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### Material Matters

Design for a Living World  
Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum  
2 East 91st Street  
Through January 4, 2010



Sheep chic by Eindhoven grad Christien Meindertsma.

*Design for a Living World*, an exhibition developed by the Nature Conservancy, presents ten products by ten top-flight international designers such as Dutch ceramicist Hella Jongerius and fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi. Each product is a response to a particular natural material and a particular locale where the conservancy works (the organization protects more than

117 million acres in Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and the Pacific, and 18 million acres across the U.S.). Jongerius, who was assigned chicle latex (from which chewing gum is made) and dispatched to the Yucatan Peninsula where it is harvested, made a series of embellished vessels and plates using the gooey latex to decorate and bind elements together. And Mizrahi,

who was asked to ponder Alaskan salmon skin, typically a waste product of fisheries, made a flowing gown and shoes from slightly overlapping, ivory-hued salmon leather discs.

The worthy curatorial premise at the heart of this show is to introduce designers to the possibilities of sustainably produced and harvested materials, and to make consumers more aware of what materials make up the products we use and where those materials come from. The fun part was matchmaking designers with locations, explained Pentagram partner Abbott Miller, who co-curated this show with his wife, the author and educator Ellen Lupton. By the way, it's great to see this duo, who were responsible for such seminal exhibitions as *The Bathroom*, *the Kitchen*, and *the Aesthetics of Waste* and *The ABCs of the Bauhaus: The Bauhaus and Design Theory*, working together curatorially again.

For me, the most seductive of the final products by the selected designers is the deliciously knobby white rug knitted by Christien Meindertsma, a young graduate of the Design Academy Eindhoven, using felted wool yarn and giant knitting needles. Each hexagonal unit in her modular rug is made from 3.5 pounds of wool, the yield of a single sheep, and is knitted in a different pattern to further emphasize the correlation between rug unit and individual sheep from which it is derived. Meindertsma found her raw material at Lava Lake Ranch in Idaho, and from the video footage used to contextualize each exhibit, it's clear she loved every minute of the process of sourcing, treating, and experimenting with this particularly soft variety of organic wool.

Which brings me to a very obvi-

ous gripe: A show that wants us to connect more fully with materials—and we're not allowed to touch? Why on earth not? After witnessing on the video footage the relish with which various designers fondle their Forest Stewardship Council-certified wood, their scaly salmon leather, their milky chicle gum, or thick, greasy Idaho wool, the first thing you want to do as a visitor is to share in their glee and caress these things yourself—to understand their properties and potentials through touch. The raw materials are on display alongside the finished products, but tantalizingly out of hand's reach, encased in vitrines. As one might expect from a show designed by Abbott Miller, the design is ultra-refined. The typography is elegant, and the details are nicely considered—Ami Vitale's *National Geographic*-style photographs of the exotic locations are printed on aluminum panels, for example, lending them a dramatic silvery sheen. But considering the haptic nature of this exhibition, its design feels almost too perfect, too locked-down.

The most important contribution of this show is not in helping us to understand the nature and sensual properties of these materials, therefore, but in highlighting the design process. Usually this is exactly what is omitted from design exhibitions, which often focus on the finished artifact as if it had dropped from the sky perfectly formed. Thanks to the inclusion in this show of working sketches, models, and test pieces, and the excellent photography and video footage, however, we get to witness the often-messy story of production: the experiments undertaken, the successes, and the failures. The video interview in which

Jongerius recounts her experience with the chicle gum is especially charming and revelatory of her design process. At first, the brittleness of the material stumped her; it was like "having an alien in the house," she admits. This drove her to try and unlock this material's "secret." She persevered in melting, molding, stretching, and winding it until she found a use for its stickiness: a way to "repair" cracked and broken ceramics and to combine them in teetering sculptural forms, like Dr. Seussian stove chimneys.

The show also gives us a glimpse into human stories behind the design process. Through jewelry designer Ted Muehling's assignment, we learn how the inhabitants of the Micronesian Pohnpei Island harvest and carve the seeds of the ivory nut palm, and cultivate black pearls in black-lip oysters. We also learn how Muehling recognized a kindred spirit in the bespectacled Joshua Borong, one of the carvers. Muehling guessed Borong was the same age as he and the one with whom he could best communicate about the carving process. Such details as these, captured on the video interviews that accompany each section of the exhibition, give *Design For a Living World* its dimensionality and its life.

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The Idaho herd

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