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How Australian designers make inroads offshore while staying local



The Jeanette chair and the Eileen table by Tom Fereday for the SP01 collection, launched earlier this year by Space Furniture.

by **Stephen Todd**

The Australian-based furniture designers making a living from their craft think creatively about business as well as aesthetics.

Australia is a difficult market, its population fragmented by state lines, stylish eyes still focused overseas. Our brain drain is notorious, our biggest success stories narrated about those who've left – [Marc Newson first among them](#). I think back to a sign I used to pass on my way to school: The Wise Australian Buys Australian. That was the 1970s. How wise are Australians today when it comes to buying design?

“Being able to offer furniture by an Australian designer has met with an incredibly positive response on the showroom floor,” says Richard Munao, chief executive of east coast furniture retailer Cult. We are discussing [Cult's collaboration with Sydney-based designer Adam Goodrum](#), its first with an Australian designer, which began last year with a range of armchairs, dining chairs, tables and beds. Since opening in 1997, Cult has staked out a place as an importer of luxury European brands such as Cassina, Cappellini and Republic of Fritz Hansen. While the initial AG X Cult offering sold modestly at retail, commercial interest was strong and it garnered a lot of positive support for what is broadly seen as an exemplary, even daring initiative.

“Initially, there was some kickback from our import brands but our response to them was that the product we are developing with Adam is uniquely Adam, not an imitation of their brand portfolios,” says Munao. “At the end of the day, we owe it to the local industry to reignite the flame and keep it alive.”



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The Jam Factory Collection includes the CUSP dining chair by Rhys Cooper; BLOCK dining table by Daniel Emma; and KC pendant lights by Karen Cunningham. **Jam Factory**

The second AG X Cult collection, launched in May, specifically targets the commercial market, picking up on the trend towards the domestication of the workplace. Titled Bower, it features a series of lounge-like seating and modular, woven acoustic screens resembling large segments of a thatched nest. Munao reports securing a large installation with KPMG at Barangaroo and another with Fridcorp property developers in Sydney's Hurstville. "We're also considering the export market," he says.

Space Furniture launches own brand

Like Cult, Space Furniture is justly renowned as a judicious importer of top-tier European brands – Vitra, Zanotta, Kartell and the like. [Space launched its own-brand SP01 collection](#) earlier this year, for which its Sydney-based head of product development, Matt Lorrain, collaborated with Milanese design studio Fattorini+Rizzini+Partners in the elaboration of a tight collection of chairs, sofas and side tables. For the second iteration of SP01 launching in November, Lorrain worked with local designer Tom Fereday on a collection of outdoor furniture in bent wire. The suspended basket seat of the Jeanette chair and the elongated Y strut and chamfered surface of the Eileen table display all the edgy elegance one has come to expect from Fereday, matched by the commercial savvy of an experienced retailer such as Space. Fereday's collection will look totally at home on the showroom floor alongside work by the likes of Castigliano, Citterio or Grcic.

"We specifically wanted to work with an Australian designer for our outdoor range because it was our belief that an Australian designer would have an innate sense of our climate and, in particular, the way we live outdoors," says Christina Caredes, group chief executive Asia Pacific at Space. "We felt confident that Tom would be able to achieve this both in terms of quality and design." The bonus: everyone got to work in the same time zone.

King Furniture works with Sydney designer Charles Wilson, when he's not working with Herman Miller. Stylecraft works with Brisbane's Alexander Lotersztain, when he's not shipping his own Derlot designs overseas.



Pieces from the 2015 Tidal collection for Tait by Trent Jansen.

For years, the accepted business model was for a local designer to devise new pieces and try to get them in front of the big European brands, hopefully by appointment but more often than not by hanging out at the seemingly endless run of parties during the annual Milan Furniture Fair. “Any of the Australian designers whom one might regularly see at the Milan Furniture Fair would have only had a fraction of the success that they would have liked,” says Charles Wilson, himself an habitu  of the Salone del Mobile. “I’m pretty sure I can speak for them all,” he adds with a laugh. “The only exception is Newson, who got out of Australia early enough and stayed there. And perhaps Brodie Neill, who has recently moved to London.”

How does a local designer get by?

Getting out early isn’t always an option – and not everyone wants to leave. With enrolments in industrial design courses on the rise and the apparent glamour of the design world unlikely to wane, how does a local designer get by? Especially if manufacturing, an essential part in the process, is conspicuous by its absence here. As Guy Keulemans of the University of New South Wales explains, “the manufacturing industry has been in decline since before the mining boom, but it was definitely exacerbated during the boom. And there is some evidence to suggest that the federal government was deliberately choking the manufacturing industry during the mining boom so as not to overheat the economy, and now that the boom has ended we need to boost the manufacturing industry again. But there’s a real possibility that we’ve actually lost some real core skills and some traditional skills.”

Keulemans insists that Australia needs not only to invest more robustly in the manufacturing industry, but that “we really need to push localism, develop a real political activism and policy in order to limit the influx of poor quality goods into Australia. I’m not really talking about tariffs, I’m talking about limiting waste, obsolescence, extended product warranties, product stewardship. There’s a whole range of policy initiatives that federal and state governments could be taking and are just not interested in pursuing.”



Chen Lu's Dream Lantern from the Broached Colonial collection.

It's a big agenda. In the meantime, designers are graduating with nowhere to go. Except perhaps their parents' garage and the internet with an e-commerce widget. Enter the bedroom entrepreneur. "A lot of Australian designers have had to make things themselves or manage relationships with component manufacturers who can produce in small quantities," says Brian Parkes, chief executive of Adelaide's Jam Factory design hub. "In order to survive in creative practice, they'll need multiple streams of income. They can self-produce for a retail market, license to other manufacturers, undertake bespoke commissions, exhibit in galleries, teach, mentor and use their design skills in broader ways."

In other words, Australian designers today must be open to different ways of interacting with the market and the culture. Gone the days of graduating, setting up a studio and churning out product to an eager market. If, indeed, that paradigm has existed since the glory days of Grant Featherston in the 1950s.

Jam Factory's collaboration strategy

Collaboration is more than just a marketing catch cry, it's an industrial reality. At Jam Factory, which runs four workshops – woodwork, ceramics, metalwork and glass blowing – and has an Adelaide retail outlet, Parkes has initiated an own-brand strategy. Launched in May at Melbourne's Den Fair, and made locally, the Jam Factory Collection includes coffee tables by Adam Goodrum, a storage unit by Henry Wilson, hand-blown glass light fixtures by Karen Cunningham, stacking stools by Jon Goulder, dining and armchairs by Rhys Cooper and the aptly named Block dining table and chairs by Daniel To and Emma Aiston (who work under the banner of Daniel Emma and also manage the Jam Factory's retail operations). There's something almost defiantly DIY about the collection, a pleasantly rudimentary allure. "I have a particular bias towards this kind of process," says Parkes. "In my role at Jam Factory I am actively engaged in helping these people develop successful careers. We want everyone who goes through our program to be successful, famous even."



Amore Mio chair, 2011, by Jon Goulder in rock maple and upholstered ply shell.

The designer-maker ethos dovetails nicely with the hipster penchant for local, artisanal production with a slightly DIY vibe. The maestro of this *modus operandi* is Jon Goulder, a fourth-generation carpenter, graduate of the Canberra School of Art's wood workshop, and the Jam Factory's creative director of furniture. "Most of my work is one-off or limited-edition collectables," says Goulder. "My goal is to have a piece in every major public collection in the country." A master craftsman, and in many ways the heir apparent to the late, great George Ingham who mentored him, Goulder is well on the way to achieving that goal. As such, he sets a very high bar.

At the other end of the spectrum are the designer-makers cobbling together an existence from 2x4s and hope. My worry is that at this level it's a trend, not a style. Perhaps even just a fad. The evident simplicity of much of the output can appear charmingly naive at first glance but merely banal on second look. As an aesthetic it fails to instill any sense of significance, let alone gravitas. Or indeed, a future.

"One of the problems of Australian design is its reluctance to embrace the decorative," says David Clark, curator and former editor of *Vogue Living*. "This is perhaps a result of the fact that Australia came of age in the Modernist era, which was aggressively anti-

decoration. Before that, there is no long history of aesthetics that we can use as a touchstone. So we have a lack of understanding of the decorative, and can even be quite uneasy around decoration.”

Exhibition links past and present



Porcelain Bear partners Anthony Raymond (left) and Gregory Bonasera.

Clark has curated an exhibition that puts the decorative to the fore. *At Home: Modern Australian Design at Old Government House, Parramatta*, juxtaposes 50 pieces by 45 contemporary designers with period pieces found in the gorgeously austere Georgian manor house, the country residence of the first 10 governors of NSW and the preferred official seat of Governor and Mrs Macquarie. By opening up a dialogue between past and present, the exhibition – which runs from November 11 to January 22 – effectively historicises contemporary output.

So, Marc Newson’s emblematic late-80s Embryo chair is covered in lush Etro paisley and posed at a period dressing table in the master bedroom. “It’s a shape only made possible by modern technology,” notes Clark, “and the paisley is a nice reference to the Anglo-Indian influences of the era.” Likewise, Sarah King’s Wingback Carbon Chair “is a quirky take on a grand chair, made out of carbon fibre. It will sit at the desk in the governor’s office, where Governor Macquarie sat”.

Rebuffing the ahistorical nature of much contemporary Australian design is the very raison d’être of Melbourne’s Broached Commissions design studio. Under the stewardship of creative director Lou Weis since 2011 Broached has attempted to contextualise contemporary Australian creation in terms of our specific historical and geographic conditions. For Broached Colonial, designers Trent Jansen, Lucy McRae, Chen Lu, Charles Wilson and Adam Goodrum created intriguing new forms based on an interrogation of our colonial past. Likewise, Broached East focused on our very particular relationship with Asia. By imbuing objects with an intense narrative, Broached Commissions produces designs that are unique to this culture. If there is a truly Australian contemporary discourse, this might well be it.

“Broached is trying to make as few collections as perfectly as possible,” says Weis. “We have seen a marked increase in the market price of the most sought-after pieces. So at this point it is a slow-burn business focused on appreciation rather than diffusion.” In February Broached Monsters will be unveiled, Trent Jansen’s series based on his

investigation of the rare interaction of convict and Indigenous mythologies. Expect chairs, wardrobes, lighting and vessels inspired by the Pankalanka and the Hairy Wild Man from Botany Bay. As David Clark puts it, “We need to learn to embrace our eccentricity in order to fulfil our potential.”

FIVE DOORWAYS TO SUCCESS:

1 | Specialise

Porcelain Bear is two big, hairy men – partners Anthony Raymond and Gregory Bonasera – who make highly stylised products in one material: porcelain. The word “niche” may well have been invented for them. Established in 2010, Porcelain Bear has become the go-to brand for lighting, tableware, tables and room dividers in that notoriously difficult to manipulate material which is fired at unfathomably high temperatures. What initially seemed perhaps a curio, a novelty, has developed into a more than viable business strategy. The bears now employ five staff and about half their production goes to the export market, predominantly to the US. “Porcelain is our chosen medium and we devote all our research and development to it,” says Bonasera, whose love for ceramics began when his parents bought him a pottery wheel, aged 10. Occasionally, the pair take on special orders. However, “if someone comes to us with a great design idea and it’s not possible in porcelain but is in earthenware, we turn it down. After all, we’re not called Earthenware Bear.”

2 | Collectivise



Emma Elizabeth, creative director of Local Design.

“It’s a question of safety in numbers,” says Emma Elizabeth, creative director of **Local Design**, based in a requisitioned factory in Sydney’s Alexandria. Part retailer, part design studio, and part project consultancy, Local Design is also the umbrella under which Elizabeth took 12 Australian designers to the Milan Furniture Fair this year. “We were aiming for a fresh cross-section of the Australian design industry,” she says. “Visitors to the stand were intrigued by the quality and variety of the designs, and then quite surprised that we were all Australian.” The goal, of course, is sales, but

amid the thousands of designs on offer in Milan at fair time, sales are rare. Nonetheless, exposure is high. “We see the work of our designers popping up in blogs and magazines for months after the installation is over.”

This month, in celebration of the 165th anniversary of heritage Melbourne jeweller, Kozminsky, Local Design will unveil a capsule collection of one-off pieces by Christopher Boots, Ross Gardam, Alexander Lotersztain, Alex Fitzpatrick, Tom Fereday and Emma Elizabeth at Kozminsky’s Bourke Street store. “The idea is to develop highly crafted, totally bespoke product to show not only what the designers are capable of, but also to resonate with Kozminsky’s finely crafted aesthetic,” says Elizabeth. Each designer will also create what Elizabeth calls “moments” in the store windows that reflect their work in the exhibition and will run through to year’s end.

3 | Diversify

Sydney-based industrial designer Henry Wilson trained at the Netherlands’ radical Design Academy Eindhoven. Returning to Australia in 2012, he found that “we have a hamstrung design language that is dictated by a handful of materials and processes. Laser, CNC and waterjet are all singular dimension robotic tooling that are favoured by local designers because of their inexpensive labour costs and relative availability. The problem with these tools, the output is not distinctive. Mostly they restrict design thinking.”

As a three-person design studio, the key to growth for [Studio Henry Wilson](#) “has been to diversify income. We already offer a broad scope of services from interiors, product and furniture and design consulting. We will continue to develop our in-house brands like the A-joint and cast accessories, whilst at the same time designing ‘out of house’ interiors for companies such as Aesop, P.Johnson Tailors and Google.”

What’s the way forward? “We need more Australian entrepreneurs. Most of my best clients have been, or started out, as small Australian start-ups. We get each other.”

4 | Stratify

Based in Brisbane, Alexander Lotersztain has his eyes focused on the northern hemisphere. Working under the banner of [Derlot Editions](#), he has a catalogue of some 160 products, including the highly successful Prisma modular seating system for commercial environments which sells through Stylecraft. A second brand, Les Basic, will launch early next year with a particular mission. “We’re targeting the Millennial, the new generation on the rise,” says Lotersztain. “They have their own thoughts about quality, about life and experience.” With a marketing strategy focused heavily on international wholesale and online, Lotersztain says “we envisage it as a global brand, but it has an Australian heritage and ‘face’. But the strategy is to really reach markets outside Australia.”



The Bower collection for the workplace by Adam Goodrum for Cult.

This is also the rationale for setting up a factory in Guangzhou on mainland China as an export hub to Europe and the United States. About half of Studio Derlot's production, including all its exports, are made there. "We've just shipped six containers to the US for Gensler architects in Silicon Valley, another batch went out to Foster + Partners in Hong Kong. It took two years to set the factory up, but we now have our own team in China and I fly there every few months. Before we embarked on the strategy of creating product offshore for the international market, we just could not be competitive enough. It's about being competitive but also flexible."

5 | Materialise

[Dessein](#) is a loose collective of creatives revolving around Melbourne entrepreneur, Michele Chow. Its new Pieman Collection is built upon one very singular material, Hydrowood from trees that were submerged in the damming of Tasmania's Pieman river basin in the 1970s. Four designers from three states – Simon Ancher (Tasmania), Nathan Day (WA), Tom Fereday and Marcus Piper (NSW) – came together to develop a family of furniture and objects for the home. "From the outset the aspiration for the Pieman Collection was to create a room of furniture and smaller pieces which worked together as a collection," explains Piper, Dessein creative director and designer of the Float series of trays, mirrors, and pendant light. "Working collaboratively, through a series of workshops and via constant contact, we were able to pool our collective talents to achieve this rather than creating individual pieces in isolation. As a team, we made decisions on which timbers to use, profiles and finishes to bring each piece together."

There's a certain rusticity to the collection, as if in homage to an earlier, makeshift settler aesthetic, reconfigured via a refined urban lens. Fereday's chair with its slung leather seat appears rudimentary, but the joinery is exquisite. Piper's single, double and triple down lights look elegantly DIY, sophisticatedly crafted. Ancher's freestanding modular shelving units echo the spindly tree trunks emerging from Lake Pieman's glassy surface. It's the particular materiality of this collection that creates a compelling narrative beyond the beauty of the work itself. Customisation is an option.

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