



Last year, Hector Serrano was just another design student. Then he beat his tutor in the prestigious Peugeot Design Awards. Albert Hill meets the deadpan designer. Photographs by Tricia de Courcy Ling

## Serious matter

It's hard to tell if Hector Serrano is deadly serious or just does a good line in droll. "Halo," he mutters in a thick Spanish accent, as he opens the front door in his green glasses, brown woolly jumper and orange leather slippers. "Bonjour!" reads the doormat.

Serrano graduated from the RCA's Product Design MA course last year. While he was still there he won the £16,000 Peugeot Design Award, beating his tutor Roberto Feo of El Ultimo Grito. He still lives with two RCA students and his girlfriend, Moniquita, in a rented house in Queen's Park. The hall is cluttered with bikes, the carpets are a student-flat shade of aubergine and green and the kitchen floor

tiles are a battered beige. But it's obvious that this is a flat of design students. The walls are brightly painted, paper bags double as lampshades and ever-so-clever self-built furniture fills every room. Serrano points out a pair of boxer shorts hanging from a desk lamp: "another small design exercise," he says. Seriously? "You know in the movies when you put a red cloth over something to make it sexy. I'm doing something similar."

Serrano's workshop is squeezed into a room (well, cubicle) upstairs, where, on the bench, abandoned among the tools, there's a tiny pair of glasses similar to Serrano's own. "They are Mr Potatohead's glasses," I'm gravely informed. Was it Mr

More than the Superpatata: drop in on Hector Serrano and you'll spy his other designs, such as the Top Secret light, left, and the bottle-cum-jug, below

Potatohead, then, that inspired the Superpatata lamp, a malleable salt-filled blob that won him not only the Peugeot award but the affection of Gijs Bakker, the head of Droog, the celebrated Dutch-based design group? "No," he replies, picking up a squidgy red stress ball, "this was".

The Superpatata is perfect for Droog: it's playful but practical and, as Serrano says, "it says things in a different way. Bakker just phoned me and said 'listen I want to show it in Milan. Are you interested?' They are very direct, the Dutch." And they always get what they want. "Droog, though, let you work for yourself. They are just the catalysts."

A tour of Serrano's other products turns up a "top secret" prototype on his bedroom clothes rail (that's a clue). And in the corner a chaotic-looking hanging lamp made from strips of acetate stuffed into a clear nylon net. The lamp's name? "Top Secret. Because the acetate has gone through a shredding machine for confidential documents."

There's a drinking bottle, based on the traditional Spanish *botijos*, developed with Alberto Martinez and Raky Martinez. Looking like an Evian bottle in white terracotta, but with a spout and handle, it keeps water cool in the sun. "It can be used as a drinking bottle," says Serrano, raising it to his lips with enthusiasm. "Or as a jug," he bends over and pours the water into a glass.

Serrano has only been in London two years, arriving from Valencia with good reports of the RCA from a friend. "Someone told me design was quite nice and easy, and I was so fed up studying physics, maths and literature. I wanted to do something more physical." Unsurprisingly, though, poor Serrano misses the Spanish sun and paella. Otherwise he's very happy. The only thing that upsets him are those open-backed Routemaster buses. "It might be a tradition, but they are very, very dangerous," he says, nodding vigorously. Whether he's being serious or not, it's hard to tell.

Droog Design, The Architectural Association, 36 Bedford Square, London WC1 (020-7887 4000), until February 22.

