

The Natural World Reigns Supreme at PAD London

Designers bring the outdoors in at this year's fair

TEXT BY [TOM MORRIS](#) · Posted October 2, 2018



Marcin Rusak's blown glass vessels with flowers inside, shown in Sarah Myerscough Gallery's booth at PAD London.



Photo: Courtesy of Sarah Myerscough Gallery

When so much of our daily lives is seen through a screen and reached at the swipe of a finger, it's little wonder that an increasing number of designers are trying to entice some of the natural world inside.

The trend flourishes this week at the Pavilion of Art and Design (PAD) fair in London, where not only do trees stick up through exhibits (the marquee is designed around the trunks in Berkeley Square) but art has a distinctly organic quality. Works range from blown glass forms that resemble sea creatures to tables held up on golden tree branches. "The digital age makes us feel insecure because the pace of our daily lives is getting faster and the link we had to nature has greatly loosened," explains Elisabeth Delacarte, founder of Parisian design gallery Avant-Scène. "There is a need for finding meaning to our lives, which have grown more and more dematerialized and virtual."

Avant-Scène opened in 1986 and has ever since dealt in furniture that touches upon this nature-inspired trend. At PAD London, the gallery is presenting bronze lotus tables by Franck Evennou alongside a cobweb-legged console by Mark Brazier-Jones inspired by minerals and molecular formations. "The pieces are inspired by nature and are faithful to my desire of the dreamlike," says Delacarte.

She is not alone; there are plenty of organic influences of nature elsewhere. Young German star Valentin Loellmann produces wonky furniture made without any joint marks to look like they've simply grown in the countryside. London gallerist Peter Petrou is exhibiting the work of Irish artist Sasha Sykes. *Gyre (From the sea)* is a tessellated jigsaw of forms she forages on the shoreline and casts in resin. Glassblower Steffen Dam produces cabinets of glass cylinders, using oxides and foils in them to mimic sea life creatures. London-based Polish designer Marcin Rusak, showing at Sarah Myerscough Gallery, infuses his glass vessels with flowers.



Lotus tables by Franck Evennou.

Photo: Bruno Simon

This desire for more natural materials and nature-inspired objects in our homes goes beyond a straightforward reaction to iPhones. According to Rusak, it is also an industrywide reaction against the direction of design over the past couple of decades, too: "With more technology and affordable artificial composites around us, we parted from our origins," he says. "As a result of long time exposure to "non-authentic" objects, there is an evident shift to be close to the origin of the product, its maker and something that would symbolize its ties to nature."

Patrick Perrin, founder of PAD, agrees. He cites the general return to tactile, deep materials such as bronze and marble as also being part of it. "All these sophisticated materials were forgotten from the 1960s to the 1980s, when it was all about plastic materials that had no quality at all," he says.

It is part of a broader move for bringing the natural world in to homes that is taking one of two routes in contemporary interiors. On the one hand, there is the step into floral maximalism—an exuberant layer upon layering of pattern, rich textiles, and organic objects. On the other hand, you have the muted, pared-back Scandinavian minimalism and its love of bare wood, undyed linen and the odd twig used as decoration. Cabana or Cereal style, both expressions evoke the natural world in their own separate ways.

"We are living in a standardized world, where everything looks the same, very industrial," says Delacarte at Avant-Scène gallery. "There is a need for handcrafted pieces that are both authentic and original."



Valentin Loellmann at work in his studio.

Photo: Courtesy of Valentin Loellmann

Indeed, the works on display at PAD London are defiantly handmade and proudly anti-industrial. Each of Sasha Sykes's resin objects take 40 hours to produce. Steffen Dam's jellyfish glass cylinders take up to three days. There's an inordinate amount of careful skill involved. Marlène Huissoud's sculptural Cocoon series skillfully groups thousands of silkworm cocoons together and coats them in honeybee resin (she comes from a family of beekeepers). Similarly, Rowan Mersh's wall-mounted works—which won the Moët Hennessy Prize for best contemporary design at the fair two years ago—are highly labor-intensive, with each shell attached by hand in a process that takes weeks. Each one can take between two and six months to complete. Making these creations brings the artists in touch with nature, too: "I find the process of making them meditative through its repetitive nature," says Mersh.

Showing the value of nature in the face of technology couldn't come at a more important time. Discussing the "harassment" of digital accessories on our daily lives, Perrin asserts how out of touch we have become: "When I walk my dogs in Paris, half the people are scared of them. Children don't know what a cow looks like anymore. They think chickens are born in plastic in the supermarket," he says. "That's why."

Fostering an intimate relationship with objects taken from or inspired by the natural world is hugely important—and something that will never go out of fashion. "An interior then becomes a very personal space rather than a functional space," says Delacarte. "It becomes an invitation to de-stress, to dream, to smile and bring you happiness."

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