

# Turning desire into dollars



## We meet up with Neil and Pam Erasmus, blazing a trail across three continents

**B**ased in Western Australia, Erasmus Designs is owned by husband-and-wife team Neil and Pam Erasmus. Together they have created production and exhibition works, as well as bespoke pieces for a clientele stretching across the globe. They are also committed to teaching and passing on their skills. Erasmus designs grace the homes and public spaces of discerning collectors across Australia and the world. Both Neil and Pam's works are featured in various publications, such as the 500 series of books.

### Introduction to furniture making

Unlike many designer-makers, Neil Erasmus did not always dream of working with wood, instead he 'drifted' from a traineeship in wine-making to working in his father's furniture-making studio in Stellenbosch, South Africa, at the age of 23. After a 'bumpy' start, Neil's commitment to his new work grew as his marital and family responsibilities increased. "The deal was that I would breathe a new life and soul into the wood and, in turn, it would provide me with a living." After becoming "incurably seduced by wood and obsessed with the art of fine furniture", Neil spent the next four years working with his father, André, himself a second-generation designer-maker. This was an intense inculcation in the traditional making process and one that Neil was determined to copy for the benefit of others at some point in the future.

In 1981, at the age of 27, he emigrated from his home in South Africa, together with his British wife, Pam, and their three-year-old daughter, settling in Canberra, Australia, where a second daughter was soon born. Neil set up a new workshop, making commissioned pieces for embassies, government departments, collectors and galleries. In 1985 the family relocated to Perth and Neil began teaching his skills to Pam, who created a small range of furniture that she sold to galleries.

### Favourite pieces

In 1996 a new gallery was preparing to open its doors to the public. The owner wished to purchase, outright, several pieces from Neil and Pam. In addition to several production items such as chairs and a table, they agreed to design and



'Hill' desk in blackbutt and jarrah



'Sept' hall table in blackbutt, cedar-of-Lebanon, leather and acrylic

make a special 'drawcard' piece for the gallery. They devised a tallboy made of West Australian jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*) that featured sawn crotch-wood drawer-front veneers, and a concealed drawer just under the top. 'Sylvia', as this piece was named, referenced buttressed forest trees, and was so loved by the gallery owner that it was never sold on. It became the catalyst for three further orders, the latest being for a collector, made in Tasmanian blackwood (*Acacia melanoxylon*). "If it wasn't the dance of light in the figured wood, or the scent of the leather-lined, cedar-of-Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*) drawer bases that seduced a would-be buyer, it surely was the discovery of the secret drawer that converted desire into dollars!" says Neil.

A year later, in 1997, several Australian artists and designers were each invited to design and make an unusual chair or seat for a travelling exhibition from the staves of a wine barrel. "I had always wished to create something akin to a traditional, hand-carved African recliner, which consists of two separate elements, one fitting through the other to form an 'X'", explains Neil. With this as a reference, Pam and Neil designed and made 'Kama Seatra', a remarkably comfortable 'slouch' chair. The entire piece was made from tapered veneers cut from the barrel's staves, and arranged in a herringbone configuration. "We have always worked in a very tight, disciplined way, working through every facet of the design, mock-up, model and cutting-list stages before picking up the first piece of wood and beginning the making process. 'Kama Seatra', however, was approached quite differently, as we allowed ourselves ➤



Detail of 'Hill' in credenza

## Makers' Maker John Makepeace

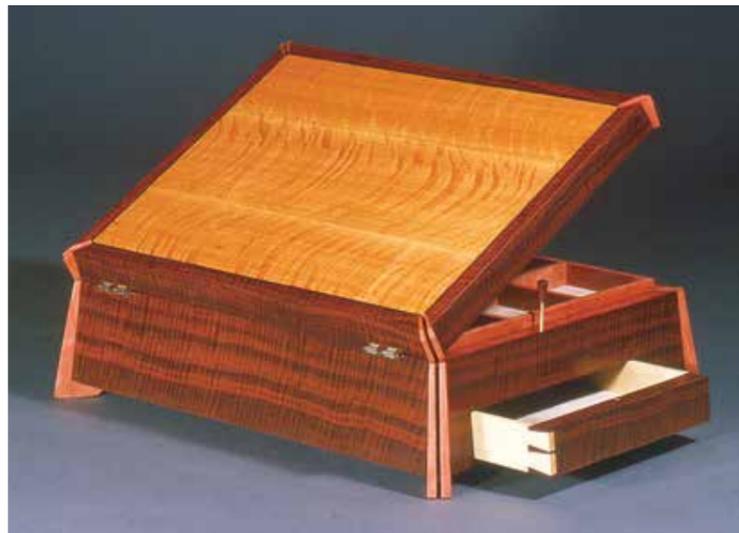
I had the pleasure of visiting and reviewing a solo John Makepeace exhibition, *Enriching the Language of Furniture*, held in Bovey Tracey, Dorset, for the *Australian Wood Review* magazine.

Given a little time to reflect on John's work, it becomes clear that he has never sought to seduce his audience with showy craftsmanship on the one hand, or contrived art or pretentious design detail, on the other. Indeed, one is seduced, but only because the impeccable craftsmanship exists as one with the form – so much so that it almost goes unnoticed! This is the essence that makes John's work great – a poetic balance of restraint and fresh effervescence. John, perhaps more than anyone, fluently 'speaks and reads' the language of design, art and, not least, craft, and imbues in his work a perfect harmony between these elements – attributes that I aspire to.

Woodworkers in general have dragged their feet in embracing other materials to complement wood. John, on the other hand, has from an early stage incorporated media, such as coloured acrylic, as demonstrated by 'Play Time', made in 1973. Then, later, he began to blend wood and cast and polished aluminium as seen in his 'Forum' and 'Serendipity' chairs – the melding of the two media crafted as if one. At a more pedestrian level, it is impossible not to be enthralled at John's ability to render complex joints, such as those on the dendroidal, 'Sylvan' chair backs, invisible. Then, at a more elevated level, John highlights the incised and radiused corners on a set of drawers, obscuring the rather finely crafted dovetails they are cut into. John employs the finest materials and most appropriate methods in all he does, but he refuses to be sentimental about his approach. As a living icon of contemporary, handmade furniture, John's considerable achievements resonate for me, as a studio woodworker, on several levels. He, seemingly, has succeeded in practically every area of the art of fine furniture worth pursuing – design, making, promotion, marketing, teaching and, as important, but far more difficult to achieve, elevating his one-of-a-kind, contemporary furniture to a level equal to that of the fine arts. Certainly, others have reached immense heights, but all too often their work is more formulaic than diverse – and it is the latter that I am so drawn to. The value that John places in his works has much more to do with each piece's true intellectual, thus collectable, value, than a simple sum of its cost in design and making terms.



'Yew Leaf' table and 'Spring' chairs



'Downunder' box in jarrah and sheoak

▶ to indulge in spontaneous freedom, casting aside the tyranny of order." This new way of working paid off. "This first foray into the world of art was a profound revelation for us when it was bought for a considerable sum of money by a collector on the opening night. It showed us that we had reached a point in our careers where we could trust our intuition and 'go with the flow', and still come up with well-resolved outcomes."

10 years later, in 2007, they were asked by a long-term patron to design and make a special hall table for his apartment. "The main lounge room was arranged like a display gallery filled with an eclectic mix of fine art and sculpture, and included a number of our pieces. Having asked us whether there was anything special we had longed to make that

could fit up against a particular wall, we jumped at the opportunity to put some polish to an idea that had been kicking around my mind for some time." The concept incorporated a pair of sevens, resting back-to-back against each other, one larger than the other. 'Sept' made in blackbutt (*Eucalyptus patens*) was thus born, but instead of making just the one, asymmetrical piece, they decided to make two, one a mirror of the other. They had intended to exhibit the spare, but their patron bought both, saying that he "couldn't bear to have close brothers separated". 'Sept' consisted of sawn veneers over a torsion box substrate, with the two sevens held apart by clear acrylic fixed invisibly at the back. A drawer graces each half and a laser-cut piercing consisting of a lacework of connected sevens serves as a handle.



'Kama Seatra' in oak

More recently, Pam and Neil have spent several months developing a new production piece, the 'Shadow' chair. This chair marks a distinct departure from others they have made, in that it is the first to feature a low back and solid, coopered seat. It is also the most complex chair they have made to date, but thanks to their considerable experience in jig-making techniques, they have managed to get the unit tally of time down to a respectable 16 hours per chair. "Shadow' is the lightest, strongest and most comfortable chair I have made to date, and sits at the pinnacle of my favourite pieces," Neil explains.

### Award-winning work

Neil won his first national award for the 'Mantis' armchair, which was designed in 1986 and exhibited at the Australian Furniture Design Awards in Melbourne in 1989. Since then, they have made over 200 'Mantis' chairs to order and the chair is still selling almost 30 years after it was first conceived.

Their most recent award for design excellence was won at the inaugural Studio Woodworkers Australia exhibition in Mittagong, New South Wales in January 2013 for the 'Shadow' chair, a piece whose name is derived from photographs of shadows of various templates cast on a wall. The infinite variety of shapes thus achieved helped inform the design. In between these, they have won a further six awards and one of their pieces has been acquired by the Art Gallery of Western Australia for its permanent craft collection.

### Inspiration and design ethos

Neil describes himself as "always the rebel, never wishing to conform and always uncomfortable when I occasionally slip into a groove. I yearn, when I can, to tread a new path." As a result, his works have taken several different forms over the years.



'Laundry Hampers' in blackbutt

He has been inspired by the wonderfully diverse work of designers and makers such as Wendell Castle, John Makepeace and the late George Ingham. "These individuals have, from time to time, managed to reinvent themselves as designers, always producing fresh, new works. I am also drawn to the breezy, informal, unpretentious and quintessentially Australian flavours that architect Glenn Murcutt imbues in his

homes. The poetry of art and the stricter discipline of design both fascinate me."

### Design ethos and process

Pam and Neil are confident that their making skills can survive any scrutiny, but they know that it's always hard work to get the form to sing with the same clear voice. "We feel that convincing art or clever design should never be an excuse for sloppy execution, just ▶



'Upside' box in native willow and jarrah



'Shadow' chair in walnut and leather

► as crisp work alone is never enough to warm one to a jarring form. For us, one of the most challenging tasks is to ensure that a piece is not burdened with a 'ticking clock' that gives it a finite lifespan of desirability. Clichéd as it is, timelessness is as elusive as time itself is ephemeral."

As a team, they start each new project by sketching and toying with shapes and proportions, to establish the 'stance' they desire in a piece. "It may be the visual mass or splay of a leg, or an element of asymmetry, or even the width versus height proportions of a piece that will reveal much about the language and message the piece communicates. We believe that the character of furniture can be read in its stance and proportions, and the shapes

of even the smallest components, such as drawer knobs, can and do convey a message. Are they happy or sad ones, are they serious or playful, or perhaps even reserved or engaging? So, we often begin with a narrative and devise the means to get the voice heard in the design. Sometimes mock-ups are made, but more often than not it's just a perspective sketch, then full-size set-outs, and occasionally models that get us moving on to more exciting things!"

#### Furniture training

Pam and Neil strive to achieve a good balance in their work. "We have always liked a 40/30/30 mix respectively between our one-off bespoke work, speculative exhibition work and orders for our product range." These

activities comprise around two-thirds of their time, while the remainder is taken up with writing and teaching. Neil is a contributing editor to *Australian Wood Review* magazine and teaches fine woodworking across Australia, and also at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship in Maine, USA.

As the academic director, Neil managed the Australian School of Fine Furniture for a couple of years before he and Pam set up their own school, the Erasmus School of Creative Arts (ESCA). "The cross-pollination of ideas and skills between teacher and co-teacher, and even teacher and student is a very powerful learning experience – one that Pam and I fully intend to continue with for as long as we can." ESCA has recently finished a resoundingly successful, 12-week master-class comprising three instructors and six students. David Upfill-Brown from New South Wales and Brian Reid from Maine, USA each taught a five-week stint, while Neil taught the two-week introductory course. "It is our firm belief that students get so much more from the broad range of techniques and experiences that two or more instructors bring to bear, so this will remain our *modus operandi* in the future." A fresh challenge for them now is to combine all this with their duties as new grandparents, perhaps influencing the next generation of furniture makers in this talented family? You can find out more about Neil and Pam from their website and you can also see further examples of their wonderful work. *F&C*

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Detail shot of 'Sept' hall table