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A Fondness for Empathy and a Fancy for Notebooks

The burgeoning Bouroullecs

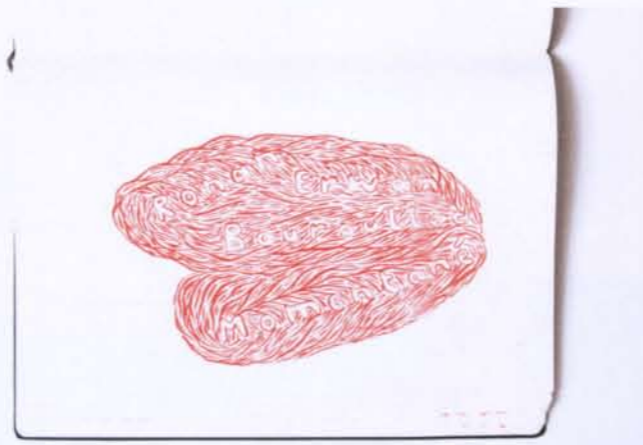
The Bouroullec's don't do things by halves, to be sure. Exercising a balance of particularity and perfectionism in all things, they manage to apply a fresh approach to each project that they choose to undertake. The remarkably diverse array of works in their repertoire includes the making of exhibitions, although this is most definitely an extra, as opposed to an intrinsic type of design project. As the third in a series of recent exhibitions on their work gets ready to open in Paris, DAMN° decided to happen by their studio and engage in a meaningful conversation.

ANNA SANSOM





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MOMENTANÉ
Installation view (1), drawing (2),
preparations (3), installing the
show (4) - images related to the
exhibition at Les Arts Décoratifs
in Paris
Photos: © Studio Bouroullec

It's early April, and Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec's exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris is due to open in a few weeks. Titled *Momentané*, meaning momentary, this follows on from the brothers' recent exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou-Metz and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. But Ronan Bouroullec is reluctant to let the institutional fetter go to his head. When we meet in their studio, down a cobbled courtyard in the multiethnic Belleville district of Paris, he admits that the treadmill of museum shows is taking its toll. "Exhibition-making isn't my job", says the 42-year-old eldest brother from behind his desk, which is scattered with piles of books on the likes of Joe Colombo and Japanese design. "I like doing it, but after a while it's like a kind of auto-celebration."

The perfectionist brothers have been intensely involved in the exhibition's scenography. "If people want to have an exhibition about us, the rule

is that it's us who makes the exhibition", he insists (his younger brother, Erwan, is out at a meeting). "I've been spending a lot of time at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, walking round and looking. I have the impression it's like directing a film – the characters are present, the décor is constructed, and there's a precise organisation and relationship between things." The characters here are the exhibits that collectively express the modular, flexible, and problem-solving philosophy of the brothers' work. A tent-like installation has been created in the nave, with a 12-metre-high textile vault that is intended to plunge the visitor into a 'dreamlike environment'. "We've tried to create a very singular, floating, and muted atmosphere", Bouroullec says of the installation, which brings together various types of partitions – such as the polystyrene *Clouds* for Cappellini, *Algues* and *Twigs* for Vitra, *North Tiles* and *Clouds* for Kvadrat, and the *Textile Field* first shown at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London in September 2011.



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FAVOURING THE ORGANIC

A common denominator among the projects is the evocation of natural, organic forms like seaweed or coral, something that is informed by the brothers' upbringing in Quimper, Normandy. "Around 10 years ago, I bought a farm on the seafront in Brittany and I spend a lot of time there", says Bouroullec. "I love driving around in the car and discovering places. For me, the car is also a place of contemplation and soft movement through the countryside. I have a very carnal relationship with water and the sea, specifically in Brittany."

The *Pico* tiles for Mutina, white and grey matte surfaces with irregular patterns of inverted and elevated dots, cover the walls of the museum, where various aspects of the brothers' work are showcased, including room-within-a-room concepts like *Lit Clos* (2000) – an enclosed sleeping area designed by brother Erwan, some 300 drawings, and alcoves presenting do-

mestic objects. The *Cork* tables and *Joyn*, a customisable office system, both edited by Vitra, are in a space devoted to workplace designs alongside the furniture collection, edited by Hay, for the reopened humanities faculty at the University of Copenhagen.

"The problem with universities in Europe today is that students come, study, and go home, and the universities seem to miss a collective life", says Bouroullec. Eager to develop a "more domestic ambience", the university asked the Bouroullecs to design a wooden chair that would be both sensual and robust. It needed to be foldable, match the price of a plastic one, and be ready within less than a year. "The chair had to respond to all the most difficult criteria", recalls Bouroullec. "Luckily, a technical idea occurred to us, which was to divide the seat into two parts [that are screwed together]. The movement is a lot more amplified and elasticised, and we realised that this could be an ideal construction for tables. It quickly became a collection, and today there are 40 references."



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LIT CLOS, 2000 (1)

DRAWING (2)
The new book by Ronan & Erwan
Bouroullec

PICO TILES, 2012 (3)
Produced by Mutina

COPENHAGUE COLLECTION,
2013 (4)
Produced by Hay



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ON CHAIRS AND IDIOTS

During the same year, the brothers designed two other wooden chairs: Steelwood, for Magis, and the Osso chair, with a four-part seat vaguely evoking a four-leaf clover, for Mattiazzi. Referring to the latter, Bouroullec says, "Mattiazzi came to see us and said: 'We don't have any work; the situation in Italy is terrible. We decided to create our own brand instead of only being a subcontractor, and we'd like to make a wooden chair.' So, for me, it was extremely obvious that we had to make an iconic, photographable, immediately recognisable chair and, at the same time, reveal a singular savoir-faire."

Warming to his theme, Bouroullec continues, "A new economic and manufacturing system needed to be invented that put research at its centre. In three or four years, Mattiazzi reinvented itself, proving that not everything is lost. This chair is sold in China. Not very long ago, politicians had us believe that the atelier of the world would be China and the thinking arena would be Europe. But that notion was racist, xenophobic, and completely idiotic. The Chinese are very intelligent and can design their own models. And we can't be satisfied with producing everything in China, so need to develop manufacturing. I think Italy will remain the splendour of possibilities."

Certainly, the economic crisis and the difficulties facing small producers are weighing on Bouroullec's mind. "This crisis makes me think that there are so many things to see, re-see, and re-imagine. For me, a good designer is somebody who has empathy in situations. There are many whose work I find completely idiotic because the same forms and approaches are used in completely different subjects and environments. It's like a bad actor that plays exactly the same way in all his films. As designers, we have a strong responsibility to do the right projects or to stop them when they're wrong. It's a very complex equation between comfort, price, elegance, and imaginativeness."

SELECTIVENESS

This veers into how the Bouroullecs select their projects. "We have a lot of proposals but we say 'no' in general, because they don't strike us as interesting. I need a precise reason to do something",



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says Bouroullec. Asked whether they intend to collaborate again with Alessi, for whom they designed the Ovale cutlery and irregularly shaped ceramics collection, he answers, "I'm a bit disappointed by this relationship – Alessi is too bulimic for me. It's extraordinary manufacturing but it's heterogeneous and commercially cynical. There's an eclectic generosity in their approach, but it lacks intellectual rigour. The stainless steel objects were made in China and that annoyed me. Once I wrote a text where I compared Alessi to the film Charlie and the Chocolate Factory – a confectionery of things that are quickly made, quickly absorbed, and quickly renewed." It's not only Alessi he feels critical about. "The context of galleries and of elites doesn't interest me at all", continues Bouroullec, who is represented by Galerie kreò in Paris. "We don't truly know our collectors and it doesn't really interest me to know them. But thanks to making edition pieces, we can develop craftsmanship and interesting types of manufacturing."

The Milan furniture fair is two weeks away. "The quantity of products has always struck us as absurd and incredible", laments Bouroullec. The brothers are planning to unveil several items there: an aluminium sideboard called Theca, and Steelwood Galva, a reinterpretation of the Steelwood chair but in galvanised steel and beech wood, both for Magis; Ready Made Curtain – a DIY curtain system for Kvadrat; and the above-mentioned Hay furniture collection. They've also been commissioned to make an installation of carousels for BMW i - the sustainable sub-brand of BMW - in the courtyard of the Theological Faculty of Northern Italy. The fun, temporary project entitled Quiet Motion comprises of four rotating cork carousels with interlocking revolving circular bases, featuring leather seating platforms, also circular, and blue fabric strips hanging down from the edges of the round canopies. Effectively, they have combined materials common to car design - bodywork paint and leather - with materials more usually associated with furniture and interiors.

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OVAL CUTLERY, 2012 (1)
Produced by Alessi

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DRAWING (2)
The new book by Ronan & Erwan
Bouroullec

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THECA AND STEELWOOD
GALVA, 2013 (3)
Produced by Magis



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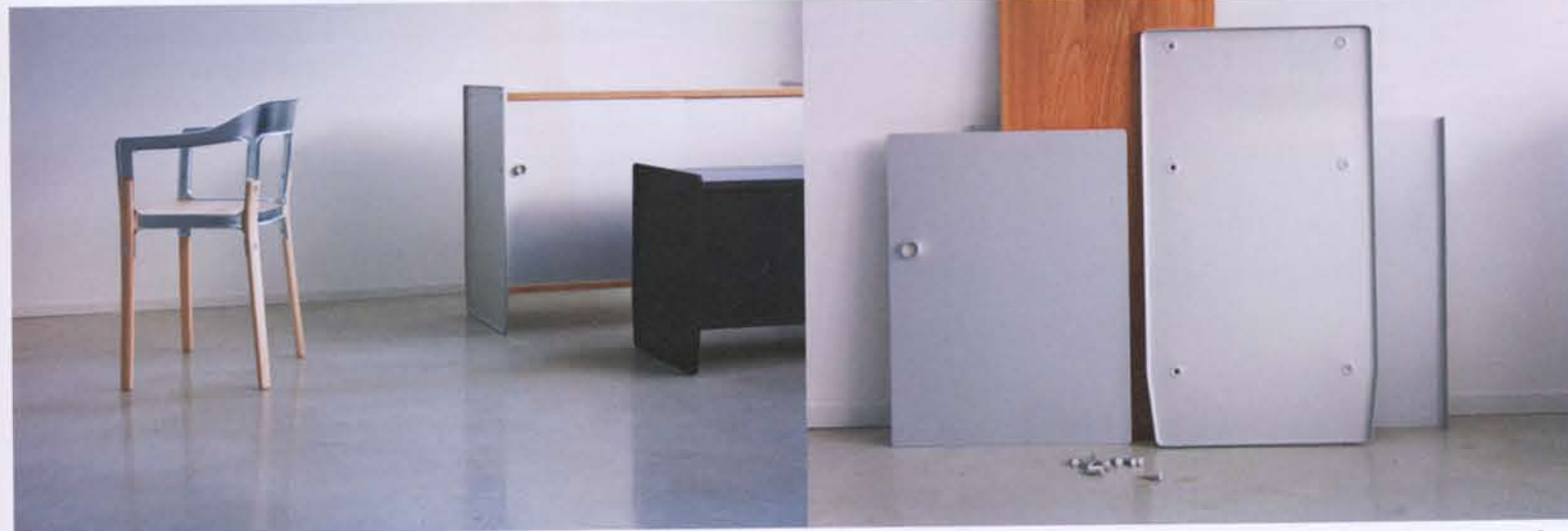
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OSSO CHAIR FOR MATTIAZZI (1)
Produced by Mattiazzi

2
READY MADE CURTAIN (2)
Produced by Kvadrat

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WORKBAY, 2013 (3)
Produced by Vitra



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"BMW i is bringing out a new electric car, and the chassis is in carbon", Bouroullec explains. "We were trying to find a way to talk about mobility and, for us, the carousel is a dreamlike metaphor for the automobile. The installation is a costly fantasy and a contemplative form of speed", he concludes.

PRESTIGE AND PLEASURE

Despite the brothers' reservations about elitism, they have accepted the commission to make a permanent piece for the entrance to the Château de Versailles. It is a chandelier loosely recalling a multi-stranded, looping necklace that will be inaugurated in November. "As a rule, we've never done a unique piece or anything site-specific", notes Bouroullec. "At the beginning, we hesitated a lot because we didn't think it corresponded to us." As he shows me some drawings on his iPhone, Bouroullec enthuses: "The object was to do something extremely subdued in one sense, yet that would have a real physical presence. It has a very delicate presence but is quite magical."

The prestigious Versailles project is further confirmation of the brothers' success. But Bouroullec is more preoccupied with discussing the importance of empathy and the usefulness that design can bring to society. Gazing through the window onto the courtyard, he says contemplatively, "There's enormous work to be done. When you stroll around Paris and look at the windows and verandas, you see that everything consists of industrial, reproduced objects that necessitate thinking."

Although the exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs is consuming much of his time, Bouroullec can imagine undertaking humbler projects pertaining to everyday life. "Right now, we're working on vases for Iittala, a Finnish brand, and it's giving me enormous pleasure to reflect on that", he says, casting his eye on the tall, transparent Iittala vase on his desk. "I'd love to do notebooks, because we use a lot of them. And pencils too. There isn't really a hierarchy for me." ◀

The exhibition, Momentané, is at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris from 25 April to 01 September 2013 www.lesartsdecoratifs.fr

www.bouroullec.com

