

Inspired Casting

Not far from Hollywood's dream factory, fantasies of a very different kind are playing out in a former industrial plant. Designer

David Wiseman produces scene-stealing, site-specific installations and furnishings for private homes and world-famous brands alike. He takes his cue from ancient techniques such as the lost-wax mould-making process, alongside a reverence for past masters such as Hokusai.

Celia McGee puts you in the picture. Photography: Ye Rin Mok



Located at the foot of Los Angeles's Elysian Park, the Wiseman Studio complex incorporates large workshop, production and presentation spaces. These allow for working mock-ups of designs that sometimes take over entire rooms



One of Wiseman's cast-bronze 'Lost Valley' mirrors is topped by a recumbent monkey. It's an animal dear to the designer's heart because 'it's our closest ancestor to nature' and 'a symbol of the wild'



It's large, even by Los Angeles standards. A 2,790sq m former cement-mixer factory nestled up against the city's hilly, historic Elysian Park on one side and, on the other, the Los Angeles River, where, in the 1930s and 40s, industrial plants arose on a scale that rivalled the movie studios Hollywood was erecting not far to the west. But for the artist David Wiseman (*WoI* May 2022), nothing smaller would do.

Celebrated for nature-inspired work that ranges from furniture, lighting and decorative objects to collage-panelled ceilings, walls and sometimes entire rooms, he wanted enough space to accommodate both production and presentation. Somewhere with room for a ceramics studio and a metal foundry, a gallery and a viewing room, archival storage and massive shelving for the tools of his trade. Equally important, the 2.4 sq km of parkland beyond the front door in the neighbourhood called Frogrown promised the immediate presence of the natural world,

which is 'where I've always felt best', Wiseman says. 'It makes me feel awe, wonder and devotion. My work stems from my need to make something that encapsulates that moment of gratitude.'

Such inclinations were practically his birthright growing up in nearby Pasadena, a verdant spot where houses like his childhood home are tucked away amid large lawns and meandering, lush gardens. 'All of Pasadena is classified as urban forest,' Wiseman explains. He could hop on his bicycle to the grounds of the famous Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens, and, as far back as he can remember, made the kind of fanciful, elaborate nature drawings that still inform his art. 'Maps of what I want to create,' in his own words. They become his bronze screens bursting with abstracted chrysanthemums, ginkgo leaves, fish scales and peacock feathers. They transform into a white-plaster linden-and-wisteria installation climbing four storeys

high within a Manhattan town house; his 'Radial Branch' chandelier; his burnished clusters of 'Archipelago' tables; his mirrors dripping with flower blossoms and topped by sassy monkeys or an owl. 'Symbols of wildness', he calls them. Using age-old techniques such as lost-wax casting, Wiseman has watched his traditionally crafted yield gain an unusual foothold in the world of contemporary art and design, where his intricate fantasies can jolt stark interiors to new life. From other cultures and past centuries he has mined Indian *jali* and Hokusai prints, Dagobert Peche's Vienna and Hector Guimard's Paris, Spitalfields textiles and Giacometti furnishings and the science of moss, taking an intricately wrought seat among innovative practitioners of the decorative arts.

His first furniture piece, for a class at the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design, was a bench formed from found tree branches that he covered with ink drawings 'for a deer to sit on', and his thesis

Wiseman stands in the shell room of the studio foundry, holding a mould that has been prepped for casting. He inspects every phase of the designs executed by his team of 25 ceramicists, metalworkers and draftspeople

ANTENNAE PROFILE



Artichokes and the patterning of their faceted armour appear throughout Wiseman's portfolio. The designer employs moulds such as the ones shown here in countless sizes to achieve his complex schemes

project was a spectral forest made from fallen branches cast in resin that emerged and disappeared and re-emerged across the length of a wall. After graduation in 2003, 'I followed everyone in a mass exodus to Brooklyn,' Wiseman says. 'But I felt something was amiss. I missed being with nature.' A commission from the Los Angeles socialite and fashion-scene fixture Anne Crawford – for the dining-room ceiling in her 1920s Neo-Georgian residence – brought him home again, and he has worked from here ever since.

The impetus for Wiseman Studio lay in part with his brother, Ari, who left his position as a deputy director of the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2017 to join him in buying the derelict property. They converted it to a setting meant to afford David greater independence from the gallery system and allow him to work more directly with designers and collectors on commissions, and on editioned pieces for a growing body of clients. Now

famed designers like Peter Marino, who turned to Wiseman for Dior's 2011 flagship and glamorous outposts in Tokyo and Shanghai, can be welcomed to a complex where any architectural element bearing Wiseman's imprint can be mocked up and tinkered with before fabrication. It's also where, intent on sharing his work with aspiring young artists from an array of backgrounds, he has partnered with organisations such as Inner-City Arts to bring students from Los Angeles's most economically challenged neighbourhoods to his workplace and its mix of technology and handicraft, fairy tale and horsepower.

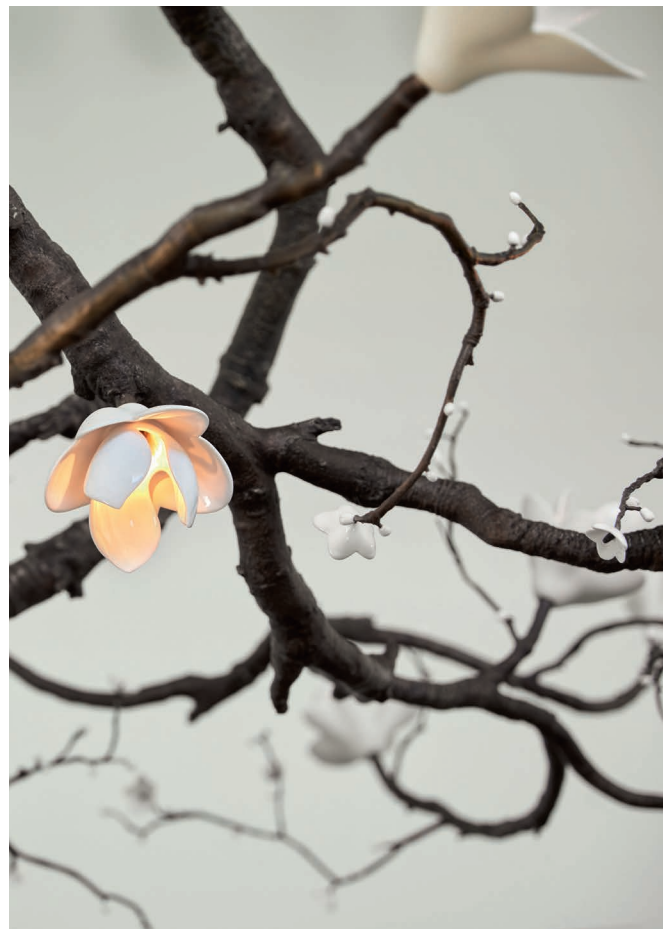
When he's seated in his 'command centre' office, surrounded by some of the many books that have opened up the history of art and design to him, Wiseman is just a few filigreed bronze doors away from the studio gardens that he had laid out. They're planted with specimens of the myriad plants, flowers, trees, vegetables and other types of nature's edibles

long present in his work. 'The front garden features some of my favourites,' he reveals, 'including ginkgo, datura, succulents, magnolia, wisteria and irises. All of which are going into a new piece I've been working on: a dining room for a private residence in Hong Kong where everything is my design – the walls, the ceiling, the furniture, the rug, the tableware.' Overlooking the second garden – 'a great place to have events' – are pollarded sycamores and a wall sprouting tiny waterfalls. The third is the vegetable garden.

It's lunchtime. At the ready is a meal 'all made from the giant zucchini we've been growing in the garden,' Wiseman explains. There's zucchini soup, zucchini bread and zucchini pasta, the bounty arranged on the long farm table where he and his crew of 25 gather for midday meals.

Blink for a second, then open your eyes. It's another David Wiseman tableau ©

To contact Wiseman Studio, ring 00 1 323 834 2672 or visit dwiseman.com



Above left: a rubber mould of a budding branch stands ready for the lost-wax casting of a tree fragment. Above right: part of a bronze-and-sculpted-porcelain 'Radial Branch' chandelier, with delicate blossom-shaped lights



Wiseman's studio complex boasts three gardens. The intricate bronze grille of this door echoes much of the plant life there, including stylised magnolia flowers and ginkgo leaves woven together along winding branches

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