

This is a project that exemplifies the power of design to transform, repair, and promote social cohesion.



Sebastian Cox

When designer and furniture maker Sebastian Cox (1986, Ashford, Kent, UK) was 12 years old, the wood burners came. 'I can remember smoke hazing through the deforested landscape,' he says. 'It was a really vivid experience.' They cut not just the woodland in which he grew up, but all the woodlands in the area, living in each one for a few weeks, burning the timber in kilns for charcoal before moving on to the next, so the effect stretched as far as the eye could see. But as striking as these scenes of seeming devastation were, what really stayed with the young Cox was how quickly everything grew back. By selectively felling trees, the woodsmen opened up the canopy allowing more light to reach to forest floor and more species to flourish – and being temperate hardwood, even the felled trees regrew from their root system without the

need for replanting. This was not destruction after all, but coppicing – a traditional way woodland management practice that dates back thousands of years and that we now know mimics conditions that mammoths would have once created by knocking down trees as they blundered through forests – and that beavers create when they bring down trees for their dams. Woodland species have evolved for such conditions over millennia and so this sort of management optimises woodlands for abundance and biodiversity. In fact, when woodlands are not managed in this way, they become 'overstood'; too many older trees block out the light required for new growth and the species that rely on it.

Today, Cox produces furniture based not on market demand, but based on the timber that comes out of coppiced woodlands – including



his own. 'I grew up understanding the cycle of coppicing and harvesting timber,' he says. 'During my design education at university, I became really interested in the idea of regeneration and using materials that are potentially inexhaustible. I was so excited by the idea that there was a material that would replenish itself without you doing anything other than harvesting it.'

Cox's Hewn Underwood Collection features slightly splayed legs made from coppiced hazel with the bark intact and tapered feet. Each leg is jointed into an English ash tabletop or seat with neatly wedged tenons. Wooden furniture is often so highly processed that you could be forgiven for forgetting that it is made from trees. Not so this collection; its tapered hazel legs evoke evenings spent whittling sticks around a woodland campfire, or at least pencils sharpened with a knife. It provokes important questions about where materials come from and what happens to the environments from which they are taken – all questions Cox is more than happy to answer. The hazel is sourced from coppiced woodlands – his own and local woodlands managed in similar ways – and the ash is 'selectively felled,' which means choosing trees to take down not only for their timber potential, but also to optimise the canopy – and therefore the amount of light reaching the forest floor – for biodiversity.

By the 13th century most of the UK's woodlands would have been coppiced – and there would have been many more woodlands than there are today, but the Industrial Revolution brought about faster and cheaper ways of manufacturing the products once supplied from the woods by coppice workers. Coppicing – and woodlands – have been in decline ever since. Once



I want my daughters to know
what a nightingale sounds like.



We are only just starting to really understand the damage we have done, so I think it's essential that we not only try to [...] stay sustainable, but that we actually try to repair what has been lost.

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Horrified by the drop in value a simple hairline crack could inflict on precious ceramic pieces – sometimes to the extent that they wouldn't warrant the cost of restoration – and curious about how repairs were often made invisible to the untrained eye, he started to explore a different approach to his craft, one that celebrated the history of each piece. He was invited to restore a glass Roman funeral urn designed to hold the ashes of the dead as part of an internship at the V&A, and the seed for what was to become the Memory Vessels was planted.

There were two turning points that took the art element of his practice from a side hustle to his main focus (he still does some restoration work). One was getting a call from curator and collector Kay Saatchi who

nominated his work for an exhibition at Selfridges highlighting 'rising stars' of the art world in 2009. 'His work is about things in decay,' she said of **her** nomination.

The second happened more recently when pictures of his Memory Vessels series went viral during the COVID-19 pandemic 'People were sharing the images, saying "This is how I'm feeling",' says de Vries. 'Somebody even changed the name and for a while one image was doing the rounds under the title "In Pieces but Holding It Together".' De Vries is conscious that although the breakages he highlights might represent the most dramatic moment in a vessel's life, they are far from the only stories it holds – they are often simply the only ones we know about. In the same way, the stories he intends to tell aren't always the ones that people read into his work. 'But I think it's great, because it's doing its job – it's making people think.'

When I'm restoring, I have to put my creativity to one side and make whole what somebody else has created.





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objects you can collect on the Thames, I became hooked on visits to the river,' she says. 'The objects I collect from its muddy shores have sometimes been sitting there from the moment they were lost or thrown away. Materials left over from previous industry along the river tell us a lot of the type of activity that took place there.'

From her studio in Walthamstow's Lloyd Park in London – also home to the William Morris Gallery – she researches maps to connect these tales together. 'My storytelling is quite site-specific because of the objects I find and

where I find them,' she says. 'I delve into the archives and discover so much detail of what life was like from old maps and panoramas – they provide a context to my finds and bring my pieces alive. As human beings, it's important to connect to our past to inform where we go in the future. The Thames is a history of what we do with rubbish – by exploring what has been left behind we can see what has had a negative impact on the environment.'

Harrison not only tells these stories through her own work, she has also collaborated

with Thames archaeologist Mike Webber and fellow mudlark and author of *Mudlarking: Lost and Found*, Lara Maiklem, to create public engagement artworks and exhibitions. 'By understanding what has been dumped in the Thames Estuary throughout history, we can see the impact of industrialisation and recognise that we need to make sure regulations are robust enough to protect the environment,' she says. 'Nature can reclaim and create new habitats on the river. The RSPB has one of the largest designated areas in the country for birds at Cliffe in the Thames Estuary and it's a reminder of

what can be done when we stop polluting our rivers.' By telling the stories of what our ancestors threw away, Harrison is asking us to be mindful of the things we buy, make, keep, mend and discard ourselves. 'The rubbish sites at Tilbury and Mucking are a lesson in modern waste – plastics and polyester fabrics are now revealed in layers along the river's eroding banks,' she says. Somehow it seems unlikely that the mudlarks of the future will be as delighted with those finds as she is with a shard of Delftware.



makes work about issues of social injustice, such as a tea service in memory of the Chinese cockle pickers who drowned in Morecombe Bay, made to commemorate the anniversary of the abolition of slavery, as an ironic commentary on the continuation of the practice in the modern age. His *Syria Series* subverts the traditional blue-and-white ware aesthetic with scenes from the civil war and ongoing humanitarian crisis there, while his *Cumbrian Blue(s) Bombs Over Baghdad* remains shattered, its broken state telling us more than a repair ever could.

'Environmentalism and social justice are inextricably tied together,' he explains. 'The Western capitalist system creates inequality in the process of killing the planet – it's completely unsustainable. I am working on a series about the Hudson River at the moment and industrialisation has poisoned that river to the extent that it's not going back to its natural state for many, many, many years, if ever. It's all connected – there's an arrogance in the Western philosophy that needs to change.'



Is he hopeful about the future? Does he believe that change will come? 'No, not really,' he laughs. 'Some days, I get terribly depressed, but then, people in power rely on that fatalism, and on other days, you do see things changing. So, I oscillate between thinking things are completely fucked and finding a little bit of hope. I think the key is to focus on what you can control. I might feel completely helpless in the light of worldwide events, but what I can do is impact my

immediate environment – through my art, I can have a small impact on what people see in museums and galleries, and hopefully open their eyes a little. When people see my work, they see it on one level, and then suddenly spot the nuclear power station in the landscape. There's a dawning realization that all is not as it seems. That double-take enables them to see a whole genre of objects – and even situations – in a new light. It's sort of enlightening.'



Mending is something humans have done for thousands of years. It's only very recently that we've stopped repairing things, and it's completely unsustainable.

