



Above and opposite page:  
Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec  
© Margarete Le Gall

# THE BOUROULLEC BROTHERS



It must be in their DNA. Or maybe it was something in the Breton air of their youth, where the airs of far-away Paris are muffled by the roar of the Atlantic. Or perhaps it was just chance that led the Bouroullecs to their distinctive aesthetic — one that sets them apart from, and leagues above, most of their contemporaries. Their colorful, pared-down, striking, clever objects and interiors caused many — from Issey Miyake to Rolf Fehlbau — to take notice early on, and have made the brothers the leading exponents of French design since Philippe Starck.

Erwan joined Ronan — five years his senior and already designing — immediately after art school, and they shared a studio in a sketchy part of a Paris suburb their illustrious admirers were loath to visit. While they sometimes draw comparisons to the Campana brothers, their Brazilian counterparts, they are more akin to the Castiglioni, designing siblings from another generation whose focus on function drove their form-making, but never dominated it. In the Bouroullecs' case, rationalism and pragmatism often give way to romanticism, resulting in unexpected pieces, ranging from the pure form of a tree-house-like bed (*Lit Clos*, 2000) to the organically shaped plastic stacking chair inspired by the branching of a tree (*Vegetal*, 2009).

*BY JOSEPHINE MINUTILLO*



Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec  
 Cloud modules  
 2002  
 Polystyrene  
 41 x 73 x 15 inches  
 © Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec

**WHITEWALL:** *For a long time Philippe Starck represented French design to the rest of the world. The same can be said of you now, though you have little in common with him aside from geography.*

**ERWAN BOURULLEC:** Starck has done incredible things, and we respect him. But unlike many of the other French designers today — Matali Crasset, Patrick Jouin, Christophe Pillet — who all worked in Starck’s studio, we didn’t. He has a point of view that is totally different from ours. For example, the garden gnomes he did for Kartell, I never understood them. It’s not that I hate them or think they shouldn’t have been done; I’m just still a little surprised and shocked. In art, I have no patience at all for Jeff Koons, but he’s not someone who can be ignored. Starck is a massive figure who can’t be ignored — he’s just not my taste. But it’s important to make things, and it’s important to have diversity.

**WW:** *How would you describe your own aesthetic?*

**EB:** First, the character of an object, and what it expresses, has to come from the way it is constructed and its function. We never want to apply a language to an object like decoration. It must have its own inner language. In Steelwood for Magis, for example, we focused on the way the two materials come together, how the metal, by its shape, is welcoming the wood. Second, we follow Mies [van der Rohe]’s ideal that “less is more.” We limit the number of materials and details in an object. During the development process, we always try to erase everything that is not necessary and anything that would confuse the design.

**WW:** *But you wouldn’t consider yourselves minimalists, would you?*

**EB:** Not at all. Industrial design is quite different from fine art, which is meant to be looked at. Once an object is in a shop or on

the pages of a magazine, we have no more control over it. People buy furniture and objects as tools. Our designs have to integrate with a living landscape that already exists and is already full of things from different times and provenance. We want our design to be silent enough to assimilate in that environment without transforming or spoiling it. Design in the nineties got a little too baroque, too complex, too full of meaning. Instead of expressing an already finished story, our objects are, in a way, half-finished, and only become complete when they are inside the user’s space and fulfilling the user’s needs.

**WW:** *Vegetal is the most organic of the objects you’ve designed, while still being very restrained and rigid.*

**RONAN BOURULLEC:** For the Vegetal chair, we wanted something that seems to grow like a plant — a mix of a romantic idea and something very mechanical. From the back it appears as a very strong structure, but from the front it is more subtle. The effect is very contemporary.

**EB:** It’s more about looking at a plant and finding within it a logic, which turns out to be incredible. For most people, organic equals futuristic. They refer to nature but still utilize a human-based construction. I’m always frustrated by forms that speak of a future that pretends to be near, but to me is much more far away than we expect. We still need windows that can keep out the rain and brooms that can sweep up the crumbs. The future won’t be this kind of empty white sphere in which we will all float.

**WW:** *In much of your other recent work, like the Quilt sofa for Established & Sons and the Facett seating range for Ligne Roset, you seem to be exploring geometries.*

**EB:** Too much contemporary design has been driven into a certain

“I’M AFRAID OF THIS TENDENCY TOWARD A WHITE CUBE WITH A WHITE SOFA AND A RECTANGULAR TABLE. IT REDUCES THE AMOUNT OF INFORMATION WE GIVE TO OUR EYES, OUR BODIES, AND OUR SENSES”



Above:  
Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec  
*Clouds*  
2008  
Thermocompressed foam and fabric  
& double injected rubberband  
19 x 11 x 4 inches  
© Paul Tolson and Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec

Right:  
Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec  
*Cloud modules*  
2002  
Polystyrene  
41 x 73 x 15 inches  
© Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec





This page:  
**Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec**  
**The North Tiles** — A showroom for Kvadrat in Stockholm  
 2006  
 Design of a showroom for Kvadrat in Stockholm  
 © Paul Tolson and Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec

Opposite page:  
**Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec**  
**Clouds**  
 2008  
 Thermocompressed foam and fabric  
 and double-injected rubberband  
 19 x 12 x .4 inches  
 © Paul Tolson and Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec

“IT’S NOT DIFFICULT TO HAVE A GOOD IDEA.  
THE REAL DIFFICULTY COMES IN MAKING THIS IDEA  
EXIST IN EXACTLY THE TERMS YOU WANT”

dryness, in part because of an inability to deal with industry. Of course, the less material and the fewer pieces involved means lower costs, faster production, and more sales. We’ve been interested in generating a language that is a bit more complex. It’s the difference between a cube and a stone — a cube can be understood in a second, while a stone has more complexity. If you start to apply this logic, it can begin to flow naturally into a useful detail, without being decoration. I’m afraid of this tendency toward a white cube with a white sofa and a rectangular table. It reduces the amount of information we give to our eyes, our bodies, and our senses.

**WW:** *You are fortunate to work with the kind of companies that will permit that kind of exploration in the manufacturing process.*

**RB:** We were lucky that Giulio Cappellini wanted to work with us. At the time of our meeting over 12 years ago, a journalist who was with him said to us, “This day will totally change your lives.” It seemed like a ridiculous statement, but he was absolutely right. Being part of Cappellini at that time was like playing for a really good soccer team, like Real Madrid now. Since then, we’ve never had to knock on anyone’s door again to get work. But we were also very naive — we had never worked for anyone before. Now we are

still a little too young not to be naive anymore, which is a risk in other ways.

For us it makes sense to only have a few clients, because we want to keep the studio small. We’ve been collaborating with Rolf Fehlbaum and Vitra for 10 years. Every day of my life, I think about something for them. It’s an extreme relationship — they’re never satisfied and we’re never satisfied. For Vegetal, we did at least a thousand drawings and over 50 mock-ups. Four years passed between the first drawing and the time it finally arrived in stores. But each company is different: While Vitra focuses on research, for instance, Established & Sons, with whom we started working last year, is more about a collective intelligence.

**WW:** *What makes a good designer?*

**RB:** It’s not difficult to have a good idea. The real difficulty comes in making this idea exist in exactly the terms you want, to be able to do something marvelous with very banal plastic, for instance, or something completely modern using very old techniques. A good designer is like a good actor — in one film you have to be able to make people smile, in another you can be very dramatic. You can’t play the same role over and over, no matter how charming you are.

