

VOGUE

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It Takes Two: An Exhibition on the Bouroullec Brothers' Work Opens in Chicago

by Leslie Camhi

Lightness, elegance, and adaptability are hallmarks of works by the French brothers **Ronan** and **Erwan Bouroullec**, who, at 41 and 36, respectively, have spent the better part of two decades taking the contemporary design world by storm. Their precocious success with now-iconic objects such as *Algues* (2004)—a fluid system of partitions snapped together from algae-shaped plastic modules, answering an urban nomad's longing for nature and the need for flexibility—has made their work ubiquitous. Yet among the general public, they remain largely unknown. “The proselytizer in me is excited about the idea of taking these designers, who should be household names in front of a large audience, and showing how great they are,” says **Michael Darling**, curator of “Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec: Bivouac,” a retrospective of the brothers' fifteen-year collaboration, organized by the Centre Pompidou-Metz and opening at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago on Saturday. “We hope to finally consolidate their influence and presence as designers here in America.” But celebrity is not something that Ronan, at least, embraces. “The main thing is for us to feel very free,” he says, in a conversation that ranges over the history of iconoclastic design and includes my own need for transportable book storage. He explains that he and his brother accept very few commissions and limit their team to five people working out of a studio in Paris's Belleville neighborhood. “It would be pretty easy for us today to churn out ‘Bouroullec-style’ objects,” he continues. “But I hate that idea.” The show's title “Bivouac” (literally, “an encampment”) recalls both the itinerant nature of a traveling exhibition and the nomadism that is dear to the brothers, evident in works like *Clouds* (2009)—a series of interlocking, felt-based units capable of being reconfigured into infinitely variable, acoustically sheltered enclosures. Like *Lianes* (2010; translation: “vines”)—sensuously hanging, leather-clad lights, or the stackable *Vegetal Chair: Growing* (2008), whose branching forms and molded plastic seat are suggestive of plant life—*Clouds* was inspired by the Bouroullec's seaside childhood in rural Brittany, while also drawing upon the most sophisticated contemporary technologies. The brothers compare design to cooking: a chemical compound put together in a way that is intelligent, coherent, subtle, and light, but also magical. At the Victoria and Albert Museum last year, they installed a room with flooring whose gradual incline provided an ideal surface for lounging and reverie. “I adore contemplation,” says Ronan, who claims he was a “mediocre” student even after deciding, at fifteen, on his life's vocation. (Erwan, a brilliant pupil, disappointed their parents by joining his elder brother's design studio; they had entertained higher hopes for him.) Does the theme, running through their work, of a permeable divide emerge from the joys and challenges of their collaboration? “Well, it's true that we've done many projects related to the idea of separation,” Ronan admits, laughing. “It came in part from our early work for Vitra when they asked us to think about office space, and the idea arose of creating simple, movable partitions for large, open spaces,” he continues. “And then, perhaps, it's also related to the fact that I am extremely claustrophobic. I can't stand being in an elevator; I suffer a lot. But Erwan doesn't suffer from anything. He is very light.” “*Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec: Bivouac*” opens on October 20 and runs through January 20, 2013 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; mcachicago.org.

October 17, 2012 5:12p.m.