



Ronan Bouroullec Talks Bivouac at the MCA

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By John Dugan Photos by Samantha Simmons

Earlier this week I popped into Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, where, after dodging small forklifts, shelves of Alessi and Capellini cups and vases, Vitra chairs, and hanging room dividers inspired by algae, I met Ronan Bouroullec on the museum's upper floor. He, his younger brother Erwan, and the crew were busy installing Bivouac, a retrospective exhibition imported from France's Pompidou that covers roughly a decade's worth of the brotherly duo's stellar designs for major European manufacturers. The pieces by the Brittany-born-and-raised team run the gamut from organic and futuristic to pragmatic and simple—but always beautiful, elegant, and useful. But today, we needed a bit of privacy, so Bouroullec and I found ourselves pulling together a pair of gray Vitra Alcove 3 chairs to form an interview nest. And away we went.

JD: About the exhibit, the whole Bivouac concept is interesting—it's connecting the art gallery show with camping. With both, you put everything up and then take it down. Who's idea was it, what does it mean?

RB: It's two or three things. The first is that our discipline is linked to the situation: it's to invent or find a solution or proposal which, obviously, has the ability to be built somewhere, developed

somewhere, put in some apartment. French for furniture is *mobilier*, it's about mobility—so the piece of furniture, an object, is linked with mobility. This is very important, that all objects can adapt to so many different types of environments. So many objects are so badly conceived, they are working somewhere but not in another context. This is a big part of our approach.

The second theme is that, in a sense, an exhibition—especially this one—is traveling. So it's like: arrive in a city, you start it, then you go to another one. I'm a bit tired of this sort of very bourgeois way of seeing museum art. It's missing a lot of life. A lot of museums are cold and very sad in general. So I wanted something a bit light, it's not a serious exhibition. It's just an exhibition about objects. Is an exhibition important for designers? This is another question. But... we wanted something light, which is a bit modest in a certain sense. And, again, this super serious attitude of displaying things in museums that I don't like so much.

JD: So we're right in front of the Clouds, and I want to talk about the concept of micro-architecture. Is that something you came up with, was there a precedence to that?

RB: I dreamt to be an architect very much, but it's totally another discipline. I think we are interested in developing a component for architecture. And if you consider the history of architecture, and especially of the ways of walls, of dividing spaces—there are so many solutions, situations, from Japanese paper to some marvelous marble in India, to divide space. Considering this situation, I think there are so many things to improve, to invent, since our first project *Algae*, which was a way to divide. It's not a wall but it very clearly defines *that's the space* and *that's the space* of something else.

And then there's the *Cloud*, which is something in wool, which has an interesting sound effect. And this is... missing on this wall, too. It's a very basic function that we try to solve through different exhibition.

JD: Do you feel like there's an opportunity here to explain to people why or how they can use things like the Clouds? If you're opening a restaurant or designing an office, the Clouds aren't on your list, but they might really enhance the space.

RB: It's why for new projects like that we also consider communication. All the pictures you see on the wall were done by us. It's quite important to find a strategy, a process to make people understand the reason for a [movie] like that. [pointing to a video display on the wall]. This was a movie for one chair, the *Vegetal chair*. For two reasons, because we like that, to play with different mediums. And for the question of trying to explain what we can do, especially when it's a new typology or a new type of something important. Sometimes we get marvelous success and... sometimes, terribly bad sellers. But this is the life.

JD: Right, if you don't take it too seriously, you just move on to the next project. We were talking about "utility" earlier, but there's also some magic dust... there's a magical quality to some of your things. This could've just been hanging pieces of gray felt, but it wouldn't transform. Is the magical part the emotional side of things?

RB: It's exactly that—sometimes it's magical. A good object is a very complex chemical

synthesis—it's like cooking, you can have the best product, the best meat, you can cook it perfectly, but if you put too much salt it's not good. A good object is a very bizarre balance between very clear fact and utility and comfort, practice, strong ethics, but something else, too. This is something you can't define, a certain balance, elegance, a certain sensuality that makes some objects clearly better than others for not totally obvious reasons... but are just a bit more magical.

JD: Last question—the rug that was made in Pakistan, that jumped out at me because you don't see a lot of global influence but I know that this nomadic idea of being able to move furniture, that's one of the first things you mentioned to me. That's global. Is that something you guys tap into, but you don't put out front? Is global or traditional design a subtle influence?

RB: The fact is that we come from a country which is not a country that understands this discipline—for different reasons which would be very long to explain. And we come from a country which is very centralized in Paris. Paris is the center of everything, and we grew up 500km from Paris in the countryside with parents who didn't care about design and art. It was a big change for us. When I started, I understood I was very interested in objects—I'm not interested in design, to be clear, I'm interested in objects and surroundings. So my first influence was more a sort of very intelligent, rustic approach to solving the way of building a barn or shelter—very pragmatic and very often an extremely beautiful approach. So it's why the first books I ever bought about art, I was 15, was a book about Donald Judd and the Marfa situation. For me, I understood that we could design things which are good enough to maintain a certain balance between very natural rustic normal things and things which are totally new. Not a sort of modernity that would exclude, or want to preach, but more inventing things that have the ability to be put in a different type of environment like a person. A beautiful person is able to have a discussion with a farmer, and with a president.

Preview the *Rowan and Erwan Bouroullec: Bivouac* exhibition.

Bivouac opens to members, Friday, October 19, 2012 at 7pm, to the public Saturday, October 20 and runs from October 20–January 20 at MCA Chicago.

Look for more with Ronan Bouroullec in the March 2013 international design issue of Design Bureau.

Tagged with: *Algae • Centre Pompidou-Metz • Chicago • Clouds • MCA • micro-architecture • Museum of Contemporary Art • Ronan Bouroullec • Vitra*