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Design's most interesting practitioners are embracing a hand-made ethos, a compelling antidote to the digital age.

CHAIRS MADE FROM BOILED **LEATHER.**

TABLES COMPOSED OF **LAVA.**

CABINETS HAND-FIRED IN **CLAY.**

SEA **SHELLS.**

STRAW, COPPER, CRYSTAL, **CHARCOAL.**

Materials typically used in handicraft are being turned into small batch, limited edition pieces by a raft of designers of mounting credibility and repute. xxx

A glance at today's design avant-garde suggests that while super-sleek mass production is not going away, it's not where the innovators are at.

"A lot of consumers today are interested in studio pieces, objects that are designed and manufactured by small teams working in their own, independent ateliers," says Wava Carpenter, a former director of Design Miami and the brains behind pamoto.com, one of the world's most comprehensive websites selling international design. "There's also a rising interest in things that used to be considered part of the decorative arts – things like glass, ceramics, woodwork, leather."

From left: Simon Hasan, Andrea Trimarchi, Gijs Bakker, Brodie Neill



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Andrea Trimarchi, Formafantasma

London-based Simon Hasan is a case in point. Hasan works alone in his studio with one intern, creating intriguing furniture and tableware using cuir bouilli, the same method that was employed 500 years ago to make medieval armour. Hasan boils leather until it is strong enough to make furniture. His Bermondsey stool looks like a disc of rich, caramel coloured saddle leather dripping down three shiny, lacquered brass legs. The Geno chair is constructed from cold-formed brass tubing and resin-laminated boiled leather so solid that it forms an aerated, arched back and base.

The Wrap series of glassware is a set of three, laboratory-grade, hand-crafted borosilicate glass vessels cradled in sectioned leather which provides insulation and visual interest. Fastened with turned brass fittings, they’re intriguingly sculptural, and speak to the new importance of hand-crafting.

In no way could Hasan’s pieces be deemed suitable cogs in Le Corbusier’s industrially produced, modernist “machine for living” – they’re too sensual to merely respond to function. And yet, they’re not simply decorative, either. “I love craft and heritage and historical technique,” Hasan tells me. “But I’m also a young man living in London in the 21st century so I’m very interested in new technologies. I’m a designer, so to my mind it’s about bringing design and craft together, making connections – not divisions.”

The integration of craft into design is an increasingly compelling proposition. But it’s a craft that’s far removed from the populist reduction to macramé and thrown clay, a nostalgia for 1970’s suburbia. It is much more a recourse to the arts and crafts movement in Britain and America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which saw a return to craftsmanship and authenticity in the face of anomic industrialisation. In a similar way, the massive advances in information technology can be seen as the impetus behind a renewed interest in the finely crafted object, produced with thoughtfulness and integrity. Authenticity is not just for hipsters.

“There’s an entire generation that is working across design disciplines, stretching the parameters of what was known as industrial design,” says Andrea Trimarchi, co-founder with Simone Farresin of Amsterdam-based Formafantasma, who I meet during September’s Parallels symposium on craft and design at the National Gallery of Victoria.

Trimarchi and Farresin have taken the design world by storm since graduating from the Netherlands’ Design Academy Eindhoven in 2009. “This generation is quite naturally asking the questions, do we need more objects, do we need more chairs? We are in a post-industrial moment, overloaded with objects. It’s not of interest to us to just create more stuff.”

The Design Academy Eindhoven is a hothouse for this new ethic. It does not structure its courses along traditional lines of graphic, interior, product or industrial design; rather, it has departments of Well-Being, Leisure, Identity and Mobility. This open-ended, transversal approach and research-led practice encourages students to conceive the world, and the products they are going to create for it, differently.

When I ask Trimarchi what he learnt there, he doesn’t hesitate: “Firstly, to take our work very seriously. Secondly, to be independent. And thirdly, discipline. Most definitely discipline.” Other Eindhoven alumni include Marcel Wanders, Hella Jongerius, Tord Boontje, Job Smets of Studio Job, Maarten Baas, and the Dutch design collective, Droog – every one of them producing quirky, highly original work that is eminently collectible and massively influential.

For his graduation show in 2002, Baas infamously took a blowtorch to a selection of baroque-looking furniture. Two years later, in collaboration with New York design gallery Moss, he did the same to a selection of iconic modernist pieces including Gerrit Reitveld’s Zig Zag chair of 1934 and a dining chair by Charles and Ray Eames. Modernist design, Baas seemed to be saying, is not an aesthetic inevitability.

“Actually, modernism was never a huge success on the mass market,” says Carpenter. “Its austerity was perceived as too severe, as somehow denying yourself pleasure. Function should include touching something in the consumer, should create a feeling. It’s not just about the form. Today it seems to be more about ethics, labours of love, skill, deeper narrative, distinctiveness, individuality.”

In March the NGV established a department of contemporary design and architecture, under the direction of curators Ewan McEoin and Simone LeAmon. In a sense, that new department is an extension of the gallery’s well-established department



Left: Urn from the Botanica collection. *Below:* Craftica for Fendi used animal by-products. *Opposite:* pieces from De Natura Fossilium used lava from Sicily’s Mount Etna.



Forma fabulous

When I first encountered the work of Formafantasma, I felt I was witnessing a paradigm shift. Perhaps seismic shift is more apropos, since the furniture and objects on show under the banner of De Natura Fossilium were the result of accumulated materials from, and reflection upon, the massive eruption of Sicily’s Mount Etna in 2013.

“We were hiking up the volcano at the time,” remembers Andrea Trimarchi, who along with partner Simone Farresin is Formafantasma. “And what we

realised was that Etna is a mine without miners, constantly excavating itself, spitting out these incredible minerals.” Minerals such as lava, basalt and pumice stone, which the pair turned into side tables, stools, épergnes and clocks. Monumental and stoic, the collection pays homage to the maestro of 1980s Memphis design, Ettore Sottsass, who also had a fascination for the volcanic Aeolian islands of Sicily and Stromboli. xxx

What was interesting to me



was the way in which narrative was seamlessly woven into the design just as beautifully as the brass threads that bisected the totemic side tables; the manner in which the objects were clearly intended to articulate a discourse about locality, authenticity and taste. And at the same time, add sexy allure to a room.

Trimarchi and Farresin met at design school in Florence. Sharing affinity, they became a couple in life. After graduating the master’s course at Design Academy Eindhoven in 2009, they became partners in their Amsterdam studio. Trimarchi is from the Sicilian town of Taormina, all glaring sun and brutal landscape. Farresin is from Venice, with its gilded light and formal, Palladian exuberance. “We’re from very different places, it’s true,” Trimarchi acknowledges. “But it’s rare that we have different ideas about ways of approaching a project.”

Projects such as 2012’s Craftica for fashion label Fendi, for whom they explored the potential of animal by-products by creating tanned salmon leather and sea sponge stools; tables of cow hide, Carrara marble and brass; and jugs of hand-blown glass, cow bones and leather.

With Anatomica della Luce (2014) they created a chandelier from cow bladders and brass. In Botanica (2011), urns were crafted from hardened forest wood, branches, unglazed ceramic and dewed shellac. In

each case the material research and innovation is primordial.

Spearheading a new aesthetic, their work is deliciously ambiguous, the means as interesting as the ends. At the same time, there’s a quiet poetry to much of it. And a respect – for origins, for craftspeople, for meaningful process.

Working in a studio below their home, the duo has three full-time staff and three freelancers on hand for when production gets intense. All eight are graduates of Eindhoven. If their output looks low-tech, that’s no accident: they adroitly sidestep the allure of mass production. But this is a business, and they are intent on growing it. So they’ve begun accepting commissions from industrial manufacturers.

“The problem is, most of the time companies expect us to just translate what we do at a studio level, our more experimental work, to the industrial context,” Trimarchi says. “But that’s not interesting. For us, when we work for industrial companies we try to feed into and change the way big companies engage in industrial production. That’s what we think of as our role in industrial design. It may seem a bit arrogant, but we are part of a generation trying to change the society.”

In 2017 Formafantasma will participate in the NGV Triennial, creating an immersive installation of documentation, video and product focused on the mining of valuable e-waste. *ST*





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of decorative arts, and in that way the relationship between design and craft is directly interrogated by the curators.

It couldn't come at a more interesting time. "We need to get over the idea that design and craft are antagonistic," says McEoin. "There's no need to distinguish between them. Sure, design is generally mass produced whereas craft is artisanal, but that's increasingly irrelevant. For the NGV, I want to assemble a collection of the most interesting people doing the most interesting things."

The two-day Parallels conference drew a dozen international speakers including Milanese designer Antonio Arico, architect Shun Horiki from Tokyo, Cyril Zammit of Design Days Dubai, Sasha Titchkosky of Sydney's Koskela, which collaborates with Indigenous artists, and Jon Goulder, creative director of furniture at Adelaide's Jam Factory. There were also speakers from Southern Guild gallery which represents South African limited edition design. xxx

"So much of Parallels was about trying to get designers and makers in our sector together," says LeAmon. Parallels also hosted a four-day camp at architect John Wardle's estate on Bruny Island, off Tasmania's south-east coast.

"We aimed for a collegial atmosphere, and there was a lot of positivity from both designers and makers," LeAmon says. "This is really important, since globally there is a huge shift to small-batch production and the alliance between these two fields needs to be strong."

Also at the Parallels conference was Dutch designer Gijs Bakker, who co-founded Droog with Renny Ramakers. Bakker used to head the masters program at Design Academy Eindhoven and is a maker of much-coveted jewellery, but he warns against romanticising the handmade. "I hate craft, hate it!" he laughs. "When I was making small production jewellery with Emmy [van Leersum, his wife] people would come visit us and they would not be interested in what we were making – just in watching our hands make it. Artisanal can be seen as just a substitute, a nostalgia."

To be sure, industrial production is not going away any time soon. But we are witnessing the rise of a new generation of designers, an unaffiliated group of global creators who share a belief in authenticity, integrity, locality, historicity, a new materiality – and encouraging alternative means of production. A group that's not in the least bit interested in generating just more stuff. ●



Clockwise from top: Wrap pendants; Bermondsey Stool; Wrap glassware and Slice Copper vases all by Simon Hasan.



"Tasmania is known for its designs in wood, and I did learn carpentry. But that was the founding stone of my process. From there I learnt how to use my sculptural eye, more than I learnt how to use a table saw." *Brodie Neill*

Above: Brodie Neill in front of his Remix lounge and e-chair at the Rigg Prize, NGV. *Right:* Neill's Alpha dining chair. *Below:* Reverb wire chair and *below right:* Wishbone Bench seat.



Wandering eye

Brodie Neill's designs are sculptural, sensual, technically exceptional. Each of his pieces also tests the limits of a technology. Stylistically precise, they're informed by an in-depth knowledge of materials and how they can be made to perform in new ways. xx

A lot of that knowledge comes from classical design training at the University of Tasmania, Neill's home state. "My education there was very much hands-on," says the now London-based designer. "Tasmania is known for its designs in wood, and I did learn carpentry. But that was the founding stone of my process. From there I learnt how to use my sculptural eye, more than I learnt how to use a table saw."

At the Rhode Island School of Design, where he completed post-graduate studies in 2004, Neill refined that sculptural eye. "I see things in form, in terms of negative and positive, line and void." This way of seeing has resulted in some exceptional pieces. For example, the e-chair,

a slick, swooping loop, a Möbius strip in space. Produced by Italian manufacturer Kundalini, its lacquered fibreglass form keeps the eye moving along the variable breadths of the continuous strip.

The Remix chaise longue is an extruded figure-8 shape, carved from a mixture of reclaimed and sourced plastics and woods. Amassed into a solid block, the randomly arranged splices are then carved into shape by a state-of-the-art 5 Axis CNC router. The Remix is a limited edition of 10, each one a different arrangement of colours, "each just slightly different to the other, adding interest to the edition," he says.

His @chair earned Neill a place on *Time* magazine's best designs list for 2008. Not only a compelling rendering of the @ grapheme into 3D, it's also a savvy commentary on our immersion in Twitter culture. In fact, Brodie says, "I often see tweets from friends who spot my work around the world, in sci-fi movies and corporate offices."

With his limited edition pieces selling globally, in 2013 Neill launched an industrial production series Made in Ratio, working from his headquarters in London's edgy Shoreditch, and selling through select retailers such as Living Edge in Australia. "Made in Ratio came from the realisation that I don't have to do everything myself. In fact, I shouldn't do everything myself. It functions much as a diffusion line does in fashion." The comparison is potent: Neill's wife is fellow Tasmanian, fashion designer Fleur Watson.

Industrially produced they may

be, but his Cowrie chair and rocker in plywood faced with ebony ash (its gentle form something of a riff off Eero Saarinen) looks anything but mass. Neither does the Pleat bench, folded from a single sheet of Corian®. Or this year's Alpha dining chair in solid walnut or ash – so sensually shaped, you just have to touch it. Stackable, it makes great shapes in space.

"Why should a production piece be any less beautiful or any less emotional than a limited-edition piece?" asks Neill. Quite. *ST*

