

MATERIAL MINDED

The feats of Paul Cockledge

Paul Cockledge has won national and international acclaim in the design field, underpinned by fervent research into the limits of technology, materials, and manufacturing processes. In short, the designer derives much pleasure from pushing to extremes the boundaries of making. His latest products testify to this in a big way. Having achieved the joining of diverse types of metals without the use of fixings of any sort, he has outfoxed even minimalism. With his nose to the grindstone, almost literally, Cockledge perseveres in the process of technical advancement, doing whatever it takes to get the result he envisions.

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Paul Cockledge testing how to freeze materials in Austria

Facing page:

Paul Cockledge working on the Freeze Multi-Circle Table in Liverpool

Paul Cockledge does not like to make things easy for himself. In an age when some designers are outsourcing production or using 3D printing, Cockledge is dedicated to creating objects that are as complex to make as possible. For his new, conceptual collection of furniture called Freeze, currently being exhibited at Friedman Benda in New York, Cockledge spent three months in a factory in the Liverpool docks. It was there, in the gritty heartland of industrial England, that the British designer pushed himself to the limit, both physically and mentally. This culminated in a body of visually stunning and challenging work that celebrates materials.

Cockledge utilised temperatures well below freezing to create a seamless bond between two metals that otherwise do not adhere. Liquid nitrogen causes metal to contract by one-2000th of a millimetre. As the metal returns to room temperature and expands to its natural dimensions, the components then remain bonded, eschewing the need for bolts, screws, or other fasteners. "What's really exciting is that we've fused materials that in normal circumstances you cannot bring together", enthuses the designer, whose fascination with testing materials and desire to make projects difficult for himself are things he shares with Ron Arad. Indeed, Cockledge studied under the Israeli luminary at the Royal College of Art, gaining an MA in Product Design.





AWESOME

Cocksedge's left-brained yearning joined up with his right-brained creativity, culminating in pieces that conjure up a how did he do that? sense of awe. A bejewelled myriad of shiny stainless steel circles decorates a round table top, the circles becoming smaller in diameter as they approach the table's circumference. This elaborate arrangement of hundreds of gleaming discs is a feat of industrial expertise. "I like to think of it as a big piece of jewellery, because it's so detailed, with so much intricacy, and it required so much precision", says Cocksedge. "After we froze the stainless steel discs they shrunk by a tiny amount;

we then dropped them into the holes in the steel table top and they locked into place. Although the two materials are similar, they have opposite qualities. Stainless steel is extremely robust and doesn't tarnish or change, whereas steel is alive, unpredictable, and acquires a patina. It is achieving the impossible to end up with something so pure, combining rusting steel with mirror-polished stainless steel."

For his futuristic desks and tables, Cocksedge explored a variety of metals, such as brass and copper. Concentric rings of contrasting colours and materials that were frozen together using liquid nitrogen glide into each other to form a spectacular round

A metalworker with the Freeze Twelve Ring Table in the Liverpool factory

Liquid nitrogen being poured into a canister

A metalworker fixing the base onto the Freeze Twelve Ring Table



table. A dozen copper, silver, and gold panels stand in a dazzling row atop a desk, casting hypnotic reflections onto its aluminium surface. The piece was previewed in October at Friedman Benda's stand at PAD, the upmarket art and design fair in London. There's also a bench, with four large sheets of brass and copper slotted into an aluminium surface at diagonal angles creating a dramatic effect. People are able to sit and chat to each other, or equally, to exist in their own space. "There's a picture of me on that bench at 8am after doing an all-nighter – the men working in the factory with us were pushed to the limit", declares Cocksedge. "That bench came out of a sketch consisting of five lines on a piece of paper. But an incredible amount of energy went into the next chapter. It was about getting burns, cuts, and scars on my skin, to get into these materials. This is very personal, as these are objects that I'd been dreaming about for so long. It's about the passion of the idea, not about ease and efficiency."

NORTHERN HOSPITALITY

The starting point for all this was a trip to Austria a few years ago, when Cocksedge buried metals in the snow to learn how they could be frozen together. He realised that the furthering of this experiment could not happen in London. So he and his team spent several months knocking on factory doors in the north of England in order to find the right one



Paul Cocksedge and the metalworkers sitting on the Freeze Bench

The all-acrylic Slice Stool on the factory floor



to work with. “That took us on a tour of the north that ended up in Liverpool, out of the comfort of our nice London studio and into a very industrial zone”, discloses the designer. Factories in Liverpool being more used to building ships than producing design objects, Cocksedge needed to convey the level of investment he had in his work. “Any tarnish causes us a big problem, so I said to them, ‘When this comes off your machine, please treat it as the most expensive car or motorbike you have in your mind, because that’s what it means to me.’” Thankfully, his worries were unfounded. He was humbled by the company’s enthusiasm and by the team’s appreciation of how precious the materials were to him. “The metalworkers told me that their 16-year-old apprentices were energised by working on pieces with people who cared so obsessively and who respected what they were doing. It was an exchange of knowledge, 100 per cent.”

FUN WITH FURNITURE

Friedman Benda is also presenting objects from Cocksedge’s two other new series, Slice and Rhythm, also produced outside of London. The Slice pieces, as exemplified by two transparent stools unveiled at PAD, are graceful, poetic, and ethereal. They are so-called because they’re made from a single block of acrylic that is sliced into from either side. The application of heat and gravity then cause the lower of the sliced parts to drop down, thus forming the legs, while the upper sliced-parts are coaxed to curve upwards to create the arms. It’s another way

of making furniture without traditional joints. “And because the material is transparent, you can see the cut marks where we sliced, which contrast with the transparency”, elucidates Cocksedge “There’s something soft and simple about it – it looks effortless, and it’s just made of one seamless material.”

After the table, he made a shelf. “Using a sheet of material that was two metres high, we ended up with a shelf that’s four metres long”, he announces. The Rhythm Shelf, its upright segments positioned at varying intervals to create a rhythmic dynamic, grew out of a completely different concept. “I was looking at the chaos of my untidy bookshelf, with things falling and twisted about. And I started to draw vertical lines on a piece of paper to represent uprights that would hold everything in place, with support on every side”, he explains. “It began in a geeky way, but as I became hypnotised by the lines, it turned into an exercise in rhythm that optically moved into something decorative.” The four-metre-long aluminium shelf can take everything from a book to a single sketch, poem, or note, assures Cocksedge.

At the time of writing, the Freeze, Slice, and Rhythm pieces are being shipped to New York. Cocksedge is impatient to see them installed at Friedman Benda. “It’s all been super fun”, he says of his creative adventure. <

paulcocksedgestudio.com

Paul Cocksedge: Freeze is at Friedman Benda in New York until 19 December 2015.
friedmanbenda.com

The making of the Rhythm Shelf