

IN STUDIO

A Designer Who Finds Beauty in Decay

In a Warsaw warehouse, Marcin Rusak turns decomposing plant material into polished pieces that degrade over time.

By Stephen Wallis Photographs by Rafal Milach

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ONE OF THE designer Marcin Rusak's lasting memories from his childhood in Poland was spending time in his family's greenhouses. His maternal great-grandfather and grandfather were flower growers in Warsaw and, although their business shuttered just before he was born, he often played in those abandoned, overgrown glass structures. "I can still feel the warmth and smell the weeds and bacteria growing there," he says.

It's fitting, then, that the 34-year-old has built an international following for furnishings and objects that incorporate flowers and plants in unexpected ways. About a decade ago, while in his master's program at London's Royal College of Art, he began using discarded blooms from a flower market to create painterly textiles, pressing the petals' natural pigments onto silk — a metaphorical way of extending their life, at least until the colors inevitably faded. "So much effort goes into the flower industry, which is massive and confusing," he says. "We grow these living things that we keep for two weeks, and then they end up in a bin."



An in-progress Protoplasting Nature Chandelier (2021), made of *Thaumatococcus daniellii* leaves, which will later be preserved in resin, on a steel wire structure. Rafal Milach



A selection of tall plant species, including beech, ash-leaved maple, pear tree, eucalyptus and *Cytisus scoparius*, that are dried in steel containers. Rafal Milach



The handmade racks Rusak uses for drying flowers and leaves, filled with freesia, hydrangea, paeonia, Matthiola incana, Dianthus barbatus and more. Rafal Milach

Since establishing his studio in London five years ago, he has expanded upon these ideas, most notably with the flower-in-resin furniture for which he's now best known. His Flora tables, cabinets and wall hangings, typically crafted with minimalist metal bases and frames, feature surfaces with dried blooms, leaves and stems, all encased in semitranslucent resin and composed by "intuition," says Rusak, in a style that calls to mind Dutch still lifes or East Asian lacquer. Then there are his furniture-like Perma sculptures, created with thin, cross-sectioned slabs of flower-infused resin that resemble vividly flecked stone. Rusak cuts the segments, in black or milky white resin, into interlocking parts using a CNC milling machine, which leaves bits of raw plant exposed. Over time, some will decompose, crumble and fall away, leaving small voids. "In a sense, the piece is living," he says. "And I want to keep it this way."

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IN PART BECAUSE of Brexit, Rusak decided a couple of years ago to move his studio to Warsaw, where he rents three adjacent spaces, totaling 5,400 square feet, inside an industrial park 10 minutes from the city center. There, amid prototypes in various stages of development, bins and racks are filled with dried or drying flowers, discarded blooms and plant material that Rusak sources from various growers and sellers, including his mother and sister, who own a floral design business and shop in town called Mák 1904. As his output continues to expand — between here and a production facility in Rotterdam, the atelier now makes upward of 100 pieces a year — he has hired 15 or so employees, while also collaborating with artisans throughout Europe, including metal workers and glassmakers, who fabricate components for commissions from private clients, interior designers and galleries such as Sarah Myerscough Gallery in London, Carwan Gallery in Athens and Hauser & Wirth's Make gallery in Somerset, England.



On the table, Rusak's Perishable Vase I, made out of shellac and waste flowers, alongside more waste flowers, tree resins, shellac, tools and oven trays. Rafal Milach



Thaumatooccus daniellii leaf metallized in bronze using a thermo-coating process. Rafal Milach

At Design Miami, opening in December, New York's Twenty First Gallery will show four new Rusak pieces, all inspired by the work of the Austrian architect and designer Josef Frank. The gallery's owner, Renaud Vuillat, who says Rusak has "a kind of rock 'n' roll quality," thinks the most striking piece is a cabinet covered in bronze metalized leaves, crafted using a process in which Rusak creates hand-welded, branchlike frameworks that are overlaid with damp leaves, typically African *Thaumatococcus daniellii*, chosen for their pliability and strength. Their texture and veining are preserved in the metalizing process, which begins with a thin, protective coat of resin, followed by successive layers of molten zinc and bronze or brass often applied by Rusak himself, who spends countless hours inside a ventilated chamber within his Warsaw studio, outfitted like an astronaut in protective gear, dispensing liquid metal from an industrial thermal spray gun that reaches 7,000 degrees Fahrenheit. The works reference Art Nouveau's mimicry of foliate forms — only, in this case, they're literally composed of leaves. And while the metalizing encases and, in one sense, preserves the organic matter by giving it durable form, it also transforms it.

Such duality is at the heart of Rusak's practice, particularly with what he calls his Perishable vessels, formed using a mixture of tree resin, shellac, beeswax, plants, flowers and cooking flour that is heated and pressed into molds. With their archaic, almost haunting beauty, these unique objects are meant to degrade, sag and collapse over time. "These works expose the fragility of nature," says Brent Dzekciorius, the founder of the London-based design company Dzek and a mentor of Rusak's, who owns a vase from the collection. "It still smells ... and I like that it's aging in parallel with me."



Sketches, models and material samples for "Chochol," an installation work commissioned by William Morris Gallery. Rafal Milach



Olga Michaluk, an artisan at Rusak's studio who is working on the "Chochol" sculpture, sewing jute fabric onto the hand-bent steel wire construction. Rafal Millach

Rusak has been scaling up this degradable concept, starting with an outdoor sculpture commissioned to accompany an exhibition of modern Polish art and design at the William Morris Gallery in London. On view through early next year, the seven-foot-tall treelike form will be covered with a shellac mixture that will slowly erode, eventually revealing a metalized core with flower patterns inspired partly by Morris's own Arts and Crafts designs. At the same time, Rusak continues to pursue his interests in botanical engineering and genetics, working with scientists who are studying the potential for storing data in plant DNA. He recently acquired an 18th-century neo-Classical villa outside Warsaw that he intends to transform into a design research lab and cultural center, with spaces for exhibitions, artist residencies and educational programs.

It's this mix — of science and beauty, poetry and personal history — that defines Rusak's work and lends it depth. In the 17th century, Dutch flower paintings not only demonstrated an artist's virtuosic skill but reminded viewers of their own mortality. Today, Rusak's flower furnishings impart similar lessons. "What I love about this work is that it's never the same, and it doesn't have a limit," he says. "It's an endless pool for discovery."

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