

Adrian Potter: Artist Profile

Like many practising artists, Adrian Potter wears many hats. While he identifies himself primarily as a furniture designer and maker, he is, or has been, highly active as a product designer, public/ community artist, teacher and even musician. This diversity of practice is perhaps not uncommon, but what makes Potter's career so remarkable is his prolific output across all these areas...an output that, it must be noted, is never at the expense of the meticulous craft and consideration that typifies his objects. Whether he is producing commissions, exhibition pieces or ambitious public artworks in collaboration with other artists, Potter's distinctive personal aesthetic is apparent: elegant, understated and highly crafted, bearing a coolness and restraint that belies a deeply passionate thinker and maker.

Curiously, it was Potter's early musical ambitions that brought him to his career as a designer-maker. While studying mechanical engineering, Potter played in a band, which in turn led him to making guitars from exotic timbers. This experience was the tipping point for Potter, as he realised that it was ultimately less the object of the guitar and more the raw materiality of the wood itself that spoke to him. Putting his music and engineering career on hold, Potter studied woodwork and design at the Canberra School of Art and after graduating in 1994 began to pursue his new calling with vigour and verve.

Currently Potter works from his home studio in suburban Adelaide, shared with partner and frequent collaborator, Bridgette Minuzzo. Visiting Potter in his studio, one is struck by the quality of the space: dense, lived in and charged with activity. The place is packed full of work at various stages of development: a guitar under construction, Potter's own exquisite portfolio box being repaired after a nasty fall from a great height and, in particular, the private commissions that occupy so much of his time. While these commissions admittedly eat time away from more personal projects, the artist's voice rings true in each and every piece of furniture.

Some of Potter's most intriguing commission pieces are those with a specific relationship to a particular site. Notable examples include his liturgical furniture for the Mary Mackillop Chapel in Adelaide (for which he received a commendation in the 2005 South Australian Design Awards) and the Annunciation Church in Hectorville. In both instances Potter's furniture makes quiet and respectful reference to the architectural spaces it inhabits. In the case of the Mackillop Chapel, the arched ceiling provides a motif that echoes throughout each of the furnishings, while in the Annunciation Church, Potter's altar, chairs, font and lectern all taper upward, making a formal allusion to a church spire and seemingly reaching skyward like the spire itself. Where Potter's exhibition pieces are often purposefully layered with meaning and reference, needing to be unpacked by the viewer, these pieces are pared back to the most elemental of forms, inviting quiet contemplation.

The other important strand of Potter's commission work is his role as a public artist, designing and creating artworks for parks, reserves and other public spaces. Such collaborative projects further reveal the artist's keen understanding of space and give license for him to indulge his more playful side. A striking example is the Tao Dan reserve in Ferryden Park on which Potter and Minuzzo were principal artists, working in collaboration with landscape architects and the local Vietnamese

community. This project fluidly melded sculptural elements, play spaces and the more pragmatic considerations of a public space into an eccentric and dream-like environment.

This agile melding of a range of concerns is also apparent in the artist's exhibition work. Potter is that rare kind of maker who remains grounded and thoroughly versed in the tradition he has emerged from while simultaneously being attuned to the possibilities offered by contemporary visual art and craft practice. This sensibility is most clearly in evidence in the body of work brought together for the exhibition *Water* (exhibited at Adelaide's Jam Factory in 2005 and later at CraftVictoria in 2006). In this remarkable body of work, Potter's furniture becomes the vehicle for communicating complex ideas about Australians' equally complex relationship to that most basic, life-giving element. It must be stressed that Potter's social and ecological concerns are not merely an adjunct to his furniture, tacked on or imposed by means of a supporting essay, but are rather inherently bound up in the materiality and methodology of the work itself. In a number of pieces Potter collides the woodworking traditions with additional ingredients such as digital sampling technology, photographic imagery and kinetic elements.

'A Certain Maritime Affair' is a sombre and elegiac piece that initially lures the viewer in with its interactivity and allusion to fairground amusement. Atop a chest of drawers a model ship floats on a timber sea. Turning a handle on the side of the chest causes the sea to undulate, almost hypnotically. The ship is in fact an amalgam of Captain Cook's Endeavour and the SIEV X, the work a lament for those that lost their lives attempting to travel to this country. 'Parched' is another somewhat paradoxical work, evoking a potentially ambivalent response from the viewer. This elegant drinks cabinet bears a stark image of cracked earth, reminding us that while quenching our own thirst is a relatively straightforward matter, this is not the case for our drought-stricken earth. In Potter's artist statement from the exhibition he puts it to us in a characteristically forthright manner: "our land could do with a good long drink". In 'The Real Gordon Dam' Potter commemorates the fight to stop the building of the Gordon Dam, identifying it as a turning point for non-Indigenous Australians and their relationship to the land. Even Potter's musical inclinations show up in 'Water Music', the most whimsical piece of the show. Opening the doors to this simple cabinet triggers a digital sampler which plays back sounds of rain storms, waves and even treats us to a few bars of 'Singing in the Rain'.

In *Water* Potter's furniture operates not only as an object, but also as a site: a landscape or microcosm unto itself, at the mercy of natural forces and the actions of those that inhabit it.

More recently, Potter has made an interesting shift away from functional (though nonetheless poetic) objects to a largely formal investigation of object and surface. In 2006 Potter held an exhibition simply titled *Decoration*, in conjunction with Bridgette Minuzzo and under the auspices of the *Inside SAM's Place* project. *Inside SAM's Place* is an on-going collaboration between Craftsouth and the South Australian Museum in which artists and craftspeople make works in response to some aspect of the Museum's collection, which are in turn exhibited in the Museum itself. Potter and Minuzzo chose to examine the role of decoration in both the

human and animal kingdoms. Potter regards decoration as underestimated consideration for visual artists and in this project he treats it not as a secondary, ornamental concern, but as a serious formal investigation. Indeed, in this suite of objects, decoration is both the form and content of the work. Within this fairly broad premise, Potter's research eventually led him to the Australian Artefacts and Pacific Cultures collection, from which he drew a number of objects as his primary source material. To focus this potentially expansive project even further, Potter chose an essential and elemental vehicle for his exploration of decoration and adornment: a simple wooden egg-like form. Here he makes a deliberate and considered reference to various egg-decorating traditions throughout history, from the humble domesticity of a hand-painted Easter egg to the opulent Faberge eggs of the Russian court. Potter also found the shape and form of the egg echoed in many of his source objects, from a decorated shell to the head of a ceremonial club. The artist then drew from these objects a vocabulary of colour, texture and pattern and transposed them onto his egg forms. When exhibited together with the objects that inspired them, Potter's pieces set up a compelling dialogue between contemporary practice and its traditional antecedents.

British sculptor Tony Cragg has often argued for a redefinition of the term 'materialist', shifting its meaning from one who values possessions as a form of wealth to one who has an intellectual or emotional investment in materials and their poetic and communicative possibilities...one who learns the language of the matter they work with and who enters into a kind of conversation with it. Adrian Potter is surely such a 'materialist'...an artist who finds absolute joy in the inherent properties and potential of his chosen materials and whose practice communicates this delight to the world around him.

Roy Ananda