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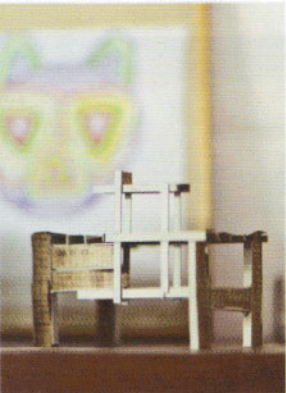
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THIS PICTURE Fabien Cappello stands outside his former home and studio surrounded by Christmas trees, each of which will be made into a stool for its owner. OPPOSITE BELOW Fabien works in his studio/sitting room. OPPOSITE ABOVE A cardboard model of a desk by Fabien stands on a shelf (far left). Christmas trees are cut into lengths, ready to be made into stools (centre left). Fabien's 'Brick Glass' project (centre and centre right) was the result of his collaboration with Murano glass-blowers. Fabien gets to work in his studio (far right)



LIFESTYLE

Hatta Byng meets **Fabien Cappello**, designer and RCA graduate, who collaborates with small-scale manufacturers, often using found materials

PHOTOGRAPHS **CHRIS TERRY**



For most of us, Christmas trees are synonymous with twinkling lights, carefully collected decorations that come out each year, cosy fires and piles of presents; not with the more forlorn sight of dying trees cast unceremoniously out into the cold come January 6. In London alone, it is estimated that most of the 970,000 or so trees brought into the city will be thrown away. For young designer Fabien Cappello, however, these abandoned trees provide the materials for his gnarled, knobbly, yet beautiful stools.

The idea began as a project while Fabien was doing his MA in Design Products at the Royal College of Art. He realised that the largest single quantity of wood shipped into London was Christmas trees. 'Christmas is such a big commercial entity, I felt I could be part of it without interfering,' says Fabien, who collected the trees from street corners in the middle of the night, before they were collected by dustcarts. The stools are simple, and constructed using traditional woodworking methods: 'I'm not skilled,' says Fabien, 'the imperfections become part of the design.'

Fabien's RCA graduation show, in 2009, was a huge hit. Libby Sellers, gallery owner and former curator at the



THIS PAGE Fabien collects discarded Christmas trees from London streets (above left) - 'a local and free source of materials'. He trims branches from a trunk (far left) before transforming it into a stool, using the stand as the seat (left). Fabien has breakfast at Raoul's in Notting Hill with gallery owner Libby Sellers (above), who invited her clients to commission stools from Fabien, to be made from their own trees. OPPOSITE FROM TOP Fabien has tea with his friend and fellow designer Bethan Laura Wood in her flat. A hallway in his former flat leads from the sitting room to the workshop. A picture of a cat is pinned up at cat height, over the skirting



‘Upcycling was not the driving force – the trees were a local and free source of materials’

Design Museum, who had seen his work evolve since his days as an undergraduate in Lausanne, describes ‘making a beeline for him to buy one of his stools’. They kept in touch, and over Christmas 2010, Libby invited clients, new and old, to commission a stool made from their own tree. ‘It was a lovely and admirable project, and an easy one to say yes to,’ she says. The stools are not overtly ‘worthy’; as Fabien himself says, ‘Upcycling was not the driving force – the trees were a local and free source of materials.’ For him, ‘Design is not about solving problems, but creating new possibilities and looking at things in fresh ways.’

His show also attracted the attention of the British Council, which, a week after his graduation, sent him off to Lisbon on a research trip, where he immersed himself in the community of an industrial suburb, working with local artisans and materials. ‘Designers should be able to show off the skills of other craftspeople,’ he says.

From there Fabien went to Venice for a three-month residency at the Claudio Buziol Foundation, curated by his RCA tutor Martino Gamper. One project involved

working with Murano glass-blowers to create pieces inspired by the manufacturing process. The glass-blowers use kilns made of bricks that have to be replaced every two months because of heat damage. Combining two elements that have long associations with Venice – glass and brick – Fabien used these discarded bricks, which bear the patina of the firing process, as a base on which to balance blown-glass vessels. He spent a week with the artisans – who blow between 7am and 10am, when their lungs are at their best – working with them to produce his pieces. ‘It is all about reacting to the situation,’ he says. ‘I love this process – communicating my ideas, which come into being in somebody else’s hands. It is fascinating.’ The fruits of this partnership were exhibited in Milan, and lately shown by Libby in her gallery. ‘They were experiments and unique for me; I won’t be doing more,’ says Fabien.

Following this was yet another residency – this time in Korea – before he returned to London. It was never Fabien’s plan to set up his own design studio straight after graduating, nor – since he grew up in Paris and studied, >





initially, in Lausanne – was London necessarily going to be his base, but a series of events have gradually propelled him to both. At the time when these pictures were taken, Fabien's home was – as you might expect of a young artist-cum-designer – a live/work space in a former shop near Seven Sisters, furnished sparsely with anything he and his housemate, jeweller Linda Brothwell, could lay their hands on, but nevertheless artfully and amusingly arranged. There's a postcard of a cat pinned to the wall at cat height, just above the skirting, and for privacy in his bedroom, Fabien made a sliding door out of scraps of wood, mounted on little wheels. This was always intended as a temporary situation and, as this goes to press, he has taken the next step by moving to a flat and finding a separate studio off Brick Lane. You sense that being a designer is very much a way of life for Fabien. One of his great friends, for instance, is the engaging and talented Bethan Laura Wood, a fellow RCA graduate, who – known for her intricate laminated marquetry and idiosyncratic dress sense – exhibits at the Nilufar Gallery, Milan, deemed one of the most exciting galleries of modern and mid-century design.

Perhaps most accessible for those less in tune with the contemporary design world are the furniture pieces that Fabien created for Retrouvius, which he describes as 'a very beautiful collaboration'. Maria Speake and Adam Hills had also spotted Fabien's Christmas-tree stools at his graduation, and invited him to see their shop, a reclamation warehouse full of the most wonderful old materials. 'We got on very well from the start,' he says. 'They have an amazing vision; I was really inspired.'

The remarkable results of this association include a desk whose design is dictated by a system of interlocking pieces of parquet reclaimed from a north London school, set within a frame made from tulipwood shelves from the Patent Office. There are also shelves made from drawers that came from the Natural History Museum; and side



tables and dining tables made from limestone flooring rescued from Heathrow's Terminal 2, for which nothing was cut. Fabien was keen to work with the broken pieces – 'to use the breaks themselves to drive the shapes', he explains. 'Maria suggested I use materials in ways that would not necessarily mean the end of their life, so that they could be taken apart and used in other ways.'

A recent commission of a completely different and very temporary nature came from Sarah Elson, a collector of art and design, and trustee of the Contemporary Art Society. For her, Fabien adopted the role of event designer for the CAS's annual fund-raising event, a glamorous gathering with an auction to which artists including Jake and Dinos Chapman and Gavin Turk donated work. The event was entitled 'Material Worlds', and Sarah's brief was for 'a combination of rough and luxe' – think a reception desk made from particleboard and clad in old leather using coloured drawing pins, and, instead of the usual flower arrangements, boxes made from pegboard held together with plastic cable ties and filled with flowers. The boxes were numbered, stamped with Fabien's logo and sold at the end of the evening. Sarah had wanted something that was creative and unpretentious, and Fabien's vision was exactly

what she was looking for. 'I feel Fabien's work gave the event its identity. He has an amazing eye for texture, colour and design that is very particular to him,' she explains.

Indeed, Fabien is one of those enviably creative people, effortlessly original and focused in his approach to design, yet gentle and clearly a pleasure to work with. 'I admire the honesty and guilelessness of his approach,' says Libby – for her it is vital to be able to work very closely with the designers she commissions for her gallery.

Recently, Fabien travelled to Mexico to work with Mexican artisans, and also installed a commission at Bloomberg's London offices. Now, he is taking the Christmas-tree project a step further. The next stools, to be shown at Gallery Libby Sellers, will be bigger, more finely crafted and more complex in design. It will be interesting to see what comes next □

Fabien Cappello (www.fabiencappello.com) | *Gallery Libby Sellers* (020-3384 8789; www.libbysellers.com) | *Contemporary Art Society* (020-7831 1243; www.contemporaryartsociety.org) | *Zabludowicz Collection* (020-7428 8940; www.zabludowiczcollection.com) | *Bethan Laura Wood* (07754-064070; www.woodlondon.co.uk) | *Retrouvius* (020-8960 6060; www.retrouvius.com)

OPPOSITE Fabien discusses plans for his collaboration with Retrouvius with Maria Speake (top left). The resulting designs include a desk (top right) made from parquet from a school and shelves from the Patent Office; shelves (bottom left) made from drawers from the Natural History Museum; and a side table (centre) made from limestone flooring from Heathrow. Fabien and Bethan shop at Ridley Road market in Dalston (bottom right). **THIS PAGE** Fabien presents ideas for the event design of the Contemporary Art Society's fund-raiser to Sarah Elson (left), and visits an exhibition at the Zabludowicz Collection (below and bottom right) called *The Shape We Were In*

