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Stepping up New directions at London's Design Museum – PAGE 4

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Sustainable design hits the stands

PAD London | Makers at the fair unite natural and recycled materials and new techniques. By *Susan Moore*



When Fernando Laposse returned to the Mexican village he had known since his childhood to source maize leaves for a design project, he discovered that this staple corn was no longer growing in the mountains around Tonahuixtla. Years of industrial farming with chemicals, introduced to improve productivity, had resulted in devastating soil erosion. The place was a ghost town – most of its indigenous community had been obliged to find work in the US. Those who remained had, however, thanks to a small government grant, begun to reintroduce traditional, pre-Hispanic terracing and had planted 200-300 agaves. This fleshy, spiky-leaved succulent was the only fast-growing desert plant able to cope with the climate and terrain and provide root systems to retain soil and water and act as a barrier against the wind. "There was no sustainable plan as to what would happen after the two-year funding stopped," says the engagingly energetic London-based Laposse. "It was time to change my life." That was 2015.

Now there are 80,000 agaves, and the hairy furniture he designs from sisal, the agave's fibre, is on show at this year's PAD London fair in Berkeley Square (October 10-16). Sarah Myerscough Gallery presents Laposse's black Sisal Pup, no less companionable or endearing than its canine counterparts, the

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Left: Thierry Jeannot's "Transmutation" chandelier (2022). Courtesy of the artist/Minerva Gallery



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Valerio Capo, left, and Sam Pratt, business and life partners behind Gallery Fumi — Thomas Joseph Wright/Penguins Egg for Gallery Fumi

'We only show work we would have at home'

Gallery Fumi | Sam Pratt and Valerio Capo want their designers to take risks. By Victoria Woodcock

In the office at Mayfair's Gallery Fumi, owners Sam Pratt and Valerio Capo invite me to take a seat; the chair is, in fact, a fitting introduction to the dealers' design ethos.

One of British designer Max Lamb's Scrap Poly chairs, it is constructed from irregular slabs of expanded polystyrene slathered in a glossy, cream-coloured coating of polyurethane rubber. It is weird and wonderful, and the office holds plenty of other indicators of Fumi's unconventional take on collectible design: a playful neon squiggle of a lamp is a collaboration by London-based creatives Saelia Aparicio and Jochen Holz; a black and white vase by Anglo-Dutch duo Githero is covered with a blue-tinted seaweed print. The table is another of Lamb's Poly pieces, its super-shiny white surface a striking counterpoint to the rugged, somewhat neolithic-like structure.

Lamb has been part of the Fumi line-up since the gallery was launched in 2008. "We called up Max when he had just graduated and told him we loved his work; he was the first person that we showed," says Sierra Leone-born Pratt, whose middle name, Olorofunmi, was shortened for the new venture. "At the

time, Valerio was a marketing consultant," says Pratt of Italian-born Capo. (The men are life and business partners.) "And I was a trader in the City. But we both hated our jobs and really wanted a change."

Diving into the design world with no previous experience, they set up their first space in Shoreditch. "We wanted to bring something new to the market, to show designers that we were undiscovered," says Pratt, adding that they swiftly established a set of selection guidelines that they still adhere to: "We only show work that we would have at home. We always have to both agree on a designer. And we never work with anybody that we don't like as people."

"Even when we've been offered the possibility of representing a well-known name that could help the gallery," says Capo, "we've had to politely decline if we really don't feel it." This approach has not always been an immediate recipe for success. "Sometimes it takes a very long time for people to get the work," says Pratt, citing Lamb's lacquered Urushi pieces, created with master Japanese artisans in the city of Wajima, whose middle name, Olorofunmi, was shortened for the new venture. "At the

We didn't sell a single thing. But now it's in museums."

One change they've made along the way is the gallery's location. "We quickly found out that our clients don't necessarily live in Shoreditch, which is why we ended up here in Mayfair," says Pratt of the two-floor Hay Hill space they moved into in 2017, which they extended to a double frontage in 2021. Their current exhibition (on until 22 October) is *Haptic Nature* by design duo Voukenas Petrides — the creative partnership of Greek designer Andreas Voukenas and American architect Steven Petrides, whose organic and statuque furniture pieces begin as plaster forms. While some stay in this state, others are cast in bronze. From throne-like chairs to huge hanging lights, each piece is handmade in their Athens studio as a limited edition.

Fumi's previous solo show was very different, dedicated to the work of multidisciplinary artist Saelia Aparicio. It included the oddly anthropomorphic neon lights with Holz, as well as a cartoonish, figurative fireplace. Most intriguing, though, are her rectangular



'Matilda' (2022) by Saelia Aparicio
Courtesy the artist/Gallery Fumi. Photo: Thomas Joseph Wright/Penguins Egg

birch plywood forms cut and ink-illustrated to resemble folded-over bodies. "She focuses on the 'not beautiful'," says Pratt of her distinct aesthetic. "She enhances what other people could consider is ugly," adds Capo, highlighting the *Matilda* mirror, framed with a fringed hairstyle and big sticking-out ears. "It's a message against bullying. Kids in school usually get bullied about big ears, but Saelia has gilded them to make them more noticeable, to make them special."

Voukenas Petrides' and Aparicio's contrasting styles will be brought together by Fumi at PAD London. "We have such varied taste, and we try to reflect that in the gallery," says Pratt, adding that a common theme in their selection is "the handmade and craft". Also in the PAD mix is British sculptor Rowan Mersh, whose intricate wall artworks painstakingly piece together a multitude of individual elements — from shells to coffee stirrers. At PAD London in 2016, Mersh's hanging piece "Asabikeshiinh" (Dreamcatcher), constructed from thousands of sliced pink sea-shell shells, was awarded the Most Hennessy Prize for Best Contemporary Design, and this year's PAD creation is an amalgamation of tiny leather coils.

"I love Fumi's visionary aspect, they are always pushing boundaries to find something new but meaningful," says Finnish textile artist Kustaa Sakki,

'When we first showed the Urushi work, nobody looked at it for two years. But now it's in museums'



Clockwise from above: 'Summer Solstice' (2022) by Jie Wu; 'Hold Me High' (2022) by Githero; detail of a new leather piece by Rowan Mersh — Courtesy the artist/Gallery Fumi. Photo: Thomas Joseph Wright/Penguins Egg

whose PAD project with Fumi is a series of cabinets combining oak with woven fabric made of Japanese paper developed at TextielMuseum in the Netherlands. Called "Hiisi", the design is based around a creature in Finnish mythology.

"As a gallery, we always try to push our designers totally outside their comfort zone," says Pratt of how they prompted Sakki to move into furniture. Most recently, the Fumi duo has been encouraging young Chinese-born, London-based designer Jie Wu to grow from miniature boxes to large furniture. "The side table I've made for PAD," says Wu, "was inspired by ancient Chinese palace lanterns, which were found in the imperial garden and were symbols of light and peace."

All her works are produced in resin, embedded with wooden elements salvaged from her father's antique business in China. It's an unlikely combination of materials. But as with the Fumi selection as a whole — or indeed the founders themselves, who describe themselves as "like yin and yang" — it's the cohesive vision of contrasting elements that is so enticing.

galleryfumi.com

Sustainable design hits PAD's stands

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fibres for this bench dyed with native indigo, zapote husks and cochineal.

Laposse is one of a new generation of designers and craftsmen represented at PAD who have shifted their focus to sustainability — the use of responsibly sourced materials or the reuse of existing ones.

Where skilled artisans of the luxury goods trades once worked with precious and exotic ivory, tortoise shell, coral, shagreen (shark skin) and boldly figured hardwoods imported from the New World, their successors exploit the potential of discarded plastic bottles, industrial foam, stone offcuts and metal aggregates or byproducts such as rice straw, sawdust or feathers from the food industry. Their wood is sourced locally from storm-felled trees. The language of their lexicon is revealing; fragments are "reconciled", materials recycled, upcycled or repurposed and, in every sense, revalued.

In fact, Laposse has even taken sustainability a step further, helping to provide a positive future for the village. He devised an ingenious community project, addressing both land regeneration and social repair, around sisal.

Once a thriving industry used to make ropes, carpets and fishing nets, its production halted with the introduction of plastics. A product designer by training, the 26-year-old began to explore its character and develop new techniques of hand-knotting and weaving the harvested fibre. Hairy, animalistic shapes began to emerge.

"It is how the material behaves," he says. "It naturally forms organic rounded shapes, like animals and the dwellings they create." Thus his combed hairy furniture was born, the planting, harvesting and crafting of its sisal providing full-time employment for 12 local families.

A hundred and fifty miles away in Mexico City, a few years before Laposse changed his life, Thierry Jeannot began treating recycled PET plastic bottles as if they were crystal to make the grandest of 18th-century-style chandeliers. This paradox questioned both luxury and classicism. His current Transmutations light fittings (Ammann Gallier) ever more imaginatively combine recycled plastic bottle parts which have been melted, dyed and deformed into spunbells of radiating colour.

There are plenty of other sustainable designs to be seen at PAD. Zaview Wong

describes himself as "gardening in an industrial wilderness". The Eindhoven-based maker likes to work with reclaimed and unconventional materials that invite transformation. "I use the pairing of materials that are perceived as either precious or disposable to generate a new understanding of value," he says. In the case of his Revalued Foam table, these are EPS and PU insu-

trial foams in bright colours and gold leaf (Privécollektie).

In Beirut, Tessa and Tara Sakhi work with a team of local craftsmen to produce moulded tables where the offcuts of semi-precious stones and aggregates of metal powder found in the factories surrounding their studio are set in resin (Galerie Gosserez).

This ingenuity extends to novel ways

of re-engaging with the natural world. Feathers are the stock-in-trade of Julien Vermeulen, one of France's last *plumiers*.

This master craftsman developed new techniques of dyeing, steaming, shaping and gluing recycled feathers which would otherwise be destroyed. His huge black wave-patterned wall panels exploit the material's nuance and texture and the play of light and shade across their surface (shown at Maison Parisienne).

Perhaps the most unexpected collaboration represented here is between designer, artisan and silkworm. Diane

French designer explains. "It was very important to me that I should find something organic."

Since her drawn forms resembled cocoons, a friend at the Ecole Boulle suggested that she contact the entrepreneur Clara Hardy at Sericre, the only manufactory in France producing non-woven silk through a newly patented technique. This enterprise is reviving sericulture in the historic silk-production region of the Cévennes, rehabilitating an organic ecosystem by training silkworm breeders and planting mulberry trees on whose leaves the silkworm feed.

The lamp stands, basswood branches echoing de Kergal's designs, are sourced from the Brittany forest of ARCA workshop's founder Steven Lepitizé and meticulously stripped of bark and brightly polished.

En masse, the Emergence lights suggest a surreal lunar forest. When turned off, the cloudy lamps seem formed of solid matter. When lit, the intertwined threads of silk of these cocoons — a promise of metamorphosis — become near-transparent. "I am an urban woman, but this project is my dialogue with nature," says de Kergal, smiling. "There is nothing more beautiful in the world than a silkworm becoming a butterfly."

PAD London runs October 10-16, padesignart.com



Fernando Laposse on his white Sisal Pup stool (2019) — Courtesy designer/Sarah Myerborough