

# Less is Always More for Beirut's 200Gr's

By SHONQUIS MORENO



Displayed in 200Gr's Beirut studio are two of their 198 Kg coffee tables and a 230 Kg buffet, all in walnut and brass.

200Gr's upcycles wood offcuts to create minimalist objects, such as this extension-cord spool and the tape dispensers below.

ONE OF THE OLD MARKETS that has been lost to the inhabitants of Beirut is the secondhand textiles souk al W'iyeh. Its name meant "the market of two hundred grams" because shoppers would leave laden with any number of small paper parcels. Today, 200Gr's is the name of a design studio founded in 2013 by Rana Haddad, an alum of the Architectural Association School of Architecture, and interior designer Pascal Hachem, the former creative director for the Lebanese lighting label PSLAB. Nostalgic not just for a particular souk, but for a time when the human relationship with our objects felt weightier, 200Gr's is predicated on returning to the crafting of basic objects. The studio uses a materials palette that promises to

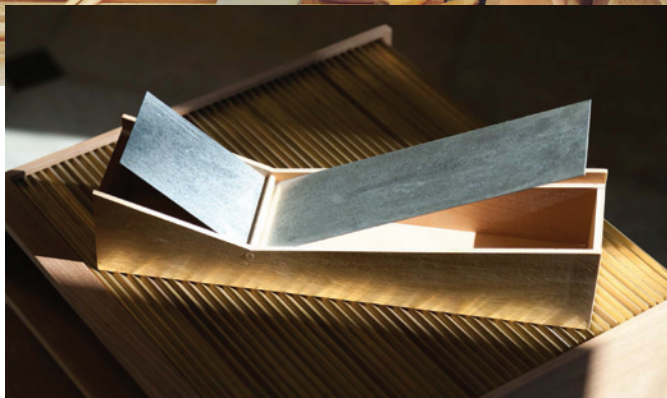


shift perennially, but which has so far included wood offcuts, rubber (bands), metal, cardboard, and textiles, and has taken advantage of the expertise of local artisans, including themselves.

Their practice is a conscious return to less-is-more, one that can't help but broadcast the designers' critical approach to their surroundings and to an international design industry in which more has become far too much. Each eminently simple piece that Haddad and Hachem make—a box, a tape dispenser, nutcracker, pencil case, an extension-cord spool—takes its precise weight as its product name, with the understanding that the weight of every object will vary depending on the material used to make it. "We realized that if we are surrounded with objects that we relate to, we smile more often, our work area becomes friendlier," Haddad says.

Haddad and Hachem met when they collaborated on the branding of an architectural project; they co-founded PSLAB for Projects and Supplies and did some architectural projects before launching 200Gr's. Hachem's family had a small wood shop,





The work area in 200Gr's studio.

The 618 Grs—nicknamed the Always Open box—features a pivoting bent-metal lid that uncovers one side as it seals the other.

and the two were eager to work with wood offcuts, but “the real trigger was not the scrap wood,” Haddad says, “as much as needing to re-establish a tactile relationship with some of our everyday objects. Wood is warm, a living material that grows old with you. It wears, it bends, it reacts to extreme weather changes and humidity.” The two felt that mass production and a glut of generic molded plastic objects have made us lose the connection with our objects. “We forgot what it means to have an object at hand that has a certain proportion and that fits properly in our palms, that needs some of our attention. That to change a roll of Scotch tape, for example, you need to spend two minutes with the object, aware of your

own movements, feeling and discovering how it works, and if you are lucky, smelling the wood it is made from.”

Undaunted by its near obsolescence, they remade the fax machine's paper roll, creating an analog scrolling object on which one may take notes or write stories. “By giving it a different use you are giving it a new life,” Hachem points out, “so as long as a fax roll is produced, you might as well make use

of it.” They also designed the Always Open, a box that uses the lid's own weight and a rudimentary pivoting element to maintain one open and one closed compartment at all times. “Each project that we start comes with its own set of rules,” Haddad says, referring to the clean architectural lines, obsessive detail and graceful economy that make an object “of the now stay in the now, even ten years from now.”

Beirut's progressive Carwan Gallery has earned international kudos since its founding several years ago, and 200Gr has quickly become one of its rising stars. Last November, Carwan inaugurated a new gallery in the nineteenth-century Villa Paradiso in the Gemmayzeh district



with an exhibition of 200Gr's 0,91 Cubic Meters, a limited-edition collection of brass and wood tables and other furnishings. "Pascal's background as a visual artist combined with the architectural vision of Rana seduced us," Nicolas Bellavance-Lecompte, Carwan director and co-founder, says. "They have a methodology and high precision in the way they develop their projects, and their atelier, where they produce with extreme care and passion all the wooden components, has almost a monastic feel." Haddad and Hachem moved the architectural ideas they had been containing in small objects to a larger scale, while playfully imagining them as crocodiles dressed in brass: "Playfulness is part of our approach to design. Our line is architectural and yet it sometimes reminds us of pets, animals, plants," Haddad says. "We make it lighter and we 'talk' to each piece. By naming it or referring to it, we can simplify it without losing the importance of the sleek architectural line." From the heaviest piece (a buffet) to the lightest (wall-mounted shelves), they exploited the natural rough lines of the wood while finely crafting it, allowing balance and weight to play a strong role.

To make the studio's products, the designers "exchange know-how" with local craftsmen. They fashion wooden pieces in the 200Gr's workshop, but visit shops in Beirut's industrial zone to work other materials. The designers hand-sketch and make no computer drawings: "We prefer to jump in in 3-D, to

In the studio, tension-mounted metal rods multitask with vase, mirror, and plant-holder appendages.

The 23 Kg Low table—a "crocodile dressed in brass"—is part of a limited edition series of furniture and objects designed for Beirut's Carwan Gallery.



work at a 1:1 scale," Hachem says. "Do it, then fix it' is our motto." They test prototypes quickly, modify them, and test again. Local craftsmen are skilled, but finding less and less work. However "we are not carrying the torch of safeguarding the artisans," Haddad says. Indeed, it is impossible for such a small shop to have widespread impact; but they want to generate, even at a small scale, awareness of handwork. "Not everything should be mass produced," Haddad says, "and globalization does not, and should not, mean the loss of local skills."

For Beirut Design Week in early June, the two worked with steel and brass to design a series of objects—a candleholder, plant pot, vase, mirrors—that can be mounted without piercing the ceiling, floor, or wall, but are held in place by tension, using pressure exerted by rods from ceiling to floor. Which products, techniques and materials are next is anyone's guess: "We refuse to put any limitation on our design. Next might be a handbag or a raincoat. Who knows?" Haddad says. "The sky is the limit."