

MAX

Interview by
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LAMB

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Much of what the London-based designer Max Lamb creates is made by hand — either his own or those of skilled craftsmen — because even more than the finished object, it's the process of making that brings the 33-year-old joy. Often resorting to traditional and hard-to-achieve craft techniques in site-specific locations, Lamb studies and executes his projects with military precision. His website shows countless images of the designer getting his hands dirty, whether it's on a beach in Cornwall, where he's seen carefully pouring pewter into a mold made in the sand; in a dusty granite quarry in China, mingling among the workers; or in his studio, hand-chiseling scraps of polyurethane into objects. Lamb often produces time-lapse films of the making process, which he then shows to potential clients who end up admiring the finished objects in decidedly more pristine gallery settings. A graduate of London's prestigious Royal College of Art (RCA), he maintains longstanding relationships with well-respected design dealers like Fumi in London and Johnson Trading Gallery in New York, both of which regularly sell his one-of-a-kind pieces or limited editions to important collectors. But this year Lamb has made a rare venture into the realm of industrial production, teaming up with young design entrepreneur Brent Dzekorius to launch a terrazzo-like artificial stone, as well as a series of furnishings. Shortly before the resulting *Marmoreal* collection was premièred during the 2014 Milan Design Week, PIN-UP paid Lamb a visit at his new house-cum-studio in Wood Green, London, where he recently moved with his girlfriend, jewelry designer Gemma Holt.

Caroline Roux Congratulations on moving into your new space. Was it really a mosque when you bought it?

Max Lamb It had been empty for a long time, but before that it had been a mosque. Gemma and I had been looking for a new place for ages. We'd been living in an old industrial unit in Tottenham for seven years. When we moved there people used the warehouses as proper live/work spaces, like we did. But gradually it was being taken over by people who thought it was great for throwing fabulous parties. It all got a bit much in the end — you could hear people's microwaves pinging all the time, and people shagging. It took us two years to find this place, then another to buy it, to find a bank brave enough to gamble on us. But now we're here, and it's really quiet, and I'm already more productive. Once we get curtains and blinds it's going to be even better.

CR Did you do a big clear out before you moved?

ML Oh yes. Moving is really quite refreshing, because it allows you to get rid of all the things you thought you were still going to use. When I was packing everything up, I found myself facing a wall of found materials and prototypes that I'd accumulated over the years. I used to walk past them with a sense of guilt for not putting all this material to good use. So I put it all in my little panel van and drove it to the municipal dump. As I was unloading it, there were people putting it straight back onto their trucks. [Laughs.] We also did most of the remodeling of this building ourselves,

and I tried to salvage as much material as possible, like the timber from the walls. But it's still amazing how much rubbish you make.

CR Gemma told me that Martino Gamper is making her a proper jeweler's bench.

ML He is! He was our tutor at the RCA, and Gemma's worked for him ever since she graduated in 2007 — he was doing the *100 Chairs in 100 Days* project when she started in his studio. He wanted to give us a housewarming present, so she's finally getting a proper bench. She likes the idea that it's being made by the person who's had such an influence on both of our careers, and for the bench to facilitate her own creativity. It's poetic. She's always had to work on an ordinary table, and her work is so tiny, it's always been a bit swamped by the scale of what I'm doing, and all my sawdust.

THE HANDS-ON LONDON DESIGNER WHO WILL LEAVE NO STONE UNTURNED

CR Your personal collection of pottery is in Martino's show that's currently on at the Serpentine, isn't it?

ML Yes, displayed on Michael Marriott's *Double Bracket* shelf. It's my and Gemma's collection, though most of it's mine to be honest. I'm a big fan of studio pottery, and especially Bernard Leach. His pottery was in St. Ives, and I'm from Cornwall. Also, my mother used to teach with the weaver Jackie Harrison, and her husband is Nic Harrison, who was Leach's last ever apprentice — Leach ran an apprentice system in homage to the great tradition of Japanese ceramists. Some of Nic Harrison's work is in our collection; in fact, we have work by quite a few Leach apprentices.



To create the *Bronze Poly Console* (2008), Lamb carved a solid block of polystyrene by hand. He then cast it in bronze in a mold that can only be used once. The project illustrates the kind of labor intensive process the designer often employs. Photograph courtesy of Johnson Trading Gallery, New York.

CR Who's been your mentor, apart from Martino?

ML I worked for an interior designer called Ou Baholyodhin for a year just after I graduated from Northumbria University in 2003. He was a wonderful boss, and he lived in that amazing Lubetkin building Highpoint II [an early example of British Modernism from 1938]. He was deadly serious, in a really friendly way. I didn't need to be taught how to take my work seriously — my dad was in the forces, so I'd grown up with that attitude — but he definitely reinforced it. Ou introduced me to the design world of London. I remember he took me to Sketch for the launch of Nigel Coates's book *Ecstacy* where I met Shin and Tomoko Azumi, and I asked for their autograph! And he took me to the 40th birthday party of Oscar Peña Angarita, the husband of Ilse Crawford. I was

the barman, which was Ou's contribution to the party. So I was making mojitos for all these people I'd only ever read about in magazines. He went back to Thailand to become creative director for [luxury-textile house] Jim Thompson. The last image I saw was of him driving a vintage sports car around a track in Geneva or something.



Max Lamb's first ever exhibition in the U.S. took place in October 2008 at Johnson Trading Gallery in New York. The gallery is one of two, along with Fumi in London, who represent the designer's work. Photo courtesy of Johnson Trading Gallery, New York.

CR You rarely work in production. Is the *Crockery* line you did for 1882 Ltd. the only production work you've done to date?

ML No, there's also *Last Stool*, a series of stool designs I've done for Discipline, a young design firm from Milan (see page 220). But *Crockery* has been a real surprise because it's selling so well. The pieces are quite cheap and the royalties are only a few pennies per piece, yet it's probably the project I've had the most royalties from. It all adds up.

“THE FURNITURE IS SIMPLE — DESIGNED TO BE UNDERWHELMING.”

CR It's all made in England, isn't it?

ML Yes, it's made in Stoke-on-Trent by 1882 Ltd. in some of their oldest factories. But even though it's a factory, everything is done by hand: the slip casting, the assembly and disassembly of the molds, the removal of the pieces, the sponging of all the pieces, the loading of the kilns. Everything is under human control.



Lamb inherited the design gene from his father Richard Lamb, and both father and son are ardent collectors of ceramics. Lamb Sr.'s collection of British pottery (pictured) even was the subject of *The Everyday Life Collector*, a 2009 exhibition in London.

CR How long is that factory likely to survive, do you think?

ML Well, they've been going well over 100 years already — since 1882, in fact. All those big potteries, Wedgwood, Royal Doulton, Hudson and Middleton, are strengthening day by day because of the Asian market. They want things made in Britain. All the higher-end, prestige pieces have to be made here, otherwise, if they don't have the “Made in England” stamp, the Chinese won't buy them.

CR Emily Johnson, of the family's youngest generation, started

1882 Ltd. to liven things up a bit in Stoke-on-Trent. She's worked with you, Philippe Malouin, and Mr. Brainwash among others.

ML Yes, but it's still in the original spirit of the company. The Johnson Brothers were quite revolutionary in their time in what they were doing with clay. They were designing new clays that assisted the slip-casting process. They took a scientific, progressive approach. Emily's dad, Chris Johnson, is a bit of a legend. He took us around the potteries and knew everybody there by name.

CR What did you make of the whole set-up in the potteries?

ML Chris is really personable, but the industry as a whole is quite stuffy. On our first trip there he took us around the Wedgwood factory in the morning and another factory in the afternoon. For lunch he'd arranged for us to go to the Potters' Club, which is like a member's club. I'm very familiar with those kinds of places from my upbringing — officers' messes and clubs. One of my first jobs was working in the officers' club at Halton House, which is this amazing Rothschild building in Buckinghamshire, where I managed the bar at weekends, pulling Guinness. On the day we went to the Potters' Club, I was actually quite smart for my usual standards: I was wearing shoes and a black knitted jumper, and for once I wasn't covered in dirt. But Emily and I were both wearing jeans, and they wouldn't let us in. Chris Johnson is one of the longest-serving members of the community of potters in Stoke-on-Trent, and has been a member of this club for 40 or 50 years, where there are even two rooms dedicated to the Johnsons. And he said, “We're in the 21st century, and there is absolutely no way I'm going to continue to fund this ridiculous establishment if you're not going to welcome the younger generation, the next generation of potters, the people who are going to bring life back to this industry.” So he resigned on the spot. There and then!



Pewter Desk (2011), a private commission for Calder Foundation president Sandy Rower, was hand-cast by Lamb and a group of students during low tide on Caerhays Beach in Cornwall, near where the designer grew up.

CR He sounds fantastic. I can see why you like working with them. What about the new work you're showing in Milan this year, with your new product *Marmoreal*? That's industrial in a way, isn't it? I see you've lined the bathroom walls in your new house with it already.

ML What you see in the bathroom is an early version, a prototype. *Marmoreal* is a sheet material — stones of marble set in a polyester resin, 95 percent marble, five percent polyester. It's made from four marbles: Bianco Verona, that's the buff background color; Giallo Mori, a yellow-orangey color, which is from the region of Lake Garda; Rosso Verona; and the green is Verdi Alpi, which is from Genoa. I've chosen those three colors partly because I like them, but also because they work really well together, and because

they're all Italian and represent Italy. It will also have a random quality. In my bathroom, the big aggregate is too big and the small is too small, and there isn't enough in the middle. It's unbalanced, so individual pieces of the material would have fractured. We cut it into 30 x 30-centimeter tiles just to salvage the material, and I've wacked it on the walls. It's unique. We can never move now. Or we'll have to work out a way of taking the bathroom with us.

CR Why "Marmoreal"?

ML It means something that is, or resembles, marble. It's a rather literary word that's gone out of use. "Beautiful marmoreal skin," for example.



Lamb's *Marmoreal* collection was made in collaboration with London-based firm Dzek and debuted during Milan Design Week 2014. It includes a dining table, chair, two small tables, and a shelving unit (pictured), which the designer calls "the library." It weighs a solid 265 kilos. Photograph by Frank Hülsbömer.

CR Are you planning a big installation in Milan for Marmoreal?

ML Yes, the installation is going to be huge — an entire room lined in Marmoreal and a collection of furniture constructed from the material. But the furniture pieces are simple, designed to be very underwhelming. They could be used outdoors, they could be used indoors. They're also heavy... I'm never going to make light marble; even if I was to cut a very thin layer and glue it to another piece to reinforce it, it's always going to be heavy. The furniture is really like a canvas to display or carry the material. I've designed a shelving unit, which I call the library. It's a fairly large, free-standing shelf unit, and it's just a giant slab with shelves glued to it. From the front you can see the shelving, from the back it's a slab. And it weighs 265 kilograms! Then there's a dining table, which comes with two trestles, so you can swap them around and turn it into more of a desk. And then there's a chair, and two smaller tables, one of which could also be a stool.

"I DIDN'T NEED TO BE TAUGHT HOW TO TAKE MY WORK SERIOUSLY. MY DAD WAS IN THE FORCES."

CR Are they all unique pieces?

ML No. They aren't unique, they aren't limited editions, they're not numbered, and I'm not making them myself. They're production pieces, and they're available for sale. Santa Margherita, a company near Verona, is casting blocks, and cutting them into slabs, then cutting them into tiles. Then they're delivered to the stonemason next door, who deals with the edges and assembles them into pieces of furniture. I guess they'll be made to order, but we'll see.

CR How did the idea for the project come about?

ML I think it was in 2011, when Gemma and I went to Yorkshire for a few months. We were actually looking for a building to buy. My grandfather has a farm up there, and Gemma and I were both disillusioned with London, and we thought it'd be a good idea to look further afield, for something with outdoor space and so on. Anywhere I go in the world, to me the most fascinating places to visit are supermarkets and old industrial estates — they always give you the best overview of a culture. So while we were in Yorkshire, we visited this wonderful old industrial estate in Hull. And that's where I found Toffolo's — an old Italian terrazzo-manufacturing company. They still make traditional cement-based terrazzo, both tiles as well as so-called "in situ," which is where they pour huge areas with concrete and chippings of marble. I spent the whole day with Carl Toffolo Jr., who still runs the company today. So that's when I became inspired to make a terrazzo tile. I like the idea of it, of something portable that's pre-defined, that becomes a salable product. But traditional terrazzo is too thick, the tiles are up to five centimeters, which makes shipping and handling very difficult. So Mr. Toffolo referred me to a company in Bristol where they make synthetic terrazzo. And from there I was referred to Mr. Aldo Breoni at Santa Margherita in Verona, who is amazing. It's all a bit of an experiment.



Material samples of the four Italian marbles used as the aggregate for *Marmoreal* each have a distinct color (from left to right): *Rosso Verona* (red), *Giallo Mori* (orange), *Verdi Alpi* (green), and *Bianco Verona*, which constitutes the nude background.

CR How experimental was the making of the three-and-a-half meter long zinc bar at the new Ace hotel in Shoreditch? How did that come about?

ML One day in January 2012 Alex Calderwood from the Ace just came and knocked on my door. I didn't know much about the Ace so I did some research. I like to know who I'm making something for. Meeting people and talking about what they want is so important. At the time when Alex came here the builders were in the process of remaking whole sections of this roof and I had become fascinated by the process of led bashing. So when Alex asked me to do something for the hotel I started to think about using that process and translating this into a bar, but using zinc instead of led. It's like a little piece of architecture, a plywood body dressed

in zinc. Alex was great to work with, always so enthusiastic and complimentary. It was like an education for him — he was so super interested, like a kid, so excited, wide eyed and involved. It's so incredibly sad that he's not around anymore.

“THE MOST FASCINATING PLACES TO ME ARE SUPERMARKETS AND OLD INDUSTRIAL ESTATES.”

CR Your work is often centered around personal relationships, making to order, not over-producing.

ML My work isn't speculative; there is no real demand for high-volume production in order to justify the initial outlay or investment in tooling, or anything like that. Everything I make is bought by a person who I'm generally in quite intimate contact with. I value forming strong relationships with the customer. To me, that increases the value of the object — I don't mean the monetary value, but the quality of the product, the fact that it will be cherished. Or I hope it will. That's one of the few ways I can justify digging up the earth and raping the world of its resources.



A large 16-foot-long dining table was carved from expanded polystyrene using a hot-wire foam cutter. The 18 chairs were formed from the scrap material and then coated with rubber for weather-proofing. Photograph courtesy of Johnson Trading Gallery, New York.

CR Who are the people you have a particularly formative relationship with?

ML Well, there's Sandy Rower, president of the Calder Foundation in New York, grandson of Alexander Calder. Sandy has a very close relationship with Johnson Trading Gallery, which is my gallery in New York. He's bought many of my pieces, and he's also commissioned me to do a few for him, including my first copper chair, a pewter desk, a poly dining table and chairs, and a library. What I admire and appreciate so much about Sandy is the amount of freedom he gives me. I'm currently working on three more copper stools, which are more like bar stools, and a bronze table for him. They're private commissions for his house. I actually just went to the foundry this morning, where the table is being made. It's an art foundry, and they were also making a Gavin Turk bin bag while I was there, and something for the Chapman Brothers.

CR How are the copper stools being made?

ML They're molded in wax and then electroformed. I start with a solid slab of wax, softening it to mold the shape of the stool, drill all the holes, and further mold the shape with my fingers, caressing the wax. Then I take it to a company outside Guildford where they spray a sterling-silver layer over it,

which makes it conductive. Only then can they electroform it. They can grow copper onto the surface until it's strong enough — one millimeter thick — then they melt out the wax.

CR Didn't you make an enormous pewter desk for Sandy Rower by creating a mold in the sand on a Cornish beach?

ML Yes, that was in summer 2011. It was the same method I'd previously used to make the *Pewter* stools, except this was much bigger, almost two meters long. So I employed the services of ten art students from Falmouth University and we cast 200 kilos of pewter, with 30 saucepans on 30 little camping stoves. It was scary. I only had one opportunity to do it because I had to work with the tides. So I arrived at 4:00 a.m. at high tide, not knowing how long it would take to carve, just that I needed to work on sand that had already had water on it. Normally one of those small pewter stools would take me an hour to make, but the table took five hours. By the time we were casting it, at 11:30 a.m., loads of people were turning up to the beach.



Lamb enjoys being directly involved with production of his designs. To make the 19 pieces of the *China Granite Project* (2009), such as the chair below, the designer spent extended periods of time with the workers of a quarry in Chengnanzhuang, 220 miles southwest of Beijing.



CR And how did the desk come out? Was it worth it?

ML Yes, it was. For me, though, all the joy is in the doing. The outcome is not always so satisfying, even if it's good and does the job. The enjoyment for me usually ends when the making is done.

PLATES — pages 74–75, 78–79

1 *Copper Stools, Chair, and Console* (2006); Nanocrystalline copper; Courtesy of Johnson Trading Gallery, New York.

2 Max Lamb's bathroom (2014) in *Marmoreal* terrazzo tiling; Photograph by Thomas Lohr.

3 *Marmoreal* stool (2014); Terrazzo; Photograph by Frank Hülsbömer; Courtesy of Dzek.

4 *Crockery* tableware (2012); Fine bone china; Made in Staffordshire, England for 1882 Ltd, UK; Courtesy of 1882 Ltd.

Shoot location provided courtesy of the Barbican Centre, London. barbican.org.uk



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