





BRUSSELS

THE DASH OF SALT

Beginning with humble seasalt, a forward-thinking designer has created a material as impressive as marble at a fraction of the weight

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There was a time when salt was a valuable commodity. In the late Roman Empire and through the Middle Ages, it was known as 'white gold'; its value derived from its ability to preserve food, and the fact it was relatively difficult to obtain. Salt deposits in an area could enrich a city or an entire country.

These days the ubiquity of salt is a major health consideration, and a kilo sells for 87 pence in the supermarket. But not if that salt has been sculpted into furniture by the French-born, Brussels-based designer Roxane Lahidji, who will exhibit at the contemporary design fair Pad London when it returns to Berkeley Square next week.

Lahidji studied social design at the Design Academy Eindhoven, in the Netherlands, graduating in 2017; since then her aim has been to work with locally sourced, renewable materials, using environmentally friendly processes, and exploring the concept of value in her work.

She first started to use salt when researching at the art foundation Luma Arles in Provence. The project with which she was involved, Atelier Luma, focuses specifically on innovative new designs working with local materials, as well as employing traditional crafts and artisans in the area; and one of the materials to be widely found in that part of southern France happens to be sea salt.

After two years of research and experimentation, Lahidji came up with her own technique for working with the material, and she developed her first pieces, a collection of small tables and objects named Marbled Salts, due to their similarity to coloured marbles. These won several awards for design innovation, and she has continued to work with salt, with increasing success and ingenuity, ever since.

The recipe that Lahidji eventually developed for making salt into a workable material for producing furniture is, she says, 'a bit of a secret'. Unrefined powdered sea salt arrives at her Brussels studio in 20kg bags, and she then mixes the powder with organic binding materials that enable the salt granules to stick together. The resulting mixture is then humidified so that it can be moulded into shape.

For a free-form piece such as the table pictured, Lahidji will make a 'mother shape' or model of the object first, sometimes using foam, at other times making the model from salt: 'It's very easy to work with; I can work with it like clay and it dries in the oven the same way at low heat, 30-40C,' she says. A Plexiglas or rubber mould is then taken from the model, and used to make the final piece.

A large object such as a table is created gradually, over about six weeks. 'We build up a piece like this in layers of 2cm,' Lahidji explains. 'Each layer has to dry before the next one is applied, so we can add 2cm to the piece every 12 hours until we get to the final shape.'

The last step in the process is to apply layers of transparent resin, which reveals the aesthetic qualities and natural colour variations of the salt and protects the finished piece from scratches, humidity and UV rays. For this, Lahidji uses a resin partially made of PLA, or polylactic acid, a type of bioplastic derived from renewable, natural sources such as corn starch

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or sugar cane. 'The resin we use is 40 per cent bio-based. It's the most eco-friendly option that is currently on the market,' says Lahidji. 'The salt mixture itself is completely reusable, recyclable and biodegradable. The resin, depending on the nature of the piece, represents between one and 10 per cent of the total volume.'

Her pendant, wall and table lamps, for example - an application for which the luminous quality of the salt is particularly well suited - won't be subject to much daily contact, so they only need two layers of resin, applied by brush. A tabletop, on the other hand, which will need to be far more hard-wearing, will require a 3-5mm coating. Once the resin is dry, the final piece will have the cool, solid finish of stone, yet will have only between a third and a half of the weight of marble or granite (the table pictured, for example, weighs 50kg).

Lahidji is continually experimenting with different forms, many of which, in line with her commitment to sustainable practices, are organic in shape, and often informed by the natural world.

'I'm really inspired by the desert, rocky landscapes and mountains; I'm quite a mountain fan,' she says. 'I used to ski a lot as a kid, and I also used to spend a lot of time by the seaside, so I'm really into this relationship between snow and sand; that's something I try to bring out in my pieces.'

On the flip side, there is a distinctly futuristic, technological element to her aesthetic, too. 'I'm also a big fan of science fiction,' she says, 'so I really like all those '70s-style, curvy, very aerodynamic shapes; that's part of my inspiration as well.'

The fact that the finished pieces bear such a resemblance to expensive hardstones in both look and feel neatly makes the point that is behind Lahidji's work: she has taken a very cheap, common material, and alchemised it, in an ecological fashion, into something desirable and luxurious.

For the future, she has ambitions to incorporate salt in her work with other materials, such as wood, glass and metal, and perhaps work with responsibly quarried stones, too. 'It's a fascination of mine, because I'm sort of imitating real stone with my material,' she says. 'We only produce on commission, so although I am always experimenting on the side, I don't have the funds to produce all of the things that I might want to.'

Wherever the future takes her work, it will no doubt be in a direction that both supports the planet's natural resources, and demonstrates how beautiful they can be. ●

Roxane Lahidji will be represented by 88 Gallery at Pad London, Berkeley Square, London W1, October 10-15 (padesignart.com)



Roxane Lahidji in her Brussels studio