

# DRAMATIC ENSEMBLES

"Assemblage" art pioneered by Picasso is, a century on, enjoying a thrilling new eminence in the world of interior design, says **Helen Chislett**

**I**t is Pablo Picasso who is credited with pioneering the use of assemblage in art, beginning with three-dimensional works that he started to make during the cubist period. One notable example is *Still Life 1914*, comprising scrap pieces of wood and cheap tablecloth fringing. Over the years, assemblage has been embraced by artists as diverse as Georges Braque, Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg, Tracey Emin and Ai Weiwei.

One hundred years since its inception, assemblage is finding a new appreciation within the world of collectable and commissioned design. Whereas the artists who first appropriated assemblage used mainly found objects, ephemera and inexpensive odds and ends, today's artist-designers use existing objects as well as creating their own in order

to orchestrate thought-provoking compositions of beauty and wit.

More than any other contemporary design studio, Humberto and Fernando Campana's Estudio Campana has embraced assemblage in its work, creating chairs out of strips of pine and teak, coloured cotton ropes, sheepskin pillows or soft toys (prices for their work range from \$6,500 to \$145,000). "For us, a material is like a character waiting for an author," says Humberto. "What might it become? A sofa? A lamp? A jug? The work we make may look casual, but it is not – it is like making a map over many months, deciding how each piece should be placed against another." For their latest exhibition, *Hybridism*, held at Friedman Benda in New York before Christmas, the brothers cast all kinds of found elements in bronze, iron and aluminium, including branches, bark strippings and animal figurines, and then brought them together to create unique or limited edition design pieces, such as the Noah bench (\$125,000, pictured below),





*"I create a narrative with scenes that follow round a lamp, such as a scenario where everyone is climbing to reach the top"*

From far left: Estudio Campana aluminium and fabric Noah bench, \$125,000. Haberdashery 14ct gold and bone china Leaf Fall light sculpture; Leaf Fall pieces cost from £7,150. Ryan McElhinney Toy lamp, from £5,000



*"We wanted to create a high-impact experience. Lit from above, the glass tubes mimic light breaking through the clouds"*

Noah wall shelf (\$60,000) and Branches sofa (\$145,000, pictured overleaf).

Found and everyday objects have also long been a feature of the work of Stuart Haygarth, whose signature chandeliers (from £5,000) made of spectacles and plastic flotsam and jetsam collected from beaches have inspired many other designers. "Although my work is functional, including lighting and furniture, the starting point is finding an everyday object I think has an interesting story to tell," he says. "For example, I have been collecting broken car wing mirrors on the streets of London for many years because they are a result of motorists driving too fast, which is a reflection of how we live our lives in a large city. The world is full of such objects – the skill is in finding the right ones and reinventing them intelligently."

The emotional response his work can inspire is often unexpected. "When I exhibited Spectacle [a chandelier made from more than 1,000 pairs of plastic-framed vintage spectacles], an elderly gentleman told me he found the work both uplifting and sad – the first because of the explosion of light through the lenses, the second because it reminded him of the Holocaust. Having visited Auschwitz myself and seen all those cubicles containing thousands of confiscated objects, including spectacles, I could relate to his comment." A limited-edition "Mk.2" version of the chandelier (pictured overleaf) is now available to order from £5,000.

Ryan McElhinney began experimenting with assemblage when working as an animator in the US, first for Walt Disney and later for 20th Century Fox. "I was a big fan of yard sales and car boot sales in America," he says, "and was always finding bags of toys, plastic soldiers and

other figures, which were really cheap. I couldn't afford expensive materials to sculpt with, so I began playing around with them, making rather unorthodox 3D jigsaws, with whole scenes imagined and recreated. That led me to make my first Toy mirror and then a Toy lamp [example pictured on previous page]."

McElhinney has built up an enthusiastic fanbase for his

work. "I think people love spotting something they had as a kid – Buzz Lightyear, Luke Skywalker, Mr Potato Head or The Hulk. They get excited about reclaiming their childhood."

His assemblages, which sell for upwards of £5,000, are painstakingly thought through and executed. "I create a narrative in my work by building scenes that follow all the way around a lamp, such as a king of the hill scenario where everyone is climbing over each other to reach the top and be kingpin. I see my work endlessly copied on the internet but am always shocked by how poorly composed the fakes are."

Artist Rowan Mersh makes extraordinary sculptural works (from £10,000) from shells, which have been a recent highlight of shows such as PAD and Design Miami/Basel. In 2016, his rectangular Asabikeshiinh screen, made of sliced turritella shells, cast fantastical shadows over Gallery Fumi's stand at PAD. It took many months for Mersh to assemble the thousands of shells that make up the work, assisted only by his friend, the sculptor Nathan Pass. The infinite subtle variations in the colours, shapes and textures of the shells create a remarkable palette from which to work. "Shell by shell the works organically evolve like brushstrokes," he says. "The inside of a shell can have the delicacy of lace." A circular version of the Asabikeshiinh screen (pictured below) is available, and Mersh works to commission and will customise his pieces in both size and shape.

While found and natural materials offer myriad opportunities for eco-glam upcycling, other assemblage artists and designers are adding a more literal value to their work. Designer Dio Davies recently launched her first collection of acrylic tables filled with objects – the Solar table (£7,500) glows with 1,500 pieces of 24ct gold leaf piled beneath its see-through surface, while sister design the Luna table (£8,000) features pure platinum leaf. There is also a Happy Pill table (£4,000), filled with about 14,000 resin pills containing tiny scrolls of paper. Davies cites Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and Mauro Perucchetti as influences. "An exciting transformation occurs when a single object becomes multiple, creating unexpected colour fields and random patterns," she says. "The tables are like a blank canvas waiting to be filled by the subject." Other bespoke commissions have included tables packed with lavender grains harvested from the grounds of a family home in the south of France and a section of a 200-year-old tree trunk felled on a country estate, with the family



From top: Haberdashery borosilicate-glass Semblance light sculpture, created for 77 Mayfair, bespoke sculptures from £50,000. Rowan Mersh turritella-shell and fluorocarbon Asabikeshiinh IV (Dreamcatcher IV) screen; shell works from £10,000



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members' names on plaques placed by the rings, representing the years of their birth.

For Valeria Nascimento's exquisite installations of porcelain elements (smaller works from £7,000) – such as the 5,000 or so petals on the walls of Spring restaurant at Somerset House (pictured top) – she handcrafts each individual piece herself. "Every piece I use – although seemingly a duplicate – is, in fact, unique." She is fascinated by the recurring patterns of nature, such as spirals, waves, petals, leaves and birds in flight. Having grown up in Brazil, where she studied architecture, she cites Roberto Burle Marx and Oscar Niemeyer as important influences. "Both of them had a passion for curvaceous lines and sensuous forms. Niemeyer in particular drew great inspiration from Brazil's exuberant nature." With her own architectural background, it is natural she should consider the space in which her installations are to be housed before proposing compositions, whether for walls or suspended from ceilings. "My piece for Spring was a good example of a light-bathed noble space with imposing windows, columns and a tall ceiling, giving me the opportunity to create a work that would enhance and complement its setting." Residential commissions in the past year have included assemblages of porcelain flowers in bloom on the wall of a swimming pool in Surrey and in a dining room in Barcelona.

Like Nascimento, design atelier Haberdashery (bespoke sculptural commissions from £50,000) has used porcelain

to dramatic effect. The light sculpture it created for the Conrad Chicago hotel is made of 1,300 bone-china leaves (Leaf Fall products from £7,150), each hung on a cable of a different length, and one of several scaled-down versions (pictured on opening pages) was commissioned for a home in Kensington last year. Other projects include Semblance (pictured on previous page), a light sculpture conceived for the reception area at 77 Mayfair, made from laboratory-grade glass tubes. "We wanted to create a high-impact experience for residents, so we covered the ceiling with 8,000 borosilicate tubes of different lengths, from 25cm to 50cm," says creative director and co-founder Ben Rigby. "The wonderful thing about scientific glass is that it allows a clinical level of precision but can be used to create something more organic. We like to take something seemingly cold and draw out a sense of warmth through intelligent design. Lit from above, the glass tubes mimic the effect of light breaking through the clouds."

For Humberto Campana, it is this ability to impart renewed significance to materials that gives assemblage

its emotional power. "Making an assemblage is to give fresh meaning to objects through individual storytelling that will resonate with the viewer." ♦

#### FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLAGE

**Carpenters Workshop Gallery**, 4 Albemarle St, London W1 (020-3051 5939; carpentersworkshopgallery.com). **Dio Davies**, by appt, Chesterton Rd, London W10 (01865-951 660; diodavies.com). **Studio Campana**, campanas.com.br and see Friedman Benda. **Friedman Benda**, 515 W 26th St, New York, NY 10001 (+1212-239 8700; friedmanbenda.com). **Gallery Fumi**, 2 Hay Hill, London W1 (020-7503 2366; galleryfumi.com). **Haberdashery**, 020-7503 7080; haberdashery.com. **Rowan Mersh**, by appt, Unit G1B, 8 Mackintosh Lane, London E9 (07949-158 987; rowanmersh.com) and see Gallery Fumi. **Ryan McElhinney**, 07764-450 775; ryanmcelhinney.co.uk. **Stuart Haygarth**, 33 Dunloe St, London E2 (020-7503 4142; stuarthaygarth.com) and see Carpenters Workshop Gallery. **Valeria Nascimento**, valerianascimento.com and see Woolff Gallery. **Woolff Gallery**, 89 Charlotte St, London W1 (020-7631 0551; woolffgallery.co.uk).



Clockwise from top left:  
Valeria Nascimento porcelain  
Blossoming installation  
in Spring restaurant at  
Somerset House, from  
£7,000. Stuart Haygarth  
Spectacle Mk.2 chandelier,  
from £5,000. Estudio  
Campana bronze and fabric  
Branches sofa, \$145,000