

20
minutes
with...

Ben Rawlinson

Ben Rawlinson is a maker with a realistic approach to producing beautiful, modern furniture



Ben Rawlinson's furniture features flowing curves that produce subtle highlights and shapes that encourage tactile interaction. Although he's a relative newcomer to the furniture making business, there's nothing amateur about his work, which displays careful craftsmanship and consideration of fine detail.

F&C: What are you working on at the moment?

Ben Rawlinson: I'm working on a small chest in padauk (*Pterocarpus dalbergioides*) commissioned by some friends who have just married. It's an extension of a jewellery box really but with all the trimmings. On the small but detailed projects where one small

slip can be really costly, you have to focus really hard.

F&C: Why did you become a furniture maker?

BR: I was getting the creative urge but wasn't in a position to let it all out, so I decided to retrain in furniture making. The variety and natural beauty of wood is quite astonishing really.

F&C: What inspires you?

BR: This is tricky because I don't think I'm directly influenced into thinking 'that pattern in the sand looks nice' then making a piece of furniture based on it. I'm sure lots of images start to come from the subconscious at the design stage, all based on things I've seen or experienced at some point no doubt, but I couldn't pin it down to anything that specific.

F&C: If your furniture were music, what kind of music would it be?

BR: That's a pretty deep question! I used to DJ quite a bit and have a passion for the expressive nature of hip-hop which is very personal, much like the individual styles of designer/makers.

F&C: What do you admire in the craft at the moment?

BR: I always admire pieces and makers that make me feel like an absolute beginner. When you see a Joseph Walsh or Rupert Williamson that blows your head off it keeps your ego in check whilst at the same time motivating you.

F&C: Who has been your greatest mentor/role model?

BR: Simon Yates whose workshop I rent space in has been very supportive and encouraging about my ideas and I've also learnt a lot from him about how to deal with people on a business level.

F&C: What comes first, design or technique?

BR: Sometimes design comes first and the work develops to provide a solution, but at other times the experiments and trials of technique lead to something exciting. Inevitably these two must work together no matter where the starting point is.



The 'Warp' table

F&C: Are we too obsessed with outdated modes of work?

BR: No I don't think so, but it's important to embrace new tools and technology because it gives you much more scope for designing and making different types of furniture. It's great to cut traditional dovetails and joints and use solid timber if the money is there, but there's plenty of jobs where you need to adapt to make it pay. I learnt how to draw up rods by hand and that's useful because it can sometimes be essential, but I invariably draw and visualise with CAD because I've been using it a long time and find it faster now.

F&C: How or where do you exhibit your work?

BR: I try and do three or four shows a year to show speculative work and smaller items that people can buy on the spot. It's expensive, but it gets the work in front of a large audience where they can get hands-on and appreciate the quality. Having professional photographs on the website is also an absolute must.

F&C: How comfortable are you with working to someone else's design?

BR: I have made pieces for other people and it can be very satisfying, especially if they are open minded about the work and how it progresses. I've also been in the room when the client has seen it for the first time and not been given any credit and that's not so nice. It's a different kind of pressure and never as absorbing as working up a new piece of your own when the hours disappear in seconds and your heart is really in it.

F&C: What's your creative process like?

BR: It's very simple really. Ideas can come at any time and when one bites, I don't hang around. Bouncing ideas off someone you trust can help, but I'm largely self-directed. Once the making starts it just takes over until I come out the other end bleary eyed and happy.

F&C: Do you consider yourself an artist or a craftsman?

BR: It's very difficult to label yourself like that. Anyone who designs and makes the work themselves has to have elements of both, plus business sense to succeed.

F&C: What's the practical process you undergo when moving through the stages of a project?

BR: On a commission it's a case of pinning down a final design quite early through presentation and perhaps slight adjustment to initial ideas. I think I'm quite organised in drawing up cutting lists and a plan of making and quite good at sticking to that plan. I still tend to overestimate timing slightly, but maybe that means I'm getting faster at making? For speculative work, it's more a case of feeling the right path with more scope for experimentation and risk. I'm not a great fan of lengthy finishing processes and really have to force myself to stay focused at the end if necessary.

F&C: Do you think furniture making is in danger of disappearing?

BR: Absolutely not! It's difficult yes, but I think it's one of most respected crafts out there at the moment, especially in the UK and lots of people are willing to train.

F&C: What advice would you give to someone starting out?

BR: I'm only really starting out myself, but the thing I'm finding most important is that being flexible in terms of what you make doesn't mean you have to stray from your prices, goals or standards. Times are tough and if you work for yourself then you have to promote yourself like hell and grab jobs when they come up, that way you will have the time to make the speculative pieces and still be in



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEN RAWLINSON

The 'Princess Sarah' desk and stool revealing the careful detail within

business when those lovely bespoke commissions come along.

F&C: What irritates you about the industry?

BR: People who say they will contact you and then don't! *F&C*

Contact

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The 'Helios' coffee table has featured in *F&C* before when the editor took a shine to it at Cheltenham's Celebration of Craftsmanship and Design