

Adrian Potter, Furniture Designer-Maker, Woodworker, Conceptual Artist

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Born in Melbourne in 1968, Adrian Potter is a conceptual artist and product designer who makes work that most often happens to take the form of furniture. Potter is also recognized for his public art, examples of which are to be seen in and around Adelaide. Adrian Potter works in the borderlands of craft, design, sculpture and conceptual art, creating work that defies rigid categorization. This raises questions about what furniture - and works of art - can be.

A meticulous craftsman, with a background in mechanical engineering, Potter began making furniture after producing a series of guitars early in his career (1988-1990). Based on the elegant geometry of vintage harp guitars, these musical instruments are precursors of Potter's later, more ambitious woodwork and furniture. In his more recent work he seems to be conducting a dialogue between form, function and concept.

While making guitars Potter happened upon a book entitled *A Cabinet Maker's Notebook*, by James Krenov. This book, which posited the idea that fine craft could be a way of life, influenced Potter to the extent that he turned his back on mechanical engineering as a career. "*Feeling like an imposter as an engineer*", reveals Potter, "*and loving working with my hands*

as I do, coming across Krenov's book was for me the right thing at the right time".

This defining moment led, indirectly, to Adrian Potter's studies at the Canberra School of Art Wood Workshop (1993-94), under the late George Ingham, who was to become his most important mentor. Ingham's successor, Rodney Hayward, who still runs the Wood Workshop at the Canberra School of Art, has also influenced and supported Potter's career path in myriad ways.

Adrian Potter is a courageous thinker. This is borne out in the furniture that he makes. While not narrowly politically affiliated, Potter's thinking has been permeated by certain major paradigm shifts that have occurred in the collective Australian psyche during his lifetime. One of these shifts is that Australians now "*value the Australian landscape for its own sake over and above economic or land development*". In turn, these profound, positive social changes (as Potter sees them) exert a very real influence on the furniture that he is making today, in terms of the thought processes and ideas that inform his work, and its material presence. In many respects Potter's furniture reflects the tempo of our times.

An example of this is his concern about Australia's dire and unprecedentedly dangerous water situation, which plays itself out in the work he makes. To date Adrian Potter has held four solo exhibitions entitled *Water* (JamFactory, Adelaide, 2005; Craft Victoria, 2006; Mildura Arts Centre, Victoria, 2007; and Bungendore Wood Works NSW 2007). These exhibitions represent the apogee of his career thus far. Despite the grim state of our waterways and

experts' prognostications of a worsening of this state of affairs, Potter's water-themed furniture is not only aesthetically beautiful and finely crafted in terms of its formal properties, but it is also ingenious and often witty too. *Water Music* (2005), a three-door cabinet from which joyous music issues forth the moment that one of its doors is opened, is an effervescent work of considerable originality. The woods used in its making include Queensland Maple, PNG Rosewood, Blackwood, King Billy Pine and She Teak.

A chest of drawers, *The Real Gordon Dam*, makes tongue in cheek reference to the tall, double curvature arch Tasmanian dam of the same name that drowned Lake Pedder and destroyed the flow of the Gordon River, basically by impounding it. At one level, by means of his skilful use of colour-contrasting woods, Potter's *The Real Gordon Dam* shows the environmental desecration wrought upon this beautiful, pristine Tasmanian river- and waterscape. At the conceptual level Potter was drawn to this subject matter because it marked the huge shift in collective Australian consciousness with respect to the environment. As previously discussed, such broad social re-valuing of dominant discursive régimes is a source of abiding fascination and creative energy for this artist. Ultimately the environmental vandalism exemplified by the building of the Gordon Dam, notwithstanding the dam's structural magnificence – which the engineer in Potter readily appreciates - led to a change of heart on the part of many Australians *vis-à-vis* the environment. There is now much greater social realization of the finite nature of our environmental resources.

Parched (2005), a drinks cabinet made from European Beech, Flame Mahogany, Celery Top Pine and Raw Silk Granite, the exterior front

cupboards of which have been cut to suggest the dry, cracked, pockmarked surface of Australia's drought-stricken interior, is both poignant and droll. It is also a masterpiece of design. As the French writer and director Sacha Guitry once quipped, "*You can pretend to be serious; you can't pretend to be witty*". In *Parched*, Potter accomplishes both. No pretending.

Another wonderful work that relates to the overarching theme of water is Potter's chest of drawers entitled *A Certain Maritime Affair* (2005). Alluding to the notorious 'Children Overboard' affair, Potter's choice of wood is ironic – the work has been fashioned, in part, from Cedar of Lebanon. Potter's fascinatingly left-of-field *Water: Walk with Me*, also a chest of drawers, is another complex water-themed work that also encodes his enigmatic approach to *organized* religion, rather than to religion, ethics, morality and alternative worldviews *per se*. ~~To~~ Towards the latter ~~these~~ he is respectful and sympathetic.

Water: Walk with Me is significant in terms of Adrian Potter's *œuvre* because it represents a point of connection with the stunning ecclesiastical furnishings that Potter was commissioned to design and make for various liturgical settings. These include a church altar, a church lectern, church chairs, and tables, and other sanctuary furniture made for the interiors of the Annunciation Church at Hectorville in 1999 and more recently, in ~~(2005,)~~ for Adelaide's Mary McKillop Chapel.

In addition, over the years Adrian Potter has been commissioned to make numerous items of secular furniture, especially tables and chairs. For more than five years now he has been exploring and experimenting with

innovative ways of minimizing or entirely eliminating the use of time consuming traditional wood joints in chairs and other furniture. His ostensible success in this continuing enterprise lends the works a clean, streamlined appearance and also facilitates the assemblage process.

With respect to public art, Potter has received commissions to make, *inter alia*, several bridges including the Vine Bridge at Modbury Civic Park. As he notes, it is no coincidence that he has “...built “art” bridges and also [has]...an engineering degree, although in no way was I involved with the engineering calculations for the bridges’ structure”. The Vine Bridge was a collaborative work between Potter, Martin Corbin and Lynne Elzinga-Henry.

In 2004 Adrian Potter created the striking Tao Dan Gates for the Vietnamese community at the Tao Dan Reserve located in the Westwood housing development in the outer Adelaide suburb of Ferryden Park. The latter was a collaborative work with his ceramist wife Bridgette Minuzzo, with whom he has also worked on other collaborative projects.

2009 sees a number of exhibitions, both solo and group, in the planning stage. Included among these is a group show, *Resource – Re-Source*, to be held at the JamFactory in which Potter will participate. A, ~~and an~~ exhibition of works by Alumni at the ANU Art Gallery in Canberra is also scheduled for later in 2009.

Future plans include further exploration of Potter’s interest in Polynesian and Pacific Islander people’s tattooing practices. The transliteration of these

decorative practices to the medium of furniture, without appropriation, present significant but not insuperable challenges, as Potter's earlier work demonstrates. His beautiful egg-shaped carving *Moko*, "was inspired" Potter writes, "by Maori facial tattoos that were traditionally carved into the skin". Other project ideas for projects that Potter aims to follow up soon include work that makes reference to weaponry and armoury, to the universal themes of erotica, sex and death, and to outlaws, including the iconic Ned Kelly.

To conclude, Adrian Potter is low-key and modest in his approach to his furniture making and to his artistic practice generally. This should not blind us to the fact that the work he makes, the thrust of his social and environmental concerns, and ~~the~~ the underlying philosophy informing these, ~~informing these~~ stand for something important, inspiring and full of possibilities.

Adrian Potter's work can be viewed by going to the following websites:

Bungendore WoodWorks:

<http://www.bwoodworks.com.au/>

One Small Room:

<http://www.onesmallroom.com.au/home.html>

More articles about his work can be accessed at:

<http://www.craftculture.org/Review/finch7.htm>

http://www.craftaustralia.org.au/library/review.voice_of_the_soul

For further information about commissioning work from this highly skilled, well-informed and committed object maker, contact Adrian Potter direct on

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