

The Medium is the Message

He's Tasmanian but lives in London. His designs are licensed and made in Europe and elsewhere. His works are in public and private collections. He's a master of digital design but likes to keep it hands-on...and increasingly, he's driven by environmental concerns. Meet Brodie Neill. Story by Linda Nathan.





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Oceans of plastic debris and kilometres of thin veneer can be found in the furniture creations of London-based but Tasmanian-bred designer Brodie Neill.

Organically and often futuristically streamlined, his furniture is generally made from recycled and abandoned materials and carries a stern message that is cloaked in beauty.

Brodie Neill, 43, is a designer with an extraordinary range. Complex forms are conceptualised and realised through painstaking iterations. He's a master of digital design who also likes to get his hands on the work, even though some of his designs will only ever be made by others. Wood, metal, plastic and more are transformed and combined.

His works are licensed, commissioned, exhibited and reside in private and public collections in several continents. He's had a lot of press and currently has a recently acquired piece on show at the National Gallery of Victoria as part of the NGV Triennial.

Twenty years ago Brodie completed an honours degree in furniture design at the University of Tasmania – that was in the days when John Smith headed the course and Kevin Perkins also taught there. 'It gave me a great foundation, not only physically making things but being quite experimental with processes, forms and materials,' said Brodie. 'The things I learnt still echo in my ears and are very much the foundation of things.'

It started before that though, 'I was making things when I was probably 12', Brodie said. His British-born grandfather was 'a problem solver who built houses and taught trades and engineering'. It was in the blood so to speak, 'Some people go as far as to say it was reincarnation...and I have his tools in my studio here, beautiful tools engraved with his name that must be about 80 years old'.

Receiving a fellowship from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) sent him next to the USA to do his Masters. 'That's where the digital and the handmade literally



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Main: Brodie Neill with strips of Hydrowood veneer offcuts.

1. Recently acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria and on show until March within the NGV Triennial, *Recoil* (2021) is made from Huon pine, eucalypt, celery top pine, sassafras, myrtle and blackwood veneers recovered by Hydrowood from submerged trees in the Pieman River Valley. Photo: Eugene Hyland

2. It took around 60 hours to hand coil the strips estimated to extend some 3.5 kilometres. 'Other than the lacquering, everything was done in-house. It's very difficult to explain how to make that table. You've really got to feel the materials and see how they behave.' Photos opposite and above: Mark Cocksedge



went hand in hand. I was confident with my making skills, so that's where I was able to explore digital design tools as an extension of imagination and how that might be brought into not just visualisation like rendering, but to also be able to break down the complex configurations. In later years that got into quite advanced projects like the (*Recoil*) table currently on show at the NGV that is very much an example of those two worlds coming together.'

'After graduating from RISD I had a sketch book and a head full of ideas and was ready to embark on my career. In New York City I got a job designing point-of-purchase displays for L'Oréal stores. It gave me a taste of that world and it wasn't for me. I really wanted to embark on a career as a furniture designer.

'In 2005, along with a friend from RISD, who also graduated, we took an exhibition to SaloneSatellite

in Milan – the young designers' platform, where talent scouts search for new designers and new ideas. And I was very fortunate to pick up a couple of Milanese companies who still produce my work today in that kind of licensing model. But I always craved making, and designing for licensing is a very 'hands-off' approach – you really do just hand over the drawing or the CAD and leave it to someone else to figure out, which is a shame because that was the magic that I wanted to be part of and wanted to do.

'So then I wanted to get back into being that kind of Tasmanian designer maker, doing experimental, functional art design pieces. And because my focus was in Europe and because I could (with British ancestry), I relocated to London in 2005, still a youngish man. It was a vibrant, really creative place and my work really kind of germinated in those first few years. We did some signature pieces like the *E-Turn* (as in eternity) bench and the

@Chair, a seamless mobius strip chair that was acquired by the Art Gallery of South of Australia in 2023.'

Working across a wide range of materials and combining them has meant years of research and inquiry. 'We've done everything from cast glass to upholstery to...everything really. It keeps things interesting for me. I'm always envious of the Japanese master that keeps repeating the same process over and over to absolute perfection – I'm just not that person.'

As well as licensing certain designs out, Brodie has his own 'self produced' Made in Ratio brand, designs that are sometimes produced in-house, or at other times in batches through partner workshops in the UK or in Europe, Asia and Australia.

Over the years his business model has changed. 'There were stages; early career was production, trying to get a foot in the door of the



Italian industrial design model, and then in 2008/9 we moved to limited editions making kind of spectacular pieces.' The latter were produced in conjunction with a London and Paris based gallery. 'A lot of these pieces were material-based concepts. I would design and render the pieces and produce material samples and models as a proof of concept. The gallery would then have limited edition rights to produce, distribute and sell them.'

The GFC in 2008 affected the high art design market and there was also a push to make design more affordable and accessible, explained Brodie. Coupled with a desire to invoke his roots as a maker, the range launched in 2013 signalled a return to being part of the process. The *Alpha Chair*, *Cowrie Chair* and *Cowrie*

Rocker, and *Stellarnova* series are all part of the studio's Made in Ratio brand that celebrated its tenth year in 2023. 'It was a way to get hands dirty again and get back into it. We were designing limited edition pieces, but they were just kept in galleries and even worse, kept in a crate, so we wanted to make things that were accessible and that we could fulfil orders for.'

'Where do you get all your ideas from?', I asked. 'They really are what-if moments...just curiosity as to what might happen if you put two-and-two together. They certainly don't happen when I'm sitting at my desk sketching. They happen when I'm out walking on the beach, through the woods, on the street...and you just kind of get these ideas. I must

3. *E-Turn* (2022), stainless steel. A seamless mobius strip seat acquired by the Art Gallery of South of Australia in 2023. Photo: Angela Moore

4. *Jet Desk*: 'An energetic adaptation of a side desk. The graphite form swoops around from the front legs to the flat surface before becoming a single support.' Photo: Alex Hamilton

5. Made in Ratio *Alpha Chair* (2015): 'Solid-wood, all-purpose, stackable. An A-shaped structure where the back legs and backrest are organically and sensually moulded into one.' Photo: Elliott Lowe

6. '*Gyro* substitutes examples of precious marble, timber and ivory with "ocean terrazzo", a material produced from fragments of ocean plastic waste.' Photo: Angela Moore

7. Made in Ratio *Rotor Stools* in walnut with leather padded seats are 'inspired by sacred geometry.' Shown with *Stellarnova* table in marble with bronze legs. Photo: Mark Cockledge

admit I'm not a very good designer-for-hire. If you said: "I'll give you two weeks to come up with an idea for something,"...I could sit there and fester and come up with various things and it just won't happen.' 'So you're a bit more spontaneous?', I suggested. 'Yeah, and when you do get those spontaneous ideas you really do have to focus on them and see them through.'

The process for developing a new edition piece can take quite a bit of time. 'I would probably have a list of ideas that I would love to explore. For example, the *Recoil* table was an idea for a couple of years before we did anything with it. We basically took some scraps of veneer and started coiling them to try and recreate the annual rings of a tree, and it was a disaster! It didn't work, but there were areas that were successful and if some of those issues could be resolved then there could be something special there. And I think you've just got to kind of chase that.'

8. *Origin* (2021), reclaimed wenge herringbone flooring and glass. 'An organic skimming stone shaped for set on an architectural glass element, making a bench that transforms the prosaic into the poetic.'
Photos: Mark Cocksedge

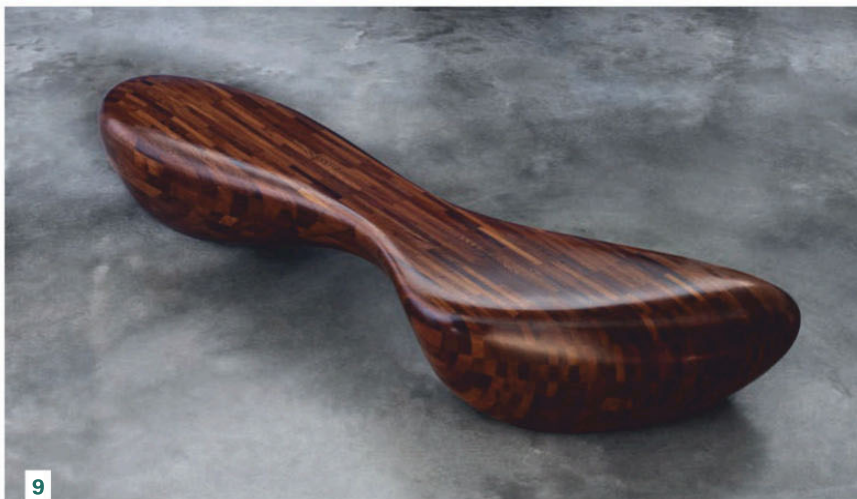
9. *Meridian* (2022), 1000 parquet blocks were painstakingly refurbished, stack laminated and carved into the contour lines of a curved bench seat. Photo: Angela Moore

10. *Latitude*, 422 recycled pinewood dowels are interlaced in a sequence 'elevating salvaged wood to new heights whilst bridging the material properties of old and new'. Photo: Brodie Neill

11. Made in Ratio *Cowrie Chair*, 2013, veneered ash plywood. The shape is inspired by the concave lines of seashells. 'A contemporary bentwood occasional lounge chair that fuses art and design into one.'
Photo: Elliott Lowe

12. *Cowrie Rocker* (2012). 'The secret to the concave form is the removal of surface tension from within the centre of the plywood leaves. Developed in unison with its sister design the *Cowrie Chair*, extensive form explorations began in paper, card and then ply before I made the first full scale prototypes in a workshop in Hackney, London. From these experiments, prototyping moved to a timber engineering company in the north of England, before full scale production moved to Belgium where it has continued ever since.' Photo: Mark Cocksedge

13. *Torso Side Tables*, panga-panga (wenge) parquet blocks 'salvaged from a school in Leicester, where it lay as a herringbone floor for almost 60 years'. Photo: Angela Moore



When Brodie Neill says 'We have a lot of little ideas', you could be forgiven for thinking that is an understatement. Coming back to ideas seeded years before and working through forms, processes and prototypes takes persistence. Coiling three kilometres of mixed Tasmanian veneer strips, or for that matter coalescing a miscellany of reclaimed plastic ocean flotsam into glued-up and resplendent tabletops – these are not exactly weekend warrior projects.

'Working from home, there were 10 to 12 smaller iterations (of *Recoil*) and we eventually stumbled on a way of keeping the tension. It's like coiling a

spring – you've got to keep the tension on using traditional things like veneer tape. We came back to it over a period of time, maybe five or six years. After I was approached to do an event for London Craft Week with Design Tasmania, I thought it was an opportunity to do a very Tasmanian collaboration and showcase.'

It was also about utilising offcuts and waste. Hydrowood gathered what were basically workshop seconds or offcuts from other designers, unusable for most other producers. These pieces are not models for large scale production but designed to say something about the material, its

origins and value, and our attitudes to its usage.

'Every product that we do in this ilk is definitely a message,' said Brodie. 'It's showing resourcefulness, an alternative to what waste can be and a demonstration of innovation.' These scraps would literally be thrown away, mulched, incinerated...'

'How important is it to you to get that word out?' I asked. 'It runs through all my work, from the work we do with ocean plastics to recycled metals, and reclaimed woods. We did a whole series of pieces where we took 6,000 parquet floor pieces, beautiful African



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wenge laid in the 1950s – a material that I would not touch in its virgin state because of the chain of action involved in logging and exporting it out of the Congo – but here’s a material that’s secondhand, waste, and covered with the bitumen used to glue it down and would otherwise be burnt for heat. And it’s the most gorgeous wood. We found an effective way to remove the bitumen and the tongue and groove.’

The plastic waste used in some of Brodie’s work comes from ocean gyres or garbage patches. ‘These are predominantly in the Pacific but we collect it from lots of places – the

West coast of Tasmania, the Roaring 40s that whip around the southern coast of Tasmania. There are amazing people who collect this kind of stuff. ‘I came back from Tasmania once with an extra suitcase packed to the brim with tiny fragments of ocean plastic. Hawaii is where we get most of it, and we get it by the absolute sackload. The middle of the Pacific is where most of it congregates.’

New works ‘wood ones, very different’ are on the horizon but the focus is still personal. ‘I love the experimentation, having an idea, breaking it down into processes and then realising it. And then, at the end

of the day, when it’s finished, stepping back and seeing it there.’

To others Brodie Neill certainly seems like someone who has literally ‘made it’, so what’s his advice for aspiring designer makers? ‘I always say, follow your own ideas. I know it sounds a bit cheesy, but you can be very influenced by trends or things you see in magazines or on Instagram, but the real essence of something new is when people embark on new adventures and their own ideas.’

Learn more about Brodie Neill @brodieneill at <https://brodieneill.com/> and at www.madeinratio.com