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THE SEARCH FOR ORIGINALITY

French designers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec have reached the top of their field in less than a decade, by exploring ideas with pencil crayons in hand. / By Tim McKeough
IN MILAN THIS PAST SPRING, THE BOURROULLECS LAUNCHED SIX NEW PRODUCTS, but one—a small wooden bird created for Vitra—imestems with symbolic meaning. Vitra, of course, is the producer of the Eames House Bird, a black sparrow-like creature made famous by the mid-century design power duo, who kept a similar one in their house for years and frequently used it as an accent in photographs. Although few contemporary designers would dare compare themselves with the legendary Charles and Ray Eames, the Bourroullec’s homage seems to have arrived just as their own covers are achieving full flight.

Roman and Erwan Bouroullec are arguably among the most talented product designers now working—a distinction they’ve quietly earned over the past decade. Rather than making big statement pieces, their modus operandi has been to turn out a string of sleeper hits. Take their decidedly minimalist Jioh office system, released in 2007 by Vitra. It is essentially a conference table with modular components that together create one large communal work station, ideal for encouraging collaboration among co-workers. The concept is so logical in retrospect it seems inevitable. According to Eckart Mester, Vitra’s chief design officer, “Jioh has been endlessly copied since its debut. It has become a very important part of our portfolio,” he says.

Since then, the French pair has launched one hit after another, with such products as the best-selling Alcové sofa, released with Vitra in 2006, and two popular modular space dividers, Alde, a wedge screen made from moulded plastic pieces that snap together into wavy curtains, and Clouds, faceted Kardan fabric tiles for Ligne Roset that can be linked to create three-dimensional walls and enclosures. In recent years, their client list has ballooned to include such A-listers as Magis, Alessi, Kartell, and Axor.

In person, they are very much like their work: quiet and unassuming, with a thoughtfulness in their manner and speech that’s more sincere than scripted. Unlike the hackneyed cliché of design stars as overexposed geniuses, they are far more comfortable out of the limelight. Even at openings, they are inclined...
to show up in loose-fitting jackets and rumpled, baggy pants. And rather than conquering the design world by stamping their name on ever more products, they actually aspire to work on fewer pieces for longer. “We’d like to do less and less,” says Roman, 39, the elder of the two (there are six years between them). “We’re driven by patience, and we really want to do the very best. We don’t often achieve it, but that’s the goal.”

Amid an ocean of minimalist design, it’s almost impossible for designers to distinguish themselves, yet the Bouroullecis have consistently found subtle ways to twist form and materials into something altogether new. What makes their work singularly distinct, though, is hard to pin down. It may come from the fact that they’ve kept their Paris studio impressively modest, with just the two of them, four assistants and one administrator sharing a two-storey office with a makeshift fabrication workshop in the basement. It could be their almost monastic focus on getting the details right, or that they are avid critics of their own work. Speaking about Album, an exhibition on view earlier this year in Berlin, France, that presented more than 900 sketches, photos and other process documents, Roman mentions one room dedicated to their chair designs. “The question of chairs is the most important for designers,” he says, noting that the room contained nearly 100 sketches for the “We’ve produced maybe five of them, but there are only two that are good, one of which is better: the tradition chair.”

At the same level is the Show chair for Vitra, he reveals, “but it’s more a faint idea than a real chair. I think that’s the two most interesting chairs of our research.”

Such honesty offers a glimpse into their day-to-day working process. Extremely hands-on, they relish the creative act of drawing and making mock-ups and then debating each other’s ideas. When asked about their respective strengths, Roman shrugs, indicating that there is nothing easily divisible between his vision and his brother’s. “Every day, we need to let the creativity flow out of us,” says Erwan. “In making drawings and mock-ups and things like that, we generate a complex system of information. In small details, we create points that feed the larger works.” It can be as simple as squashing a circular form into a distorted circle, which they did for their Alien Ovale collection of tableware, or using a common manufacturing technique in an unexpected way. But there is usually something about their creations that appears ever so slightly — and delightfully — off. “Most of the time,” he discovers the language through some technical reasons,” says Erwan. “Even if the shape is strange, we help it by adding something familiar, like a lipped-visible Mitch, or the way the screw connects to wood. This is the interesting normality. It’s the flavour that you recognize. The way we assemble all of this is stranger than you expect. That’s why our things are stranger yet simple.”

Even the manufacturers who hire the Bouroullecis don’t quite know how to describe what makes their work so remarkable. “There’s a secret-sense before quality to it,” says Antoine Rosset, executive vice-president of Ligne Roset’s U.S. operations. Earlier this year, the Bouroullecis created Plium, a sofa that looks like a giant marshmallow. For the French brand, “it takes a moment to process their highly original aesthetic,” says Rosset, “but once you have the opportunity to experience their pieces you realise they never compromise comfort.”

Part of their success stems from a sort of internal quality control system. Nothing is released into the world without the absolute agreement of both partners. “We have to convince each other of our ideas,” says Roman. “We’re always reconsidering if a project could be done in a better way. It never ends sometimes, this confrontation, this situation between Erwan and me. It take a very, very long time, because we don’t always arrive at something the other thinks is clear.”

With their bathroom collection for Aper, launched last year, they took nearly six years to develop the final 85-piece suite, which includes basins, faucets and mirrors. During that time, they developed two collections (one comprehensive) and then unceremoniously scrapped them before arriving at a final range. Similarly, their next big project for Vitra remains secretly under wraps, with no firm completion dates on the horizon. “When a project leaves our studio,” it’s because both of us are sure it’s good,” says Roman. “Among those lucky enough to escape this year (along with Ligne Roset’s Plium): a shelving system for Established & Sons that incorporates sliding textile panels made from quilted fabric; two chairs, the Baguette for Magis and Oxo for Mattiazzi; plus L’Oseille, Vitra’s newest bird mascot.

Their successes rest most heavily on knowing that their job goes well beyond furniture. “We’re always thinking we have to make something that doesn’t exist, that is particular, and that has its own character,” says Erwan. “It’s difficult to achieve, but we just know that we should focus on this question, and then once we find an interesting point of view we try to take it out of everything else.”