

Q-P



Summer 2022
Collecting Refreshed

Traditionally Modern
Design

Watches, Jewellery,
Art, Motoring,
Technology, Style



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Ronan Bouroullec:

Designs on Art



— The elder Bouroullec brother finds making art a therapeutic counterbalance to collaborative practice in the design studio



Interview Emma Moore,
Photography Thomas Chéné

Towards the end of last year, the fog of Covid restrictions lifted on London's Cork Street for the launch, at Galerie Kreo, of a collection of abstract artworks composed of glazed ceramic forms on anodised aluminium. The gallery, an outpost of the Parisian sanctum of design art, is more accustomed to showing pieces of functional sculpture – or furniture as some might call it. But in late 2021, it was a more conventional art gallery that greeted show-goers, its whitewashed walls neatly lined with the bas-reliefs of Ronan Bouroullec. 'Some people see landscapes,' says the artist of the sweeps and curves of

glazed clay with imperfect bevelled edges that submerge the forms into the metallic pool behind. "If you want to see something you can."

The chances are that if you know of Ronan Bouroullec, it is as one half of the Bouroullec brothers, a formidable duo of industrial designers at the heart of the Parisian design scene and among the elite of the global design community. The fraternal pair sign their work Erwan and Ronan Bouroullec and still, after more than 20 years designing together and aged 46 and 51 respectively, they work alongside each other daily in their eleven-strong studio in Paris's 10th arrondissement, striving to inject poetry into useful, essential design. There have been iconic chairs (Vegetal for Vitra) and lamps (Lighthouse for Established & Sons). There has been enduring tabletop pieces for Cappellini and Iittala and in 2015 their mould-breaking TV, The Serif, for Samsung.

Then there are the monumental endeavours such as the fountains of the Champs Elysées Rond Point, poetic architecture such as room interrupters *Algues* for Vitra and *Clouds* for Kvadrat, micro-architectures such as last year's riverfront folly, *Le Belvédère*, in the City of Rennes, and the design inside and out of the Pinault Collection at the Bourse de Commerce in Paris.

Launches during this year's Milan Design Week included three exquisite chairs crafted from wood for new Japanese brand Kyori, alongside a new lamp for Flos, a bronze sofa for Magis, and new ceramic vase

compositions for Japanese tile company Tajimi. The pair's aptitude for original, thoughtful design that feels timeless is inexhaustible, their output is phenomenal. Permanent collections have been penetrated, books have been published, retrospectives have racked up.

Ronan's name, however, is gaining renown in isolation – as a signature on pieces of art. His bas-relief work is just his latest form of artistic expression. A passion for drawing started young, when there was downtime to fill in his rural Breton childhood, and Erwan was a long five years behind. "The age gap was enormous then," he says. "My best friend was my ball. And I would draw." Art college steered him, and later his brother, towards product design, but the urge to draw has never left Ronan, and has even become an antidote to his design practice. "There are two different approaches," he spells out. "There is my work as a designer in the studio. Then there is something else which is not in the studio, which is something I do in the night, at the weekend, in Brittany... When I start drawing I have nothing in mind – there is nothing that I want to represent or achieve."

He talks of his personal work as an introspective, healing, mediative practice, that balances the frustrations that come from the slow march of the

studio's collaborative practice "I need to produce something everyday," he says. "Design is a long process with fact and weight and material. You need to find balance between them all. It's also a collective intelligence, because as a designer I am not a specialist, I work with specialists. I might work with a ceramic or woodworking specialist in Japan, for example. But it can be frustrating because between the idea and an object appearing, there's a lot of time round the table. With drawing, you can decide not to sleep and spend the night finishing it because you are totally in it; it's a sort of self-hypnotising situation."

It means that intentionally, his art materials are what comes to hand - paper discarded by the printers opposite the studio, whatever he pulls from his bag when on the train - the spontaneity also means there is no dedicated place in which to draw. "It's a way not to deal with pressure, not to have to deal with a certain result. It's a sort of escape without a goal.

A Love of Ceramic

The elder Bouroullec has an affinity with ceramic, whether it's manipulating it himself, working with artisans or with industrial machines. It stems from time spent in the southern French pottery town of Vaullaris, where Picasso developed his love of ceramic. It was 1997 and Ronan produced his first collection here - comprising tabletop assemblages. A few years ago and many tiles and vase designs later, the brothers were approached to help celebrate 150 years of the painter Matisse with some vases made in collaboration with Vitra. "I wanted it to be like a painting in 3D. So I started to cut the pieces intuitively," says Ronan. "It was the first time that I was physically in the process." The 2D shapes he cut and extruded combine with the cylindrical form of the vase.

It was the inception of his bas-reliefs. At some point, experimental pieces of ceramic found themselves next to some aluminium in the studio and the juxtaposition ignited a flame. "There was this almost primitive way of cutting ceramics with just a knife and movement and then this extremely sophisticated synthetic aluminium," he says. In contrast to his drawings, for which he can spend five minutes covering one millimetre of paper, there is a hiatus of three to four weeks between the moment he intuitively and crudely carves what he calls a 'repertoire of shapes' into slabs of clay and assigns them colours, and assembly. Once fired and glazed he plays around, marrying up pieces into final compositions.





Dream Project: La Bourse de Commerce

Last year the Studio took on the interior and exterior design of the Bourse de Commerce in Paris, a building restored by Tadao Ando, to house The Pinault Collection. Led by Ronan while Erwan's main focus remained on more technical projects, the project encompassed the furnishings of the public square outside, the restaurant, a spectacular bespoke chandelier made by Flos that descends the stairwell, alongside further lighting, seating, tables and textiles. Outside, three striking standards made from vast rippling swathes of a custom-designed fabric resembling liquid metal on 3m poles, announce the new museum. "The effect is so specific - this project was very complex and cost a fortune, but the little bit of floating fabric is the most photographed part," says Ronan.

It was Ronan-the-designer's dream project - free rein to collaborate with whomever he wished on pieces and details that would establish the museum's ambiance while withstanding the wear of thousands of visitors every day. This, he claims, brings the excitement that keeps him saying yes to design projects. "What is extraordinary in this discipline of a designer is you can work with the best craftsman one day and the next have to deal with a machine as big as the atelier of that craftsman. For me it's technique, a new colour, a new palette. It's about creating an atmosphere. It's complexity treated in a simple way."





On Instagram

Ronan has embraced Instagram, posting regularly to his 335,000 followers. It came, he says, just at the right time, giving him the chance to show both his design and art quite literally in the right light. "Sometimes I don't like how my work is photographed - I don't even recognise my work in certain contexts," he says. "My work has a certain delicacy, a certain type of light and I feel good when I can translate my point of view about something I have done. And then I don't care. I do not own my work and it means that when it's reproduced it can be seen in different contexts, and I like this. A good project is like a song; it exists by itself and then it's everywhere."

I start with a line and I don't know where it will go." Whether composed with Bic biro or paint, marker pen or graphite, the work is distinctive and consistent in style, and has little to do with the drawings he makes as part of his design output – which are readable impressions, sometimes in a setting, of his object design. His personal drawings are different. Swelling abstract volumes, made from tight-knit lines that ebb and flow and entwine.

The drawings were first brought to the public during a retrospective at the Centre Georges Pompidou and in the intervening years they have been exhibited more widely. Since his embrace of Instagram, there is also a constant feed of his work available to all. The bas-reliefs are more recent, born from the 2019 Matisse vase project for Vitra. Though they share a common material and colour palette with the Studio's output, and require a certain amount of planning and process, these pieces are no less intuitive than the drawings and are distinct from his design.

The difference between the two is not only in process and outcome, but in intention too. Ronan sees design as a democratic endeavour, and he is passionate about this aspect of disseminating beautiful usefulness. 'I am often asked to explain why I do what I do, and on this I am clear: I am interested in design because if you have got a good idea it is better that you share it, at the lowest price possible in the highest quantities possible, I like to find a service through design,' he states. His art, however, fits a different mould. He is in the privileged position of not really needing to sell the pieces he creates. He produces it compulsively, unstopably, therapeutically and it's in

part thanks to a friend who reasoned that there was no point in them living for eternity in a darkened store room, that we get to see them on gallery walls in London, Paris, Venice, and Milan.

As for pricing, Ronan shrugs this off as gallery business. But he imagines collectors of his art to come from the same pool as fans of his design. The two disciplines, after all, bump into each other on his Instagram feed. And, aware of the democratic discrepancy between art and design, he points out that with Sebastian Wrong of The Wrong Shop, he has, for several years, developed very fine prints of his art to sell at a more accessible price point.

Though his art-making life is distinct from his design career, they bubble along together, sometimes coinciding, such as in the recent Sound of my Left Hand exhibition at Casa Mutina in Milan, which saw the brothers' brilliant new tile designs for Mutina and the tile vases that also brought Bitossi's 100-year-old expertise into the picture, displayed alongside Ronan's latest bas-reliefs – these ones occupying a ceramic frame, and combined with a background of oil pastel on wood. And coming from the same mind, notwithstanding Erwan's input to the design pieces, one suspects that they will always occupy the same world.