

LIBERTÉ, MODERNITÉ, SENSUALITÉ

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Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec have made a career out of questioning, provoking and reinventing various genres, chalking up an enviable list of clients and trophies, and insisting on the freedom to work on exactly what pleases them. When dream commissions manifest themselves so easily, what drives and inspires this unique design duo?



They are the heroes of office furniture design, who don't like offices – or 'office' furniture. They are designers who 'don't care about design'. They are multiple award-winners who don't appear to believe in awards. 'Bad designers also get awards,' says Ronan Bourouillec, in an offhand – possibly mischievous – aside, on the day that he and his brother are being feted by the UK press and their peers as recipients of the 2014 London Design Festival's Panerai Medal, the first time it has been awarded to a non-UK designer, never mind a pair of them. His comment is certainly not intended to be arrogant or ungrateful; rather, it seems to come from a complete lack of interest in the hype attached to being an 'award-winning' designer.

And yet, it's probably this very freedom from attachment to the trappings of success in such a competitive market – the lack of craving for those prestige brand endorsements from the likes of Vitra, Magis, Flos, Cappellini – that has the same brands falling over themselves to work with this pair. That and their unquestionable talent for reinterpreting and reinventing the mundane objects of everyday life as something more essential, more elegant, more 'humane'. French architecture magazines drool over their 'sensual modernity'. Ben Evans, director of the London Design Festival and chair of the medal's judging panel, says: 'In a relatively short period of time they have built up an incredibly important body of work... there is a certain morality in their work. They won't compromise on things that are important to them.'

When you put this idea to the brothers in person – the idea of morality in design – it elicits two very different responses. Erwan, the younger of the two by five years (dark-haired, bookish, bearded), begins a pragmatic meditation on the dilemmas of working with companies 'whose way of living is producing things... and of course we always face the question whether we should produce more'. But no sooner are the words out of his mouth than Ronan (fair-haired, vivid blue eyes that flare with humour or – in this case – irritation) interrupts, declaring: 'I don't care about design. Design for me is a bad word, especially used outside of England or English-speaking countries. The question for me is about objects. There is a lot of work to make things more interesting, more beautiful, in a good way. I don't speak just about the weight, the cover; for me it's about the entire picture – who did it, for which institution? That's the big question and it's an extremely complex question.'

Erwan steps in to put his sibling's outburst into context. He explains that in France, 'design' has become a label that is tagged on gratuitously – and meaninglessly – to objects that 'are colourful, joyful, a little bit childish'. Ronan interrupts: 'In France it has come to be an adjective: a "design chair", a "design object", which is the most idiotic thing you can imagine. A "design chair" is the most terrible one, in plastic, with funny colours and sold in a museum shop.'

You can see why the Bourouillecs apparently 'never give

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1 (previous page) – The Bourouillec brothers, Ronan (left) and Erwan (right) who, not normally interviewed together, made an exception for Blueprint

2 – Workbay, for one of the Bourouillecs' top-flight clients, Vitra (2013)

3 (opposite page) – Textile Field, a 30m-long installation using Kvadrat fabric at the V&A Raphael Gallery for the 2011 London Design Festival

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interviews together' – though they have made a rare exception for Blueprint. 'We always disagree,' says Ronan. But this verbal sparring and debate is probably one of the reasons why their partnership is so successful: their designs, when they emerge, have been through such a rigorous process of mutual critiquing that there isn't a line, a detail or an element out of place. 'I'm not often satisfied,' Ronan recently told the New York Times. 'We refine and refine and refine.' The degree of brutal honesty – and perhaps a smidgen of rivalry – shared only between siblings clearly fuels that working process.

But it's not a stormy relationship. They enjoy the sparring, as part of the collaborative process. They are not the kind of designers who deliver their products, like manna from the gods, on a gilded platter to their manufacturer patrons and walk away. Ronan says they speak to their colleagues at Vitra every day. Cornel Windlin, the graphic designer who has worked with the brothers for most of the past decade on various projects including beautiful books, such as the captivating 2012 tome Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec: Drawing, says: 'They still speak softly, if at all, and they are as alert, astute and impeccably courteous as ever, and (have) kept their sharp sense of humour. And they still draw – relentlessly, all the time.'

The Bouroullecs don't take detailed briefings. 'Our way is to collect a lot of information,' Ronan recently told an interviewer for Vitra's blog, 'to conduct interviews and to analyse. We function best in tasks where we don't know a lot. We simply start out naively,

which could be good for the situation.' They specialise in not specialising – likening themselves to actors who never repeat a role, but offer insights in different contexts. 'Specialised knowledge is the enemy of passion,' Ronan adds.

For inspiration, Erwan says he reads – a lot: 'Novels are my way of learning about people.' Meanwhile, Ronan declares, 'I am unable to read.' His office is stuffed with books, but they are visual inspiration rather than verbal, for him – many are in Japanese or German, 'two languages that I don't speak,' he says. But he has a photographic memory, and he draws, listening to the radio – France Culture in particular (the equivalent of BBC Radio 4). The drawing is the thing, however: 'Drawing for me is like knitting.'

The studio in Belleville, Paris, where they work with their team of between six and eight colleagues, sounds slightly chaotic. Just 350 sq m, it has a cellar and two floors, with large north-facing windows. The ground floor is where desks, computers, papers and glue are situated. Each brother has his own office. The first floor has a studio/gallery space for mock-ups and visualisations, plus admin. The cellar is where all the woodworking machines and tools are, where prototypes are worked on, and where Erwan keeps his many books – mostly novels and historical essays.

Multiple projects are worked on at the same time. Erwan prefers a workplace filled with machines and tools so that he can create models and prototypes. His dream office would be a factory-sized workshop. Ronan, on the other hand, says he needs



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a horizon, a free perspective. This he gets from his small house in Brittany, overlooking the coast.

The theme that underpins their work is comfort – not the artful arrangement of luxurious shapes and fabrics to seduce the eyes and flatter the ego. They are more interested in investigating and then facilitating how the body wants to be in the world. Their approach is phenomenological as much as aesthetic (phenomenology being a form of scientific or philosophical enquiry based on the multisensory, in-the-moment experience from the point of view of a particular subject, favoured by such philosophers as Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty). Erwan is fascinated with the way our wi-fi-enabled interactions with technology have created a different set of needs for our bodies. 'I don't know much about peoples' comportment but I understand a lot about the body, what the body wants, and I feel we are in a strange time because with this mobile technology, you have the ability to transport your whole life with you. You have more and more need to settle somewhere. We have started to develop quite a lot of things that say "settle here", for a short or a longer period. Most of the time we do it by a language that is speaking to the body, drawing them to certain positions, certain surroundings.'

On a magnificent scale, this is what their London Design Festival installation at the V&A in 2011 achieved: Textile Field was a 30m-long platform in the museum's Raphael Court, upholstered in thick Kvadrat fabric that echoed in its pixelated, panelled colour

scheme the blues and creamy whites of the gallery's Raphael cartoons. Occupying almost the entire floor area of the room, its sides were tilted, like a gently cupped hand, inviting you to kick off your shoes and lie back, dreaming yourself into the mythical scenery or just enjoying the ambience, bringing a sense of relaxation and playfulness into what is one of the V&A's most severe and gloomy spaces.

The installation, says Erwan, was about 'bringing a surface that was just really easy for people to more or less do what they want with, in a different way. [It was saying] even though you are in a museum you don't have to behave in a way that you feel you have to. Museums create a certain kind of moral authority that is not always the very best way to be educational. Because sometimes when you establish a state of moral authority, people can escape the content. We were not sure that it would work in the V&A, but it did, strongly. Here what did work especially well was [that] the surface was for me collective. It was not a premium, private thing. It was not a kind of lounge which you can only access with a card. I have incredibly good memories of it.'

Ronan, too, enjoyed being able to expand their remit from the creation of expensive, often limited-edition objects for the privileged to devising an experience for many. He says: 'I recently saw a documentary about [sculptor] Niki de St Phalle, and she was talking about why she worked on the large scale she does and she said she didn't want to do small pieces that only one person could



4 – The Album exhibition, presented at the Vitra Design Museum Gallery, Weil am Rhein, in 2012. Its main focus was on the Bouroullecs' drawings

5 – From Bivouac, the brothers' 2012/13 exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago





own or look at. If you are in this discipline you normally address your work to a certain social group... I'm interested in the discipline not for niche people, but for larger situations.' Fortunately, shortly after the Textile Field experience, the brothers were given another opportunity to bring their design sensibility to the service of the masses: a commission from Hay to design all the furniture – desks, chairs, tables – for a new University of Copenhagen building.

The Bouroullecs are not short of great clients. Their unique approach has been celebrated in three books and nearly a dozen dedicated exhibitions, including at the Design Museum (in 2002, just five years after their first pieces appeared at the Salon du Meuble in Paris, bringing them to the attention of Giulio Cappellini, their first big client), Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art (2004), the Victoria & Albert Museum (2011), and most recently, in a richly textured, immersive show at Paris' Musée des Arts Décoratifs (2013). They have ongoing relationships with the most prestigious brands in contemporary design, mostly medium-sized or small – Flos, Iittala, Hay, Kvadrat, Established & Sons, Vitra, Magis, Cappellini, Issey Miyake, Ligne Roset, Axor, Mutina – working across a wide range of design disciplines, and yet retain an experimental, small studio environment. They turn down work if the proposition – or the ethos behind it – is not interesting to them.

Many of their strongest relationships are with north European companies. It's as if the lyricism, sensuality and

philosophical rigour of their French cultural DNA combines to make a very special kind of signature when it meets the collectivism and streamlined functionality that is such a strong marker of Nordic design. There is a fascinating, if a little gushing, interview in Vitra's online blog (Wellworkingnews, posted January 10, 2014) which declares there are two ages of office furniture: 'before and after Bouroullec'. Here, Erwan Bouroullec makes the case for teamwork over strict hierarchies. 'I feel that the idea that everything belongs to everyone and that as a team you can achieve more is making progress and is significantly more common in northern Europe, Switzerland and Germany than in southern Europe. As always, the pre-revolutionary monarchy especially exists in French companies. In Japan there is an extreme sense of hierarchy and order.' He hopes that the French and the Japanese will eventually see the light and adopt more of a teamwork model. Regardless of territory, however, Bouroullec says they have the same approach – that of maximising flexibility, adaptability and, ultimately, enjoyability. 'For example, our Joyn Table for Vitra is not a worktable; rather, it's first and foremost a table. We leave the paper as blank as possible... so that it offers the user maximum possibilities.'

Being outsiders in the team gives them an important role, to provoke, to question, to reinvent. In an era where vast, open-plan offices of battery-farmed executives have become the norm, who else would have thought of sticking a high-backed sofa into the

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6 (previous page) – Ruutu for Iittala, the Finnish glass maker that Ronan Bouroullec loves for its heritage, craftsmanship and egalitarian appeal

7 & 8 – Alcove sofa for Vitra, offering both comfort and semi-seclusion, in an era where vast open-plan offices have become the norm

9 – Joyn, a workstation for Vitra. 'It's not a worktable, rather first and foremost, it's a table. We leave the paper as blank as possible,' says Erwan

scenario as a means of offering both comfort and semi-seclusion (as with their Alcove sofa for Vitra).

But good ideas can be abused – both copied, as the Alcove sofa has been, many times over, and used in ways that the designers hadn't originally envisaged. Ronan talks of Joyn, the ultimate bench desk they designed for Vitra, as a table where people could come together. He had envisaged this as being just one typology within a creative mixture of seating and table options, but now he sees offices filled with nothing but Joyn (or lookalike) bench desks, because that way companies can shoehorn more people into a space. 'Sadly, it makes me think of huge chicken farms,' he says.

The office itself has changed dramatically since they first started working with Vitra in 2002. Recent studies show that two-thirds of office workers are permanently mobile, connecting to work only via multiple wireless devices. The wirelessness of modern office technology has played beautifully into the hands of designers who don't like offices: more opportunity to create spaces that support people's different preferred modes. As Erwan has said before: 'We need a den, a room where we can feel safe and free. Even office nomads crave shelter where they can settle and relax.'

It is curious that they should have such affinity for those who are constantly on the move, as the brothers try to avoid travel if at all possible. Ronan has talked of creating a sort of 'firewall' around their workplace and themselves so they can do

'concentrated work'. They estimate that 70 per cent of their time is spent in their studio in Belleville, 20 per cent at home and only 10 per cent travelling or in meetings.

There is no specific set of goals they are looking to achieve – no new genres they're itching to break into (beyond Ronan's desire for more architectural commissions). Their commissions evolve through conversations, says Ronan, around how objects can 'generate an interesting atmosphere'. 'The beginning of a project starts with observation, sometimes linked to things we discover together (with our clients), or a product type... We have had this chance to be so successful that we decide each day what we do.'

What matters, he says, is the chemistry with their clients. He's particularly pleased with their recent project for Iittala, the Finnish glassmaker that Ronan loves for its heritage and craftsmanship but also for the egalitarian nature of its appeal – 'every Finnish taxi driver has their glasses'. The Bouroullecs' response, Ruutu, is a series of richly tinted, diamond-shaped vases, which look great singly but even more seductive when arranged together. The shape evolved to deliver the maximum intensity of colour individually, as well as the most beautiful spectrum of colours en masse – the hues layer over each other and blend like brushstrokes on a watercolour painting: the power of the collective gesture over the individual. How very Bouroullec. ■

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