

LUXURY



Winter style wrapped up

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BOLD AND BOULDER

Working with rough stone and molten glass, an innovative designer at this year's PAD fair brings imagination to the table

By Jessica DOYLE

Ever since it first opened its doors in Paris in 1998, the Pavilion of Art & Design (PAD) fair has been championing the best in contemporary and 20th-century work. Its London edition, which was established in 2006, returns this month after a three-year pandemic-induced break, bringing with it a cornucopia of prestigious pieces, from modern art and decorative accessories to furniture and jewellery.

Among the 60 galleries exhibiting this year will be Carpenters Workshop Gallery, which will be showing the work of London-based designer Paul Cockledge. Known for his large-scale public works – including, most recently, a light sculpture for the new Dior flagship store in Paris – Cockledge likes to push the creative possibilities of the materials with which he works to the limit. Take, for example, his Slump series of dining and coffee tables, so-called because of the way the glass top of each table is draped over the base, a new collection of which he has produced for this year's PAD.

Cockledge's idea for the Slump series came from the glass itself, and a desire to rework a normally flat material to give it a three-dimensional quality. 'I'm always in factories, where there are racks filled with sheets of marble or metal or glass, because that's the result of the industrialisation of materials – it's cheaper and easier to make, transport and install something flat than something curvy,' he says. 'You see sheets of glass everywhere in the modern world, from architectural glazing, to roofs, to pieces of furniture; but I didn't want to work with a flat material. I felt there was a kind of tension within it; almost like it needed to relax.' The challenge, as he saw it, was 'to change this flat thing and take away that tension and rigidity'.

The solution came in the form of slumping, a glass-making technique whereby sheet glass is laid over a mould and heated in a kiln until it softens and drops, taking on the shape of the support. His first Slump tables were made by draping the glass over steel tubes, which acted as the table legs. It was during lockdown in 2020, while walking his dog in Hackney Marshes, that the idea came to him to use rocks as the bases.

'I was walking by the river, and I noticed the way the rocks were poking up above the surface, which was really interesting to me,' he says. 'I just had this feeling that the collection could do with something a bit more natural. When you slump the glass on to the rock, the rock gives it this texture that looks like kinetic water – when you see water running over rocks in nature.'

To make the tables, Cockledge selects the rocks from a quarry in Essex. 'They have rocks from all over the place, some of them formed over 150 million years ago,' he says. 'It's an interesting part of the project: the people who work there must be thinking they've got a group of mad people in the yard, because we're looking at rocks saying, "Is that table height?" or, "Could this be a coffee table?" We need to think about what the glass will do when it slumps over the rock, where it will stop.'



Paul Cockledge with a work in progress: the slumped glass is re-cut to a perfect circle before the table is assembled

'When the glass starts to move, it's almost like it's breathing out, like it has relaxed. The result looks as though it's in motion'

Once the rocks have been selected – for the new collection, specimens include harlequin quartzite, weathered limestone and Purbeck limestone – they're taken to a kiln in East Sussex. 'The hard part was finding people with the correct kind of kiln,' says Cockledge. 'When I first started the project, my instinct was to go to Italy, because it's where a lot of incredible glass is made, but it needed to be somewhere nearby due to the experimentation that was needed. We had to really get involved in the process and modify the machines, because we're really pushing the slumping idea; it's a technique normally used on much smaller pieces. It's not an easy process, because when you take something that's designed to be flat and you heat it back up, you end up creating stress within the glass.'

A graphite copy of the rock and a sheet of glass are placed inside the kiln, which is slowly heated over about seven hours until it reaches around 1,400 degrees Celsius. At this point, the glass softens and starts to drape over the form, coming to rest on a bed of sand that is placed around the rock to set the surface of the table at the correct height – if the glass is stretched too far it will become too thin, creating a weak point. The kiln is then gradually lowered in temperature to anneal the glass: a process of gradual cooling to reduce internal stresses and avoid cracking, which takes around 48 hours.

Once the glass has cooled, it is finished by water jet-cutting the edge of the tabletop to create a perfect circle. 'Initially we tried polishing the underside, because it gains a texture – when you heat glass up, you lose its complete transparency,' says Cockledge. 'I got obsessed with trying to get it back to transparent, but as the project evolved I thought, "Why am I trying to bring it back to what it was before?" So now we leave it as it is, so it has a ripple, or a hazy quality. It's better; it shows more character and craft. When the glass starts to move, it's almost like it's breathing out, like it has relaxed. The result is an object that looks as though it's in motion.'

The aesthetic power of the finished tables lies in this perfectly imperfect quality, as well as the combination of natural and industrial materials, and the fact that each is unique. 'You can say a table is unique because it's a bespoke size,' Cockledge points out, 'but when you're using a rock for the base, you really do get something incredibly different; there's not going to be another one out there.' This is why PAD in London's Berkeley Square makes a particularly appropriate setting in which to show the collection: 'It's a large fabric canopy that encircles trees – a nice backdrop for the Slump series, which is about nature and the industrial combined.'

Responses to the tables, he has noticed, tend to be emotional. 'I can't pinpoint what it is about them that speaks to people, but their eyes light up,' he says. And, as far as he is concerned, that is the point. 'Ultimately, I'm trying to create objects that move you.' ●
 PAD London is in Berkeley Square, London W1, 10-16 October (padesignart.com)

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