

Collecting



Marc Fish at his workshop and school in Newhaven – photographed for the FT by Leo Goddard



Sycamore haze:  
Marc Fish's  
'Ethereal  
Console Table'  
(2019) — Todd Merrill  
Studio / Simon Eidon

# Wooden wonders

**Materials** | Marc Fish is one of several ambitious makers

whose furniture aims to excite. By *Josephine Lawson-Tancred*

What's the appeal of woodwork in an age of industrial design? For many, it's an image of sensitive artisans bringing out the expressive, even spiritual qualities of wood.

Furniture designer Marc Fish entertains no such illusions. "For us it's not about wood, it's about a material that we can manipulate to give us the forms we want," he says. On this point he is candid, although the statement feels a bit blasphemous coming from a four-time winner of the Guild Mark award and the founder of his own furniture school.

"If I don't make things out of wood next year, I don't mind. Maybe it doesn't make for happy reading, but we don't over-romanticise about wood."

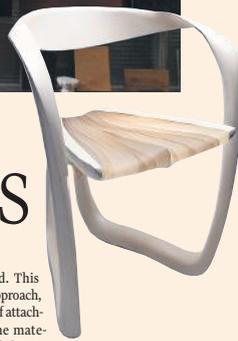
Fish is among a number of craftspeople who, with the aid of modern technology, are developing new ways to assert their will over wood. The result is several series and standalone works

without a unifying style, though each is made possible by a specialised technique of layering veneers — thin slices of wood — known as micro stack lamination. In "Ethereal", Fish's latest series of tables and chairs, these compressed veneers fan out, creating gaps that are inlaid with resin. Each form is strikingly graceful and lithe, rising up weightlessly while the splayed slivers of sycamore trap the light in a soft pink haze. A chair, a lounge chair and two console tables will be presented by Todd Merrill at next month's PAD London fair.

When I visit Fish's East Sussex studio, a former factory close to the coast, it is swarming with students and we soon retreat to his office. There he introduces me to a stack of shelves filled with tiles, shells and other unidentifiable objects that he picks up and plays with. These, it turns out, are carefully catalogued samples from Fish's forays into material science, a process of trial and error that takes up as much as a quarter

of his workload. This experimental approach, and Fish's lack of attachment to any one material, reflects a life-long tendency to explore new ground. After spending seven years working at a bank straight after school, Fish turned his hobby of restoring cars into a full-time job and gained the welding skills necessary to start making metal furniture. By the time three shops selling his metalwork closed down suddenly in the late 1990s, Fish was already getting interested in the distinctive new woodworking style of the American furniture artist Wendell Castle and his British counterpart John Makepeace. Disappointed to find nobody teaching in a contemporary style, Fish opted instead for a traditional training at the City and Guilds of London Institute.

It wasn't until 2009 that Fish, a long-time admirer of French architect Hector Guimard and Art Nouveau, saw Louis Majorelle's 1903 "L'Orchidée" desk in Paris. Bewildered by its fluid forms, he realised that "in the 1900s, this would have just blown people's minds." Fish took it as a challenge, wondering "can we still excite [people] to that kind of level over 100 years later?" For his own "L'Orchidée" desk, Fish spent three



Weightless grace:  
Marc Fish's  
'Ethereal Chair'  
Todd Merrill Studio / Simon Eidon

months prototyping a sliding tambour top that, rather than rolling back and forth with the help of slats, exploits the flexibility of stack lamination to bend repeatedly without cracking.

It was a revelation, and for the past decade Fish has worked exclusively in stack lamination. It not only offers him unparalleled strength and durability, but the opportunity to play conceptual tricks. Take, for instance, his best-seller "Nautilus" from 2011.

Tasked with representing the cross-section of a shell, Fish found that the veneers' double compound curves could wrap around the edges while the visible stripes of glue in between recalled the real shell's internal growth lines. It delighted Fish to find that an artificial technique might mimic the

and I glimpse the ground through its frail, interlaced veins. In his first attempt at scaling it up, Fish filled the gaps with clear resin but believed he had lost the leaf's essence. Further experimentation gave him the results he wanted from frosted resin. "All of a sudden the negative space has an ethereal, positive element to it. It's ghostly."

Born of this seamless merging of resin and wood, Fish considers "Ethereal" to be a new third material. A similar hybrid emerges in the work of Francesco Perini, who carries on the family tradition of marquetry at his atelier in Tuscany. Defying all expectations of the medium, he will exhibit a new rug from his "Incontro" series on Gallery Fumi's stand at PAD; it is formed of curved oak slabs joined by fluttering lines of travertine, arranged in much the same style as natural wood grain.

British artist Eleanor Lakelin's "Echoes of Amphora" series moulds seemingly ancient, shattered vessels out of blocks of burr, several of which will be presented at PAD by Sarah Myerscough. The outer structure, bleached, sculpted and scorched, is a foil to the exposed sections of untouched burr, amplifying its original, craggy surface, which Lakelin considers a living substance.

Natural tree structures are also present in the work of French wood turner Pascal Oudet, whose works undergo a similarly intensive process. After the surface is shaved down to be wafer-thin, the softer early growth lines that occur in spring are sandblasted away, leaving behind an exquisite, naturally woven crotch of later growth lines and medullary rays. Few of his objects look like usable vessels.

"In the earlier years people didn't get it," Fish says of his increasingly eclectic portfolio of furniture. "They'd never seen work like ours before so didn't know what to do with it." He plans to keep surprising us and, right now, wood does the trick, although no material is ruled out and he happily returns to experiments that failed in the past. At one point he plucks out a disc of resin with one side accidentally fractured in an exothermic reaction. It looks like a crumpled. He gives it a long, interrogating look and asks, "That'd be a pretty cool tabletop, if you could... Come back next year and see if we've done it."

PAD London, September 30-October 6  
pad-fairs.com/london

'People didn't get it. They'd never seen work like ours before so didn't know what to do with it'

natural process of accrual that is organic growth.

The discovery recalls the work of the German artist Pia Maria Raeder, whose "Sea Anemone" collection, launched in 2016, amasses beech rods fixed at varying heights to form a rippled surface resembling sea anemones or coral. Two of her table lights will be debuted at PAD by Paris's Galerie BSL, their suggestive proliferations blurring the boundaries between sculpture and design.

Fish's ability to morph wood into forms not normally associated with the material is something he looks for in the work of others — including fellow British designer Charlie Whinney, who creates heavily sculptural works by steam-bending long strips of wood into tangled contortions. His works are at once like chance configurations that might evolve in tumbleweed and precisely wrought compositions that defy plausibility.

For years, Fish likewise pushed stack lamination to new extremes, with see-it-to-believe-it tables loosely looped like ribbons around a structure of tight twists. Now he is turning to less stylised, more abstract impressions of nature. "How do you take something that's delicate or see-through, scale it up, yet keep that same essence?" He hands me a small skeleton leaf laminated in plastic