



MEDIA RELEASE

NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA

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***Plant Life: The Nature of Design* explores the future of plant-based materials as an alternative to plastics and non-renewable materials**

The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia | 28 August 2026 – 7 February 2027 | FREE



22 June 2026: The NGV's world-premiere exhibition, *Plant Life: The Nature of Design*, looks to the future of plant-based materials as a vital alternative to plastics, synthetic and non-renewable materials. From leather grown from fungi, to light reactive bio-plastics, and fibreboard made from hemp and bio-resin, the exhibition features the work of leading designers using plant-based materials, including **Formafantasma** (Milan), **Joris Laarman** (Amsterdam), **Crafting Plastics** (Bratislava), **EAST Architecture Studio** (Beirut), alongside Australian practitioners **Kate Scardifield**, **Ed Linacre**, **Broached Commissions** and more.

Presented thematically across four chapters and featuring more than 60 works, the exhibition brings together furniture, architecture, decorative arts, craft, photography and film drawn from the NGV Collection alongside a new commission by a bio-design team at RMIT University, and fifteen recent acquisitions and key international loans. Developed in partnership with NGV's Futures Partner, **RMIT University**, *Plant Life* traces humanity's relationship with the plant world through design.

The exhibition also acknowledges the longstanding engagement of First Nation practitioners with the natural environment through works made from bull kelp, grass weavings, tree bark, bamboo, Amazonian yaré vine, and leather made from the Amazon's shiringa tree.

The exhibition reveals plant-based knowledge systems that were never interrupted by the petrochemical century. **Emma Håkansson's** documentary film *SHIRINGA: Fashion Regenerating Amazonia* follows communities in the Amazonian state of Acre who tap shiringa trees using traditional methods (without cutting the tree down), producing a plant-based leather sold directly to fashion designers and brands. The exhibition also brings together other work by First Nation practitioners from Australia and abroad that embody knowledge systems that have sustained human relationships with plant life across millennia. Based between Brooklyn and Medellín, **Chris Wolston's** *Nalgona Chair* is made from willow, cork and yaré – a vine that grows in the forests of Venezuela and Colombia, harvested through traditional knowledge systems by communities for whom the plant's continued abundance is inseparable from their own.

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The exhibition gathers designers working at the frontier of the transition from synthetic to plant-based materials, across the everyday categories most reliant on plastics: seating, lighting, furnishings, even buildings. **Aifunghi's** suite of mycelium furniture is not manufactured but grown – cultivated from fungal networks in hemp hurd, compostable, and produced without petrochemical input. **Joris Laarman's** *Ply Loop Chair* replaces the urea-formaldehyde resins that have bound plywood for a century with the plant-derived Plantics bio-resin, demonstrating that the long history of engineered wood can be rewritten without ecological harm. *Sensbiom 2.1* by **Crafting Plastics** is a web-like plant-based plastic alternative that stains pink when exposed to ultra-violet radiation providing real-time health data within architectural space.

A new commission from RMIT University, Industrial designer Judith Glover, material scientist Tien Huynh, microbiologist Mohamad Arekha Bentangan and bio-designer Alexi Freeman have collaborated to develop *Mycelium Wildfire Jacket* exploring the potential of fungi-grown materials for future protective clothing. The prototype is fabricated from mycelium leather developed through a collaboration between RMIT designers and material scientists. This section also presents drawings, film and architectural fragments from the winner of the inaugural AlMusalla Prize: a pavilion mosque by **EAST Architecture Studio**, constructed primarily from reclaimed date palm waste. Its woven facade stretches 200 kilometres of palm fibre across the structure, a distance greater than the pilgrimage route between Jeddah and Mecca. The walls of the original structure, presented in both Jeddah and Bukhara, rose to 12.5 metres, constructed from the compressed waste of 150 date palms.

Highlighting the ecological cost of extraction – from the industrialisation of timber to global trade routes – the exhibition presents a series of works that show how beauty and consequence are not opposites but coexist together in material form. The **Eames leg splint**, manufactured in 1943, demonstrates this duality: the work is moulded from mahogany plywood, yet plywood as a material is bound with urea-formaldehyde resins, a compound that renders the product non-recyclable, and is now understood as a significant indoor air quality hazard and a reminder that even progressive material thinking carries its own unintended consequences. **Martin Corbin's** set of twenty-five spoons, each carved from a different Australian tree species – Sheoak, Mulga, Myrtle Beech, Grey Mangrove, Macadamia, Blackwood – creates an intimate botanical inventory that asks, without stating, which of these species remain in sufficient abundance to continue working with.

The exhibition's own display structures, plinths and surfaces will be fabricated from Plantbord, a new Australian-made hemp hurd board developed by **Joost Bakker** and **Forest One**, bound with Plantics bio-resin – the world's first 100% bio-based thermosetting resin, CO2 negative and fully biodegradable.

Tony Ellwood AM, Director, NGV said: 'This NGV-exclusive exhibition shines a spotlight on Australian and international designers who are using plant-based materials to radically transform our world. Moving away from abstract ideas and far-off possibilities, this exhibition powerfully reframes conversations around sustainability by offering real, tangible – and above all beautiful – examples of design created using plant-based polymers, leather, mycelium and more. Importantly, this exhibition also acknowledges the deep and long held knowledge of First Nation peoples, who have been creating with natural materials for millennia.'

Donna Cleveland, Dean, RMIT Vietnam, said: 'RMIT's focus on regenerative futures aims to address global environmental and social challenges through impactful interdisciplinary education, research and partnerships. *Plant Life* highlights how designers and communities around the world are rethinking our relationship with the natural environment, including by returning to Indigenous and First Nations materials, methods and modes of stewardship.'

Plant Life: The Nature of Design will be on display at The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia from 28 August 2026 – 7 February 2027. Information via the NGV website: [NGV.MELBOURNE](https://www.ngv.com.au/exhibitions/plant-life)

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***Plant Life* is made possible with the generous support of our partners:**

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Images:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/pabwnthisr9humy3lujmr/AFSNCLQGM3kNciBldBOm9ow?rlkey=jzhhbqygykwa3uxh76heti3ang&st=x3bsydiv&dl=0>

Image caption (L to R): East Architecture, AKT II, and Rayyane Tabet *On Weaving* winning design for the AIMusalla Prize 2025, Islamic Art Biennial, Jeddah, 2025. Photo: Marco Cappelletti, **Fernando Laposse** *Resting place* 2023, from the *Conflict Avocados project* 2023, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Commissioned by the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased with funds donated by The Andrew and Geraldine Buxton Foundation, 2023. This artist has been supported by the Elizabeth Summons Grant in Memory of Nicholas Draffin. This project is proudly supported by Mercedes-Benz. This project is proudly supported by Mercedes-Benz © Fernando Laposse, **Alvaro Catalán de OCÓN** (designer) **Mary Dhapalany** (weaver) *PET Lamp Ramingining: Twin piece* 2016 pandanus (*Pandanus* sp.), natural dyes, PET plastic bottle 87.0 x 220.0 x 164.0 cm (variable) (installed) National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased NGV Foundation with the assistance of Vicki Vidor OAM and Peter Avery, 2018 © Alvaro Catalán de Ocón.

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