

## **Furnished**

**Essay by Joe Pascoe, Curator of *Furnished*.**

*Furnished* opens a door to the world of objects, furniture and fabrics for the home and personal environment. All the makers in this exhibition have entered into the essential social contract of developing forms for use by others, in the service of responsible aesthetic values.

It has become a symbol of Tasmania that its craftspeople live without boundaries in terms of their creativity, yet subscribe to a highly ethical position in terms of their output. The origin for this philosophy is without a specific geographic centre and is in evidence across the island. The strength of its integrity is indicated in the care that is taken with materials and a unique attitude to making.

It is often said that Tasmania's aesthetic is nurtured through its landscape, with the wild lyricism of its forms promising an inner peace whilst ruffling the emotions of all who engage. This may mean well considered surfaces and ever respectful colour schemes, couched within an intellectually curious approach to design. This exhibition is evidence of that philosophy.

Thus *Furnished* is not about furniture as objects; it's about how you may choose to live your life as informed by this extraordinary place, Tasmania. Take a piece of Tasmanian craft and place it in a New York apartment and you will still hear the waves break. And the sky crinkle over a rough mountain. Or remember a road leading to a bushy beach, away from the small city just 20 minutes back. And you will remember the people who solicit such poetry from their location.

*Furnished* is about how you can exist harmoniously in the twenty-first century by carefully selecting domestic and work items, and keeping them for a very long time, until the doorknobs are softly bruised with use. The soul of this exhibition shines through due to the dedication of each maker.

The brief for the *Furnished* project was based on the idea of collaboration, with makers encouraged to form teams to extend the economic growth path of the craftworks they produce. We see this in different ways through the exhibition.

Design Objects Tasmania ('DOT') is an outstanding model for the development of contemporary craft and design. Its studio spaces and ethos encourages collaboration in terms of support and knowledge transfer. This model can be described as a form of porous incubator. The social patterns within DOT give permission for exploration, with the proximity of each workplace quietly nurturing individual development.

The standing lamp by **Stuart Williams** reaches out to the natural environment for inspiration, dramatically bringing the landscape into the work itself. In a key statement Williams says, "My work is about finding a sense of place within the urban landscape. I like to combine new technologies with old traditions. The opportunities that new technologies hold for sustainable design and innovation are exciting. Yet it is the wonderment of the natural world that inspires my creativity. For me it's about reminding people to think about their environment, their place, the space they live in, and about finding peace".

Radical partnerships under the collaborative umbrella of DOT are seen in the works by **Duncan Meerding, Daniel Schneider** and **Zach Sonstegaard**. These three recently graduated furniture makers are working within the metaphor of nature too, though sometimes at one step removed, and are prepared to use irony as a positive tool. The DOT environment is an evolving one,

allowing the makers to each pursue their directions and interests through a mixture of commercial realism and experiment.

As Meerding notes, “Light and the way it performs around objects is important to the mood that we are in and the way that we live. Having indirect light is important for making one feel relaxed in their living environment (aka *Blackwood leaf Lampshade*). Likewise, Schneider’s beautifully simple dining chair is designed to be both traditional and contemporary, as well as commercially viable with its use of timbers such as Blackwood, Celery Top Pine and Tasmanian Oak. Sonstegaard’s *Trails* “... is a work that relates to my frequent adventures through the Tasmanian bush. One of the things I enjoy most about bushwalking is having an elevated vantage point, and seeing the trail ahead of me rolling and winding before it disappears into the distance”. One senses in these three makers a practicality and integrated design sense that will evolve through a focus on self exploration.

A different, more academic model operates at UTAS at Launceston, where **Simon Anchor** leads his students through an intense process of designing and making. The most current technologies are available and the designs created are rich with concepts, and derive from a complex framework of inquiry. The works by **Hugh Nagle**, **Matt Prince** and **Matt Smith** evidence the value of this form of tuition. As an ideas-driven situation, this model has a rigour that pushes each student to establish a personal vocabulary of making. Anchor’s own work in *Furnished* is the ‘impossible’ *Stool*; “Detailing from the 747-airplane wing has inspired the development of my *Clipped Wing* range. Cantilever, span and disbelief are all very important elements in the design”.

Also in Launceston at the university, lecturer **Mae Finlayson** and recent Contemporary Textile graduates **Abigayle Tett** and **Isis St Pierre** have used new fabric designs and forms that ‘dress the space’ to address the furnished theme. Upholstered chairs, furniture dresses, a chandelier and building blocks combine to speak of objects that animate the environments they may populate. Finlayson’s work is entitled *This must be the place*, and its found fabrics, threads and wallpapers act as a reconstruction of the notion of home, as she quotes David Bryne (1984), “*Home is where I want to be/ pick me up and turn me round./ Home is where I want to be,/ but I guess I’m already there*”. Tett’s *Knitted Chandelier* blends high and low art on the hearth of the home too, while St Pierre’s *Home* chair and wooden cubes “reflects an appreciation of discarded objects and materials; patterns and shapes from the past...The embroidery on my armchair reference lines and symbols from topographical maps and street plans”.

From Stanley on the north-west coast of Tasmania, **Toby Muir Wilson’s** hall table *Lake Vera* references both human and geological time. The first is evidenced by the counterpoising of aesthetics from the different centuries; the second is seen via the respect for materials and the overall feel of the work. *Lake Vera* is a profound work that honours an ancient lake. Muir Wilson states simply and authoritatively, “My primary design sources are the physical environment, geology and flora which surround me in Tasmania”.

This model of individual studio practice is strongly represented in *Furnished*. ‘Morphe’ by **Karin Beaumont** is designed to either adorn a wall at home or be worn, with its beaten silver and reclaimed materials intended to achieve “...fluidity between disciplines as boundaries dissipate and we re-establish personal connections with the natural environment and our dwellings”.

The presence of the ethereal is evident in the iconic furniture of **Rye Dunsmuir** with his *LINEA table and four chairs*, very modestly described by the maker as “...designed with small

apartment living in mind and makes the most of solid timber and simple joinery. Comfort, weight and strength were critical factors in designing *LINEA* while keeping material requirements to a minimum". Sublime would be a better description!

Also from northern Tasmania **Joanna Gair's** paper works combine recycled materials and natural fibres to explore concepts of femininity and natural forces, once again progressing an inquiry into nature that we see in many of the pieces in *Furnished*. The work *Book Terminus* repurposes Tasmanian timber and handmade paper made from recycled linen combined with native Tasmanian Flax, which as, "A pair of bookends to mark the end of the line, the complete A to Z, a sanctuary away from iTechnology and digi-books...these very Tasmanian bookends offer your library the perfect happy ending".

**Penny Malone's** super-sized wall-mounted fabric buttons (entitled *Cityscape*) show how Tasmanian craft crosses boundaries with ease. Texture, form and pictorial motifs are given equal weight in her works, which can exist as a series or individual items. As Malone explains, "The central concern in my work is pattern. I am interested in creating designs that have both a functional and aesthetic value and I have an ongoing interest in textiles for interiors. My design method is one of repeat placement printing...This process is often carried out hundreds of times in order to create a repeat pattern over a single textile length...I look for new ways to extend my practice and have recently started applying digital technology as an aid to design, production and marketing". Technology is a signpost that can point to either the past or the future for many craftspeople.

Cast light and pattern becomes the subject of the lighting fixtures by **Loz Abberton**, whose flat pack light-works reference industrial design processes. *GROW* uses Tasmanian timber veneers and polypropylene because "The growth and divergence of Tasmania – pre and post-colonisation – is symbolised by the choice of materials for my *GROW* light. The CoC ('Chain of Custody' standard) Tasmanian veneers represent our island's natural forests and original indigenous population...the timber grain and growth marks expresses the unmodulated progress of life pre-settlement. The recycled white polypropylene alludes to Tasmania's discovery and subsequent culture change, the stylised graphics representing the introduction of colonial craft – for example, tatting, cross-stitch and embroidery – enrich the shapes of shadow and illumination".

**Rebecca Coote's** lights utilise the positive elements of her chosen materials, rather than the spaces in between the striking forms, to act as a dramatic stage for her lights, and thus act as light sculptures. Her *MONA lamp* and *Cape Bruny Lighthouse* series were inspired by artist residencies; "I found beauty within the lighthouses, especially the cast-iron stairwells and ornate lantern room balconies. This attention to detail and decorative features was typical of the period, however I found it intriguing that often it was only the lonely lighthouse keeper, in an often lonelier location, who could appreciate such detailed architectural decoration. Each light sculpture comes with either red or clear glass. Clear glass represents the light from the lighthouse reaching into the sky and red glass represents the warning or leading light which some lighthouses have to warn ships of dangerous rocks".

**Amanda Kaye** and **Jerome Dobson** have combined to present Kaye's colored sketchbooks within the context of Dobson's acrylic sheet wall unit. Colour forms a bond between the two worlds of natural and unnatural materials, as the two opposites of fibre and plastic combine to create a unit that is designed to encourage creativity by an as yet unknown third party. *The 3rd Door Artist Studio* has "...been designed to enable artists and designers to catalogue their creative workflow..."

The jewellery by **Nelle Pittman** housed in the cabinet by **Finn Seccombe** aims to deliver a devotional impact, which once again speaks eloquently of the power shared authorship of an artistic experience, prevalent throughout *Furnished*. *The Chester Suite* asks the question “Is an adorned body so different from an upholstered chair? Our furnished limbs turn to shapes and things under the gaze of the sun”, to quote the makers.

The emotionally intense world of dolls and their alter-egos as measured by the dreams and games that go with them are ventured into by the collaboration of **Claire Byers**, **Sabrina Evans** and **Stefan Stojanovski**. As children share, Byers has made the blankets, Evans the dolls and Stojanovski the beds. Together they have conjured a unique approach to the notion of ‘furnished’, letting their imaginations play together. *Dolls Dreams* explores narratives derived from Tasmanian colonial life, with each assemblage acting as a dreamed life yet to be lived and later to be perceived, as adult shadows fall across their diminutive scale, in echo of father time.

In her sculpture *Hull* **Sally Brown** re-interprets bugs, shells and larger geological shapes to softly meld them into pure humanistic objects that have an implied emotional and practical use. Woven steel and strong ropes are made to behave like gentle vines, raising the question of how humans and nature can co-exist together. *Hull*, made from salvaged copper, “... is inspired by my observations of natural structures, particularly plant structures. To me this piece is reminiscent of an opened seed pod that has shed its seed, leaving behind the dried layers of its husk. As a craftsperson, I like to design and make simultaneously, letting the piece evolve in my hands and exploring the potential of my chosen material”.

**Natalie Holtsbaum’s** project penetrates the moral question of how humankind’s lust for precious material has a profound and tragic cost. Working with **Shauna Mayben**, **Livio Muench** and **Ella Knight** as the **Radical Art Jewellery Gang** collective, they have developed an enclosed space whose cube form approximates the dilemma of seeking gold at any human price; “Inside a self-standing structure shaped like a short corridor, micro-organisms and chemical elements [used to refine precious metal] are enlarged to human scale and mounted on opposing walls. Invading the personal space of the viewer, these works highlight a consideration rarely taken when purchasing jewellery”. This type of collaboration has an important role as it questions the economic cycle that drives jewellery production, and holds the supply-demand dynamic up for scrutiny – what price beauty? And what price Tasmania’s most precious asset – its environment?

An architectural practice and individual makers have come together in the installation developed by **Evan Hancock**, **Belinda Winkler** and **Peta Heffernan** (Forward Brianese and Partners) to present a coordinated trajectory for ideas borne of crafting and given the calming title *Shhh*. This, again, is aesthetics with a purpose, successfully realised as material mantras for the home or similar shared spaces. As the makers say *Shhh* references the Japanese concept of ‘ma’. Ma refers, “not just to spaces but to the way those spaces are activated by the objects that surround them. The space we have designed for *Furnished* is an intimate one – bringing a sense of stillness into the busy urban environment – a private space within the public realm...Our created space for living is a ‘slow space’ reacting to the busyness that has become the norm of our hectic lives. It’s a place to pause, reflect and rejuvenate. Tasmania’s natural environment is unique in its offerings of tranquil, pure and solitary places at our doorstep”.

Looking across the complex range of craft and design practice in *Furnished*, the 33 makers all share some common ground in terms of an interest in nature. The approaches though are diverse and traverse a territory that encompasses the heart, mind and hand in different ways.

For the crafts to survive into the future, the ability to switch between different approaches is becoming increasingly necessary due to commercial demands. The market is both global and niche, with each participant wishing to mark their individuality with craft.

Craft now has a new dual purpose – to function as an emblem of the owner’s values as much as representing the maker’s intentions. This is a shift that has occurred since the 1970s, when craft was political in the sense of acting as a placard at a demonstration. Now craft is everywhere, free of institutional collecting canons, yet equally value laden. Today’s craft will soon start be collected again, in depth, by our museums – given the evidence of the many inspired craftworks in *Furnished*.

Whether it is over a trestle table or via a website, shop or gallery, the need continues for makers to be in dialogue with the market, so as to influence it and gain a living. Strategies for long term survival as a maker should therefore include documenting inspirations for future use, applying rigorous methodologies for analysing one’s own work, and consciously defining what is really new in the saturated contemporary craft market.

This type of self-reflective approach to making is evident in much Tasmanian craft and has its roots in the excellent art schools and intuitive understanding many people hold in terms of their Tasmanian heritage. The later is often conveyed through retained memories and oral histories relating to creative individuals who have lived and prospered intellectually in the hinterlands as well as the urban centres. Legends regarding highly individualistic Tasmanian artists abound. And perhaps this process of remembering acts as an antidote for the waves of information that arrive everyday via the internet and social media, with the making of craft functioning as a magnetic north for finding a direction in one’s life.

Whilst the core of a maker’s oeuvre will often remain steady, the external manifestation of a maker’s work can and should change, and even blur its own boundaries. A maker needs to ask *what makes craft ‘craft’*. The most vital craftworks have this question at their core.

It is a rarity to find such a large and impressive group of craftspeople working in this way, and this is a humbling reminder that periods of transition are most powerful when they leverage off groups as well as creative individuals.

Tasmanian craft is fulfilling many of the fundamental requirements for growth; openness to new technologies, persuasive use of materials, and a wry radicalism. These factors underpin its appeal and explain the market’s interest.

If there is a ‘next step’, it is probably to completely free craft from the bondage of the Arts & Crafts Movement, with its excessive emphasis on investing objects as sites for skills development, materiality and social purpose, and to shift it further toward being a driver of cultural development and change. While the argument for doing so is based on the belief that creative regeneration will occur through such repurposing and scrupulous self-examination, the reward should be an even greater future, as more and more people furnish their lives with craft.

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