

Few designers or artists have managed to capture the wild, chaotic, explosive energy of Latin America like double-act Fernando and Humberto Campana. The furniture they have made over the last 25 years is a better evocation of hair-down, hip-shaking, barefoot Brazil at its most hedonistic, carefree and samba'd up than any photograph could capture. It also embodies the edginess of the favela – for all its meticulousness, it is naïve and raw, even dangerous. Let's face it, there aren't many chairs you can say all that about.

The Campanas' style is a muscular and complex blend: brash and dirty colour; natural, unusual and often recycled materials; distressed textures that are tamed, honed and made sophisticated. Hundreds of metres of rope or fabric can go into producing one impossible-looking woven piece. Their work is the product of time and painstaking craft, its assembly is a wonder.

#### Joie de vivre

When they work on interior projects, like the 2008 Camper store in London's Mayfair, they bring a chic, ripped, torn and frayed aesthetic to a room, reminiscent of American artist Rauschenberg, but with a ghetto twist. As their UK dealer, Michael Hue-Williams of the Albion Gallery, says of the Campana aesthetic: 'Their work has joie de vivre, exuberance and vitality of colour and material. It is essentially Brazilian.'

The brothers started working together in 1983. Fernando trained as an architect while Humberto, eight years his senior, studied law. A flirtation with sculpture saw the brothers join forces and they fought to prove themselves on the world's design stage, while being largely ignored in their own country. They're design superstars at home now, but it was America

# TWO'S CAMPAÑA

Mark C O'Flaherty heads to Brazil to meet South America's most unlikely but celebrated practitioners of contemporary design – the irrepressible Campana brothers.



and Europe that celebrated them first and it's only in recent years that Brazil has taken them to its heart, with affordable ranges of jewellery for H Stern and 'jelly sandal' footwear produced specifically for the home market.

The Campanas create around 25 highly prized pieces of each design. When they showed at the Albion Gallery in London in 2007, Hue-Williams says: 'It was a revelation – everything was sold, and to some of the most serious art collectors in the world.' With a chair clocking in at six figures, their customers had become serious collectors indeed.

Speaking amid the artful clutter of their anonymous Sao Paolo studio, surrounded by mountains of soft Disney toys that are used in some of their most celebrated pieces, Humberto offers his perspective: 'We make a bridge between art and the universe of furniture. I make sculpture that can be used.'

### Chairmen

If there is one piece that embodies the Campana look, it's perhaps the Vermelha chair, woven from a single piece of rope. A £3,000 production version, made by Edra, takes a day and a half to weave. The original edition version, produced in the studio, took over a week to put together and would require much deeper pockets to acquire at auction.

'The Vermelha chair is a good example of how we work,' says Fernando. 'First comes the material, then the form, and finally we elaborate the function

of the product by studying its ergonomics, limitations and capabilities. With the Vermelha we found a large bunch of rope in the street here in Sao Paolo and brought it back to the studio. When we placed it on the table, we observed its deconstruction before our eyes. We wanted to replicate the deconstruction in the chair – it's a representation of Brazil in its beautiful chaos. I am actually quite shy. I try to seduce people with my furniture. I try to communicate a sense of humour and emotion, a dialogue with the observer. Can you sit on the furniture or just look at it? I like to play games.'

The most playful works that the Campana brothers have produced in recent years are the price-on-application Banquette pieces. These chairs, made from stuffed Disney icons, furry toy dolphins or cuddly acrylic pandas are absurdly wonderful. Last year they took up most of the window displays at Moss in New York City, the most influential interior design store in the US, and home to the Campanas' whole range of Alessi Blow Up metal baskets and kitchenware pieces as well as one stark, conical favela Christmas tree.

Murray Moss, the eponymous proprietor of the store sees their work as close in spirit to abstract expressionism. 'If Jackson Pollock and Alexander Calder had been romantically involved, moved to Brazil and produced two love-children, these siblings would have been Humberto and Fernando Campana.'

As well as a complexity of construction, it is also a childlike simplicity

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in the Campanas' work that makes it so seductive. The colour and shapes are quite literally sensational – you want to touch and feel their furniture. It even looks like it might taste good. Their Sushi range, featuring swirls and twists of colour, is inspired by the California rolls of Japanese restaurants and thrifty scrap rugs that are commonplace in Brazilian homes.

'We were experimenting with several materials, including pieces of carpet,' recalls Humberto. 'I was very inspired by those rugs; the people don't have money to buy carpets but they make something so beautiful. The mixture of colour is amazing.' Every year the Campanas' studio produces limited edition Sushi chairs, constructed with different textiles, rolled and scored into concentric circles to create extreme colour combinations. Though artificial, there's something very organic about them, another motif of the brothers' work.

#### Natural flair

It's in their use of natural materials that this comes to the fore. 'We are excited by natural fibres,' explains Humberto. 'We are rich in rubber and rattan and other materials in Brazil. My backyard as a child was the countryside. We have a big tradition of handicraft in this country, so why not make use of it?'

Last year's London Campana show, TransPlastic, mixed wicker with plastics and for a show in Istanbul in 2008 they mixed marble and rattan. Their eclectic use of materials, and their concern with the organic and often recycled materials, has made them easy to categorise as 'green'. They certainly breathe life into their work, and while the best of it is finding its way into the sometimes sterile environment of modern art galleries and private collectors' homes, with it goes that distinctive Brazilian energy and passion. ■

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