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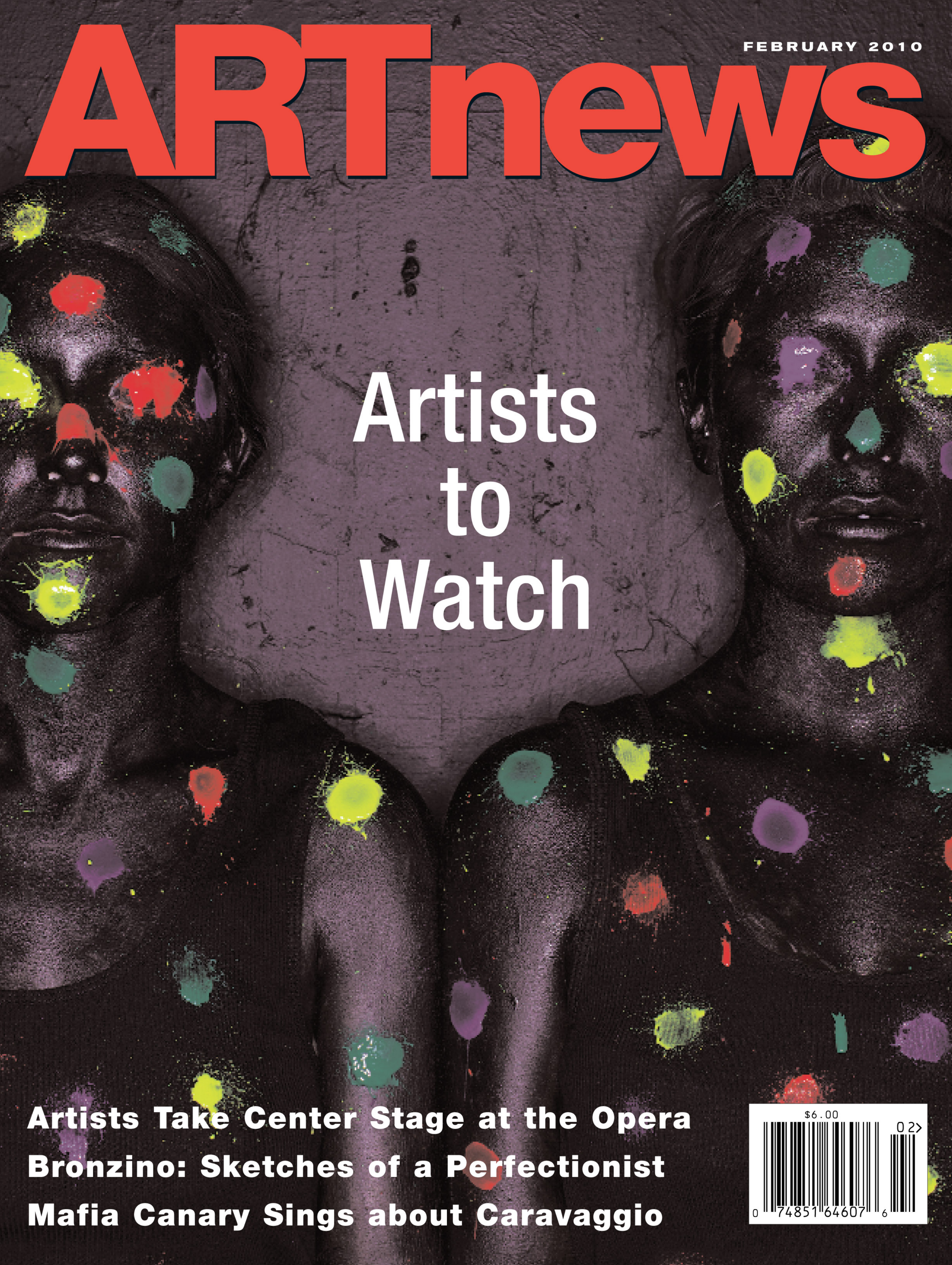

# Artists to Watch

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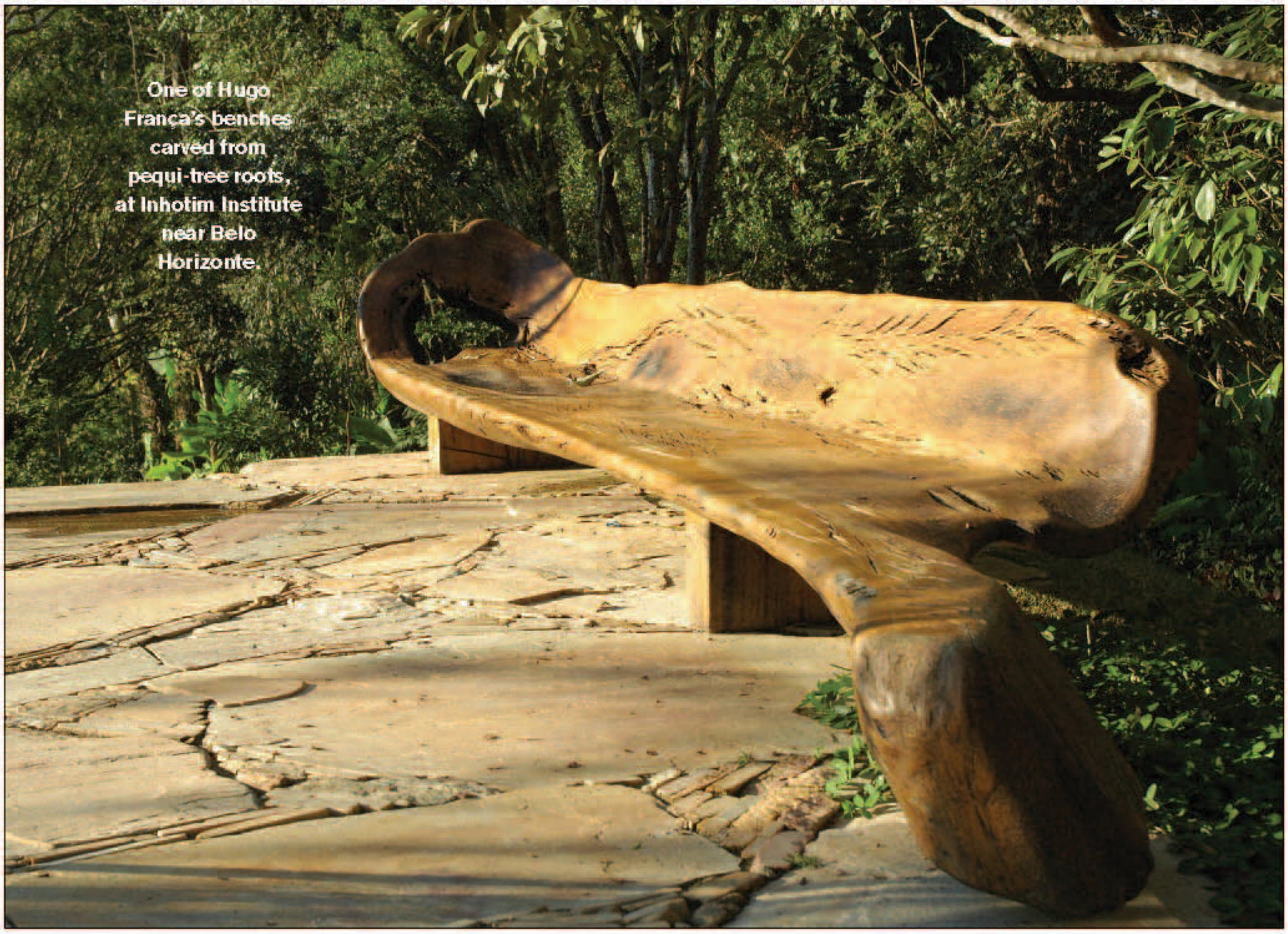
# Into the Woods

Using old canoes, discarded planks, tree stumps, and colossal roots left behind by loggers, Brazilian designers are transforming found wood into high design

**BY CARLY BERWICK**

The root network of the pequi tree, found in the forests along the central coast of Brazil, is as big as the area of some Manhattan apartments. The wood of the tree, which is very oily, highly textured, and tough to cut, is not particularly desirable as an industrial building material. Therefore it should come as little surprise that the loggers and farmers who cleared the country's forests over the past century left behind the tree's colossal roots, along with many logs.

That natural garbage has proved golden for 55-year-old designer Hugo França. A onetime production planner at a computer-parts company in São Paulo, who had studied industrial engineering, the Porto Alegre–born designer moved to Trancoso, a small city along the coast of the Amazonian state of Bahia, in the early '80s. He built rough wood houses and observed the indigenous fishermen as they hacked canoes from large stumps. The fishermen happily gave old canoes to França, who then transformed them into chairs and chaises that look like a combination of lacrosse sticks and flying buttresses. When França asked the fishermen which trees they had used, they pointed to the downed pequi trees.

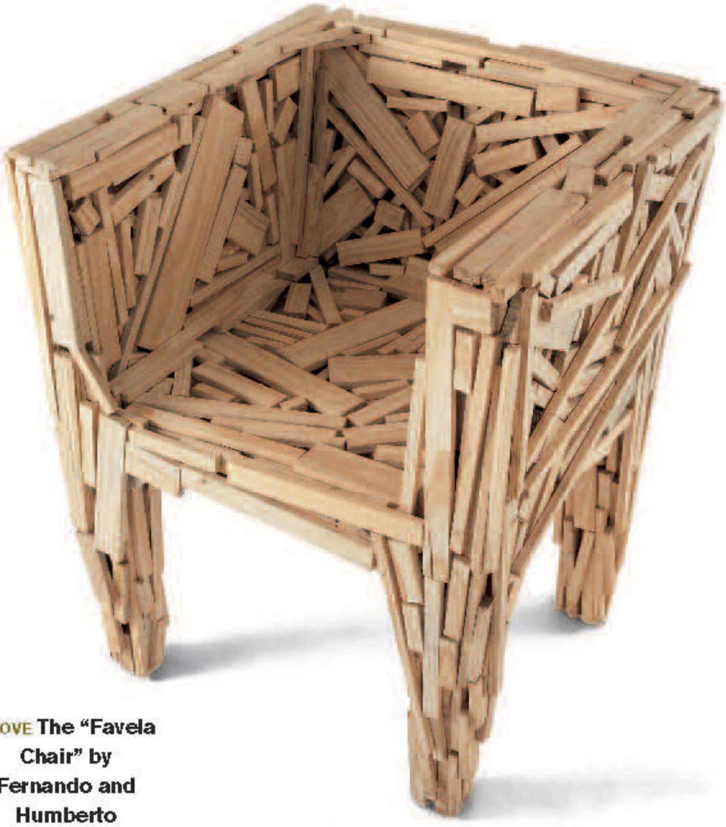

One of Hugo França's benches carved from pequi-tree roots, at Inhotim Institute near Belo Horizonte.

ELDERTH THEZA/INHOTIM INSTITUTE, BRUMADINHO, BRAZIL

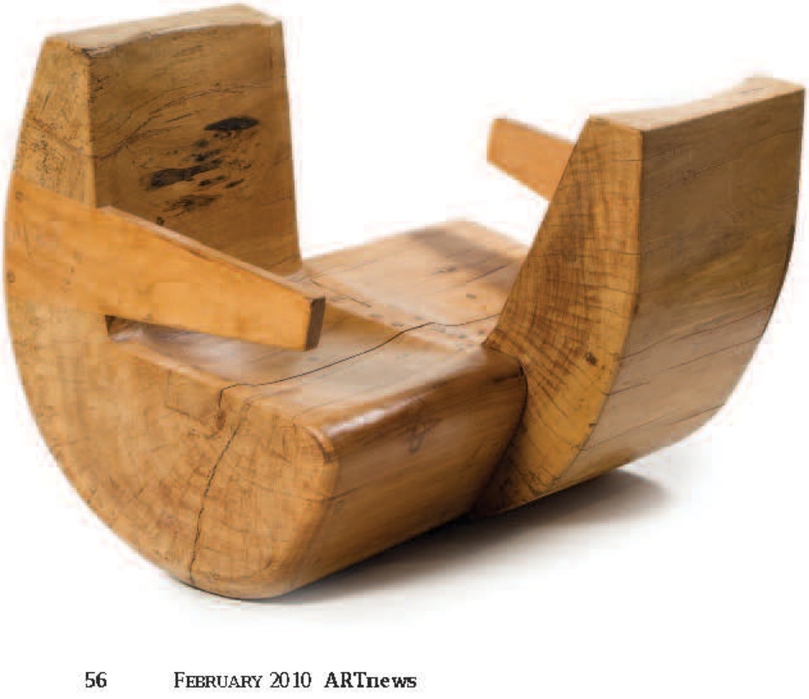
Recently França produced 60 massive benches and tables carved from the gigantic roots for Inhotim Institute, Brazilian collector Bernardo Paz's huge outdoor museum near Belo Horizonte, a few hours northwest of Rio de Janeiro. The benches are scattered across the 3,000-acre grounds. One-of-a-kind design pieces, they can sell for up to $95,000 each, according to the designer's New York gallery, R 20th Century. "While França's work is strong and raw, it's very carefully crafted," said Paz through a translator. "Nothing like this will ever exist again."

While França uses tree trunks as found objects, other Brazilian designers, including Carlos Motta, Arthur Casas, and the Campana Brothers, use discarded lumber from old building projects for their tables and chaises.

Brazil's most precious and endangered natural resource is its tropical forests. Once taken for granted as an infinite resource, the forests, although still abused, are now cherished as part of the Brazilian national heritage. The stricter environmental laws and protections instituted since the '80s have led to changes in how designers think about raw materials. The use of certain trees was banned outright, and the government requires a permit and a management plan for all logging in the Amazon. While a large proportion of Brazil's trees are still being cut down illegally, there has been growing pressure on consumers to demand certification seals, especially those issued by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). These assure that the wood was retrieved using principles of sustainable management, such as selective harvesting and avoiding cuts near waterways.



**ABOVE The "Favela Chair" by Fernando and Humberto Campana, designed in 1991. BELOW José Zanine Caldas's "Namoradeira" (Flirtatious) rocker, made of salvaged pequi wood.**

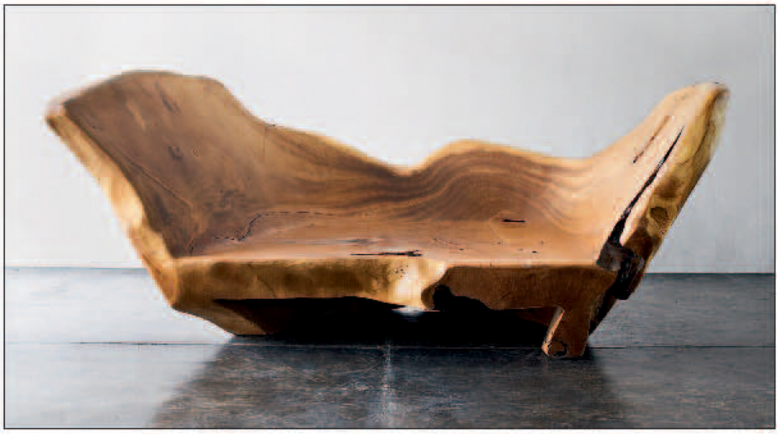


TOP: EDRA/COURTESY ESTUDIO CAMPANA; BOTTOM: COURTESY HEDGE GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO

Working with wood that would otherwise be thrown out makes a different statement about sustainability. "The fact that I am using something that is abandoned and will probably go rotten in time is a fundamental part of the concept of the work," said França through a translator. "This is another one of my goals: to bring the tree back to people's lives and houses. Usually, when wood comes into people's homes it is so transformed that you don't even recognize it's a living thing." But the abandoned pequi roots are not unlimited. França estimates he has only about five years' worth of supply left.

In the '70s, Motta, a São Paulo architect and designer, would head out to the beaches beyond the city to surf and find driftwood. As an architecture student he made a low table out of driftwood, and he later developed a laid-back but polished look for his wood tables and chairs. These sell for around $20,000, at Espasso in New York and Los Angeles. Three slats of wood with visible scratches and nail holes make up the sides of his "Astúrias Armchair" (2003), and the feet are two parallelograms sliced off from other slats. Motta says the look of the final piece is driven by technical considerations and functionality, but "there is no doubt," he adds, "that the raw materials themselves are responsible for the final effect."

Like Motta, Casas, an architect and designer who works in São Paulo and New York, sometimes uses



**ABOVE França's pequi-wood "Chara" bench, 2007. BELOW Carlos Motta constructs chairs, like his "Astúrias Armchair," from scavenged wood.**

new wood that bears the FSC seal, but he mainly relies on weathered planks for his furniture line. The "warmth and familiarity" of the material, he says, "are the antithesis of contemporary architecture's linear tracing." Thin slabs of old doors or walls from demolished houses become minimalist tables and desks with slender rods of iron or slabs of steel standing in for legs, which nod to the metal-legged desks, tables, and daybeds of mid-century giants such as Mies van der Rohe and Jean Prouvé. Casas says he only started turning to salvage about ten years ago.

One of the earliest Brazilians to work with found wood was José Zanine Caldas, who in the '70s used the huge pieces that had been left behind by timber companies as material for stools and tables with obvious fissures and treelike hollows. He dealt with nature itself as a found object, the way França would with pequi roots and Motta with driftwood a few years later.

In Motta's work, says Henry Urbach, curator of architecture and design at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, "there's very much a kind of relaxed, coastal feeling, a kind of casual elegance that comes with working with found driftwood. França's work, however, has a heroic aspect—it's epic really."

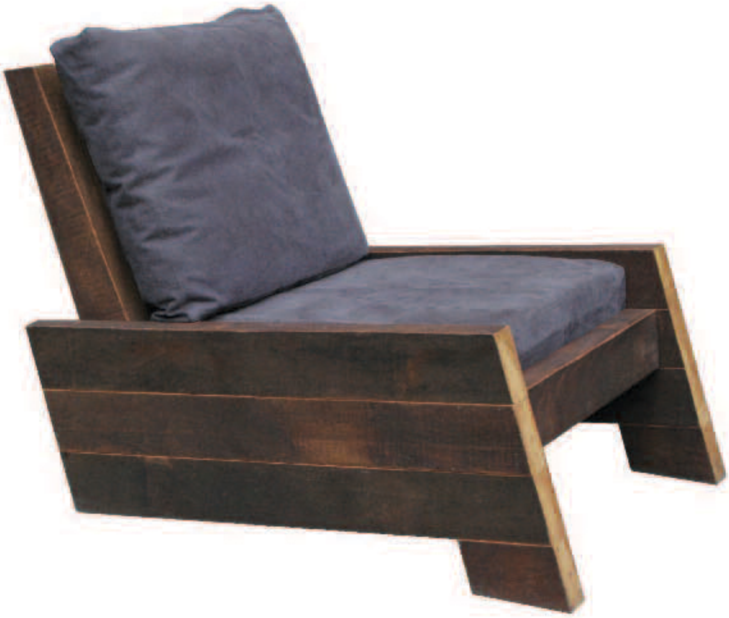
Fernando and Humberto Campana, known as the Campana Brothers, are among the most prominent Brazilians on the international art-design scene. They use such materials as red rope and felt scraps, for example, to make their chairs. At Design Miami in 2008, they won the Designer of the Year Award. They constructed the design fair's entire private HSBC lounge—from chairs to walls—out of the stringy, rattanlike fibers of the Apuí plant, a weedy member of the ficus family that grows around and stangles rainforest trees.

The Campanas used found wood as early as 1991 for their "Favela Chair," whose construction mimicked the thrown-together shanties of the Brazilian slums, or favelas. "It was trying to reproduce the same process that comes through lack of means and money and that produces something efficient," says Fernando. "It is a shelter that protects from the climate and has an esthetic. When I see the favelas, it's like looking at a Cubist painting." They built the prototype out of wood boxes gathered from São Paulo's fruit markets; today the chair is being produced by Edra in Italy, but artisans in southern Brazil gather wood for it from leftovers at nearby furniture factories.

The use of salvage is not a strictly Brazilian phenomenon. But, as Paola Antonelli, who organized a 1998 show dedicated to the Campana Brothers at the Museum of Modern Art, where she is senior curator of architecture and design, points out, "when it comes from countries where the economy is either in development or poverty, it takes on a different kind of meaning."

Even though objects can today be designed in one country, produced in another, and sold in a third, context still matters. Brazilians, in particular, must confront the complicated issues of conservation: the country is vast, there are bulldozers and logging trucks still humming in the jungles and hinterlands, and while there are many people who grow wealthy off Brazil's natural resources, a lot of others are left far behind.

"These designers have found a way of engaging something very raw and primal and arguably very universal about Brazilian culture," says Urbach. "It's a popular national heritage—everyone shares it—that creates objects like these that circulate among the upper classes yet provide the touch of something basic and human." ■



TOP: TUCA REINÉS/R 20TH CENTURY, NEW YORK; BOTTOM: COURTESY ESPASSO, NEW YORK, LOS ANGELES

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*Carly Berwick is a contributing editor of* ARTnews.