

Homes

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Milan's magic

Australian designers are fast-tracking international exposure at the world's most respected furniture fair. But it can be a rough ride, writes **Jeanne-Marie Cilento**.

PICTURES PAUL MCDONNELL



After a frenetic day at Milan's international furniture fair, the world's design cognoscenti gathered at midnight under the 19th-century chandeliers of Bar Basso to dissect the best projects and parties. Behind the long mahogany bar, black-haired men in bow ties briskly mixed cocktails amid a cacophony of languages and mangled orders in Italian for the famed Negroni Sbagliato.

This old-fashioned yet ultra-fashionable bar with dark-green velvet drapes, figured wallpaper and comfortable antique chairs became the chosen late-night haunt during Milan's six-day celebration of contemporary design last month.

This year's balmy April weather encouraged the voluble and excited crowd of designers, journalists, architects and acolytes to spill out from the elegant rooms on to Via Plinio. Although Australian designers were among the throng, others were finding Milan a less soigne experience.

Stephen Proctor, on a tight budget for his first show at Salone Satellite, the young designers' exhibition, was trudging home to a one-star hotel after 10 hours manning his stand.

"The glamorous image of designers

FAST E-TURN TO SUCCESS

From prototype to production has been an amazingly quick process for London-based Australian designer Brodie Neill, writes Jeanne-Marie Cilento.

Returning from a party after the launch of his new project with the Italian company, Kundalini, Brodie Neill finished the evening at a Milan hospital when the design director's wife went into labour. It was an exciting week for the London-based Tasmanian designer who had had his work picked up by Kundalini after exhibiting at Salone Satellite two years ago.

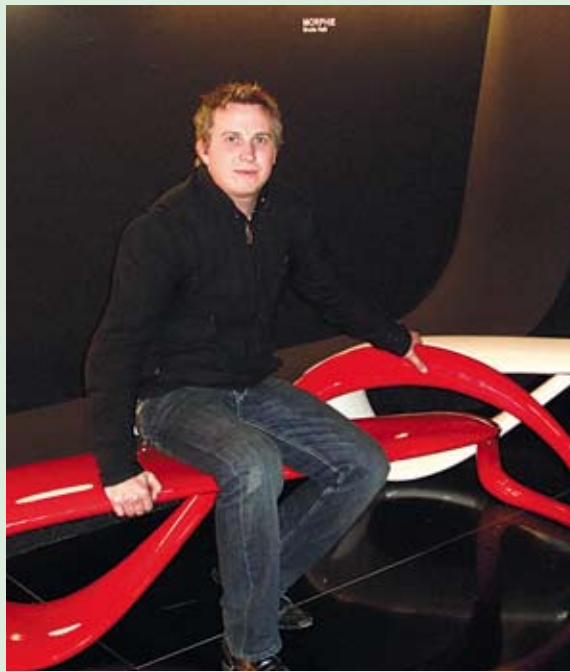
The company began manufacturing Neill's Morphie light last year and exhibited his dynamic E-Turn seat at Milan in April. The curvaceous design is pleasingly organic, like an art nouveau tendril by Victor Horta. But its aerodynamic smoothness and brilliant, glossy finish are 21st-century. The "E" stands for "eternity" as the line of the design flows in a continuous loop.

The husky-voiced designer describes the design: "E-Turn is a three-dimensional realisation of a twisting and transcending line that provides structure and form."

Originally, the complex configuration of a double overlap wasn't designed with production in mind, but as an experiment for exhibition, but when the seat was first shown, in London in September last year, companies were soon competing to manufacture it.

But Neill decided to stay with Kundalini as he was confident of a high-quality finished product. They also guaranteed that the design would be ready to launch in Milan by April.

"I had not envisaged such interest, but Kundalini fell in love with the piece when it was



first introduced," Neill says. "The exact elements that made the piece unique made it difficult to manufacture. To their credit, the piece remains identical to that of the original."

Designers' prototypes can be years in development before going into production, but both of Neill's projects have been manufactured in a short time. The designer says that the fast turnaround from concept to production was due to the quality of the original prototypes.

"For the E-Turn, I presented drawings of the design to several companies," Neill explains. "By the time they saw the prototype in September, their interest was sparked enough to make negotiations for its manufacture."

Neill found the second time around with Kundalini was far easier due to the lessons he had learnt working with them on the Morphie light.

"Italians work with a lot of passion and enthusiasm,"

Neill says, "but patience during the production process is important."

Neill studied and worked in New York for four years before going to London nearly two years ago.

"London has a strong design scene due to the high number of designers and architects based here. But Milan merges design and manufacturing seamlessly into the fabric of the city. It has a design heritage unmatched by any other."

Next week, Neill's solo design exhibition opens in New York at the Rubin Chapelle gallery, in conjunction with the city's International Contemporary Furniture Fair.

at the Milan furniture fair was not a reality for me," Proctor says. "I almost abandoned coming several times because of the high cost. It seemed especially excessive while I was concentrating on earning a sensible income for my family."

Proctor's first child was born last year and he decided to create a range of baby furniture for his entry into the highly competitive Salone Satellite. Based in Sydney, Proctor's unlikely day job is designing and making church lecterns that are sent around the world.

"I knew if I wanted to make an impact in Milan I had to come up with something new: not chairs, tables and lights," Proctor says. The designer's submission to exhibit for Salone Satellite was accepted in November last year. By January, he was making MDF prototypes in his backyard on a Bunnings' trestle table with an electric handsaw.

Although he knew it was important to have a strong theme for his show, he also had to keep the costs of making and shipping his products to Milan as low as possible. Like a Victorian inventor, Proctor has a passion for mechanical or moving parts in furniture and tried to make each of the pieces foldable, stackable or able to be easily flat-packed. After much experimentation, he created a range of glossy white baby furniture with a futuristic yet retro edge: think *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Proctor then worked out the cheapest way to get the finished pieces to Milan.

"I ended up taking my products as luggage on the plane, without paying excess," he says. "I had to use all the tricks in the book including flying via the United States because I could take more baggage. I only took a minimum of clothes — and only the shoes I wore — to keep the weight down. In the end, I just freighted the

Captions



“XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.”

stand's cardboard wall.

"I stayed at a one-star hotel and took a trolley so that I hand-carried all my products across Milan to the fair using the metro."

In the rarefied atmosphere of haute design, where sculptural chairs you can't sit on and giant vases with no space for flowers are the norm, answering the prosaic needs of children is something out of the ordinary.

Salone Satellite's long corridors are filled with hundreds of designers from around the world showing surreal experimental prototypes. But the biggest crowd was scrambling to see Proctor's collapsible pram, highchair, clothes-horse and change table.

"It was mad," he says. "I would show the products one after the other, sit down for five seconds, then do it all again. This went on pretty constantly from 10am until 7pm."

What Proctor didn't know was that among the crowd were the judges for Salone Satellite's prestigious design report award for the year's best stand. The 5000 euros

(\$8280) prize is awarded by a jury including Giulio Cappellini, Tomoko Azumi and funded by companies such as Thonet and Vitra.

The jury unanimously named Proctor the winner and, as a result of the prize, he was able to meet the heads of other design companies. Scandinavian, Japanese and Italian firms have expressed interest in producing his work.

"In a way, the disadvantages of coming from Australia became advantages because the products were born out of the difficulty of coming from a faraway land," Proctor says. "One of the reasons for creating the foldable children's products was that they would be smaller and lighter, making them easier to get over to Milan."

"In the end, these things became the point of differentiation for what I showed and helped to win the prize."

Australia's consul general and senior trade commissioner in Milan, Tim Gauci, visited the Australians exhibiting at the fair and at the Fuori Salone events held around the city centre. He believes Australian designers should consider exporting their work both for cultural and economic reasons.

"I do think it is necessary for Australian designers to come over here," he says. "Although we have a great level of respect and pride for our own products and design, Australia has only 20 million people. In order for some designers to make a good living, they need to be in the global marketplace. Young Australian designers may feel intimidated by this market, especially Milan, but the quality of work I've seen is very high. It is just having the courage to come over here and show what you can do."

An Australian designer doing just that, in the next aisle to Stephen Proctor, was Kent Gration. For his debut at Salone Satellite, Gration designed a dramatic stand swathed in black to display his range of bamboo furniture. Gration was working in the Bahamas at a

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shark laboratory at the Bimini biological field station when he found out he had to send in his final submissions to enter Salone Satellite.

"I was there with a 26K speed dial-up, trying to email images and applications and wiring funds to Milan," says Gration.

"I had researched the shark lab as part of my masters in product design at Griffith University, looking at electronic alternatives to shark nets in Queensland, and they asked if I wanted to volunteer for a month."

It was a strange start to his journey to exhibit in Salone Satellite. The Melbourne designer, now based in Brisbane, had first been to Milan three years ago to visit design firms, but had found it difficult to organise meetings with the larger companies.

"I came initially to approach design companies and arrange meetings," Gration says. "I thought at the time it may financially be more effective and easier to approach them individually. Whereas I now think, to be taken seriously as a young designer here, you need to exhibit at Salone Satellite."

Gration originally studied and worked as a graphic designer, but loved designing furniture. He decided to go back to university to learn more about product design and won an award for academic excellence.

"I moved into furniture design because it is more tactile and I think in three dimensions," Gration says. "I like the longevity of furniture, whereas graphic design is fairly ephemeral."

It was while he was working on his prototype designs for Salone Satellite that Gration discovered the aesthetic and ecologically sustainable qualities of bamboo. He also wanted to change bamboo furniture's old-fashioned connotations of verandas and *Gilligan's Island*.

His pieces are clean-lined and contemporary, but make the most of bamboo's golden colour and its natural notches and grains.

"Bamboo is a beautiful product," he says. "I think there is a real need to get back to the craft of furniture made with natural materials and the human touch. I wanted to do something using a sustainable resource and move away from the plastics and synthetics dominating current furniture design."

THE ITALIAN JOBS

Being based in Melbourne has not stopped Ross Didier from attracting the attention of Europe's top furniture design companies, writes Jeanne-Marie Cilento.

In the days following the Milan fair, Melbourne designer Ross Didier was in a hotel room in Venice preparing his design portfolio and fixing product presentations before visiting furniture factories in northern Italy.

"Venice is a fascinating city but probably not the best destination to find a hardware shop selling spray paint and sandpaper," says the designer.

Didier has exhibited new concepts at Milan's Salone Satellite for the past two years. He sold his home to afford to prototype and showcase his designs for the first show. But British company Allermuir picked up his stylish sofa, Obelisk, and it was being manufactured six months later.

This year he returned to Milan to launch a chair produced by Tonon. The Italian company is also developing another furniture range designed by Didier that will be ready for production before the end of the year.

"In the first year I exhibited at Milan I was lucky to have a choice of design concepts that were interesting to a number of serious manufacturers," Didier says. "Since that first year they have continued to contact me with specific design briefs. I have learnt that European companies are very specific with filling their product collections, so timing can be crucial."

Tonon first visited Didier's stand in Milan in 2005 and the designer says they were very direct in expressing their interest in his chair design. "They had seen an image of the chair prototype in a magazine editorial before the show and purchased the piece from the stand," Didier says.

But it was five months before they contacted the designer about armchairs to match. As there wasn't much further communication except for several emails, Didier thought Tonon were not interested in the project. They then sent the designer images of the finished product designs.

"It has been a most unusual business experience," Didier says.



"It has taken more than two years for Tonon to resolve the chair designs. But I don't think any pressure to quicken the pace would have helped, so I am now more prepared for the next design projects with Italian companies."

In Australia, Didier designs new concepts but also develops and organises the manufacture of wholesale products sold nationally.

His overseas achievements have also helped his career here. Richard Munao, managing director of Corporate Culture, saw the "Connected" table at the Milan

fair in 2005 and it is now manufactured by the company in Australia along with four of Didier's other projects.

Didier says he hasn't found being based in Australia a problem for European design firms. "If companies like a design, then efforts are made to complete the process," he says. "Phone calls are planned to be made at either the start or end of days and samples are posted. I really think the same issues apply to designers wherever they are in the world. The next suburb can seem a long way away if you're not getting answers."