

ANDREA TRIMARCHI AND SIMONE FARRESIN, THE DUO BEHIND FORMAFANTASMA, AND A PHOTOGRAPHIC PRINT OF THE VOLCANIC ROCK THEY HAVE USED IN THEIR LATEST WORKS

Milan
Preview
2014



Lava lovers

Formafantasma, the duo turning volcanic rock into design that's well worth its basalt

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For centuries, the boiling red, volcanic ooze that has geysered out of Mount Etna and Stromboli has provided an excellent source for Sicilian stone cutters. Hardened into dark slabs known as basalt, this plentiful rock once commanded a high premium among Italian artisans, who used it to build much of the region's Baroque architecture and sculptures. In recent years, however, basalt has been used to less transcendental ends and is now best known for the cheesy Sicilian souvenirs sold at the Catania airport.

Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin, the Italian-born, Eindhoven-based design duo behind Studio Formafantasma, are set to change lava rock's»

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current status with an ambitious collection of new objects entitled, after Bauer, ‘De Natura Fossilium’.

Working exclusively with lava-based materials extracted from both Mount Etna and Stromboli, the duo have spent the last two years investigating the possibilities of transforming the geological substance from the banal to the mind-blowing.

Their experimental tinkering with lavic stone has now resulted in an unusual 35-piece collection: from traditional slabs that have been cut and chiselled into sober tables or stools inlaid with brass; via melted stone whose carefully extracted fibres have been woven into lavic tapestries or unusual paper-thin ceramics; to melted stone that has been cast or mouth blown, for the first time ever, into geometric, lavic glass.

‘We were fascinated by the way these volcanoes are constantly expelling material,’ explains Farresin, who, together with the Sicilian-born Trimarchi, has spent the last few years studying these two active volcanoes in Europe. ‘In a way, it’s like a person mining. But in this case, it’s nature that’s mining.’

This kind of introspection is common to the work of Trimarchi and Farresin. At 30 and 33 respectively, they have already seen their work acquired by both London’s Victoria & Albert Museum and the



Filicudi ⬆

Cast lavic glass, lavic rock, Murano glass

Lavic glass box produced in Murano. The handle is a lavic stone, added as a reference to the production process. Pieces of orange Murano glass are added for colour accents.

Hours ⬅

CNC basalt, volcanic sand, brass clock hand

The first part of a clock that comes in three separate parts: hours, minutes and seconds. Each piece has a clock hand spinning on a basalt plate filled with three types of lavic sand.

Art Institute of Chicago, while last month the duo launched a retrospective at Stedelijk Museum ’s-Hertogenbosch in the Netherlands.

‘There is nothing industrial about their work,’ says London gallerist Libby Sellers, who has worked with the pair since their graduation from the Design Academy Eindhoven in 2009. ‘They make everything they design themselves, rather than taking it to a manufacturer to be produced. The narrative is more often than not the principle point of the project.’

Many of Formafantasma’s design themes have social or geo-political undertones and many of the collections, like ‘De Natura Fossilium’, originate with their Italian homeland. ‘Moulding Tradition’, their 2009 thesis project, was a series of vases exploring the politically incorrect ceramic tradition of Teste di Moro, based on the legend of a Sicilian girl disgruntled with her Moorish lover who cut off his head and used it as a flower pot.

‘Colony’ from 2011 consisted of a series of mohair blankets commissioned by the Audax Textile Museum, which depict Italy’s colonial history in North Africa; and 2010’s ‘Autarchy’ featured a collection of lamps and objects made from 70 per cent bread flour used for»



the religious feast of St Joseph in Salemi, Sicily, 20 per cent agricultural waste and ten per cent limestone.

From an impact point of view, however, 'De Natura Fossilium' is more in line with Formafantasma's 2011 blockbuster 'Botanica' collection, a strikingly beautiful series of objects and vases made from natural polymers that the designers developed themselves from plant and animal derivatives. Like 'Botanica', this new collection features materials made from scratch that are as attractive as they are inventive.

Though the designers had been considering volcanic rock as their next design frontier for some time, they were given fresh impetus in November 2013 when Mount Etna exploded with a roar, emitting a 12m-tall column of smoke and debris that blanketed the entire region in black matter. Quite fortuitously, the eruption provided a fresh supply of material to study.

The designers scoured the landscape over the next few months, filling their sacks with various rocks ('surreptitiously', Farresin admits with a laugh) and hauling the material back to their studio in the Netherlands. After melting the rock in a local metal workshop, the duo began playing with heating and cooling temperatures, adding water, extracting fibres,

Etna ↑

Two different types of lavic rock, brass, Murano glass

Made from lavic stone from two different geological eras, connected with brass pieces produced in collaboration with Carl Auböck in Vienna.

Stromboli ↻

Mouth-blown lavic glass, cast lavic glass, lavic rock, cotton ribbons

A vase produced in Murano comes with a lavic stone, added as a reference of the production process, positioned on a lavic support. Cotton ribbons provide finishing details.



and grounding dried rock into a powder that was later blown into glass. 'We really wanted to look at the material holistically,' says Farresin. 'Up until now, these volcanoes have been seen as a service for tourists. In our work, the forces of nature are interpreted as a facility for production.'

Though the volcanoes provided the primary material, the designers drew upon a global web of craftsmen for the final pieces. In addition to Catania's artisans, who produced the traditional lavic stone objects, hand blowers in Murano were relied upon for glass production, weavers at the Audax Textile Museum in Tilburg wove basalt fibres together with mohair for tapestries, and brass makers in Vienna created the metal work. 'It's been a really crazy process,' admits Farresin of their broad stretch of collaborators. 'It's kind of a geek project.'

But the pieces in the 'Formafantasma' collection look far from nerdy. In fact, cut into rigorously geometric lines, the pieces take on an unexpected, brutalist slant. A totem-style table is inspired by Ettore Sottsass; a clock split into three discs of lava sand looks like a cement Frisbee; and the glass has been reimagined into sharply angled boxes that were cast to look like the abandoned architecture built near the volcanoes. Blowing ground molten lava proved to be very unreliable but ultimately successful. 'They could only get five pieces out of the kiln before it exploded,' Sellers recalls. 'But there's already a queue for this work,' the gallerist adds. 'Even though people have no idea what they're going to get.'★

'De Natura Fossilium' at Palazzo Clerici, via Clerici 5, Milan, 8-13 April, www.formafantasma.com