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NGV TRIENNIAL

FERNANDO LAPOSSE

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FEATURING

A rare vase by design and
architecture luminary
Frank Lloyd Wright

The icons and inspirations
of Yankunytjatjara artist
Kaylene Whiskey

MAGAZINE

ISSUE 43 NOV. DEC 2023 \$15



IN THE STUDIO WITH FERNANDO LAPOSSE

Conflict Avocados 2023, Mexico-born designer Fernando Laposse's most ambitious project to date, supported by The Andrew and Geraldine Buxton Foundation, explores the troubled ethics behind avocado production in Mexico, the world's largest producer and exporter of the fruit. Focusing on town of Cherán in the state of Michoacán, Laposse recounts through furniture, objects, film and a major 40m long narrative textile – the Cherán Tapestry – the struggle by local people to defend their home from criminal cartels and preserve their forest ecosystem, which is being cleared for avocado production.

INTERVIEW BY GEMMA SAVIO

GEMMA SAVIO Materials help communicate information about the place and time that a designed object was conceived. They can tell us something about who designed the work, who made it and to what conditions those people were responding. Can you tell me about the importance of materials in your practice?
FERNANDO LAPOSSE Materials are the focus of my practice and I typically start a project by investigating a particular material – not only in its physical form, but also its provenance. I'm interested in what materials signify and often, the problematics around a material – the historical baggage and contemporary complications that surround it. Once you start to look at the complications, you can pose questions

that inform the research and of course the design. But the design comes as a final gesture. My work really starts with understanding the politics and problematics of the material I'm working with.

GS When you talk about the problematics are you referring to methods of extraction and production?

FL Yes, that's exactly it. I tend to focus on agricultural materials, or plant matter, because it tends to be the most complex and controversial. In Latin America, and Mexico where most of my work is based, crops, agricultural produce and agricultural heritage is extremely important. It's linked to tradition and spirituality, and more recently it's also what causes a lot of social tensions. The influence of



economics and trade have seen agricultural products become global commodities – such is the case with avocados, the plant at the centre of *Conflict Avocados* – my project for the NGV Triennial.

GS Why did you choose to explore the avocado now?

FL The avocado is an ubiquitous fruit in Mexico. It has been here for thousands of years but it's now one of the most modified plants we grow. The world trade of avocado for the most part relies on a single variety of the plant and demand for that variety has diminished the biodiversity of the species in Mexico. The avocado is a sacred plant for indigenous communities here, so we see the contemporary perversion of the plant into a commodity that now causes a great deal of conflict. Farming avocado has caused deforestation in one of Mexico's most biodiverse regions, Michoacan. The research we've done for

this project focuses on that region and the economics behind the avocado trade. Through each piece of furniture or textile in *Conflict Avocados* we are telling the story of how economics, politics and corruption has turned a well-loved fruit into something for which people are being murdered.

GS Throughout *Conflict Avocados* you have invented ways of working with the avocado as a material. Can you tell us more?

FL We started this project by working on the tapestry and the textiles for the day bed. For this we created a swatch book of all the colours that we could make using the avocado pits. Some of them are produced by boiling the pits, making a tea and soaking the fabric. With other colours we modified the tea by adding other elements – iron shaving from our workshop, lime juice and baking soda. The colour from the avocados comes from tannins in the pits, which are a

chemical compound that changes colour depending on exposure to acidity or alkalinity. Developing the artwork for the tapestry was almost like creating a storyboard for a movie. We based some of the drawings on photographs we found on the internet but in many cases, we acted the scenes out here in our studio, and we took photographs of that to work up the design. The textile was made in my studio in Mexico City, which seriously expanded during the production of this piece. Twenty-five people worked on the tapestry for more than a year and all of them were women. The textile has a lot of space dedicated to telling women's stories and their empowerment. And while I was directing the work, the team making it were leading a lot of the graphic and storytelling decisions.

The avocado skin leather that clads the *Avocado leather cabinet 2023*, took us seven months of full-time labour, with three or four people working on it every day. Over this length of time, we developed a really enriching relationship with a guacamole vendor in the market next to the studio. Twice a week, we would go and get all his waste avocado skins, bring them to the studio, and handwash them ready for stretching and drying. The drying was a fine-tuned art that came out of experimentation and working with the material at the right moment and then allowing it the right amount of time to dry without curling or cracking. The result is almost like a Japanese Kumiko technique, where each square composed of several pieces of avocado leather is protected by a frame of wood.

GS Can you tell me about the patchworking in the *Resting place day bed 2023*?

FL *Resting place* is an homage to the murdered Mexican activist Homero Gómez González. The patchwork technique references the Japanese boro, which is a system of repairing worn out clothes. Boro sees patches of material added to clothing that needs repair to the point where the original garment is transformed into something new. Instead of using Japanese indigo, *Resting place* is made of the avocado-dyed cotton. The patchwork represents an act of repair, and our desire to contribute to healing the violence and devastation associated with the avocado. I interviewed Homero's son, Homero Junior, for the *Conflict Avocados* documentary that will also be exhibited at NGV

(p. 32–3) **Fernando Laposse** *The avocado legacy: Deforestation, revolution, a new beginning 2023*, from the *Conflict Avocados* project 2023, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Commissioned by the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased with funds donated by The Andrew and Geraldine Buxton Foundation, 2023. This artist has been supported by the Elizabeth Summons Grant in Memory of Nicholas Draffin. This project is proudly supported by Mercedes-Benz © Fernando Laposse

(p. 34) **Fernando Laposse** *Avocado leather cabinet 2023* (detail), from the *Conflict Avocados* project 2023, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Commissioned by the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased with funds donated by The Andrew and Geraldine Buxton Foundation, 2023. This artist has been supported by the Elizabeth Summons Grant in Memory of Nicholas Draffin. This project is proudly supported by Mercedes-Benz © Fernando Laposse/Laposse



Triennial and during our conversation he told me a story that influenced this piece. There's a belief in Michoacán that the Monarch butterflies are the visiting souls of your relatives because they always arrive on 1 November, which coincides with the Day of the Dead. The year Homero was killed was also the year the Monarch butterfly was added to the endangered species list. In the documentary *Homero Junior* described this moment in November of the same year when he was standing in the forest completely covered

in butterflies and he felt their presence as an embrace from his father. For this story and to connect *Resting place* to Homero and Homero Junior we decided to complement the pink hues from avocados with yellow fabric dyed using marigolds, which are the traditional flowers of the Day of the Dead.

GS The materials in *Conflict Avocados* can be understood best together, and each piece works in dialogue to tell a clear story of how the avocado industry in

Mexico has been corrupted and how the consequences of the avocado trade are being felt.

FL Alongside the furniture and the tapestry, the documentary shares the voices of the people affected by the avocado trade. We have an interview with Safina, the woman who single-handedly started a revolution in Cherán. We speak to Luis who plays a pivotal role in growing the reserve around the Monarch butterfly sanctuary in El Rosario and Homero Junior who carries on the legacy of his father. These people are brave and working hard to combat the degradation caused by the avocado trade. We'd like visitors to understand the issues and consider their part in the problem, but we also want to communicate the optimism in these stories and work towards making change.

SEE FERNANDO LAPOSSE'S *CONFLICT AVOCADOS* 2023, AS PART OF NGV TRIENNIAL 2023, WHICH OPENS AT NGV INTERNATIONAL ON 3 DECEMBER. FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THIS FREE EXHIBITION VISIT NGVMELBOURNE/TRIENNIAL. WORKS FROM THE *CONFLICT AVOCADOS* PROJECT, WERE PURCHASED WITH FUNDS DONATED BY THE ANDREW AND GERALDINE BUXTON FOUNDATION, 2023. THIS ARTIST HAS BEEN SUPPORTED BY THE ELIZABETH SUMMONS GRANT IN MEMORY OF NICHOLAS DRAFFIN. THIS PROJECT IS PROUDLY SUPPORTED BY MERCEDES-BENZ.

NGV TRIENNIAL 2023 IS SUPPORTED BY PRESENTING PARTNER CREATIVE VICTORIA, PRINCIPAL PARTNER MERCEDES-BENZ AND MAJOR PARTNERS CHADSTONE - THE FASHION CAPITAL, TELSTRA, MECCA AND DEAKIN UNIVERSITY. THE NGV SINCERELY THANKS TRIENNIAL CHAMPIONS FELTON BEQUEST, JULY CAO, BARRY JAMES & PAUL CROSS, LOTI & VICTOR SMORGON FUND, NGVWA, AND NEVILLE & DIANA BERTALLI, AND WE RECOGNISE ALL GENEROUS SUPPORTERS TO NGV TRIENNIAL 2023.

FERNANDO LAPOSSE IS A MEXICO-BORN DESIGNER WHO SPECIALISES IN TRANSFORMING HUMBLE NATURAL MATERIALS INTO REFINED DESIGN PIECES. GEMMA SAVIO IS NGV CURATOR, CONTEMPORARY DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE.

(p. 35) **Fernando Laposse** *Resting place* 2023, from the *Conflict Avocados* project 2023, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Commissioned by the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased with funds donated by The Andrew and Geraldine Buxton Foundation, 2023. This artist has been supported by the Elizabeth Summons Grant in Memory of Nicholas Draffin. This project is proudly supported by Mercedes-Benz. This project is proudly supported by Mercedes-Benz © Fernando Laposse.

(left) Mexican designer Fernando Laposse. Courtesy: Fernando Laposse. Photo © Pepe Molina.

(right) Monarch Butterflies on tree branch in Michoacán, Mexico. Photo: iStock.



THE MARCH OF THE MONARCH BUTTERFLIES

In pre-Hispanic folklore, migrating butterflies were often thought to have carried the souls of ancestors visiting from the afterlife. For centuries, Mexico's Monarchs have served as a powerful cultural symbol connecting the living to the dead. They're also central to Fernando Laposse's *Conflict Avocados* project as the artist explains.

BY FERNANDO LAPOSSE

The *Conflict Avocados* project started because of the Monarch butterflies. They are an iconic insect in North America. Each year they migrate on mass all the way from Canada to Mexico. They carry out the longest insect migration in the world and no one really knows how they all know where to go, but at the same time each year they arrive from all over North America to El Rosario, a single forest in Michoacán, Mexico. They make this journey only

once in their lives – the males die there, and the females die once they return to lay their eggs in the United States and Canada, their offspring then repeat the same journey. So each year, not a single butterfly has been to that forest before, but they all know where and when to go. Early in 2019, I was travelling in Michoacán, where my grandma lived, to celebrate her 90th birthday. It's such an important place for biodiversity because of the Monarch butterflies. They are one of the main pollinators of ecosystems throughout North America, Mexico, the United States and Canada. During this visit I met Homero Gómez González, an activist who worked to create a sanctuary around the forest to protect the Monarch's habitat. He was an excellent negotiator and a titan of environmental activism in Mexico. Before we could meet for a formal interview for this project Homero was found tortured, beaten and strangled. To see one of the most important activists in this area murdered with total impunity sparked an urgency in me to talk about the fragility of the people standing between the butterflies, the forests and those who devastate these natural resources through unsustainable avocado farming. *Conflict Avocados* tells the story of men against nature and uncovers the complex web of abuse and violence towards vulnerable men and women in the region.