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Like all good artists, Manapan designers often put themselves into their work. The Fire Sideboard, designed by Melbourne furniture designer Alexandra Pontonio, draws on her memories of driving through the Kimberley Ranges, where she often saw tree trunks blackened from wildfires. Turning her vision into something tangible demands workmanship of the highest standard. Splayed, branch-like legs support an elegant natural timber base, giving the sideboard the appearance of a floating capsule that defies the laws of gravity.

For Rob Crisfield and Josiah Baker up in the workshop on Milingimbi, the challenges of making such an ornate piece of furniture are met with open arms. Manapan uses complicated machinery and finely honed modern techniques to construct much of its furniture, but traditional skills are drawn on, too. To fashion one of its Crocodile Lamps, Manapan sources termite-hollowed logs, similar to those used to fashion didgeridoos.

"It usually takes a couple of weeks to complete a piece, but when we're done it makes you feel on top of the world," says Baker, a Milingimbi local who works alongside Crisfield, a master craftsman who used to run his own furniture business in Melbourne.

Crisfield moved to Milingimbi to help get the workshop off the ground. He recently finished teaching the old craft of cooperage to the less experienced members of staff. "Not many people in the world can do it," Crisfield says. "It's a dying art." When the training is complete, the furniture makers on Milingimbi will be one of only a tiny number of Australians trained in the practice, a fact that is not lost on the many people keen to collaborate with Manapan. "The designers are clambering over each other to get a design that they can give to us," White says.

Manapan has received critical acclaim for the way it merges cutting-edge design with traditional Arnhem Land culture.