

COMMISSIONING WORKS OF ART



MICHAEL RETTER and SCOTT MITCHELL describe their recent projects to Meredith Hinchliffe

Scott Mitchell, designer maker of fine furniture and Michael Retter, marquetry artist, have been collaborating for many years, enhancing each other's fine woodworking skills.

Furniture serves a very basic function. We sit, eat, store, sleep and work on, generally, different types of furniture, often especially designed for the purpose. Furniture can be very basic and just facilitate the processes of life. However I argue that it should also stimulate an emotional response in us.

Scott Mitchell, designer maker of fine furniture and Michael Retter, marquetry artist, have been collaborating for many years, enhancing each other's fine woodworking skills.

Retter is perhaps best known for his marquetry panels in the foyer of Parliament House in Canberra, although he is regularly commissioned to create panels and designs for furniture. Mitchell has been designing and making fine furniture since graduating from the ANU School of Art in 1995.

The first work the pair designed and made together was the fit-out of a railway carriage for Dick Smith that he uses to entertain family, friends and associates. "We designed a cocktail bar, wine racks and lavish leather lounge seating, and put in a silky oak ceiling on the carriage," Mitchell said. "A large waratah sits in the centre of the bar, which is made from Brush Box and Jarrah."

After collaborative exhibitions in 2009 and 2011, this year Mitchell and Retter have worked together on two significant projects: one a large wardrobe in the Sydney eastern suburbs and the other a substantial desk in the inner western suburbs of Sydney. The two commissioners discovered Retter and Mitchell through Bungendore Wood Works Gallery.

The couple who commissioned the wardrobe live in a fully renovated and authentically refurbished art deco block of apartments. "We had been looking for a design for a new wardrobe for our bedroom that was evocative of the art deco era, without being antique and with the functionality of a contemporary wardrobe, and was made with timber," she told me. "We had seen Michael's panels in the hall at Parliament House and had almost decided that we wanted to use native flora in the image. A few days later we visited Bungendore Wood Works Gallery and saw Michael and Scott's work."

After talking to David MacLaren at the gallery, they spoke to Retter and firmed up their ideas. The image is of a branch of a Ghost Gum, with overlapping leaves, blossom, twigs and slender branches viewed through a finely framed sash window. The door edges, from solid maple, form the grid of window frames. The wardrobe is large, filling one end of the bedroom, with a window on the right hand side letting in the light.

"I suggested that we should emulate the movement of air and light from the window," Retter told me. "As it is one complete wall, I made a marquetry surface which recedes rather than dominates the room. My suggestion was that it be kept as light in tone as possible, which dictated the selection of the Canadian Rock Maple. The intention was to keep the whole wall marquetry in 'high key', hence the use of the silver grey version of the Poplar-Aspen veneer for the tree."



Photos Stan d'Argeavel

Retter has used his magic colouring processes on silvery Poplar-Aspen for the tree, leaves and branches.



Photos Scott Mitchell



The leaves almost move as one views the image, and the play of light and shadow from the trees outside add to its liveliness. Mitchell made the doors after Retter had produced the image or 'jigsaw' as Mitchell described it.

After further discussion, it was agreed that Mitchell would also make the internal structure of the built-in wardrobe. He encouraged the clients to think carefully about how they would like the different segments to work. Did she have many long gowns that required a higher hanging rail? How many shirts did he have and how many pairs of trousers? Where would the shoes be stored?

"Everything in the wardrobe is hand made from timber—all Canadian Rock Maple," Mitchell said. "We all went through a serious

process, planning each drawer and space. There are two sections: his and hers. There are separate drawers for underwear, spacious drawers for woolly jumpers, and a special pull-out rack for his trousers. I made fourteen dovetail drawers in all," he told me. There is a secret compartment for storing precious items.

"We sit in bed every morning and look at the wardrobe," the clients said. "It is like having an extra window. Our bedroom has a leafy aspect and it is as if the branches from outside are coming through the window. With the night light, it has a much more golden hue." The layout of the apartment allows people in the living room to look down at the perfectly plain end of the cupboard. "Only special guests see the cupboard."

The client who commissioned the desk was also introduced to Mitchell and Retter through Bungendore Wood Works Gallery where he admired Retter's work. The initial brief was that the image should evoke central Australia and it was to be an heirloom piece. He wanted a bold statement to sit behind in his office. It should be a large piece with just two shallow drawers on either side of the sitter. The creamy, pink-tinged bark of the Ghost Gum in the image contrasts with the deep grey/green background of Grey Sassafras, but the colour will change with the light in which it is seen.

Retter has used his magic colouring processes on silvery Poplar-Aspen for the tree, leaves and branches. The image is of a tree growing from the ground, wrapping over the top and meeting a similar tree growing up from the other end of the desk. It too, is viewed through a window frame, although as it is made from Macassar Ebony it is much heavier and darker. The desk is large—almost as big as a dining table. The drawers open with scoops in the base, and it also has secret compartments. Eventually there will be three chairs to accompany the desk.

Both Mitchell and Retter thought carefully about the area where the client will work. While the surface has been treated with a durable lacquer to protect it, he will need to take care with it. Commissioning two pieces such as these is a significant undertaking. The client must have complete trust in the craftspeople and there should be continuing discussion between all parties. David MacLaren from Bungendore Wood Works believes it is important for the contact to be between client and craftspeople, although he initiates the first meeting. The client who commissioned the wardrobe said: "This was a very successful project. It fulfilled every aspect of our brief. They work so well together and both have high standards and paid attention to detail."

I congratulate both clients for their courage in commissioning such expensive works. Both were for large sums of money—as much as a car in the case of the wardrobe and far more than a desk one could buy at Ikea and many people might have balked at the sums. Items that are in constant use are the most important pieces in our lives and there is constant pleasure and appreciation in using something that is well-designed, meets our requirements and is also a work of art.

Meredith Hinchliffe