

TWISTED ADDITIONS

Experiential and experimental
highlights from London
Design Festival 2009

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Corn Craft photo by Tom Mannion

Historically, Britain has an eminent design tradition dating back to the 18th century and the Industrial Revolution. Since that period, the robust island country has produced and educated some of the world's most brilliant creative minds. So it is not surprising that since its inception, the annual London Design Festival has been a premier showcase for emerging designers. And the British capital's preeminent design exhibition shown brightly even this year, 12 months after the recession struck, between September 19 and 27. With over 150 fringe events scattered across the city, the festival persists as a platform for experimentation, showcasing projects that are not necessarily prototypes for large-scale production but rather personal statements, often traded in galleries.

Alongside the 100% Design London furniture fair and Designersblock talent show in the Earls Court exhibition center, as well as the multi-faceted design event Tent London in the Truman Brewery in East London, a key location for the seventh edition of the festival was the Victoria & Albert Museum in South Kensington. In the courtyard garden of the museum, visitors were greeted by *Wallpaper** magazine's *Chair Arch*, designed by London-based Italian Martino Gamper; in association with British furniture manufacturer Ercol. This unusual project revived a long-forgotten tradition, in which towns would construct a commemorative arch from the products of local factories to celebrate a royal visit and other special occasions.

Equally favoring historical references and connecting the past and present was the furniture collection *Heritage Boy* presented at The Future Gallery in Covent Garden. This third collection by Lee Broom draws on traditional British manufacturing techniques to create modern-day furniture. An example par excellence is his tile series, composed of



Wallpaper* Chair Arch by Martino Gamper

ornate, traditional, twice-fired tiles made by the same factories that produce tiles for the London Underground.

Another designer who captures the lost crafts of Britain is Simon Hasan. Better known for gallery-pieces in boiled leather, the emerging designer continued his exploration into obscure crafts with new furniture prototypes intended for volume-production. They were on show for the first time in *Craft Work* at Portobello Dock in Notting Hill, a so-called emporium of creative talent instigated by Tom Dixon as part of London Design Festival. Consisting of stoneware vases, oak and steel

cabinets and oak stools, the range focuses on the gap between mass-produced industrial items and the cottage-industry techniques of small rural artisans. "There is no reason why the lost techniques from all over the UK can't be updated to work in a more commercial setting, and with these prototypes, I hope to show this is possible," says Hasan.

A mutual interest in learning and developing traditional handicraft skills in order to interpret them in a contemporary way was also the starting point of *Wool Works*, two large-scale hanging textile artworks made from natural wool and aluminum and presented at

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China Granite Project by Max Lamb, courtesy of Johnson Trading Gallery



Extrusion by Thomas Heatherwick, courtesy of Heatherwick Studio

the Exposure Gallery in London's West End. "As everything is made by hand, the process bestows an individuality to each item, which would be lacking if we manufactured using machines," explains the design duo Craftwork, founded by fashion designer Caroline Smithson and architect Mehmoosh Khadivi. "We only produce very limited editions of each design so that we can continue expanding these ideas and techniques."

Not alone in its endeavors, Gallery FUMI celebrated the collaboration between people and workers, presenting the exhibition *The Dignity of Labour* with new objects by Paul Kelley. The British designer continued his breakdown of form, while still maintaining the functionality, craftsmanship and usage of high-quality materials such as copper and brass plate, plaster and LG Hi-Macs natural acrylic stones. Also on display were new projects by New York-based artist Marcus Tremonto, focusing on light as material and form. Tremonto's *Looplight*, for example, uses electroluminescent electronic paper for its light source, and reinforces a certain illusionary quality by exploring the combination of perceived two-dimensional and actual volumetric form.

If that's not enough, Gallery FUMI opened its private residence in Hoxton Square to showcase *Corn Craft*, a contemporary installation created in collaboration with the creative consultancy Studio Toogood, which took inspiration from crafts found in traditional folk culture. On display were unique and one-off pieces by Nacho Carbonell, Raw Edges and Max Lamb based around sustainable and natural materials.

Next door, New York's Johnson Trading Gallery presented *China Granite Project*, more recent work by British designer Max Lamb. The exhibition exposed the natural beauty of Chinese granite, featuring a series of 15 furniture pieces designed by Lamb and created in col-

laboration with Chinese stone-yard workers during his two-week artist residency in the Hebei Province of China last April. Lamb drew guidelines on the boulders' surfaces with wax crayon to capture the natural form and inherent characteristics of each individual stone before it was fastened onto the saw platform and cut, inch-by-inch, with a 2.5-meter-diameter diamond blade. After polishing each of the cut surfaces, the end product revealed a stark contrast between the boulder's rough exterior and the smooth, crystalline structure of the interior granite.

Thomas Heatherwick's work pushed the envelope material-wise and took the design process to its broadest reaches in the exhibition *Extrusions* at Haunch of Venison in Burlington Gardens. Presenting the designer's first limited-edition work, the show included six extruded, mirror polished, single-component aluminum benches without fixtures or fittings. Produced by the world's largest extrusion machine, these graceful metal benches are mere prototypes for a 100-meter-long piece to be constructed and exhibited in 2010.

Whether chair arches, corn products or boulder furniture, even in a time when the full force of recession continues, the London Design Festival seems to be less about demands of clients' briefs, market requirements and bottom-line economics than a platform for experimentation. In many cases, the purpose of the objects at this year's event is symbolic and reminiscent rather than utilitarian, slipping across an invisible line that separates design and art. However, they retain a connection to functionality and a focus on materiality, substance and techniques—usually in the spheres of the handmade or limited-edition, and often favoring historical references and, therefore, meaning.