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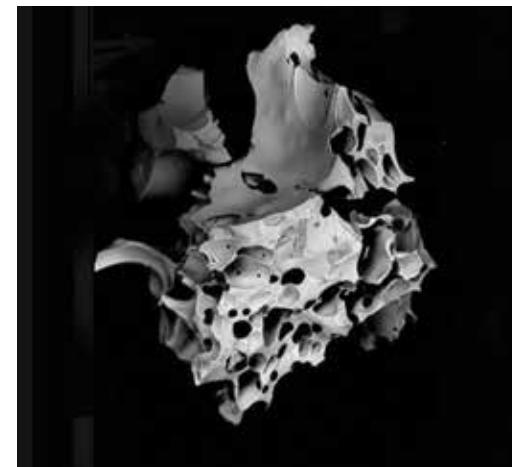
An unearthly landscape greets visitors to Mount Etna.

# For the Love of Lava

Formafantasma's latest collection explores the design potential of a raw material abundantly produced by Mount Etna in Sicily.

WORDS Jane Szita

Photos Luisa Zanzani, courtesy of Gallery Libby Sellers



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For *De Natura Fossilium*, the designers collaborated with the Catania Section of the INGV (National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology), which monitors volcanic activity and geological composition. Shown here is a microscopic view of volcanic debris collected in November 2013.



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Volcanic rock is melted and blown in a way similar to the method used in traditional glass-making.



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Various material samples and rocks collected in different areas of Mount Etna are on display in Formafantasma's studio.

**SICILIAN - BORN** Simone Farresin grew up literally in the shadow of Mount Etna, so his fascination with the lava that the volcano constantly produces is hardly surprising. 'It's a wonderful substance,' he says. 'It is as though the mountain were mining itself, and it's so active – in just a few square metres you'll find several different forms.'

But apart from crude garden furniture and some dodgy mementoes, the miraculous material is neglected. 'In the past, local people made really interesting souvenirs of Etna by putting the hot lava in moulds,' says Farresin. 'Now, they just glue bits of rock together – it's really sad.'

Together with the other half of Formafantasma, Andrea Trimarchi, Farresin set out to explore lava's potential in a project for Libby Sellers Gallery in London. The resulting collection, called *De Natura Fossilium* (after Georgius Agricola's 1546 textbook of mineralogy), ranges from the familiar territory of basalt rock to experimentation in glass and the use of volcanic fibres for textiles. ↪



**5** Results of the production of lava glass at Berengo Studio on the Venetian island of Murano.

**6** Finally, the glass is cut and the edges polished.



**7** The result is a dense black glass with metallic inclusions – ‘unique in glassmaking’, says Farresin. ‘Pure black glass is otherwise impossible to make.’



‘Geometric volumes, CNC-cut from basalt and combined with brass elements, become stools, coffee tables and a clock. Their forms, which the designers describe as ‘brutalist’, respond to the intrinsic uncontrollability of the material and, in a way, serve as a homage to Ettore Sottsass. The monolithic shapes also suggest the abandoned, illegal buildings that dot the volcano’s slopes, like the relics of ancient cultures.’

Producing volcanic glass was particularly difficult. It required remelting Etna’s rocks and mouth-blowing the molten product into unique vessels. The result is a dense black glass with metallic inclusions – ‘unique in glassmaking’, says Farresin. ‘Pure black glass is otherwise impossible to make.’

His obsession with lava, he adds, is far from over. With Murano glass-makers Berengo Studio, Formafantasma is working on a new series of volcanic glass. ‘The other area we are keen to develop is the basalt fibre textile, which we plan to adapt for furniture,’ says Farresin. ‘Lava is a cheap, accessible but sadly underrated material. We can do a lot more with it.’ X

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Salina, a 30-cm-high vase and pallet piece, combines mouth-blown lava glass, lava rock, textile and Murano glass. Each finished element is embedded with the primal material: raw lava rock.



‘Lava is a cheap, accessible but sadly underrated material’



**8** The evolution of the material is visible in a comparison between the first experiments in lava glass and the more refined pieces that came later.

A mouth-blown vase of lava glass (left) stands beside two cast-lava glass boxes. The orange section in each of the boxes is a piece of Murano glass.

