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

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CHAIRS MADE FROM BOILED LEATHER.
TABLES COMPOSED OF LAVA.
CABINETS HAND-FIRED IN CLAY.
SEA SHELLS.
STRAW, COPPER, CRYSTAL, CHARCOAL.

”
“We are in a post-industrial moment, overloaded with objects. It’s not of interest to us to just create more stuff.”

Andrea Trimarchi, Formafantasma

London-based Simon Hasan is a case in point. Hasan works alone in his studio with three full-time staff and three freelancers on hand for when production gets intense. All eight are graduates of Eindhoven if their output looks too fancy for no accident they actually collaborate the allure of mass production. But this is business, and they are interested growing it. So they have begun accepting commissions from industrial manufacturers.

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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.

"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.

"I love craft and heritage and historical technique. 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; to my mind it's about making connections – not divisions." Simon Hasan

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

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. “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.”

Wandering eye

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