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BLUE BY YOU

How an Australian designer was inspired by ocean waste.

BY *Karen McCartney*

IN THE world of design shows, there are buzzwords that have a currency to a certain point, then become exhausted. “Immersive” is one such, tipping over the edge at September’s London Design Festival. Its overuse was a shame for Tasmanian designer Brodie Neill, whose installation at the ME London hotel in the Strand was the real deal. Situated in its 10-storey-high atrium, Neill’s *Drop in the Ocean* combined sight, sound, technology and tactility to make a point about the plastic polluting our seas.

“The problem of ocean plastic waste is not unique to Australia – this is a global issue, which has been accelerating over the past 50 years,” Neill says. “We share responsibility and it’s time to rethink our relationships to plastic, the environment and waste.”

As part of the piece, a single drop of water falling from a great height hits a circular pond, creating ripples which travelled like breaking waves up the walls. The simple sensory experience was driven by complex technology. “There was a GPS timer on the roof synced to a private Wi-Fi connection,” Neill says. “A drop of water was released every minute and the wave visuals were the result of four linked video projectors.” Music was punctuated by the sound of crashing waves, with flickering candles adding scent to the air and helping to create a moody atmosphere.



Amid the frantic pace of London life, it was a contemplative, restorative moment.

Neill studied fine art at the University of Tasmania before taking a masters at the Rhode Island School of Design in the US. He’s lived in London for 12 years, finding a niche by marrying digital acumen with an understanding of traditional skills. Key pieces include his Remix chaise longue, with its experimental manufacturing processes and radical form, Cowrie chair and Supernova table.

Above: Brodie Neill at his *Drop in the Ocean* installation at the ME London hotel. Above left: his Cowrie chair.

We’ll be seeing more of Neill in Australia over summer, with Microsoft choosing him and his work to feature in a new advertising campaign. “I think they liked that my work has a strong digital aesthetic and that its futuristic form pops on the screen,” he says.

Neill collaborated with environmentalists, scientists and beachcombers to collect and reconstitute fragments of plastic washed up around the globe to use in *Drop in the Ocean* and his furniture pieces. It was painstaking



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From left: the Remix chaise longue, carved from different woods and plastics; Neill's Gyro table.



work, with sacks of it delivered to his office for cleaning and sorting. The pond-like vessel in the London installation was composed of more than half a million plastic fragments. "We experimented with melting it down, with disastrous results," says Neill. "So we work with it cold, combining it with minimal binding resins to make the forms."

Neill was moved to action by a trip to Bruny Island, off the coast of Tasmania, where he saw plastic washed up on the pristine shoreline. The first piece using what Neill calls "ocean terrazzo", a speckled composite incorporating pieces of plastic, was a blue circular table called Gyro, commissioned for the London

Design Biennale 2016. The table is now part of the National Gallery of Victoria's permanent collection and is due to go on show again as part of the NGV Triennial in December.

Neill's designs vary, with one-offs sold via European galleries, production pieces that retail through his brand Made In Ratio (here via Living Edge), and large-scale works. His eight-metre ovoid sculpture *Portal*, due to be installed in late 2018, has been designed to act as a landmark/meeting place in Hobart. "For me it's about resolving design issues, so whether a bottle opener or a bridge, an ephemeral installation or a permanent structure, the processes are the same." ■