

Building furniture & futures

Since opening its workshop on an Arnhem Land island, Manapan has been creating quality furniture, new jobs and a strong sense of pride among its community.

In April 2019, the who's who of the design world gathered in Milan for the annual Salone del Mobile, the globe's biggest design and furniture expo. There, a collaboration between cult Danish textile brand Kvadrat and fashion designer Raf Simons drew a crowd, as did the 'Loewe Baskets' installation by Jonathan Anderson. Amid the hype, it might have been easy to miss some more modest designs made by Yolngu man Josiah Baker, a craftsman from furniture brand Manapan.

"I'd only ever seen those places on TV. And the size of the church compared to the one in Milingimbi...!" exclaims Baker, referring to the city's famed Duomo. "It was a dream come true." Manapan's directional pieces, including a set of 'Crocodile Lamps' designed by Suzie Stanford impressed those who ventured beyond the Kvadrat bonanza. Even Australia's ambassador to Croatia placed an order for the lamps. "It's one of the things I'll never forget," says Manapan's founding director Mark White, who travelled to Milan with Baker and another of Manapan's master craftsmen. "Salone – it's the big one."

Thousands of kilometres from Milan, at the tip of the Northern Territory sits Milingimbi, the largest of Australia's Crocodile Islands. Home to Aboriginal people for over 50,000 years, the island has a rich artistic history; the late bark painter Binyinyuwuy Djarrankuykuy perfected his craft on its shores.

More recently though, Milingimbi's creativity has come from the Indigenous-owned and -operated Manapan. Now four years old, the furniture company is one of the island's biggest employers. It's a hive of activity, with half a dozen full-time craftsmen and 15 Manapan Academy trainees – all Yolngu people – fitting in and around the workshop every day.

"The guys don't really want to go home," says White with a laugh. "The men who work here are really revered in the community. There's a sense of pride that comes with the work they do."

White has a background in commercial and retail design, but Manapan was born the same way many not-for-profits are – from a desire to give back. "The aim was to create some employment in Milingimbi," he explains, "because there weren't many jobs here before." But White was certain that whatever he created wouldn't become just another memory to the locals, who've witnessed too many Government-funded projects come and go. "They've seen non-Indigenous people rush in with these great ideas and a lump sum of money. They spend it all and within 12 months they're gone."

Instead of relying on grants and donations, Manapan would fund itself. This meant growth would be slower, but the pace allowed something more fundamental to flourish: trust. The locals know that Manapan is in it for the long run. But before the Milingimbi community had Manapan, things were a bit different.

Baker was Manapan's first employee (he also happens to be the father of Baker Boy, the enigmatic rapper who recently took home artist of the year at the National Indigenous Music Awards). He says the workshop has given local high-schoolers a career to aspire to: "We're creating jobs for the kids when they finish school. We're getting lots of local orders for beds, tables and chairs, and the guys are proud they can build them for their families. There's a lot of community interest in Manapan."

Travelling to Milan was cool. But for White and Baker, watching Manapan transform Milingimbi has been even more fulfilling. At the end of the day, that's what it all comes down to: giving back, through great design.

For more information, go to manapan.com.au

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRISTOPHER TOVO.



Clockwise from top left: 'Crocodile Lamps' (2016) by Suzie Stanford; an aerial view of Milingimbi island, Arnhem Land, Northern Territory; a range of handcrafted furniture pieces and accessories are produced in the Manapan workshop.