

STUDIO MUMBAI / BIJOY JAIN

We are all surface

interview by
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Bijoy Jain / Studio Mumbai
Photo: Jeroen Verrecht

In both architecture and design, Studio Mumbai is internationally renowned for its interesting mix of tradition and modernity, influenced by different cultures, geographies and histories. In his continuous research, founder Bijoy Jain explores the essence of the object and its materiality. It is an approach that can be seen in a new exhibition of furniture in Belgium, where the humble is transformed and becomes a quiet celebration between man and material.



Photos: Jeroen Verrecht

Since 2014, Brussels-based gallery Maniera has been commissioning a series of objects and furniture from designers and architects. Three years ago it was the turn of Studio Mumbai/Bijoy Jain, a venture that proved successful with acquisitions by SFMOMA in San Francisco, LACMA in Los Angeles and Centre Pompidou in Paris. Jain (1965) has now revisited and added 22 new pieces to this series, Maniera 06, a furthering of his investigations into the object and its materiality. On the ground floor of Maniera, studies in fresco, bamboo, and Gandhara stone have been realised as pieces of furniture and brought together in a ceremonial setting. The floor is covered with – Belgian – clay, a recurrent material in both the architecture and design pieces of Studio Mumbai. 'I wanted to recall the idea of a ceremony, as a moment of celebration captured in time. Although I was inspired by amongst others [*The Confession of the Woman of Benvenuto*], one of the frescoes of Giotto* in the Basilica di San Francesco in Assisi, where the gathering has a very particular kind of reason, the reason of this ceremony is open to interpretation,' explains the architect.

In his furniture, Jain modulates materials and culturally diverse ways of making. 'You can see the artefacts as landscapes from near and far, each representing a certain location or culture. In this sense the materials I use are not chosen, in the instance, because of their physical aspects, but because of the culture embedded in them. The pieces are very specific in their materiality. They are the result of a research about objects and materials that are both familiar and unfamiliar... At first glance, it seems as if you would have seen these objects before, but at the same time, their materiality is not recognisable. Beside this, the installation questions the act of sitting, and the stature that is affiliated with it.'

Intriguingly, for some pieces in the series Jain employs the techniques and materials that make frescoes. It is the first time Jain has done so, but given frescoes' long and global history it feels right. Frescoes involve the application of pigment onto *intonaco*, a thin layer of wet plaster, thereby making the pigment an integral part of the plaster. As the surface dries and sets, the coloured pigment, sand and husk particles bind with the lime. This enables the



Studio Mumbai
Photos: Jeroen Verrecht



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materials to merge into one. Jain has produced five fresco studies: three daybeds, a round stone, and two blocks that can be used as stools or tables. One daybed is rendered with a lime made of kohl; another is accentuated by a lapis lazuli border; a third is plain white lime mixed with rice husk. The tables and stools, both in stone, are treated either with a dense black kohl-pigmented lime or polished white cement plaster. Because of their merging materiality the pieces take a position somewhere between architecture and furniture. 'I'm fascinated by the material because of its ambiguity. Its mass can be moulded and has a monolithic quality, but at the same time, the surface catches the light and gives the material a certain depth. Moreover, it improves with time.'

Another piece, the Cubic Chair, was sculpted out of a big block of stone left over from a building, into which the seat was carved. 'As the block of stone remains unfinished, it allows overlays and interpretations of its immediate landscape. I am interested in the idea of the impurity of things and in their capability to receive other opportunities, which have not been considered before. I am

fascinated by the idea of the palimpsest of cultures and materials. As you can find in Rome or other cities, they are able to receive new buildings as a continuous overlay. To get its own life by time and movement, a surface needs to be open. As humans we are all surface,' Jain explains. 'This quality is more important than the geographical origin of the material. The material gesture can be found in different places across continents. As in language, the essence is the same. It is only the nuances of expression that vary and define their specificity. If you would, for example, go to the source of the grey stones found in the Belgian landscape, they could be manipulated in the manner of the Gandhara stone pieces. I want to culturally transmit this possibility.'

Another important concept in the way Studio Mumbai is dealing with materials is what Jain calls an ease or economy of means. 'It's about the amount of speed and distance we can travel with a minimum of movement. In writing you can find this concentrated, dense energy, if one word or sentence has the power to describe an entire universe,' Jain says.

In this intuitive engagement the act of making takes a central position. It is about how we act on material, and vice-versa. 'Materials communicate how they want to be handled. Craft is about seeking an opportunity in this relationship between materials. Communication from both sides is required. It is in the dexterity between the hand, body and mind. It's like being a juggler,' Jain says of his balancing of act. 'The intimate, everyday practice is all what



matters. What nourishes will be the work. We not only design but also produce with the different teams of people, who are specialised in different ways of making; they are adept with bamboo, wood, stone and silk. The work grows organically, it's not part of a bigger plan.'

Whether the physical manifestation is architecture, drawing, objects, furniture or otherwise, the core remains the same for Jain. 'It goes beyond the physical object; it's about the transmission and about how we communicate between each other. One of these things could be care. Caring is about scale. There's a sense of proportion to it. It can be more or less direct. It is the best we can do.'

Maniera 06. Bijoy Jain/Studio Mumbai,
Maniera Gallery, Brussels,
until the 24 August
maniera.be

*The attribution of the fresco to Giotto is not unanimously accepted by medieval art scholars

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