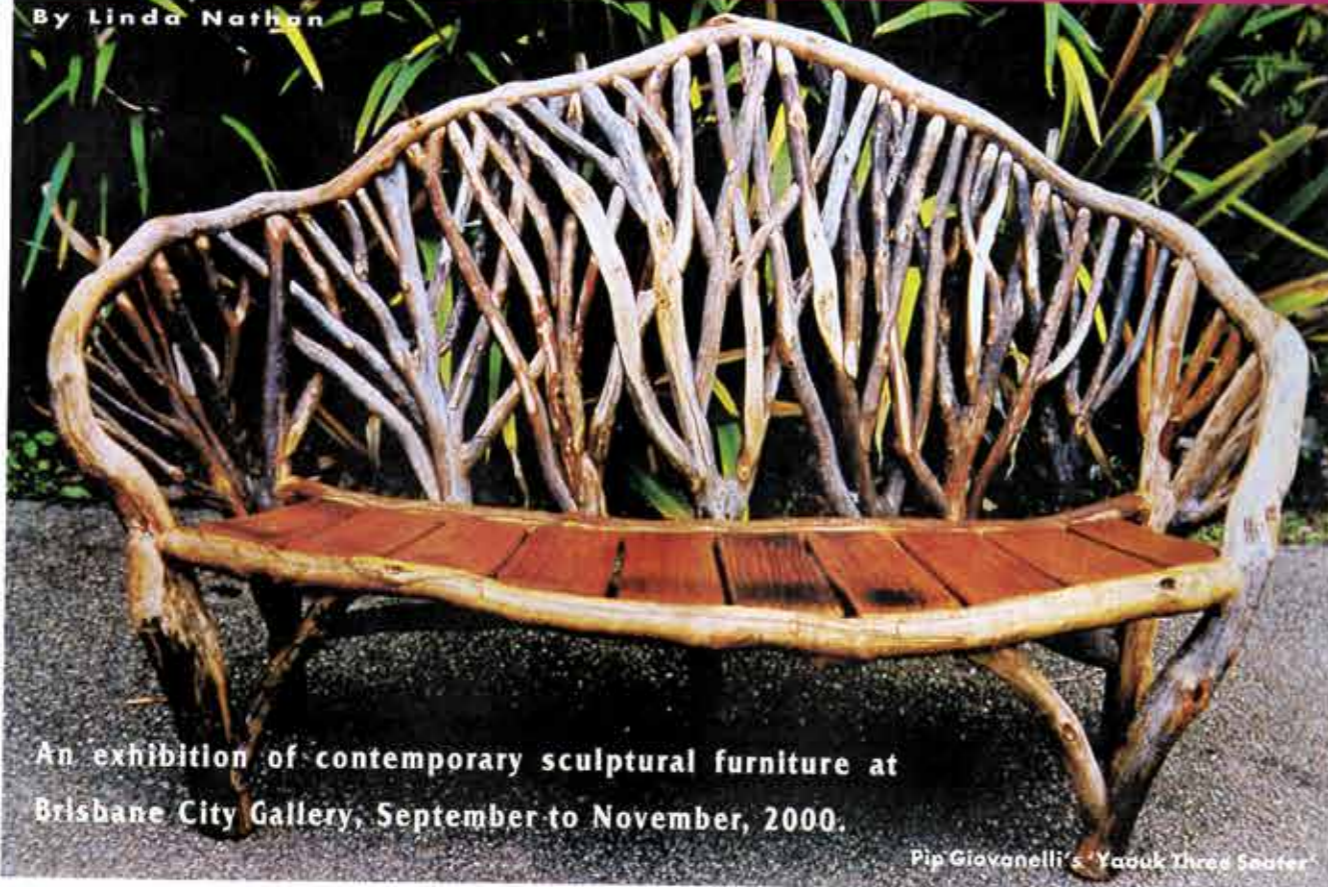


AGAINST THE GRAIN

By Linda Nathan



An exhibition of contemporary sculptural furniture at Brisbane City Gallery, September to November, 2000.

Pip Giovanelli's *Yaouk Three Seater*

'Against The Grain' is, according to its curator, Kirsten Fitzpatrick, somewhat of a landmark in Australia, the largest exhibition of contemporary sculptural furniture to date. Unshackled from primary concerns of function, 28 makers have been able to, in Kirsten's words, 'really go for it'.

From the sheer joyful impact of Tom Risley's centrally displayed, larger-than-life, driftwood dinner setting for eight, through to the highly polished and thoroughly worked wood and metal surfaces of other exhibits, it was an exhibition to enjoy. There were no niggling thoughts about the average houseperson being able to get a duster in the cracks and corners of freeform surfaces, no worries about matching existing furniture, no hassles about market appeal, or all that ergonomic stuff relating to comfort and whether the piece actually does what it's supposed to.

Collectively speaking the exhibition was certainly awash in all the aspects of wit, exuberance, sexuality, allegory,

allusion etcetera which the design and craft cogniscenti like to refer to. Apart from Risley's collected driftwood assemblage, salvaged and found objects feature in works by Pip Giovanelli, Gay Hawkes, Martin Corbin, Alex Selenitsch and Peter Walker.

The backrest of Giovanelli's *Yaouk Three Seater* is hewn from snow gum branches and suggests a row of trees, set above its seat of recycled boards. Gay Hawkes' *Throne for the Queen of Australia*, with its sea-worn 'sceptre', cow bone 'headrest', ram's horn armrests and quirky 'orb' is an ironic commentary on the monarchy/republic debate. Alex Selenitsch's *The Critic's Chest* follows in the tradition of Australian make-do furniture, wearing its concerns literally engraved on its drawer fronts. There's nothing religious about Martin Corbin's *Union of Two Church Chairs*, a sculpture which leads the viewer on an interesting visual journey, sorting out what came from where. Peter Walker's *Germein's Cross* balances

the old and the new, literally and metaphorically.

Gray Hawk is not afraid to make a bold statement and with *Unified Intent* does so in the most technically competent way. Wood, metal and glass are worked with consummate ease into a kind of corporate altar-piece.

I felt a bit uncomfortable looking at Philip Monaghan's *Banksia Table*. Beautifully carved, its downward pointing arrow-legs and big banksia nut connector were not to be ignored. Jim Moody, in *Dune* has certainly got the contemporary bent ply ethic happening. This chair's fluid curves were good to view from all angles.

Guy Parmenter's *Poles Apart* had a quiet cleverness about it. At first glance an elevated hall piece, at second glance a how-did-he-do-that kind of thing. Parmenter used neodymium magnets to produce the levitating surface effect. The weights of the objects placed on top determine the height of each of the four surfaces.



Nameer Davis and Barbara Penrose's *Coquette* is a pleasant fanned-out splay of hoop pine slats on top of a fairly basic frame-type base which doubles as a bench. Kevin Perkins's *Recherche* screens are more sophisticated partitioning devices accompanied by text which details the environmental issues which inspire them.

Leo Sadlek's *Clock Tower II* vaunts its Art Deco heritage, named after and inspired by the New York McGraw Hill building, 'humanised' for sure with legs and a clock face. *Phoenix Flamenco CD Cabinet* by John

Smith is impressive in stature and technical accomplishment, while Leslie John Wright is another designer/maker who really out-achieves most others in the technical mastery department. Sketching twisting, convoluted forms is one thing but translating them into sinuous 3-D shapes is another. Wright's table is even more beautiful close-up, and its opaque blue glass top confirms its deep sea inspiration.

Sebastian di Mauro's *Loll* couch brings to mind the supine form of an embalmed mummy, legs curving up to cradle anyone brave enough to lie on a surface of moulded pot-scorers. This was one of my favourite pieces, humorous in concept and form.

Around a year and a half in the planning, a \$40,000 grant from the Australia council made this exhibition possible, and it's part of a series focussing on furniture which the Brisbane City Gallery is planning. The first was a more architectural view of contemporary furniture, where 28 makers were in-

Left to right, top to bottom: *Loll*, made of pot scorers by Sebastian di Mauro. *Germein's Cross* by Peter Walker. *Martin Corbin's Union of Two Church Chairs*. *Poles Apart* by Guy Parmenter utilised neodymium magnets to produce its levitating surface effect. *Dune* by Jim Moody in moulded ply. *Philip Monaghan's Banksia Table*, featured an ornately carved base.

invited to design and make works. *Degrees in Latitude* (reviewed in AWR#20) was about furniture which responded to the design ethic of sub-tropical Queensland. Another exhibition in this series featuring chairs is planned for August, 2001, provided funding can be found. The gallery espouses a verifiable commitment to developing exhibitions that showcase Australian talent and engage in current critical debate while having popular appeal.

I thoroughly enjoyed looking at furniture that was free to express the creative spirit of its makers without the need for all those very serious functional concerns.

Reviewed by Linda Nathan