

A&A

Exquisite Corpse / Cadavre Exquis

12 – 28 March 2020

Tolarno Galleries Melbourne

Part of Melbourne Design Week 2020, an initiative of the Victorian Government in collaboration with the National Gallery of Victoria, 12 – 22 March 2020

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When Arthur Seigneur, a young French artisan newly arrived in Sydney, contacted leading-edge industrial designer Adam Goodrum in 2015 to ask if they might work together, neither of them could have predicted what would eventuate. But less than three years later, the *Bloom* cabinet, the first fruit of their collaborative endeavour as A&A, debuted to critical acclaim at the Milan Furniture Fair before being acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV).

A stunning synthesis of design innovation and traditional craftsmanship, the unique work, made of oak and white maple, cloaks its handmade cabinetry behind two oversized doors that form a circle, 1400mm in diameter, when closed. This provided the surface for the application of Arthur's calling card, straw marquetry, or *marqueterie de paille*, employing more than 4000 slivers of subtly reflective rye straw imported from specialist producers in Burgundy and hand-dyed by the artisan himself in a range of custom hues. The result is a kaleidoscopic, mandala-like design, inspired by the curved symmetry of the lotus blossom, that seductively catches and throws light as the doors are opened and closed, or as the viewer moves around the cabinet.

Straw marquetry is a painstaking technique similar to marquetry, which has traditionally utilised wood veneer (as well as materials such as shell and ivory) to decorate furniture and other objects. It emerged in Europe in the 17th century and went on to enjoy great esteem in France, especially under the reign of Louis XV (r. 1715-74). Straw marquetry experienced a revival in the early 20th century thanks to Art Deco luminaries such as André Groult, Jean Royère and Jean Michel Frank, the latter of whom used it to decorate entire walls as well as items of furniture. Globally, there are only around twenty-five artisans trained to practise this intricate and exacting craft, and, to his knowledge, Arthur is the only one working in Australia.

Now, on the occasion of A&A's debut with Tolarno Galleries, the duo has produced a further three unique pieces of furniture that build on the creative insights gleaned from bringing *Bloom* to glorious life. Using just a scalpel, ruler and wood glue, Arthur has decorated *Talleo*, a tallboy, *Archant*, a console, and *Longbow*, a credenza, in a series of richly coloured geometric patterns that are themselves informed by the shape of each item. While Adam conceived the initial designs and patterns, they were finessed in dialogue with Arthur so as to maximise straw marquetry's dazzling visual effects.

The exhibition takes its title from the French parlour game of *cadavre exquis*, which was invented by the Surrealists in 1925. In the game, a player sketches a body part or other image on a piece of paper, before folding the paper to conceal what they've drawn and passing it on to the next player, and so on. The completed figures tend to be wildly inventive and frequently bizarre. "The game relates to our process," explains Adam. "I came up with the shape and pattern of these pieces and gave them to Arthur to finish. Neither of us would have come up with these works independently, but together we've created something new and distinctive." Indeed, the pair played a version of the game to coin the name of each item. By way of example, Adam thought of the word 'Long' for the credenza and sent the last letter to Arthur, who added 'bow', thus *Longbow*.

What is immediately apparent is that Adam and Arthur have effected a quantum leap in their collaborative practice. While *Bloom*'s decorated surface was flat – a vertically facing tondo – these objects, made of sandwiched timber precision-carved by a CNC machine, boast curved and faceted surfaces that enhance the

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play of light facilitated by the straw's natural varnish, silica, which is also water-resistant. Each piece has been entirely covered in straw marquetry, top to bottom, front to back – even the insides of the drawers and the diamond-shaped legs. Arthur has further exploited the material's reflective properties by applying the ribbons of straw in varying and often contrasting directions, imbuing the surfaces with a dynamic textured quality. The audacious colour combinations add an extra dimension of visual delight.

If the technique looks labour-intensive, that's because it is. For complex designs such as these, it can take Arthur many weeks to complete each work, including time spent dyeing the straw, splitting open each shoot and flattening it in preparation for application. Arthur is accustomed to working eighteen-hour days when a deadline for delivery approaches, yet he doesn't regard it as a gruelling ordeal. "In fact, I quite enjoy it," says the softly spoken Parisian. "It's very meditative."

Raised in an artistic environment – his father is a master engraver – Arthur trained as a cabinet maker and furniture restorer before studying straw marquetry under the guidance of esteemed practitioner Lison de Caunes, a family friend and granddaughter of decorator and furniture designer André Groult. Although respectful of its heritage, Arthur is keen to push straw marquetry into new territory. "That's how you keep the craftsmanship alive," he says. Before taking it to Milan, the pair emailed an image of the *Bloom* cabinet to Lison to gauge her feedback. "She wished she had thought of this composition first," says Arthur, grinning. "That was good to hear."

In devising the form of the tallboy, the console and the credenza, Adam, who was awarded the prestigious Rigg Design Prize by the NGV in 2015, took inspiration from the shape of the sphericon. This strange, Escher-like 'paradoxical solid' is made from the combination of four half cones, and segments of it can be found at either end of the credenza and in the oblique 'frame' surrounding the body of the spindly-legged tall boy. "We're interested in making proud, confident pieces based on unorthodox shapes," says Adam, adding that each item features custom hinges machined out of solid brass, "like jewellery for the furniture".

The Perth-raised, Sydney-based designer has long been fascinated with the curves and diagonals of geometry – not to mention colour – as a glance at his back catalogue will attest, with furniture and objects designed for Cappellini, Alessi, Broached Commissions and Veuve Clicquot. "There's a naivety to the simple, extruded geometry of these three pieces that I like," says Adam, whose own work has been collected by the NGV, the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in Sydney, the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the Design Museum Ghent in Belgium and the Bagatti Valsecchi Museum in Milan. "The patterns are inspired by flowers, but the way we've pushed the geometry is a far cry from nature."

Great things can happen when tradition and innovation are combined in the crucible of creative enterprise, and A&A's statement objects represent the acme of collectible design. Their partnership also demonstrates the benefits of stepping outside one's own frame of reference to collaborate with practitioners from other cultures. Hybridity is powerful, and cross-cultural fertilisation has long been a wellspring of ingenious design.

"There's a certain freedom to being a designer in Australia, compared to a place like France," muses Adam. "We have a blank canvas to do almost anything. By moving here, Arthur has the opportunity to evolve his craft in a way that's unconventional." Other straw marquetry artisans are noticing, not least A&A's penchant for using brightly coloured straw. "They contact Arthur on social media and ask: 'How did you do that?' So our work is resonating on a number of levels."

For his part, Arthur is relishing the new direction he has taken since relocating to Australia. "At first I was more traditional. I remember looking at Adam's colour schemes and thinking, it's too much," he says. "But now I've changed my mind."

Tony Magnusson
August 2019



Adam Goodrum (L) and Arthur Seigneur (R) with the *Archant* console. Photographs by Josh Purnell.



A&A
Archant (2018-2019)
Custom dyed rye straw, birch ply, brass
91 (h) x 156 (w) x 36 (d) cm