

# A PLASTER JOB

TEXT

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It's a rainy morning in Amsterdam and the Finnish designer Tuomas Markunpoika is in his studio surveying the group of works that will soon be shipped to London for his exhibition, *Contra Naturam*, at Gallery Fumi. With their organic shapes reminiscent of slabs of stone and offbeat, nature-inspired colours, the pieces – a bench, a console, a stool and two tables – embody an inherent tension. What lies behind this tussle?

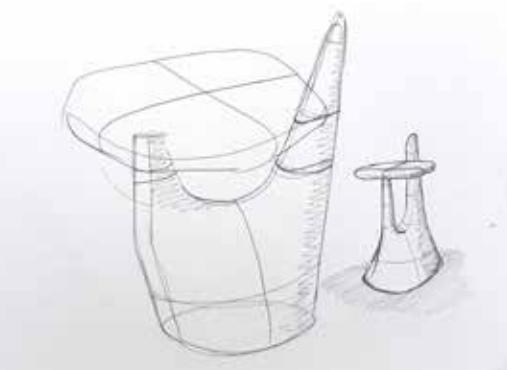


Made from Tadelakt plaster (a Moroccan building material) and filled with fibreglass and polystyrene, the *Contra Naturam* collection of objects appear heavy but are actually light; their smooth, wavy forms reminiscent of nature but obviously man-made. 'I don't use contradiction in order to have a shock or wow factor,' Tuomas Markunpoika, who has an MA in Contextual Design from Design Academy Eindhoven, says. 'I do want to play a trick but I'm not after the effect of deception.'

This is the first time that Markunpoika has used Tadelakt plaster in his work and achieving the shapes – which were inspired by the work of Japanese sculptor/designer Isamu Noguchi – has been a labour-intensive process. The first step was having a spectrum of colours and samples developed for him by a specialist. 'It was almost like a scientific approach, using different percentages of pigments and making colour combinations,' Markunpoika says. Then he experimented with the material and reworked the forms

with spatulas and palette knives. 'It's very malleable and sculptural in that you can carve out shapes in free forms,' he adds. 'If you mix the colours, you get different effects, like spotty or patchy areas, because of the mixture of minerals. You leave a lot to chance, not knowing what the outcome will be.'

The studio, which Markunpoika shares with other independent thinkers including a children books' writer and a mathematician, has an office area at the front and a workshop with his pieces, prototypes and experiments at the back. It is located in NDSM – a vast, former shipyard, 15 minutes by ferry from Amsterdam Central Station, that houses dozens of studios. Innumerable ballpoint drawings lie on his desk; Amalgamated vases, made from bundles of pencils glued together, sit on the bookcase along with candlesticks from his Engineering Temporality series (of which more below), and a Refractile light prototype is in the workshop. Markunpoika has been here since 2014, two years after setting up his studio.



A preparatory drawing by Thomas Markunpoika for the Contra Naturam series



Objects in the Contra Naturam collection

Objects in the Contra Naturam collection  
Photos: Bram Schilling

Born in the city of Jyväskylä, central Finland, to a journalist mother and an optician father, Markunpoika's introduction to object-making was during the holidays visiting his maternal grandparents in the Arctic Circle. 'It's very extreme because the sun doesn't set in summer and doesn't rise in winter, and I was exposed to a lot of tools and the idea of making things by yourself,' he recalls.

Markunpoika, 35, studied furniture design at Finland's Lahti Institute of Design making 'Scandinavian, minimalistic, timeless, rather impersonal work'. Growing up in the heritage shadow of Alvar Aalto and Eero Saarinen, who exalted Finland's international reputation following its independence from the Russian Empire, Markunpoika became anxious about getting trapped in a certain mould. 'If you didn't pursue the same kind of style or concept, you felt that your work wouldn't be accepted,' he says. 'So I left because it felt like a dead-end creatively.'

Markunpoika packed his bags and moved to Amsterdam for an internship at Marcel Wanders. 'I spent most of the time in the workshop, developing and repairing limited editions and one-off furniture pieces,' he recounts. 'That probably helped define me and showed me one approach to design. But there were other factors that dissuaded me from wanting to join an agency like that: they took on way too many projects, some of which were only half-baked due to time constraints. Of course, I still work commercially but it's more about balancing sculptural and conceptual work with materials.'



Immortal, Markunpoika's collaboration with Iittala



Amalgamated vases

Although Markunpoika enjoys working on his own, he found a collaboration last year with Mikko Aarras, design manager of Iittala, on the Immortal project 'educational'. The duo worked with Iittala's glassblowers to create shapes that produce reflections imitating the surface movements of water. 'I learnt that it's not always bad to leave some of the decisions to somebody else and have some of the responsibility taken away,' Markunpoika says. Would he be keen to collaborate with other companies? 'I've wondered whether it could be good to do some commercial projects but I'd have to be selective, as I could feel stressed about not having enough control of my work,' he says. 'Mine is a very personal practice where I don't have to compromise, except with myself. The collaboration with Iittala was very fruitful and I'd definitely receive any collaboration requests positively.'

It was Markunpoika's thesis project, Engineering Temporality, at Design Academy Eindhoven that first brought him critical acclaim and was nominated Furniture Design of the Year by London Design Museum in 2013. Germinating from his personal agony about his grandmother's debilitating Alzheimer's disease, the concept metaphorically captured the sense of loss and a desire to retain memories. Markunpoika bought old pieces of traditional-looking wooden furniture from a second-hand shop in Eindhoven and placed a semi-covering layer made from small rings of tubular steel around them. The original furniture pieces were destroyed by fire, leaving the shell-like forms of the steel rings in their place. The violent metamorphosis engendered 'a metaphysical bond between the object and memories' and a ghostly after-image. A cabinet from this series featured in Beauty - Cooper Hewitt Design Triennial (2016) in New York.

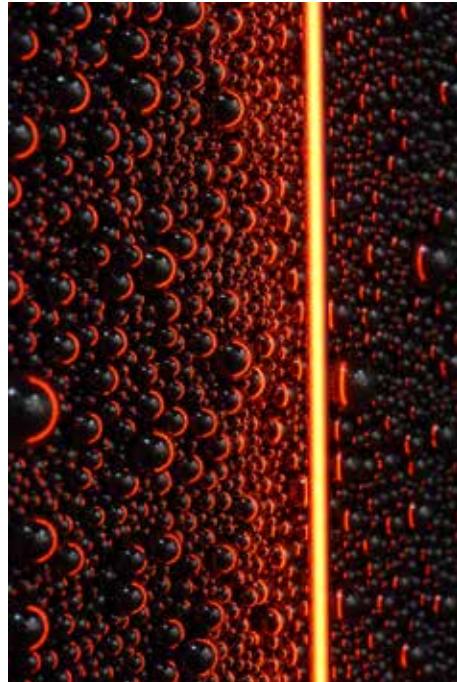




Engineering Temporality



Engineering Temporality, detail



Penumbra, a project that uses steel ball bearings

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Markunpoika, who works across several projects at once, is refining the aesthetic by making new pieces, including mirror frames and cabinets that have nickel-plated rings instead of steel ones. ‘Curiously, I’m manipulating the original work and, by playing around, might get an idea for something else too,’ Markunpoika says. ‘The limitation is only about how big you can make the piece while retaining the rigid structure.’

In parallel with this, he is exploring another material, steel ball bearings, in his project titled Penumbra. The black balls ubiquitously cover rectangular surfaces and a red neon pierces a vertical line across them, culminating in an atmospheric, shadowy light. Penumbra was presented, along with Refractile pieces, in a group exhibition curated by Joseph Grima, creative director of Design Academy Eindhoven, in April during Milan design week. Begun in 2016, Refractile comprises square pieces of manipulated polycarbonate film diffusing LED lighting in order to create shifting shadows, perception of which depends on the viewer’s standpoint in relation to the object.

Markunpoika is also experimenting with casting aluminium, using a mould made up of organic materials. ‘What’s interesting is the rainbow spectrum of colours and how the shapes resemble stalactites and stalagmites,’ he explains. ‘I’m trying different things and seeing what comes out.’

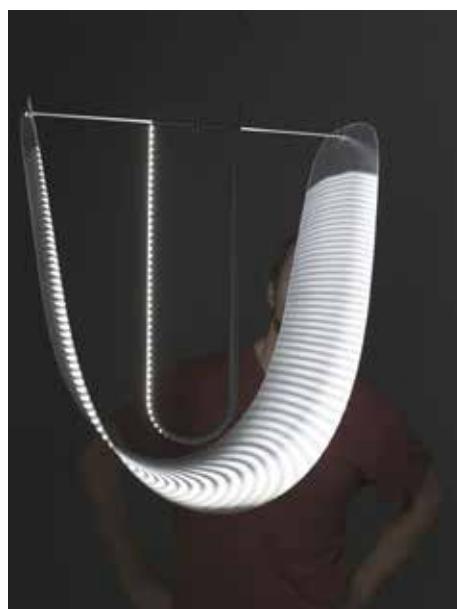


Photo: Jussi Pulkkinen

Underscoring Markunpoika’s uncompromising vision is a committed desire to innovate with a rich diversity of materials. ‘You need to work with a material in such a way that it’s strong enough on its own, and bring it to another level by finding an approach that nobody has thought of before,’ Markunpoika opines. ‘Sometimes I see an interesting quality in a material and can visualise a concept evolving around it. I like to play with the contradictions that can be achieved through idiosyncratically combining material, concept and process.’ Certainly, his new Contra Naturam pieces exemplify his point.

Tuomas Markunpoika: *Contra Naturam*, Gallery Fumi, London, until 8 September, [galleryfumi.com](http://galleryfumi.com)