

# surface <sup>asia</sup>

DESIGN / FASHION / ARCHITECTURE / ART / CULTURE

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## THIS IS LUXURY

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*Timepieces, property, jewelry:  
Designing for life at the top*



## Natural Logic

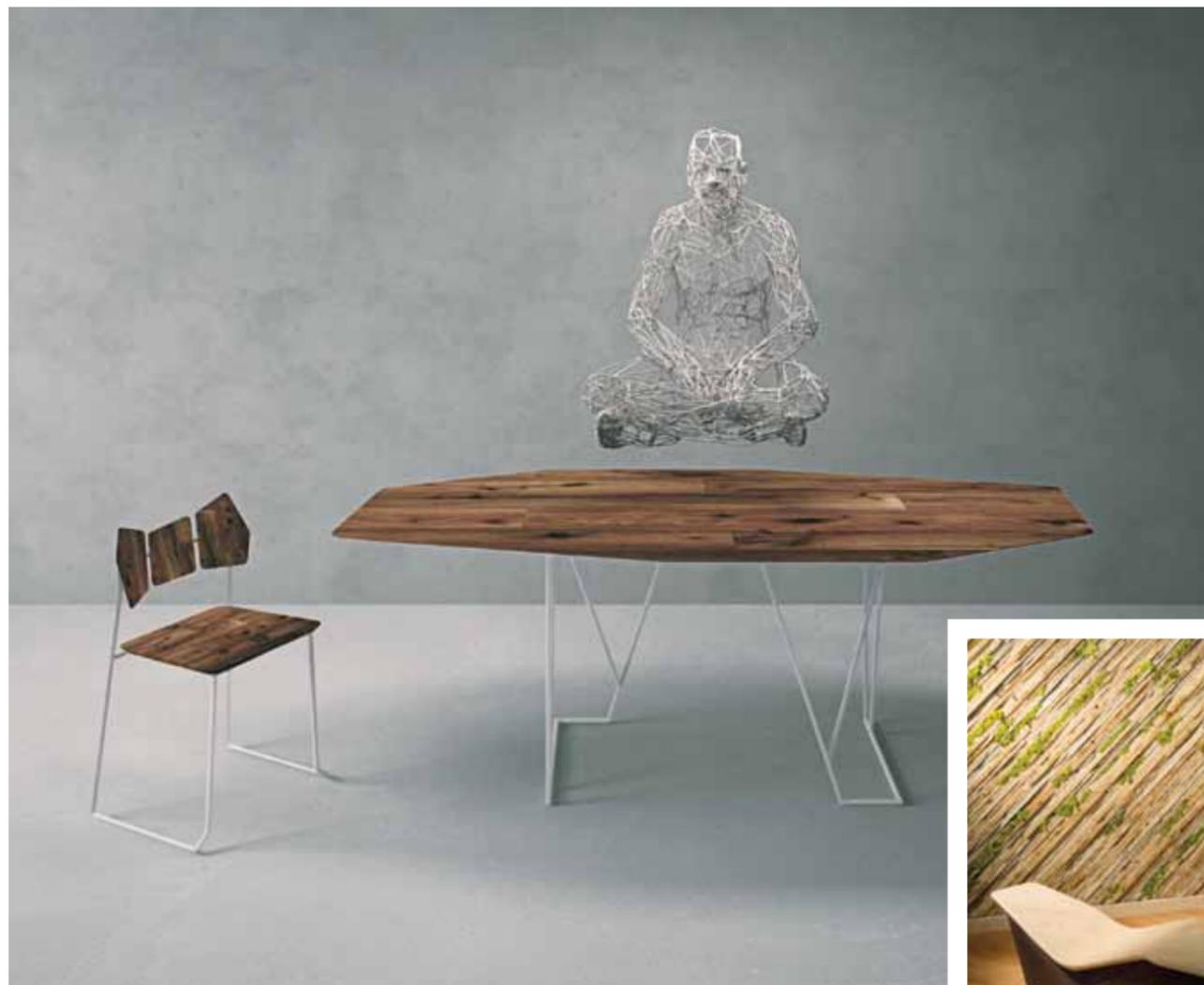
MILAN-BASED STUDIO ITO'S FUTURE-FORWARD DESIGNS INSTILL A NEWFOUND APPRECIATION FOR NATURE BY CELEBRATING THE BEAUTY OF IMPERFECTION.

WORDS ADELE CHONG

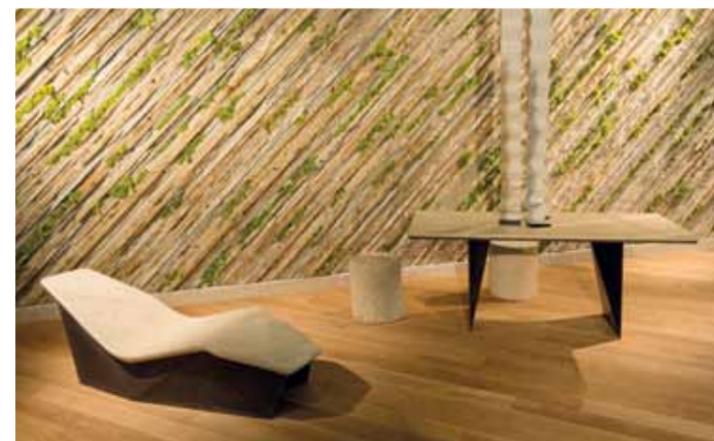
Shown at the recent Salone del Mobile in Milan, the Marg series by Studio Ito made an indelible impression. Irregularly shaped modular tables made with both bamboo and colored MDF, the designs feature a clustered pattern that recalls either organically structured systems or continental drift. At once congealed and diaphanous, its pared-down appearance is likened by its designers, Japanese husband-and-wife team Setsu and Shinobu Ito, to that of a daisy being caressed by wind on a grassy field. Poetic in its duality, the piece can be taken as a faithful representation of what Studio Ito consistently strives to deliver: thoughtful designs that celebrate nature's harmonious symmetry as well the many contradictions that govern its framework. Based on the premise that "sometimes no design is good design," works such as Marg are envisioned as smartly fashioned conduits between the natural world and its man-made counterpart.

This sensibility has garnered the couple growing acclaim, along with a clutch of prestigious accolades such as the Toyama Product Design Award and the ADI Design Index. Given its multidisciplinary outlook—from architecture to packaging design, Setsu and Shinobu are at liberty to delve into varied territory at any given time—it's clear that an exploratory approach has been instrumental in Studio Ito's success, landing its designs in the pages of pertinent publications such as *Architectural Digest* and *Abitare* in the past decade.

Drawing from a range of influences that encompass biological systems, tactile surfaces and places seen and felt in passing, the works traverse the sensuality of materials as well as the forms connected to them. A stirring example of this is the Kinoki furniture collection made in collaboration with Italian company Lago. Literally translated from Japanese as "wood of wood," the concept



(CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT) Husband and wife designers Setsu and Shinobu Ito; Pieces from the Kinoki Collection focus on the scent of natural wood; Frottage Chaiselongue, a stone and iron lounger, is displayed in a recent showcase; Inspired by lacework, the iron-wrought AMI is a highlight of the J+I Collection; Made from cardboard, the newly launched Profile Light is both elegant and green.



enlists simple, utilitarian shapes as a means of heightening the natural properties associated with the material, calling attention to commonly understated characteristics such as scent. An earlier floor lamp design, Kamui, similarly reflects a penchant for refining natural forms – in this case, a segmented bamboo stalk functions as the visual catalyst that gives the design its unexpectedly audacious twist.

In addition to this robust appreciation for nature, the studio's outlook owes much to the couple's varied backgrounds and complementary dynamic as co-designers. Exposed to design at a young age, Setsu cut his teeth at the studios of Italian virtuosos Alessandro Mendini and Angelo Mangiarotti, and credits his father, a sculptor, for his interest in shapes and objects. His artistic training proves the perfect foil for his wife's more pragmatic stance towards their jointly helmed practice; Shinobu honed her business management skills at CBS Sony prior to studying at the renowned Domus Academy and pairing up with Setsu. In the couple's view, it is this potent mix of right- and left-brained thinking, along with a progressive understanding of the cultural dynamics of Asia and Europe, that has given them an edge. "Our experiences on both sides of the world give us a broader vision of things, spaces and people," notes Shinobu, who also cites their adopted hometown of Milan as a chief inspiration.

Having just wrapped up a two-month exhibition at La Triennale di Milano—a show fittingly entitled *Frottage: A Natural Story*—the duo appear to be readying themselves for new waters by plunging headlong into the opposite end of the spectrum. "We are looking forward to designing robots or for the robotic world," reveals Setsu cryptically.

Though they may show signs of giving their prevailing muse a rest, one suspects that the Itos' obsession with imperfection and possibility will again resurface, albeit in a new mechanically wrought guise. Indeed, Setsu's wistful final words on the matter more or less confirm this, sounding more like a premonitory *nota bene* rather than a passing reflection: "Technology still seems cold – [but] it is replicating more and more human gestures." [studioito.com](http://studioito.com)