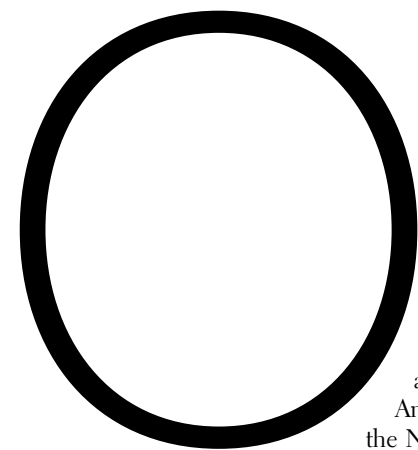


# WASTE NOT

HE WAS ALREADY RECYCLING MATERIALS, BUT WHEN TASMANIAN-BORN DESIGNER BRODIE NEILL SAW THE PRISTINE BEACHES OF HIS CHILDHOOD STREWN WITH PLASTIC LITTER, IT WAS TOO MUCH. SEDUCTIVE AND TACTILE, HIS FURNITURE DOUBLES AS A WARNING OF ECOLOGICAL DISASTER.

STORY JENI PORTER ■ PHOTOGRAPHY CHRIS FLOYD



On a sunny Saturday in July, during London's long hot summer, Brodie Neill lugged his Nix ottoman up to the third floor terrace of his home on Regent's Canal in Shoreditch. Shaped like a large boulder and made out of American cherry salvaged from Jaguar, the Nix is one of the Australian designer's earliest recycled works. He made it 11 years ago and it's been variously used as a dance floor podium for parties and as a prop for his toddler daughter's first moves.

Neill spent the weekend happily rubbing it back to the bare wood and then waxing it, all the while reflecting on what had transpired in his practice since he'd designed it. Rather a lot as it happens. He'd achieved considerable success and acclaim for what some call digital craft and become a vocal advocate for recycling ocean plastic, addressing the European parliament and the UN on his vision to give it a second life.

His recycling alchemy started with the Nix, one reason the weekend renewal project was so therapeutic, Neill says. What makes it special is that instead of being solid wood it's obviously made from components, with gaps left to accentuate the fabrication. "It was getting to know an old piece and maybe going back to remembering when I was doing more of that hands-on work. It was quite a technical feat to create and I probably don't give it the attention it deserves," he says.

He'd set himself up in London in 2005. Hobart-born and educated and recently graduated from Rhode Island School of Design, he elected to make limited edition or one-off pieces that meshed hi-tech design processes and tools with sculptural forms and a high level of craft. Such endeavours needed specialised manufacturers to produce and supportive gallerists to sell. On his second outing in Milan during Salone del

Mobile in 2007, he won accolades for his E-Turn bench, a futuristic fibreglass piece that twists and turns in an endless loop.

"It's almost the expression of a signature drawn in 3D," he says. "It was one of those designs where you really don't know how it's going to be received because it was so new and different." It made the front page of *Corriere della Sera* on the first day of the furniture fair. "So it was really big," says the designer, who'd signed a production deal with the Italian firm Kundalini.

But he found himself in a quandary. He wanted his pieces to have more substance than just a "shit-hot shape" moulded in man-made material, but couldn't afford even the cost of plywood for a prototype. Daydreaming out the window of his tiny studio he saw a skip full of building waste and had a flash of insight.

"I said, that's what we need to do, we need to use these materials because they are just going to a landfill." That led to the experimental Nix, in which Neill joined the cherry offcuts together to make a cube and then machine-cut the solid block into its organic shape. Then came the Remix, inspired by the contents of the skip and made of 44 layers of Corian, chipboard, walnut, acrylics and hardboard sandwiched together and shaped by a computer-controlled cutter into a contoured low chaise longue. They opened his mind to myriad ways to turn waste into beautiful things, awakening a sense of purpose that underpins all of his work, including the tables and chairs produced by Made in Ratio, the more accessible furniture brand he set up in 2013.

Three years ago when Neill saw the once pristine beaches of his Tasmanian childhood littered with plastic waste, he had the same "skip" moment: "I thought, you've got to do something about this." He started thinking about how he could transform microplastics, the tiny particles that are too small to be identifiable for recycling. For him they had the same

Brodie Neill on his Shoreditch rooftop with an Alpha chair from Made in Ratio





Clockwise from main: the Gyro table, Remix chaise longue and E-Turn bench

potential as the American cherry, with too much sapwood for a Jaguar gear stick, or the waste chipboard he says looks like marble when it's filled with lacquer and polished. These musings coincided with his being selected to represent Australia in the inaugural London Design Biennale in 2016.

Within months of intensive experimentation he created the Gyro, a 21<sup>st</sup>-century specimen table substituting inlaid marble for terrazzo tiles made from plastic ocean junk gathered from around the world. The name refers to the five oceanic gyres, the network of currents that circulate around the world, and the top is inlaid with the tiles in a kaleidoscopic pattern depicting the earth's 36 longitudinal and latitudinal lines.

The table was the culmination of a global project enlisting scientists, oceanographers, marine biologists and enthusiastic beachcombers who collected plastic fragments from Cornwall to Hawaii that were sterilised, sorted into various hues and turned into tiles. But it started on a beach on north Bruny Island in Tasmania where Neill had spent many happy days as a kid. He was there with the National Gallery of Victoria's curators of contemporary design and architecture, Ewan McEoin and Simone LeAmon as part of a camp they'd organised with Design Tasmania to bring local and international designers together in remote nature. The pair had selected Neill as the Tasmanian representative in the NGV's Rigg prize for contemporary design in 2015 and the camp followed the opening of the Rigg exhibition.

"Brodie would come back after having a walk along the beach at the end of the day so distressed at the amount of garbage he was finding and that sparked an interest in the material," says LeAmon. When Neill was chosen for the biennale the NGV lent its curatorial support.

[REDACTED]  
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The Melbourne institution bought the Gyro table for its permanent collection and premiered it during its inaugural Triennial survey of art and design, a blockbuster show attracting 1.3 million visitors during its four-month run from December last year. LeAmon says that of all the spectacular works it was the "quite obviously plastic" Gyro that left people stunned. "When you look into the tabletop you feel like you're in a giant kaleidoscope from the terrazzo effect and the beautiful geometry of the parametric design. Like all really great art or design it pulls you in and then delivers the punchline. People would just stand around and say, 'Wow, this table is evidence that our marine life is consuming plastic?' and you'd go, 'yep'."

The Gyro catapulted Neill on to the world stage talking about using ocean plastic waste to create new materials. Last year he did a multi-media installation called *Drop in the Ocean* and he's also trying to commercialise the ocean terrazzo. His Flotsam bench is the result of further experimentation, this time

slipcasting in an open mould. Resembling a surfboard on legs it's cast in one piece with the plastic aggregate dropped into a resin base. The waste plastic rises to the top creating a speckled pastel surface. Neill has a prototype at home. It provides endless fascination.

"I look at this and think where did this plastic come from? You don't see the warmer colours because they get consumed by the birds and the fish."

It's a lovely piece, curvaceous and comfortable and tactile from the softness of the resin and slight undulations from the different plastics. Interspersed with uneven shapes are regular dark dots, most likely "nurdles", plastic micro-beads lost in transit or during the production process. "That's ocean plastic on a whole new level. They haven't even been turned into something before being discarded. When you dive into the world of ocean plastic there are deeper and deeper levels of environmental concern but really it comes down to cultural concerns as well." It may sound evangelistic, but in many ways he's an accidental environmentalist. "I guess stumbling upon the ocean terrazzo appeal was a happy experiment or mistake in a way. There was always a sensitivity and concern but it was ignited and brought out by doing this project."

Neill, 39, who grew up in Sandy Bay in Hobart, says he's always had an affinity with the sea and things nautical. His father Bruce, a regular on the *BRW* (now *AFR*) Rich List made a fortune from financial planning and his mother Heather fostered a love of the arts with their five children. He was making stuff from an early age and by 12 was building furniture in the shed at home, using tools inherited from his mother's father, a design engineer. He displays some of the rusty tools on shelves in his Shoreditch studio alongside 3D models



Clockwise from left: the Flotsam bench, Made in Ratio's Cowrie chair in ash, Stellarnova table, Alpha chairs and Rotor stool



and all sorts of materials experiments (including an attempt at recycling felt that destroyed the washing machine in his rented flat).

His mother still has some of the furniture he made in his teens, and maintains a practical attitude towards it: she keeps her gardening secateurs in the drawer of his Tasmanian myrtle table. "As basic as it was, it was the work I got into uni with," he says of that table. When Neill did his fine arts degree at the University of Tasmania, majoring in furniture design, it was the tail end of the era of designer-makers before the advent of industrial designers. One of his lecturers, Kevin Perkins, was a master craftsman trained in carpentry and joinery as well as industrial arts and sculpture.

"They taught you how to design and make furniture, but also what Kevin was teaching me was how to think, really. Rather than draw a chair as a curve and two flat lines you need to draw it in 360 degrees and really think about object depth as well as height and length." Actual digital design and its liberating powers came during his masters studies at RISD. Living and working in London with its capital city buzz suits him, but his ties to Australia and particularly Tasmania, where his family returns every year, remain strong.

Affable and down-to-earth, Neill is the antithesis of the egocentric superstar designer, so much so he rarely uses "I" when talking about his practice. When he shows me his Supernova self-levelling table leg, he says: "without giving myself too much of a pat on the back, it's quite ingenious, really". Nor does he over-intellectualise his work, notwithstanding the considered thought behind each piece. "It's always the form and the process," he says. "The shapes are created in digital exploration as very organic smooth surfaces

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and then engineered or dissected into components."

Collaboration with skilled makers is critical and partly explains his references to "we". He's worked with a panelbeater in the Midlands that makes aluminium replacement panels for E-type Jaguars by hand; a sand cast foundry in Southampton produces Supernova and its variant Stellarnova from recycled aluminium combining digital technology with ancient methodology; Made in Ratio's sinuous all-in-one Cowrie chair is made by a veneer specialist in Belgium; and the Remix is created by luxury yacht builder Wally at its base in Ancona in Italy. "Everything has a story behind it. Not just the idea – it's got the problem, it's got the solution, it's got the who did we call, who did we work with, how did we get that done and the outcome," he says.

The NGV's LeAmon has known him since he first set up his studio, they'd meet in Milan with all the other young designers who flock there during Salone del Mobile hoping for their big break. As she switched to curating, she developed a deeper appreciation of his

work, which she says was largely misunderstood in Australia a decade ago. "He was one of the very few Australian designers who was trying to explore this unique or limited-edition production that was out of reach for so many of them. It was seen as designers trying to be artists by producing rarefied goods but there's much more to it than that," she says.

"Brodie is essentially interested in trying to achieve extraordinary objects that are a consequence of his interest in materials and technology. In the hierarchy of needs when he's designing something, function is implied but it's not the highest thing he's aiming for."

In the two years since he made the Gyro, recycling plastic has become a hot design imperative. *PlasticScene*, a show of works by leading designers made from waste plastic was one of the hits of the London Design Festival in September. But many of the pieces were Flintstone-ish or looked as if they were made of molten gloop. What's captivating about the Gyro and the Flotsam is that you don't see the recycling immediately because the work itself is so beguiling.

"Brodie Neill is a magician metamorphosing ugliness and chaos into beauty and rhythm," says Liliane Fawcett, a French dealer who's run her Notting Hill gallery Themes & Variations for more than 30 years. Influential, opinionated and revered as a talent spotter, Fawcett is exactly the sort of gallerist Neill had in mind when setting up in London. She spied the Gyro table at the 2016 biennale and was bewitched. While that table was destined for the NGV, Fawcett arranged a private viewing and Neill won a commission to make another for her collector clients who use it as a breakfast table. They paid £48,000 for a mesmerising daily reminder of the perils of ocean plastic. **W**