

CULTURE

Second Nature

Functional design may be a new chapter for Conie Vallesse, but material instinct comes naturally. Her objects feel at once intuitive, tactile, and deeply lived with.

Words by Sean Santiago Photography by Jeff Henckhausen

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Constantin "Conie" Vallesse would rather be in a tent right now, or at least somewhere slightly further afield than her apartment in central Milan, where I'mchasing her. The narrative properties of getting away from it all come up repeatedly in our conversation, as focused as it is on her recent successes, all of which have been born of the niche economies of collectible design as much as the natural world she instinctively turns to for inspiration.

The artist has forged her own creative path through a relentless curiosity, beginning with an early interest in film that has found its continued expression in a holistic understanding of how objects relate to one another in space. A romantic relationship brought her to New York City from Buenos Aires in the late eighties, where she fell into fashion as readily as a person into. She worked (Diane Pilling) but dove for Qdada and continues to book editorial work today as a model. The role of the muse isn't exactly a poor fit; Vallesse has a commanding if commanding beauty, as if she's been cast to play a version of herself in a movie about the fall of an empire. In her thirties she enrolled at Columbia University for two years to study fine art, "trying to understand exactly what I wanted to express," she remembers. "I spent a long time exploring various mediums until I began to shape and understand more clearly what I wanted my work to be."



Through painting and sculpting Vallesse became interested in a more expansive materials palette and the collaborative work of making objects. She designed her first chair during a SOG2 residency at the *La Biennale del Design* in Milan. It was a sparsely, branch-like creation purchased by two golden blooms—something if not exactly approachable. It drew on childhood memories of time spent in her grandmother's garden in Argentina. "I would collect flowers and petals and make cakes out of them," she says. "There was a curiosity in turning single materials into something more." Vallesse showed the chair in the fall of that same year at *Expo/Design*, a design festival in Paris that was pitched to her by its founder in the bathroom of the Qdada.

Broad partnerships have only become more central to her practice since then, both creatively and practically. For "Softness and Strength," an installation at the ninth edition of the design platform *Alcova*, she collaborated with the fashion label *Stacy Gray* on a lounge chair and two tables draped with velvet. "For me, strength is structural and emotional," says Vallesse. "Softness is the ability to receive and adapt—to be open and allow for flexibility. Softness is harder for me to achieve, because you want something to bend without breaking, but maybe softness is a space where things can evolve."

Her collaboration with the fashion house *Emilio*, exhibited at *Design Miami* SOG2, could be understood then as the fullest expression of softness as strength. It brought together her signature typologies in a cohesive collection consisting of works in bronze, ceramic, and glass, even the handle of an iconic *Parkhouse* bag now flower-adorned. All were arranged as if in a living room, disassembled in a manner reflective of the evoked feeling of springtime bliss. It was the largest stage her pieces have enjoyed in the few short years her practice has focused on functional design, and worlds away from her grandmother's backyard. It might be a while longer before she's able to retreat to that tent.



Family Style No. 10 Man vs. Machine Summer 2026

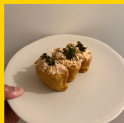
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ART Summer 2026 Art Commissions

Humanity's three-pronged ability to imagine, create, and respond to objects is, in part, what defines us. We've gone from fire and cave paintings to technology and more materials than ever before. Consequently, artists have a lot to work with—and work out. What follows is illuminating.



FOOD Deep-Fried Tofu Pockets

When in need of an afternoon pick-me-up, photographer Fujio Emura turns to this classic Japanese snack.



DESIGN Supply Demand

As machines take on more labor, humans must ensure the search for dignity.