

Triennial

2023

At a time when rapid and seismic global change is no longer unprecedented, the third NGV Triennial is a moment to reflect on the complex tapestry of our world through the work of more than 100 artists and designers. The NGV Triennial 2023 is based on three thematic pillars: Matter, Magic and Memory. Matter looks at nature, materials and making, Magic reveals how spirituality has shaped the world around us, and Memory shines a light on the people, places and objects – and their histories – that have made and re-made our world. This publication includes dialogues, reflections and commentary by fifty-six writers and presents readers with an opportunity to explore diverse cultures and belief systems, reflect on histories and envision shared futures.

(previous) Dunne & Raby *Pole 1: Trail* 2023 (render, detail), from the *Designs for a World of Many Worlds: After the Festival* collection 2023. Co-commissioned by the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne and Museum of Contemporary Design and Applied Arts, Lausanne. This project is produced in collaboration with RMIT School of Design (below) Fei Yining *Duke of apple in the vile oubliette* 2020, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased with funds donated by Rob Gould, 2022



Material flows

Ewan McEoin

Throughout history, the creative outputs of different cultures around the world have always been contingent on the materials they have access to. The rise of our era signals a major shift: from passive receivers of nature's gifts, humans now extract and create materials on an unmatched scale, gaining access to substances from anywhere on Earth, be they organic or synthetic. As we wield this power, a new question arises: how will the materials and industries that define our current age be interpreted or understood in the distant future?

Throughout the history of human creativity, something that has always linked nature and the act of creating is matter. From the rudimentary stone tools and clay vessels of our ancestors to the sophisticated devices of the digital era, every utensil, artwork or object made by humans reflects the materials available at the time and the technologies we have developed to manipulate them. The raw substances of these creations, whether they be earth, wood, ore, sand, fibre or pelt, are all forms of matter, each carrying their unique narratives and characteristics, each affecting and being affected by human touch. Artists and makers continue to employ a diverse array of organic and synthetic materials in their practices today. Man-made objects can prompt reflection on the role humans play in the life-cycles of the environment; art, craft and design can pose pertinent questions about our relationship with and responsibility towards the materials, species and ecosystems that sustain us. Observing the interaction between objects, people and the natural world might lead us to redress or re-evaluate our destructive practices towards other life forms and the non-organic materials we rely on so heavily in the twenty-first century.

The scale and complexity of contemporary relationships between people, matter and materials were facilitated by material and labour extraction and trade through hundreds of years of settler colonialism. The 500-year spread of Western philosophy and science, nested within the dual expansion of Christianity and European colonisation, has had a profound influence on how humans globally interact with both matter

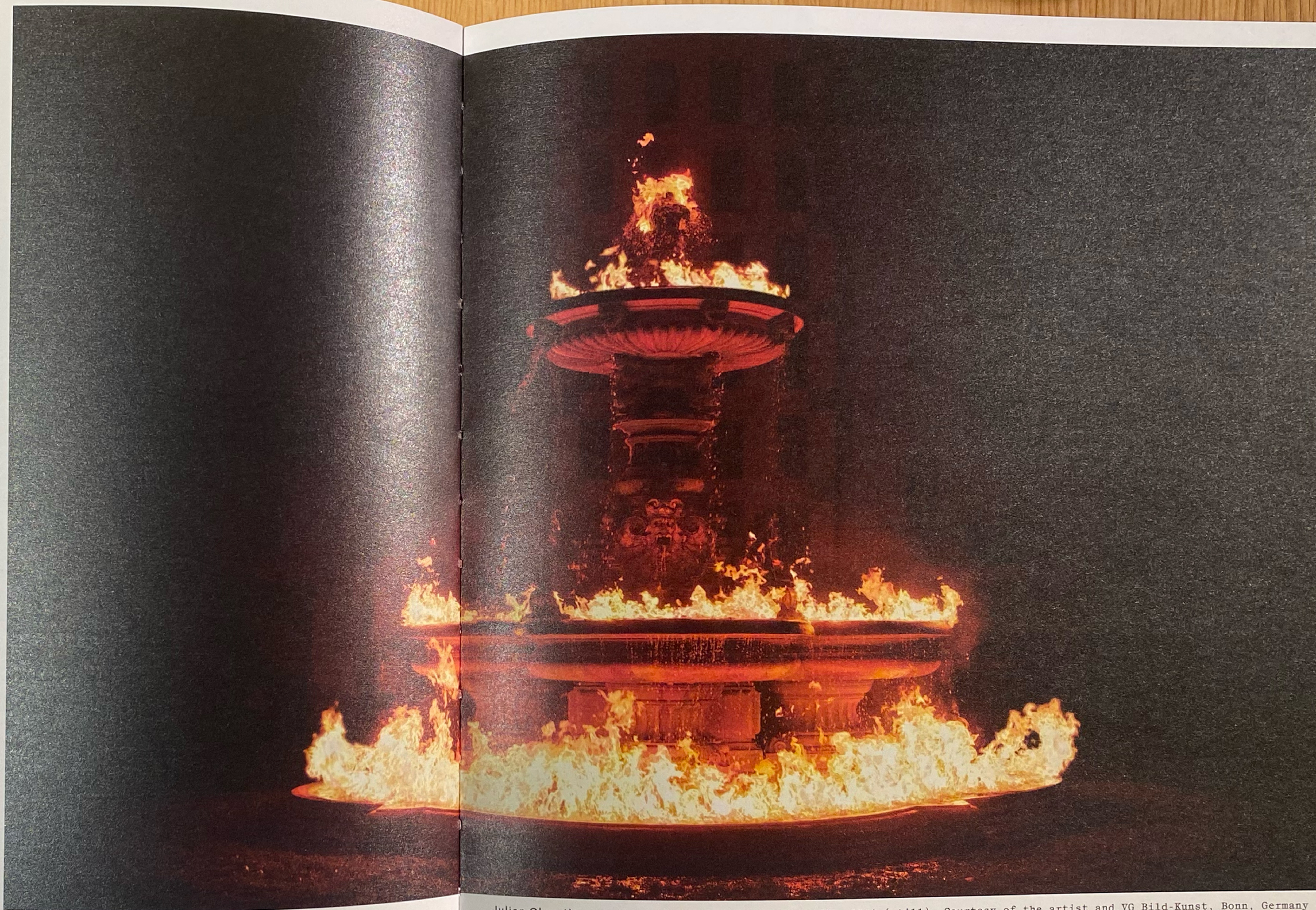
and other cultures today. As the Western world slowly begins to comprehend and address the continuing ramifications of this and the accompanying draining of natural resources, we can see that Western ways of thinking continue to separate nature and culture, placing humans and culture outside of nature and apart from matter. In many Western contexts, nature is still understood as dangerous and in need of taming, mastering or destroying – or conversely, as a pure, primordial space only existing in the absence of humans. The Industrial Revolution was a watershed moment in this breakdown of the human-matter relationship. The divine authority to subdue nature, coupled with newfound mechanical prowess, facilitated the exploitation of the planet's resources on an unprecedented scale. It was this era that gave birth to the global neoliberal economic system, built on the tenets of free trade and industrial capitalism that envelop us today.

The relationship between humans and matter is concurrent and never-ending. In prehistory, as humanity's understanding of its environment grew, so did its relationship with natural resources. The creation of sophisticated tools and artefacts for rituals and ceremonies testified to this evolution: these tools were no longer purely utilitarian, but became repositories of spiritual value and served as conduits for connecting with the divine. Today, most man-made objects – across myriad typologies – are not imbued with spiritual meaning. On the other hand, contemporary art and design might offer a starting point from which to delve into existential inquiry and begin to understand humanity's relationship with the world around us. Some artists and designers transform matter, teasing out its essence and reshaping it to offer function, utility and beauty while also representing and questioning societal norms, environmental concerns and the human condition. These artists and designers operate in a space that can provide a critical counterpoint to material consumption and waste generation. With their work they animate inert matter with life and meaning, seeking that the viewer ponder on the longevity and future impacts of these materials on our planet.

Our journey to understanding matter has led us to fascinating realms. From the subatomic to the intergalactic, we have pried open nature's secrets, revealing a universe of stunning complexity. Matter forms the very fabric of our existence, a fact so fundamental that it is often overlooked. We *are* matter, intimately connected to all life, locked in a reciprocal relationship with nature, including other animals. For most of human history, it was a given that every part of a hunted animal – including the blood – would be used, whether for food, clothing, tools or art. Today, artist Basse Stittgen's work *Blood record*, 2023, revitalises this practice. This vinyl record, from cow's blood, emits a cow's heartbeat when played, manifesting the scale of industrial agriculture and evidencing a wasteful and often unempathetic agricultural system. Encapsulating the stark reality of livestock as material, *Blood record* invites reflection on our disconnection from animals' physicality and the ethical implications of their commodification. Stittgen's blood record and associated sound work offer a potent reminder of our shared corporeal existence, urging us to reconsider our habits of consumption and the forgotten value in all animal life.

Wood, another living material, has long served as a canvas for human expression. The process of wood carving echoes the cyclical process of life, growth and death. From a tree, we derive a block of wood; from that block, an artist can evoke forms that last well beyond the tree's natural life span. The carving of wood transforms a piece of the natural world into an expression of human thought and emotion – a poignant reminder of our relationship with the world in which we live. Osamu Mori, a Japanese artist renowned for his traditional woodcarving techniques, explores the juxtaposition of human beauty and the raw power of nature through his artworks. In his latest creation, *3MMM – rivalry*, 2022, Mori carves a human body out of a nearly 120-year-old camphor tree. This age is significant, as it recalls the record for the oldest living person, emphasising the ephemeral nature of human existence. Mori's sculptures capture a sense of movement and levitation, depicting unstable body positions as well as flowing hair and clothing. The camphor wood itself, with its warps, cracks and natural imperfections, is an integral part of the artwork, mirroring the lines on a face or the bends in an elbow. Faces seem to melt into the wood as the essence of the tree appears to reclaim the human form. Beyond their use in Mori's sculptures, materials derived from the camphor tree possess a rich history: camphor oil has been employed as a topical medication, a manufacturing chemical and as embalming fluid. It has also played significant roles in religious ceremonies. When incorporated into art, camphor wood embodies the healing powers inherent in nature and the possibilities of recovery.

The Dutch design duo Tejo Remy and René Veenhuizen, with their *Bamboo chair*, designed 2007, manufactured 2023, celebrate the properties of bamboo, renowned for its speed of growth and regenerative capacity. This plant has become a symbol of nature's resilience and productivity, and embodies the principles of sustainability and adaptability. With durability comparable to steel and flexibility akin to plastic, bamboo represents an ideal alternative to more ecologically damaging materials. The artists' choice to harness bamboo's properties conveys a commitment to sustainable design and highlights the potential of organic materials in our industrial world. This bamboo chair thus serves as a reminder of our ability to coexist harmoniously with nature while achieving functional elegance. In a similarly sustainable fashion, with *ReCoil, table*, 2021, Australian designer Brodie Neill resurrects



Julian Charrière *And beneath it all flows liquid fire* 2019 (still). Courtesy of the artist and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany



Osamu Mori *3MM - rivalry* 2022, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
 Purchased with funds donated by Dr Brett Archer, Tania and Sam Brougham and
 the Professor AGL Shaw AO Bequest, 2023

Installation view of Joshua Petherick and Lewis Fidock *Make a wish!* 2023 at Asbestos, Melbourne, 2023.
 Courtesy of the artists. Proposed acquisition, Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Artists



timber recovered from Tasmania's lakes. Neill's material of choice is Hydrowood, created from reclaimed drowned trees of the region, including sassafras, myrtle, eucalyptus, blackwood, Huon pine, Tasmanian oak and celery top pine – testaments to nature's resilience and longevity. Turning the drowned and downed timber into prized objects, Neill's work emphasises the cyclical nature of existence – in this case, from living trees to drowned timber, finally resurrected as artistic creations.

Lewis Fidock and Joshua Petherick's recent body of work, *Make a Wish!*, 2023, also delves into the cyclical nature of life and the transient nature of materials. This exploration is vividly depicted through three large sculptural leaves in various states

of decay, presenting an intriguing speculation on the future. The decay of leaves in the natural world plays a crucial role in the regeneration of life. As leaves decompose, they release carbon back into the atmosphere, contributing to the life cycle as fungi break down the decaying matter, enriching soil's structure and water-holding capacity. This process ultimately nourishes plants, supporting their growth and vitality. The oversized leaves of *Make a Wish!*, despite their grand dimensions, evoke an unnatural representation of nature's vital energy source with their cold, man-made texture and detachment from soil and water. This prompts the viewer to contemplate the interplay between fantasy and reality, illusion and truth, and absurdism and natural processes.

Beneath trees, forest floors and artists' studios lie lakes of magma, a molten or semi-molten natural material from the Earth's upper mantle or crust – this is the raw material of our planet. Magma is composed of a complex solution of silica, along with various amounts of dissolved gases including water vapour, carbon dioxide and sulphur. This fiery mixture is also rich in metal ores, including copper, tin, zinc, gold and chromium. Intrinsicly tied to the planet's life cycle, magma's colossal scale – a reservoir of about 1.6 billion cubic kilometres – is difficult for humans to perceive. This enormity is veiled beneath layers of crust, far beyond our direct experience. French-Swiss artist Julian Charrière's artwork *And beneath it all flows liquid fire*, 2019, exquisitely articulates this concept. This powerful video installation encapsulates the artist's thoughts on the tensions between modern societies and ideas of nature. It juxtaposes water – a source of life – with the force of fire – an element that has both destroyed and advanced civilisations – to explore the complex coexistence of opposing elements. The installation posits that beneath politics and philosophy lies the original state of our planet, embodied by magma, the molten 'liquid

fire' churning at the Earth's core. Employing a massive array of LED panels, Charrière bridges the gap between humanity and the unseen geological reality. Utilising technology made from elements from the Earth's crust, such as metals, plastics and glass, the artist creates a tangible connection to this force, bringing the formidable scale and power of the planet's subterranean world into human perception.

In turn, fire, and humanity's ability to harness it for our own ends, is an integral component in the creation of many materials. Glass, the result of an age-old production process marrying fire and sand, is a prime example of material metamorphosis. Under intense heat, sand transforms into a state of fluidity before cooling to create glass – a material that has become integral to our lives. Once a luxury item, glass has evolved over centuries to become a material now found in almost every human environment. *Afrikando*, 2017, Jaime Hayon's series of Venetian glass vessels crafted on the Italian island of Murano, underscores the delicate balance of existence and the changing nature of the physical world. The translucent and malleable nature of glass, its ability to obscure and reveal, is part of its rich cultural and historical significance.

Basse Stittgen *Blood record* 2023. Courtesy of the artist



Diego Cibelli *Meditation in an emergency* 2019, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased with funds donated by Amit and David Holckner, and Lisa Ring, 2023



Jaime Hayon *Chausuki (Born at night)*, vase 2017 designed, 2023 manufactured, from the *Afrikando* collection 2017, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased with funds donated by Krystyna Campbell-Pretty AM and Family, and Sean Kelly and Carol Kelly, 2023



Brodie Neill *ReCoil*, table 2021 designed, 2023 manufactured, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased with funds donated by Chris Thomas AM and Cheryl Thomas, Noel Fermanis, Robyn and Ross Wilson, Beatrice Moignard and Emily Hardy and Woods5 Foundation, 2023

Like sand, clay can be transformed, by the application of fire and human ingenuity, into a lasting testament to our ability to shape the world around us. A product of eroded rock, clay is one of the earliest 'virgin' materials used by humanity. From the outset, ceramics served practical purposes – forming items such as storage containers and cooking vessels – but they also carried significant symbolic value, often being used in rituals and cultural traditions. As an art form, ceramics also recontextualise our understanding of the Earth, representing a balance between human needs and care for the environment. Using ceramics and porcelain, Italian artist Diego Cibelli crafts unique pieces inspired by everyday household objects; his body of work *Meditation in an emergency*, 2019, reflects on crises and their power to transform daily life. From animal figurines to festoons of flowers, fruits and vegetables, these humble items take on new meaning in his art as it oscillates between realms, merging contemplation and functionality, the courtly and the prosaic, the transformative and the mundane. Cibelli draws from archival sources, including prints, engravings and moulds, to weave a narrative that connects tradition with contemporary contexts.

Moving from the present moment to the future, Chinese artist Fei Yining's sculptures revolve around the exploration of possible alternative states of existence in a post-human era. Fei manipulates materials to create objects with a monstrous quality, drawing inspiration from writers of horror and suspense such as Edgar Allan Poe and Angela Carter. Fei's sculptures showcase a juxtaposition of grotesque elements with utility, as they are presented as functional furniture pieces. *Duke of apple in the vile oubliette*, 2020, is a furry figure with arm-like appendages resembling claws, its limbs arranged in the form of an armchair. The chair is part of a series that aims to dissect and examine ideas that provoke confusion, consternation and sometimes fear. The artist challenges the viewer by questioning whether they would truly want to sit in such a peculiar and unsettling piece. Glenn Brown's etchings *After Rembrandt*, *After De Gheyn II/Greuze/Jordaens*, all 2019, reinterpret figures from art-historical works of note. He works solely from reproductions and manipulates, obscures and makes monstrous faces and figures. Do we need and want everything we make, or are we compelled to make monsters?

The artists and designers highlighted here challenge our understanding and treatment of different materials. They prompt a reconsideration of our role within the life cycle, compelling contemplation of how things are made and from what, while reminding us that forgotten materials can be repurposed, recycled and re-imagined. They remind us that materials flow from place to place, form to form, and as they flow through our lives, they can tell stories and gather memories.

Jaime Hayon's *Sauda (Dark beauty)*, vase, 2017 designed, 2023 manufactured, has been purchased with funds donated by Chloe Podgornik and Katrina Knowles, 2023. Jaime Hayon's *Wambua (Rainy season)*, vase, 2017 designed, 2023 manufactured, has been acquired with funds donated by John and Cecily Adams, 2023. Jaime Hayon's *Abayomi (Brings joy)*, vase, 2017 designed, 2023 manufactured, has been purchased with funds donated by Dr Peter Chu, 2023. Jaime Hayon's *Umi (Life)*, vase, 2017 designed, 2023 manufactured, has been purchased with funds donated by Nick and Sarah Orloff, 2023. Jaime Hayon's *Saidah (Fortunate)*, vase, 2017 designed, 2023 manufactured, has been purchased with funds donated by Leigh Clifford AC and Sue Clifford, 2023. Jaime Hayon's *Malawa (Blossoms)*, vase, 2017 designed, 2023 manufactured, has been purchased with funds donated by Brendan and Grace O'Brien, 2023.

Glenn Brown *After Rembrandt* 2019, from the *Bring On the Dancing Horses* series, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Ruth Margaret Frances Houghton Bequest, 2019



Tejo Remy and René Veenhuizen *Bamboo chair* 2007 designed, 2023 manufactured, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased with funds donated by Gordon Moffatt AM, 2023

