



Cutting-edge designers, Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec, bring wares to MCA

BY KYLE MACMILLAN

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Discussions about design in today's tech-crazed world tend to become monopolized by the frenzy surrounding the latest snazzy enhancements to the iPad or Droid.

It is easy to forget that hundreds of designers remain at work in more traditional, less trendy realms, conceiving new takes on time-honored objects like furniture.

Among the most respected of these creators are Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec, who will be showcased in a large-scale traveling exhibition opening Oct. 20 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago — its only American venue. The survey, organized in France by the Centre Pompidou-Metz, presents an in-depth look at the first 15 years of the French brothers' innovative, thought-provoking and eye-catching designs.

On view will be 200 chairs, sofas, tables, lamps, shelves, kitchenware and other home and office furnishings, as well 280 drawings and photographs that offer insights into the duo's thought processes.

Included will be some of the Bouroullecs' most widely known designs, such as Lit Clos (2000), an off-the-floor, partially enclosed bed; Alcove (2007), a wrap-around, high-backed sofa, and Twigs (2004), a snap-together, translucent partition.

"I think a lot of these pieces are quite iconic by now, but people might not know they are made by the Bouroullecs," said MCA chief curator Michael Darling.

Although the museum has spotlighted architecture and a few broad-based design thinkers like Bruce Mau previously, this is the first time it has focused on furniture design.

"With them," Darling said of the Bouroullecs, "I felt that there were these connections with contemporary art: the sculptural quality, the linear quality, the color and the intellectual grounding of so many of these pieces — solving problems with materials. It broadens the palette of our offerings."

Self-described "control freaks," Ronan, 40, and Erwan, 35, have resisted the pressures that have come with success to expand the scope of their firm. Their Parisian studio remains surprisingly compact — just six employees and two or three rotating interns.

Although their work often possesses strong conceptual underpinnings, the duo avoids products that are little more than experimental gimmicks. They strive to make everything they design both practical and saleable, and, indeed, many of the objects on view will be available in the MCA shop.

Among the defining qualities of the duo's output are flexibility, portability and modularity, all of which are embodied, for example, in their versatile Steelwood shelving. In pieces such as their Vegetal Chair (2008), they draw at once on the logic and what Erwan calls the "strange geometry" of nature.

While the Bouroullecs embrace technology, sometimes using complex computer programs to

streamline aspects of their products' construction, they are in no way beholden to it.

"Me and Ronan, we are not at all the designers of the future," he said. "We're not especially keen on using the very, very latest lightweight material. We're not especially keen on putting people into something that they don't know at all."

While the two brothers' designs possess an innately European look, Erwan believes little about the objects is distinctively French, with the possible exception of the duo's roots in tradition.

The two study aesthetic details or motifs that emerge as part of long-established manufacturing practices and often emphasize these in unexpected, contemporary ways.

"We have a lot of respect," he said, "for craft and the notion of manufacturing, which sometimes gives us a formal approach that could look, old-fashioned is not the right word, but refers to older times. This might be a little bit French."

Unlike most exhibitions, which are overseen by a curator in conjunction with exhibit designers and other museum staff, virtually every aspect of this show, down to the sleek wooden display shelves and identical curved-corner resin frames on the duo's drawings, has been painstakingly supervised by the Bouroullecs.

"Working with space and arranging objects, that's their everyday job in a way," Darling said. "I've brought some ideas about how I think the people use our building and what looks best, but it's one of those types of shows where you can stand back and let them do what they do best."

Although the Bourellecs have avoided creating imaginary kitchens or living rooms, they have tried to arrange the objects in an accessible, down-to-earth and what they call "realistic" way.

Most of the objects are approachably human-scaled, but some of the rooms will have massive, architectural partitions. The atrium, for example, will be criss-crossed by the Bourellecs' Cloud Modules (2002), stackable sections of a kind of honeycombed polystyrene that will create a mysterious, translucent wall that stretches upward some three stories.

"There are pieces in the show that are huge and in big quantities and generate a real magic in a way — a scale people are not used to at all," Erwan said. "So, there is a certain magic in the show while everything on display and the way of display is kind of normal — not fake, not pretended."

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