he emphasises. Instead MAC created the shapes of the mats with SLA (stereo lithographic apparatus), a process commonly used in car design. Moulds of the mats are made in a vat containing a resin that hardens under the intense light of two computer-controlled laser beams. The mats are built up, one layer at a time, by pouring polyurethane into the moulds.

Basically neutral, the 18-foot-high retail space boasts white walls and a floor virtually drained of colour. The most striking feature is the gravity-defying, translucent flooring, which peels up and twists sideways at the rear of the store to demarcate two rooms used for private make-up consultations. The floor also curls at the front of the store, sticking its tongue into the shop window to provide a single display platform. This magic-carpet manoeuvre was designed in collaboration

with Ove Arup and Partners. 'Conceptually, this was a very daring project,' says engineer Markus Schulte of the new MAC store. 'The curved floor panels could quite easily have been made of plywood. But the designers' choice of resin and acrylic to create translucency was a real challenge – especially in terms of refining all the connection details.'

An essence of sensuous body consciousness oozes from nearly every object in the store. Hand mirrors, display cases, mats and built-in seating are all wrapped in a translucent skin that reveals a dark skeleton whose 'bones' are hand carved out of lightweight black foam. Functionally, the bones provide the fleshy polyurethane forms with a strong structural support. Aesthetically, they evoke a sense of mystery and set up a play of light and dark, seen and half-seen.

Look for the evolution of the SoHo concept in Tokyo, Paris and London. 'This is a global experiment,' says Gager. 'Like throwing a pebble into the water, it's going to have a ripple effect in different places around the world.' Whether the ripples he envisions will have the intended impact or simply fade into oblivion depends on the designers' ability to build on the promise shown by certain details at the SoHo outlet, which is, on the whole, a somewhat sterile space. If it wants to earn its 'experimental' stripes, the next shop will have to offer a spatial experience that matches the quality of its displays.

