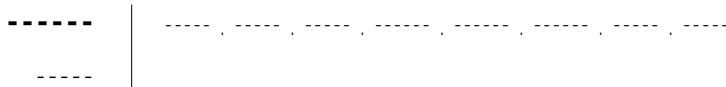


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NATURE IN MIND

As a human being, Kosuke Araki is passionate about nature and the environment. As a designer, he is driven to transform food waste into products and eliminate the use of plastics.



WORDS: ROSSARA JAMIL | PHOTOS: KOSUKE ARAKI



The situation, as we know it, is pretty dire. The effects of unchecked activities in modern life and industry are now catching up with us. Plastic, for example, is not only affecting the environment because it does not biodegrade, but it is also harming the waterways, oceans and marine life. This year in June, the UN's message for World Environment Day is to reject single-use plastic. Countries like France and Kenya have banned plastic bags, and many cities around the world are following suit. And then, there is the issue of food waste. According to the National Environment Agency, in Singapore alone, food waste has risen by 40 per cent over the past decade. In 2016, 791,000 tonnes of food waste were generated. Globally, about a third of all food produced is discarded or lost.

As a designer, Kosuke Araki has these environmental issues at the heart of his work. It began while he was studying at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London when one of the project briefs was to design something that could be considered 'living'. As a student in London, he was cooking for himself every day. One day, he became aware of the vegetable offcuts that sat on his cutting board as something 'living'. "This was the moment I became drawn towards the issue of food waste," he shares.

That led to a journey of discovery and experimentation, where he researched and documented the scale of food waste not only that he produced, but also shops and supermarkets, on a daily basis. The data was recorded and compiled into a booklet. The research led to Food Waste Ware, his graduation thesis for the RCA, in 2013.

Food Waste Ware was the result of five months of work that included documenting food waste and exploring ways to turn them into useful material. The process starts with carbonising vegetable waste. This makes the material safe and also easy to crush and utilise. Araki also collected animal food waste, such as tendons and bones, from which he extracted glue. The two materials were mixed and then moulded into tableware. As part of his presentation, he showcased a booklet and also the mould for turning the material into tableware.

Five years later, in 2018, Araki has produced a new range called Anima. The collection uses Japanese lacquer to coat the tableware, giving it the characteristic durability and sheen. Lacquer, made from the sap of the urushi tree, has antibacterial properties. In keeping with the spirit of the project, he used food waste such as rice and tofu to adjust the viscosity of lacquer.

Araki had also named Anima “a memorial service”. “It has a double meaning. The idea behind this project is a tribute to ‘consumed’ lives of vegetables and animals, so the first meaning is literally a memorial service for them. Like the cremation of the body, they are carbonised and reincarnated into something else. To me, the process feels kind of like a rite. The other meaning is like ‘a tea service’. I am planning to expand the collection, and that will include the addition of some cups. That is why, I also call it ‘a memorial service’,” he shares.

Kosuke and two friends, Noriaki Maetani and Akira Muraoka, have also formed a design collective called AMAM. Together, they entered the Lexus Design Award 2016. The project, Agar Plasticity, explored the use of agar, a food made from seaweed, as an alternative to synthetic plastics for packaging. It won the Grand Prix award.

Agar has been a material that fascinated his teammates. He shares, “For years, I had been feeling stressful with plastic waste issues and wanting to work on them in some way. So, when I was invited to join the project, I thought that making something which could be an alternative to current plastic products, specifically cushioning materials, out of agar would be appropriate. It is light, crushable and, what is more, natural. This encounter of our interests formed the Agar Plasticity project.”

The trio has since been working on other plant-based projects. Unlike working with man-made materials like plastic and concrete, natural material comes with a different set of challenges. It would require patience, tenacity that is driven by purpose. “I often struggled with controlling shrinkage of natural materials because they usually contain a certain amount of moisture. When dried, they shrink, which causes distortion or a resultant shape for better or worse,” he says. “Other challenges would be to keep finding and realising ideas that are truly good for Earth.”

This is quite a progression from his pre-university days when he chose to study art. As someone who enjoyed art and crafts, he studied product design simply because he wanted to expand from drawing to modelling and experimenting with materials. Unsure about his path and not knowing what design meant, he felt immense self-doubt, only finding product design interesting in his fourth year of study. “It was also when I was starting to feel the ways of thinking about design can be applied to almost anything in other fields. I gradually realised the possibilities of ‘design’.”

Today, he has not only settled into the role of a product designer, but also found meaning in it. “I would say my client is nature. Making something less beautiful than its raw materials is ‘rude’ to nature. I would like to make things celebrating the rich diversity of the universe in collaboration with them. I, therefore, always ponder ways of designing things and living within the natural cycle.”

With the impact on the environment due to human activities, there is no easy way out of a difficult situation. It takes a collective effort to right some of the wrongs, and there are countless areas where work is needed. Plastic use is undoubtedly one of them. With their work targeted at consumers, designers would have to decide which side they wish to be on as our civilisation enters a new phase, and Araki seems to be on the right path. **D**

