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Revitalising Waterford? @JHillsStandard's plan to save Irish crystal-making/
Martino Gamper & Scholten & Baijings <http://t.co/3swupGeoxd>

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Martino Gamper's
Cuttings collection
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The revitalisation of Waterford crystal

Milan
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At its peak in 1987, Waterford Crystal employed 2,900 staff across the south-east of Ireland, the majority centred in the company's namesake harbour city. First founded in 1783, the company had, over the course of its stop-start existence, become inextricably tied to the city in which it was based. Waterford, for years, was crystal production.

The qualifier "for years" is important. Since its heyday in the late 1980s, Waterford's crystal industry has faded dramatically. As early as 1992, Waterford Crystal was cutting jobs and salaries. In 2009 it went into receivership, barring its employees – many of whom had worked there their for their entire lives – from entering the factory. The majority of the company's production is now based in Germany and Eastern Europe, with its remaining factory in Waterford now playing a predominantly tourist role, handling only small-scale production with a skeleton staff. It is in this climate that J. Hill's Standard, a new crystal brand in Waterford, launched at Milan's Spazio Rossana Orlandi during last week's Salone del Mobile.

It was a tentative first step in an effort to rekindle Waterford's livelihood. The company – named for the 18th century crystal worker who developed Waterford Crystal's distinctive polished finish – debuted with collections from Martino Gamper and Scholten & Baijings, showing a collection of crystal tumblers, stems and decanters. Gamper's crystal is cut with playful finger-like rising patterns, while Scholten & Baijings is more intricate, the glasses broken into linear grids that play with levels of transparency and opacity.

Gamper and Scholten & Baijings are surprisingly prominent early collaborators, particularly given the scale of the company. J. Hill's Standard is a small company founded by Anike Tyrrell, the CEO of the Waterford County Enterprise Board. "Suffice to say, I can't afford to pay what Baccarat or Kvadrat can," she says. Tyrrell had no previous experience in design, but was optimistic that it could help trigger a resurgence in Waterford's crystal industry.

"Crystal production in Waterford is tiny and almost everybody who left Waterford Crystal has gone into different businesses," she says. "They're driving taxis or retired and they don't have the opportunity to make glass anymore. And Waterford also has quite an ageing population.* So I was very interested in how we could save this skill in that community. There's a short window of time in which the old glassworkers will be able to pass on their skills."

Tyrrell was introduced to Gamper and Scholten & Baijings (a collaboration between Stefan Scholten and Carole Baijings) by London-based design consultant Laura Houseley. "We were right away attracted by the heritage," says Scholten. "We looked at the history and the possibilities." Gamper had a similar reaction. "Waterford is quite a 'down' place; very industrial," he says. "But Anike had energy and an idea. I thought it could be a nice project."

The company remains in its early days. Its crystal is blown in the Czech Republic by Bohemia Machine ("There's just not enough people still blowing in Waterford," says Tyrrell) before being shipped back to Waterford to be cut and finished. The company's plan is to open facilities in Waterford within the next two years that would allow it to take production in-house and to offer apprenticeships in glass blowing and cutting. "It will be a huge relief to be honest," says Tyrrell. "There are a huge number of unemployed blowers and it would be great to take people on again."

Yet the company's current emphasis on cutting is apparent in its first two collections: Gamper's Cuttings series and Scholten & Baijings' Elements. Both collections are unlike much of Waterford's previous output, with Gamper's thickly cut tumblers in particular contrasting against crystal's reputation for finickiness and kitsch. "I wanted quite a generous cut and a sense of the handmade," says Gamper. "Waterford crystal usually has a small, triangular cut, but the material is soft enough that you can really just take parts of the material away."

"Martino went for a very interventionist approach and stripped material away like a woodcutter," says Tyrrell. "He got his hands on the machine and went for it."

The Elements collection displays similar attention to cut and finish. The tumblers utilise Scholten & Baijings' familiar design language of lines and grids, while also making use of layering. The pieces are split between transparent polished sections; opaque sandblasted portions; and areas that have been sandblasted before being polished, a technique that leads to a finish akin to placing a layer of fine wax paper over the glass.

"We wanted to use different grades of polishing and do a gradient in matte tones," says Scholten. This translucent etched layer let us play with layering across the pieces, which worked with our theme. We were very inspired by the Irish landscapes and wanted to make landscape compositions on the glasses."

The two collections represent something of a departure for Waterford's industry, which has traditionally been traditional and insular. "We're trying to reestablish an industry and want to take a fresh approach," says Tyrrell. "Which is why we worked with designers who haven't been around the industry and who we knew wouldn't just use the familiar heavy diamond cut." It is a point with which Scholten is sympathetic: "We looked at the history of Irish glass and just couldn't find the starting point we were looking for in inspiration for this collection. Irish glass cutting is very functional."

The emphasis on outside designers and progressive techniques and methodologies ("I wanted some irregularity so had to work to encourage the cutters to try some free-hand cutting, which they're not necessarily used to," says Gamper) draws J. Hill's Standard away from Waterford's traditionalism and into a region closer to that occupied by brands such as Czech Lasvit and Italian Wonderglass.

Both Lasvit and Wonderglass are companies working with heritage glass materials, but attempting to inject a new lease of life into these areas by collaborating with contemporary designers. While these two companies have focused on installation and contract work, J. Hill's Standard has focused on consumer objects, but the principle is the same – create frisson around a material that has drifted from focus by approaching big-name designers to work with it.

It is an increasingly familiar strategy, although whether it will succeed in the longterm is an open question. Both Lasvit and Wonderglass are young brands and the degree to which their reputation and impact extends beyond trade fairs is still uncertain. Are names like Martino Gamper and Scholten & Baijings enough to resuscitate an industry? In all likelihood it will be the less glamorous logistics work done behind the scenes at J. Hill's Standard – the attempt to establish production in Waterford; plans to initiate traineeships – that will prove decisive in the matter.

Nonetheless, it is a model in which Tyrrell seems to have faith. "The people left in this industry in Waterford are all makers and really didn't have an insight into creating a brand people were interested in," says Tyrrell. "A lot of makers don't see what marketing does and why you need to tell the story. Designing too. They would have all used the same makers who work for Waterford Crystal. We were anxious not to do something derivative."

With the brand's first collections now having debuted, it will be an anxious wait for Tyrrell to see whether her company and the designers it works with will have the desired effect on Waterford's industry. If successful, J. Hill's Standard has the potential to be a tonic for the city, something that has been much needed. When the Waterford Crystal Factory closed in January 2011, one of its workers summed up the situation to the *New York Times* thusly: "You can forget Waterford if you don't have Waterford Crystal." Whether J. Hill's Standard can fill this role remains to be seen.

WORDS Oll Stratford, *deputy editor of Disegno*

***Around 11 per cent of Waterford's population is over 65; roughly in line with Ireland's national average**