

AGAINST • the
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Australian Sculptural Furniture



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Christopher Robertson
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*"Unusual, thought-provoking
contemporary furniture that allies
sculpture with functional objects."*



Peter Michael Adams

Martin Corbin

Sebastian Di Mauro

Pip Giovanelli

Patrick Hall

Matthew Harding

Anne Harry *artists*

Gay Hawkes Andrew Osborne

Gray Hawk Guy Parmenter

Wayne Hudson Nameer Davis and Barbara Penrose

Helmut Lueckenhausen Kevin Perkins

Philip Monaghan Tom Risley

Jim Moody Christopher Robertson

Merv Muhling Leo Sadlek



Alex Selenitsch

John Smith

Branwyn Snow

Sue Theron

Peter Walker

Leslie John Wright

AGAINST *the* grain

Australian Sculptural Furniture is a major survey of unusual, thought provoking contemporary furniture that allies sculpture with functional objects. The exhibition participants are sculptors and furniture makers who are interested in the expressive potential of furniture. As the title suggests, their works are dramatically different from conventional furniture forms, attaining a visual complexity that incorporates multiple layers of meaning. With an emphasis on the conceptual, this furniture explores a surprising range of ideas from environmental and social issues to landscape, sex, mythology and phenomena such as magnetic fields.

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Most of the furniture makers in the exhibition trained in art schools rather than technical colleges or by trade apprenticeship. This exposure to art theory and other art disciplines has encouraged an innovative approach to furniture making. The Tasmanian School of Art in particular has a strong representation in the show with works included from both students and the staff, John Smith and Kevin Perkins. Smith's CD cabinet, *Phoenix Flamenco*, exemplifies the philosophy of the Wood Design course, in its technical accomplishment and innovative form. The cabinet is part of a body of work inspired by a residency in Barcelona and makes references to music and passion. The form of the work evokes the neck of a stringed instrument, and the ornamental carving crowning the cabinet captures the movement of the Flamenco dance.

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Kevin Perkin's work features environmental destruction as a predominant theme. In his monumental *Recherche Screens*, comprised of three panels based on whale flukes, Perkins comments critically upon the history of whaling at Recherche in Tasmania. To reinforce his point each panel is accompanied by a condemnatory paragraph about whaling, Tasmanian tigers and clear-felling of native forests. A massive ornamental hinging system which alludes to whale sperm (made by Will Rhodes), connects the panels at the base and continues the sinuous curves of the screens. In this work Perkins has used a combination of black carbon fibre and King William pine: the carbon fibre evokes whale-skin, and the pine highlights the plight of the endangered Tasmanian timber. A concern for Tasmania's diminishing rainforests underpins the work of many Tasmanian artists, including Peter Michael Adams. His bench, titled *Fence*, is from a collection of works titled *Earth Links*, designed to remind the user of their connection with nature.

Described by Adams as an icon of the natural world, Fence showcases the beauty of ancient Huon pine and captures a sense of serenity and stillness.

A less specific preoccupation with the environment informs Christopher Robertson's furniture. After completing a Masters degree in furniture design at the Royal College of Art in London, Robertson moved back to Australia and became interested in the fact that Australian decorative languages tend to be drawn from European traditions. In response, he designed a series of functional coat and hat stands that utilised Eucalypts as the source for a visual language. The frame of the stand or 'tree' was produced from finely worked stainless steel and adorned with exquisitely carved, oversized Eucalypt fruit. These stands encourage an appreciation of the diversity and beauty of the Eucalypt. Another artist using carving to express a response to the Australian landscape is Philip Monaghan. Trained as a sculptor in London, Monaghan chose to make furniture or 'functional art' as it provided a set of limitations to work within. After arriving in Australia he was overwhelmed by the natural environment and his heavily carved table is a response to this experience. The result of an interest in 17th century German woodcarving as well as African and Oceanic traditions, Monaghan's distinctive and excessive style has been described as 'tropical Victoriana'.

Pip Giovanelli's furniture has a more direct link to the landscape. His *Yaouk Three Seater* is constructed from found branches of snow gum from the Yaouk Valley. Riddled with insect tracks that reveal traces of a natural history, the branches are worked into a configuration that makes a reference to the geography of the Yaouk site. The seat (produced from the timber slats of an old woolshed) acts as a horizon line and the backrest represents a line of trees, capturing the windswept contour of the land. The spontaneity of the form belies its meticulous construction informed by Giovanelli's architectural background. Leslie John Wright also incorporates found timber in his furniture, but alters and enhances the sinuous forms by carving. Although both these works have a visual connection to a rustic or bush furniture tradition, there is a major difference in that their use of found timber is dictated by an aesthetic outcome rather than necessity.

Salvage or found timber has become a poetic language for many exhibition participants.

A major example of the genre is the Queensland sculptor Tom Risley's *Cape York Landscape Suite*, a monumental driftwood ensemble which has eight chairs, some nearly four metres in height, ranged around a table that is over four metres long. Risley began making furniture in 1986 out of a sense of frustration with attitudes to contemporary sculpture.

Interested in the ideas of shipwrecks and the qualities of boat building, Risley collects driftwood and then assembles the work, carefully retaining the gestural quality of the timber. The grand scale makes sitting in a Risley chair a memorable experience.

Gay Hawkes' *Throne for the Queen of Australia* is another significant work that reveals the evocative potential of the salvage aesthetic. Hawkes draws from a similar source of driftwood and found objects. Her throne, from a body of work inspired by the idea of an Australian Republic and the imagined regalia of an egalitarian Queen, provides an insightful commentary on topical Australian politics.

Peter Walker makes a contemporary contribution to the tradition of furniture ingeniously constructed from found objects, also known as 'make-do'. He incorporates salvaged industrial-scale, utilitarian timber in his work. However, unlike Risley and Hawkes, he juxtaposes salvage concepts with a minimalist design sense. Head of the Wood Studio at the Jam Factory Craft and Design Centre, Walker's long-term interest in sculpture is evident in the finely balanced spatial concerns of *Germein's Cross*, a three-metre long sideboard that has an impressive sculptural presence. Walker leaves the surface of the heavily eroded found timber untouched to maintain a record of its past. Like Walker, Martin Corbin has an interest in the idea of revealing or exposing the past history of materials. However, he inverts the make-do tradition by taking apart existing furniture and reconstructing it into new forms which appear to be 'make-do'. His self-imposed discipline is to use every part of the source furniture in the new configuration. Corbin's cabinet, *Union of Two Church Chairs*, was once a pair of chairs. Some of the chairs' history is revealed in the palimpsests of different coloured layers of paint and areas of raw timber which were once concealed by joints.

While Corbin's work deals specifically with the domestic history of individual pieces of furniture, other artists in Against the Grain engage with the history of particular forms such as the cabinet.

As the historical model for showcasing virtuoso technique and intent, cabinets were once a highly prized item of furniture. Patrick Hall's cabinets continue this rich history but make a significant departure from tradition by using the cabinet as a vehicle to express personal narratives. *The Tractor*, inspired by tins full of rusty old nuts, bolts and screws in rural sheds, is about a fast disappearing rural life. The multiple drawers with their quirky handles reference curiosity cabinets and ideas about collecting. Layers of nuts and bolts separate the drawers and create the impression of archaeological layers enshrining a technological past. A vignette of a tractor in a field of nails is displayed under glass at the top of the cabinet, reinforcing the idea of a museological display, but also relating to the marvellous objects traditionally displayed in curiosity cabinets. *Wunderkabinet 3* by Helmut Lueckenhausen has a connection with the curiosity cabinet at a more conceptual level. He presents signifiers of these early cabinets, such as the idea of compartmentalisation (indicated by the grid of glass panes) and enclosed spaces, but the configuration of the cabinet is disconcerting. Doors open from surprising places, interior spaces merge, small windows are placed at floor level, and stylistically *Wunderkabinet 3* seems to morph from one form into another. Juxtaposing elements of zoomorphic form and the geometry of modernism, this is an enigmatic piece of furniture which is about classification, yet defies classification or rational explanation.

The cabinet also possesses an architectonic potential and this is explored by Leo Sadlek, a USA-trained furniture maker. Influenced by Shaker, Art Deco and Arts and Crafts furniture, Sadlek was interested in constructing furniture that signalled recognisable forms including shrines or distinctive architecture. He produced a series of cabinets based on classic American buildings such as the Chrysler Building. *Clock Tower II*, a drinks cabinet based on the McGraw Hill building, is from this series. Interior architectural spaces are alluded to in the work of Brisbane based sculptor Merv Muhling. His furniture installation of a chair, a table and a suspended window frame is carefully constructed and arranged to create a sense of nostalgia and loss. In his work Muhling evokes the emptiness of a stage set long after the actors have left. The work appears functional, but is not: it is about the function of furniture characterised by human absence.

In direct contrast to Muhling's use of furniture to invoke loss are the works that use idiosyncratic form and humour to reflect on aspects of an Australian lifestyle. These qualities are exemplified in Brisbane based sculptor Sebastian Di Mauro's day bed, *Loll*. This piece is a development from an earlier series of huge, ambiguous, sculptural forms, covered in flocked carpet underlay. Disconcertingly, these held both sexual references and an attraction akin to that of giant stuffed toys. In *Loll*, Di Mauro has produced another ambiguous, anthropomorphic form based on the Witchetty grub. The piece is 'upholstered' in a textile produced from 1000 steel pot scrubbers sewn together. These create a sumptuous and alluring surface and their incorporation into an artwork enables the scourers to be appreciated from an entirely different perspective. Similarly lush and enticing is Anne Harry's aluminium cabinet *Sandra*, which plays with notions of vanity and femininity. The tall cylindrical form lined in red crushed velvet has an illuminated interior and chain mail shelves. The piece references female sexuality and represents 'a journey through the inner libidinous world'. When fully open it is the width of a double bed and can also function as a bedroom dividing screen.



The sculptor Wayne Hudson has created entirely new furniture types including 'bum rests', designed specifically for the Australian habit of leaning against objects. His huge piece *Separation*, forged from steel, has a phallic and fetishistic subtext and is destined for a pub or club environment. The work incorporates areas designed to be leant against but these are separated by steel wire. *Separation* comments upon personal screens and the culture of singles bars. Bronwyn Snow is also a sculptor specialising in steel furniture but her work is much less confrontational than Hudson's. The *Garden Seat of Earthly Delights* is based on a pattern of stones, seeds, snakes and flowers. The patterns were cut out of sheet steel creating a tension between negative and positive spaces, and constructed into a bench. Subliminal ideas about decadence and danger as well as beauty are present in Snow's work.

In Europe, recent exhibitions of this type of conceptual, sculptural furniture have been described as 'the new design'. Although all the works in *Against the Grain* have been carefully 'designed', including the driftwood assemblage of Tom Risley (who likens his process of collection and construction to a design exercise), the definitive design relationship with manufacturing is not a critical factor. Two exceptions are the works of Sue Theron and Jim Moody. Theron, like many of her peers, trained as a sculptor but was frustrated by the production of large objects that had no function. Furniture provided useful parameters to work within and made her work more accessible. Focussing on the chair's relationship to the human form, Theron's work is designed to give the user enjoyment. Her aim is to design objects that are sculptural and functional but also suitable for commercial production. Jim Moody, whose background is in graphic design as well as furniture design, became tired of the endless geometry of much conventional furniture, and decided to investigate alternatives. *Dune* was the result. Inspired by Italian sculpture of the 1930s, it is organic, rhythmic and simple. Its form emerged from a process of experimentation with materials. Moody is now exploring production options for the chair. Matthew Harding's swivel chair *Otto* also emerged in response to modernist furniture and ideas about the history of the chair. In a witty interpretation of the swivel chair, an image of a conventional chair in white is superimposed over Harding's 'chair', a black cube. Through this work Harding makes a statement about the 'imposition of western systems of thought, upon non-western cultural notions of seating'. An equally accomplished figurative sculptor and furniture maker, Harding shifts effortlessly between the two disciplines.

Alex Selenitsch, architect, poet and author, uses a chest of drawers as a device to examine complex literary themes. *The Critics Chest* is part of a series, *The Purgatorio Suite*, which seeks to illuminate Dante's middle book *Purgatorio* by turning ideas into material form. The chest 'for critics who like inventing interpretations and showing them off' was originally a cheap set of pine drawers but has been significantly altered. Based on Dante's idea of four ways of reading a text, each of its four drawers has been labelled with a category of interpretation: literal, personal, social and numinal. The fact that the chest is also a functional object, in which socks could be categorised, adds an element of humour. Andrew Osborne's screen, *Will the Real Helen Please Stand*, was informed by a dense text by Roberto Colosso about archetypal stories such as Helen of Troy. The screen contains small, ghostly white doll-size wedding dresses which are illuminated from within and positioned behind panes of distorting glass. The closer the viewer is to the work, the harder it is to see it. Osborne's work operates on a functional level as a screen but also offers metaphysical and metaphorical interpretations. The screen and ideas of revealing and concealing informs the work of Queensland based fine artists, Barbara Penrose and Nameer Davis. In their separate practices vision is a recurrent theme and together they have designed and produced an ambiguous piece of furniture, a low rectangular seat with a slatted top that opens out to become an elegant two-metre long fan-shaped room divider. The title, *Coquette*, conjures flirtatious images of personal fans, but the scale of this work is huge. *When open, the screen creates patterns of light and shade similar to the effect created by the lattices and slats of vernacular Queensland architecture.*

The furniture in *Against the Grain* performs the function of cabinets, chairs, or screens but simultaneously exposes the histories and sub-texts of these functions and forms. For example, in contemporary interiors, the sideboard has become a vehicle for the display of items of great value. Guy Parmenter's sideboard is innovative, elegant and functional but it also subverts the sideboard's role by playing with the idea of weight being associated with value. Parmenter's work is inspired by notions of hidden force – he uses magnetic repulsion as a structural device to float the surface of his sideboard, almost magically, above its base. Four separate sections form the top and the weight of the object placed on each determines how much the huge neo-dymium magnets will be forced together. This provides a witty scale-like device to compare the relative values of the works displayed. Gray Hawk's monumental sideboard *Unified Intent* is a visionary piece inspired by Toltec mythology. The form was envisaged in a dream and realised first in maquettes. The dark timber and massive steel and glass central column which is lit internally creates a dramatic presence and evokes ritual altars. Destined for a corporate environment, it is a wry symbol of power and sacrifice.

Traditionally there has been a clear distinction made between sculpture and functional objects and the furniture in *Against the Grain* is difficult to categorise – it moves between these spheres. Alex Selenitsch illustrates this issue of categorisation in the following description of his own furniture: 'As design, this furniture is too representational and idiosyncratic. As craft, the objects are too ragged and ad hoc. As art, the works are too analytical and useful.' The works in this exhibition are loosely categorised as 'sculptural' due to their conceptual basis and significant three-dimensional presence, but each maker places differing emphases on concept, function and execution. Together, these works demonstrate that hybrid practice can generate challenging new forms that redefine the relationship between art and utility, and expand perceptions about the role of furniture.

Kirsten Fitzpatrick
Craft Curator – Brisbane City Gallery



Sebastian Di Mauro

Loll 2000

stainless steel pot-scourers, aluminium
1500mm x 1850mm x 750mm
photo: David Sandison

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