

CHRISTIE'S
INTERIORS

Issue 17 – May / June 2017

Objects, art & ideas



MARCIN RUSAK IN HIS STUDIO WITH LAMPS AND VASES FROM HIS FLORA AND PERISHABLE COLLECTIONS AND THE WASTE FLOWERS HE USES TO CREATE THEM

The petal worker

Marcin Rusak extends the life of discarded flowers to create unique design pieces and artworks. By Lisa Johnson. Portrait by Gabby Laurent

MARCIN RUSAK LIVES and works in the High Cross Centre, a collection of scruffy warehouse units near Tottenham Hale station in north London. The double duplex, which he shares with the French designer Marlène Huissoud, is stark and white. But Rusak's work – 'Flora' tables made from discarded flowers set in black resin, glowing with light like a Dutch still life; 'Perishable' vases which, if left out in the sun and rain, would collapse in on themselves – is full of poetry.

Flowers are in Rusak's blood: he grew up among the vestiges of his grandfather's flower business in Warsaw, and his childhood memories are of the 'warmth of the greenhouses and the abandoned structures with weeds growing on them', of 'playing hide-and-seek and building things'. But it wasn't until relatively recently – after years of studies had taken him from the University of Warsaw and the Design Academy Eindhoven to London's Royal College of Art – that these memories became significant.

'We were invited to choose an object that had meaning for us, investigate it and find something for ourselves,' says Rusak. 'So I chose a cabinet from home. It's a really old piece from the 16th century, carved in natural floral decorations and the seasons. I had never mentioned my family, and then I said to my tutors: the funny thing is, my grandfather used to grow flowers. They were surprised I hadn't made the connection before.'

Once the connection had been made, it set Rusak on a very specific path: first to New Covent Garden Market in London, where he was 'shocked to see how much waste they have lying around', then to the Aalsmeer flower auction in the »





'If I take flowers and give them a new life,
it creates another circle of meaning'



RIGHT, PE
VASE II (D
2014. BELI
SCREEN. I
FLORA LO

Netherlands, where he was staggered by the scale of the operation. 'The flowers come from Africa and South America and are sold to buyers for Europe's biggest stores,' he says. 'It looks like an airport.' It was the beginning of a realisation that 'every aspect of today's 40-billion-dollar flower industry is controlled - from the height of the stem to the angle of the petals'.

This extensive research provided Rusak with the material for his graduate show, *Flowering Transition*, which 'looked at flowers and their meaning to us' through a series of 'chapters'. In *Scent*, he distilled the scents of rose petals from a supermarket, a florist and a garden to show how smell is controlled to make flowers live longer; a ghostly white sculpture called *Flower Monster*, created using a complex process that included 3D-scanning and 3D-printing, showed 'how much we are interfering with something that used to be natural'. Presented alongside the works was a book explaining the processes. 'It was important that people understood what they were seeing,' says Rusak. In it, a black-and-white photograph shows his grandfather, great-grandfather and grandmother among the family greenhouses, before his grandfather 'closed down the business and planted 40 acres of Christmas trees on the

coast'. Rusak's mother wanted to take on the business, he says, but her father wouldn't let her.

Rusak graduated in 2014, and has already won a string of awards including the 2015 Perrier-Jouët Arts Salon prize and a 2015 Decorex Future Heritage Foundation grant, each worth £10,000, which allowed him to develop the flower-infused resin he uses for his Flora collection. 'I wanted to create something that would age visually, like brass or leather, things we keep because of their aesthetic qualities,' he explains. 'So I started working with a PhD student from Imperial College and injecting flowers with bacteria that lives without oxygen at very high temperatures. But then I realised that air does a similar thing, so if I sliced through the resin and let air into the veins and stems and petals, over time they build up these silvery voids of light around them.'

The oldest Flora sample is two years old. And while Rusak finds it interesting that it has a 'tiny bit of a life of its own', he realises it is 'not generally a feature interior designers and collectors are aiming for'. So he has developed ways of making the material more functional. Commissions are bespoke, but a lamp might cost around £4,600, a big table £28,000. After exhibiting at Design Miami Basel last December,

he is currently preparing 10 or so pieces, including a 'really big dining table and an illuminated cabinet', for his first solo show at New York's Twenty First Gallery, 'a townhouse in Chelsea where the owners also live, so you can see pieces in a residential environment'.

At the same time, another grant - £7,500 from the Jerwood Charitable Foundation - has given Rusak the opportunity to develop his conceptual, sculptural work and create an installation of '10 to 20 vases at different stages of decay' that will go on show at this summer's Jerwood Makers Open. Made from flowers set in resins such as shellac, these Perishable vases serve as a metaphor for our attitudes to consumption: 'We're surrounded by so many objects that we use, then don't need, but are stuck with. If you have an object that is ageing, that is perishing, and which you cannot keep or pass on from generation to generation, it creates a unique relationship with the user.' He has made one of these pieces for a client, 'a very aware guy who likes the whole idea of ephemerality'.

There are trays of three-day-old flowers drying in Rusak's studio, and he is clearly fascinated by them: 'They have so many more gradients of colour, and there's something



RIGHT, PERISHABLE VASE II (DECAYING), 2014. BELOW, FLORA SCREEN. OPPOSITE, FLORA LOW TABLE



Photos: Marcin Rusak Studio

quite nostalgic about them. And at the same time, if I take them and give them a new life, it creates another circle of meaning,' he says. But he is interested in other materials, too, and is currently working on a 'process that will create a new way of looking at metal and making pieces with metal'.

Rusak is relishing the freedom that has come with success, and with production bases in the UK, the Netherlands and Poland, he is looking forward to working more as a creative director on his design pieces ('researching something, finding something interesting, making it work, then finding the right specialists to help make it'), while continuing to develop his more 'autobiographical' work.

Given his inclination to weave his identity into everything he does, it's no surprise to hear that Rusak is close to his family. His father is helping to manage the production side of things, and, nine months ago, he went into business with his sister. 'She has a similar story to mine, in that she was studying different things, not knowing what she wanted to do in her life, while also making flower compositions,' he says. 'So we thought: how about we start a business together making flowers installations for hotels and events?' He shows me photographs of some of their installations, which are made from seasonal Polish flowers; they, too, look like 17th-century still lifes. 'My mum is thinking of joining the business,' he adds. 'So finally the whole family is working with flowers again.' ♦ Marcin Rusak's work is on show at the Twenty First Gallery in New York from 11 May to 14 June. The Jerwood Makers Open runs from 28 June to 27 August at the Jerwood Space in London. 21stgallery.com. www.jerwoodvisualarts.org. www.marcinrusak.com

s, including
nated
York's
Chelsea
see

£7,500
ion - has
up his
e an
ent stages
ummer's
wers
ishable
udes to
o many
ut are stuck
ng, that
ep or pass
reates a
has made
'aware
nerality'.
owers
arly
ny more
hing