

“We need to become innovators, not just lobbyists”

— BRODIE NEILL

Designer Brodie Neill, with his Cowrie chair (left) and Pleat bench, is a champion of repurposing plastics that wash up on coastlines around the world.



THE ENVIRONMENTALIST BRODIE NEILL

As a designer morally aroused by the abuse of ecosystems, Brodie Neill has long made the point about the pursuit of short-term profits in pieces that seamlessly marry digital technology with craft tradition. But the international tipping point for the Tasmanian-born activist, creative director and self-described “default designer”, who has lived in London for the last 12 years, came with the commission to create a piece for the Australian Pavilion at the 2016 London Design Biennale.

Theming to the politicised ideal of a Utopia by Design, this inaugural global event played to Neill’s pet passions. He decided to illustrate his concerns about the estimated 150 million tonnes of plastics polluting the ocean in a piece that contemporised the 19th-century specimen table, a glory display of the precious stones plundered from lands far away.

“We took the microplastics, the stuff that is coating the coastlines of the world, and treated them as the equivalent of the winemaker’s grapes,” he says of the weathered blue-and-green composite that was inlaid into the Gyro Table, so-called after the currents circulating ‘soups’ of plastics around the planet. “They are precious bits that we reappraised as gems and re-contextualised in an object that makes people think about their everyday practices.”

To the question of where these ‘gems’ were sourced, Neill recalls joining with the like minds of marine science and sending out the

call on social media for beachcombers of the world to aid in bagging washed-up plastics. The reaction was immediate and immeasurable. From Cornwall in the United Kingdom to the once-pristine beaches on Bruny Island, part of Neill’s home state of Tasmania, the stuff poured in for cleaning, processing and colour-coding into sacks of micro-bits that became known as ‘ocean terrazzo’.

They arrange in latitudinal and longitudinal display in the circular surface of the Gyro Table — which, suggestive of the urgency for round-table talks on single-use plastics, seditiously draws the viewer into its galactic haze. Exhibiting amid the maritime history paintings as part of the National Gallery of Victoria’s 2018 Triennial, the Gyro Table made its most eloquent point about the conquering impulses of man and their consequences.

“Because we can just channel our waste back into a circular economy, oil and mining companies keep pulling raw materials out of the Earth’s core,” says Neill. “We don’t really need more, but I think we need to lighten up about practice and process. We need to become innovators, not just lobbyists.”

Parlaying the ‘ocean terrazzo’ of microplastics into a commercial venture that motivates beach clean-ups and creates revenue streams for charities, Neill is leading an aesthetic movement that questions the morality of both consumer and creator choice. “Is it time for a sea change?” he asks. “You bet!” brodieneill.com VL