

The Beautiful Grain

ELEVEN DESIGNERS EXPLORE THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF WOOD AT FUMI

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*Comparing Conditions Oak by Maria Bruun & Anne Dorthe Vester
Courtesy of Benita Marcussen*

Imagine a material that grows naturally from the ground, is strong and non-toxic, highly versatile and gets better with age: a material whose properties include carbon storage and, once used, is easy to recycle. Happily, it exists. It is wood.

For Gallery FUMI's first exhibition of 2021, eleven of the gallery's artists have created new pieces, which demonstrate the incredible range and versatility that wood offers, from the purity of a polished plank to a new method of recycling sawdust and shavings into a fully useable material.

“Frank Lloyd Wright called it the most humanly intimate of all materials” says Sam Pratt, of FUMI. “And we thought that was a value that has as much relevance now as throughout the history of design” adds his co-founder Valerio Capo.

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CELEBRATING NEW WORKS FOR 2021

Saving Shavings: Casey McCafferty

"I carve wood, a lot of wood. I've worked it since childhood. Like the Shakers in 19th century America, I use ash, oak, cherry... anything local. And every single piece has its own personality," says Casey McCafferty from his New Jersey workshop. "And often I am up to my knees in sawdust and wood shavings." Over the years he has donated this to botanical gardens and nurseries, but when asked for new work by FUMI, he decided to pursue an idea that he's harboured for some time. "I've been mixing sawdust with a polymer, to take the material full circle – back to something useable. And I'm making simple forms to create a side table and a wall shelf" he says. The addition of clay dust has added texture and pigmentation to bring the material deftly to life.

Irregularity: Lukas Wegwerth

Branches are not a traditional resource in furniture making. But the German designer Lukas Wegwerth splices them together to create the bases of consoles and other works, emphasising their strong and organic shapes, in this case for a new coffee table. "In an increasingly technical and industrialised world, wood is natural and soothing and represents past and future simultaneously," says Wegwerth. For the sanded wooden tops, or plates, he uses hawthorn or plum, local trees with beautifully irregular natural burls.

From the Mountains: Sam Orlando Miller

Sam Orlando Miller, the British artist who now lives in rural Spain, says he has spent the past year in the mountains, living with the trees. Those which grow in stony soil twist and turn as they rise, and in them Miller sees a series of "rings, rays and planetary knots – signs of life". Known for his unique way of creating three-dimensional works in mirror, Miller will be sending to London a dining table with a chestnut top inlaid with chestnut whorls, and poplar dining chairs, also inlaid with chestnut.

Craftsmanship: Francesco Perini

For Francesco Perini, wood has always been the only option: he comes from three generations of Tuscan carpenters, though he has added intricate metal and stone marquetry to the family business. "I always start with the tree itself, which has grown in spite of many enemies and aggressions, and try to harness its unique properties," he says. For his new piece of work – a one-off table from the INCONTRO Series – he has chosen to combine oak with black and gold marble. For him, this enhances the beauty of the wood's natural rings, which define its age and development.

Architecture: Maria Bruun and Anne Dorte Vester

Maria Bruun and Anne Dorte Vester exploit their skills in design and architecture to create functional hybrid works, combining wood with ceramic or metal to make sofas, tables and chairs that defy convention. For this exhibition, the Danish pair has made an all-oak version of an existing chair in ceramic and wood (Heavy Stack). "Wood is a great material. We have studied both Japanese assembly principles and classical furniture construction in order to work with it as best as we can," they say. "Its sculptural qualities, its veins, its natural warmth are all important to us, and relevant to contemporary thinking."

Sustainability: Max Lamb

British designer Max Lamb, continues his exploration into the material GLULAM with a series of new chairs, each one unique in shape. Glulam is made by bonding layers of dimensional lumber, resulting in a resistant, light, flexible and sustainable material. Lamb started working with it last year, developing a sleek sofa where the rigid Glulam is used to create soft voluminous forms.

Accretions: Rowan Mersh

Rowan Mersh is celebrated for his three-dimensional wall works where hundreds of natural elements, like shells, are used to create pieces that play extraordinary games with light and shadow. For this exhibition, he is going back to his beginnings, when he used cheap and readily available components, from toothpicks to metres of silk thread. Working in his East London studio with a mass of birch wood takeaway spoons, drinks stirrers and tooth picks, Mersh is once again pushing the possibilities of accumulation to its limits in a completely new and experimental work.

Adhoc construction: Glithero

The new piece by London-based Glithero (Tim Simpson and Sarah Van Gameren) is a conjoined pair of cupboards – one tall and slim, one stocky – that would make a perfect drinks cupboard or sideboard. The latest addition to LES FRENCH series, which the couple began in 2009, the cupboards are made in stained walnut and hand-dyed strips of gummed paper, and sit upon a cast-bronze bamboo frame. “The frame is an adhoc structure of bamboo and string, that we fashioned as we went along,” says Simpson. “Bamboo is a grass, really, but in our collective consciousness, it comes under ‘woody things’. Its advantage is its speed of growth and lack of environmental baggage.”

Animation: Voukenas Petrides

Voukenas Petrides (Andreas Voukenas and Steven Petrides), who are based in Athens, have taken 40-year-old olive trees from the Peloponnese, which was destined to become firewood, to make a bench and a coffee table. “We have split them at carefully chosen points to reveal the most elaborate grain, and then matched the pieces together,” they say. Sandblasting the outside of the logs has almost given it the appearance of human skin. The pair admires many wooden artefacts, from Ancient Egyptian figures (c. 2300 BC) to chairs by Charles Rennie Mackintosh. But here they are paying particular respect to the olive tree. “It’s considered sacred in Greece,” they say.

Two worlds meeting: Jie Wu

The Chinese-born, London-based Jie Wu continues her radical exploration into the combination of natural and man-made materials, embedding pieces of recycled antique Chinese rosewood in translucent resin of many colours. She has transformed this material into two vases and a centrepiece, her mission to elevate our perception of synthetic materials, as well to reuse and pay homage to the innate beauty of natural aged wood.

Surrealism: Saelia Aparicio

The Spanish artist Saelia Aparicio likes the humble qualities of plywood. “It’s like a canvas to me, and it is structurally good,” she says. As an evolution from her plywood stools – part chair/part sculpture, depicting women curled in upon themselves – she has created a tallboy, which she has called TALL GIRL. “On the outside, it’s like a hairy friendly monster, with blue feet,” she says. “Inside you find a pink interior and the monster turns into a beautiful couple.” Aparicio’s inspiration comes from comics and films, while the lines of her powerful drawing have their roots in the work of artists like Jean Cocteau.

Words by Caroline Roux

A full list of exhibits and images is available on request.