

KHAI LIEW *Bruce [cabinet on stand]*

Khai Liew is one of Australia's most innovative furniture designers. He was born in Malaysia in 1952 and immigrated to Australia in 1971. Liew has no formal design training, instead he worked as an antique furniture dealer and conservator prior to creating bespoke furniture pieces. In 1996 he established *Khai Liew Designs* in Norwood, South Australia. Liew is driven by the beauty of material and utilises natural materials such as wood, stone, leather, grass and linen. His work is informed by various historical and cultural influences including Danish mid-twentieth century designers, Chinese furniture of the Ming Dynasty (13th and 16th centuries) and simple Australian colonial furniture. Liew believes that his objects need to be functional but that they must be beautiful. He is motivated ultimately by his clients' immediate emotional response to the material and the form of the object.

South Australian ceramicist Bruce Nuske was born in 1949 and worked collaboratively with Liew to create *Bruce [cabinet on stand]*, 2010. This work was part of *The Collec+ors* exhibition in 2010 where Liew worked collaboratively with Julie Blyfield, Kirsten Coelho, Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, Jessica Loughlin, and Prue Venables to create one-off pieces of furniture that incorporated elements of their own practices using glass, ceramic and metal ware. Nuske's ceramic works are heavily influenced by the natural world, drawing inspiration from flower pressings, textile patterns and photographs. He describes himself as the observer and maker of patterned things.

Bruce [cabinet on stand] is made from American white oak and white porcelain tiles. Its clean lines and boxed panelling is influenced by a sideboard designed by English designer Edward William Godwin (1833–1886). Nuske has embellished each tile with sgraffito technique, depicting a botanical motif that travels the length of the side board. The subtle detailing and neutral palette used by both artists demonstrates their shared vision for creating objects that are elegant in construction and technique.

DID YOU KNOW?

Khai Liew's work is featured in many public spaces in Adelaide including the free standing and interlocking exhibition space for the Museum of Economic Botany (MEB) in the Adelaide Botanic Gardens (2009) as well as seven winged Jeannie benches installed along the Riverbank Promenade (2005). The flexible structure in MEB can be reconfigured to make varied exhibition spaces, adaptable for a variety of displays.

image: Khai Liew, designer, Australia, 1952, Bruce Nuske, ceramicist, Australia, 1949, *Bruce [cabinet on stand]*, from the 'Collec+ors' series, 2010, Cabinet, Norwood, South Australia; tiles, Adelaide, South Australia, American white oak, porcellaneous stoneware, sgraffito decoration, 130.0 x 212.0 x 50.0 cm; Gift of Michael Armitage, Susan Armitage, Philip Bacon AM, Colin and Robyn Cowan, Julian and Stephanie Grose, Andrew and Hiroko Gwinnett, Jim and Andrea Katsaros, Diana Laidlaw AM, Sonia Laidlaw, Macquarie Group Foundation, David McKee, Pam McKee, Jillian Russell, Peter and Mary Sutherland, Janet Worth to the Collec+ors Appeal through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation 2012, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. photo: Grant Hancock

DID YOU KNOW?

Khai Liew's father built their family home in Malaysia which was a modest Japanese style house that he then filled with Danish furniture. In 1969 after the May Race Riots, Liew and his family were forced to flee as rioters looted their belongings and burnt down their home. Later the family settled in Hong Kong, but Khai Liew travelled to Adelaide where he attended a boarding school to complete his studies. He and his brother permanently settled in Australia.

RESOURCES

BOOKS

Ward, P. & Liew, K. *Khai Liew*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2010

WEBSITE

The Adelaide Review – Off Topic: Khai Liew

<http://bit.ly/2fMIol2>

Arts and Craft Movement in Australia

<http://bit.ly/2fNhsjw>

The Australian – A Lyricist in Wood: Adelaide Designer Khai Liew

<http://bit.ly/2wS4uOH>

Bruce Nuske

<http://bit.ly/2fNWR8h>

The Collectors Exhibition

<http://bit.ly/2vIrhkV>

The Design Files

<http://bit.ly/2wLDK4Y>

Gura, J. *Scandinavian Furniture: A Sourcebook of Classic Designs for the 21st Century*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2007

<http://bit.ly/2vbPiPv>

Jam Factory

<http://bit.ly/2vuVygp>

Khai Liew

<http://bit.ly/2i8i7pF>

Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences – Unpacking design Khai Liew:

Expressive Minimalism

<http://bit.ly/2w2V3IG>

Neueluxury – Khai Liew

<http://bit.ly/2fNBnlj>

NGV – Khai Liew: Crafting continuity and subconscious attraction (video)

<http://bit.ly/2x6o7Sw>

KEY LITERACY WORDS

Bespoke

Brief

Design

Form

Function

Immigration

Motif

Porcelain

Proportion

Prototype

Signature

Sgraffito

Trademark

RESPONDING

Identify the geometric shapes in this cabinet.

Look closely at the detail on the front of the cabinet. How do you think the artist made these marks?

Look at an image of *Sideboard* (1867–1870) by Edward William Godwin. Identify how this sideboard is similar and different to *Bruce* [cabinet on stand].

As you walk through the Gallery, take note of other furniture made from wood. Identify the timber types and find images of the trees which they come from.

MAKING

Create a pattern to be used in Khai Liew's next cabinet. Your pattern might be geometric or inspired by nature like Bruce Nuske's ceramic design.

Bruce Nuske has used sgraffito to create the pattern on the ceramics which has been made by scratching through the surface of the clay. Using a range of tools experiment making marks onto surfaces such as paper, polystyrene foam, cardboard or clay. Which materials and tools resulted in the most interesting results?



image detail: Khai Liew, designer, Australia, 1952, Bruce Nuske, ceramist, Australia, 1949, *Bruce* [cabinet on stand], from the 'Collec+tors' series, 2010, Cabinet, Norwood, South Australia; tiles, Adelaide, South Australia, American white oak, porcellaneous stoneware, sgraffito decoration, 130.0 x 212.0 x 50.0 cm; Gift of Michael Armitage, Susan Armitage, Philip Bacon AM, Colin and Robyn Cowan, Julian and Stephanie Grose, Andrew and Hiroko Gwinnett, Jim and Andrea Katsaros, Diana Laidlaw AM, Sonia Laidlaw, Macquarie Group Foundation, David McKee, Pam McKee, Jillian Russell, Peter and Mary Sutherland, Janet Worth to the Collec+tors Appeal through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation 2012, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, photo: Grant Hancock



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RESPONDING

Describe the visual qualities of *Bruce [cabinet on stand]*. Look at other works by Liew including the *Jeannie* bench located outside the Gallery café or the *Gallery Benches* peppered throughout the exhibition spaces. Sit on these benches, feel the structure and the texture. Make a checklist for how we might identify a piece of furniture made by Khai Liew. What is Liew's trademark or signature appearance?

Liew was interested in Australian, specifically Barossa, furniture that reflected Australia's colonial past. Locate an example of early Australian furniture in the Elder Wing. What elements do you think appealed to Liew?

When designing a chair, Liew will often place the object next to other pieces to see how it compares and question whether it defines the period in which it was made. Imagine you are Liew and have encountered Howard Arkley's *Chair* for the first time. What do you think his response might be?

Liew was inspired by a variety of different influences from Danish designers to furniture from the Chinese Ming Dynasty as well as early Australian furniture. Find examples of these influences and identify how these may have impacted on the design of *Bruce [cabinet on stand]*.

Liew aims to create objects that have a lasting quality what he calls antiques of the future. What are some things in your home that have been handed down through generations? Why are these items special? What objects do you treasure currently that you would like to pass down to the next generation in your family?

A prototype is a preliminary version of a design object. Liew's wooden bench *Jeannie* is a prototype as is *LCI chaise longue* (1989) by Marc Newson which is also in the Gallery's collection. Why do you think designers make prototypes and why do Galleries collect them?

Liew's objects have been described as 'quiet'. What qualities make *Bruce [cabinet on stand]* quiet? What other works of art in the Gallery would you identify as quiet? Can you find any that you would describe as loud?

image: Marc Newson, Australia, 1963, *LCI chaise longue*, 1986, Sydney, aluminium on fibre glass body, rubber, 95.0 x 60.0 x 170.0 cm; South Australian Government Grant 1986, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. © Marc Newson Ltd



MAKING

Designers create works according to a brief. In 1996 the director of the Gallery at the time, Ron Radford, commissioned Liew for a number of benches for the Gallery's new extension. Imagine you have been given a brief from your Principal to design a new seating solution for your school grounds. Following the design process, create a prototype of new proposed seating.

Liew collaborated with South Australian ceramicist Bruce Nuske to create *Bruce [cabinet on stand]*. Nuske is influenced by the natural world and often uses sgraffito or a stippling indent to create texture in his ceramic pieces. These marks are subtle as seen in the ceramic detailing in the sideboard. Here Nuske has created a delicate texture that complements the American white oak used by Liew. Draw a native plant or flower onto a thick white card. Using a pin, trace your drawing by making indentations into white paper.

In *Linenfold* (2007) Liew makes reference to Dutch Renaissance timber craft. Here his timber pieces look like a folded piece of linen. Imagine Liew has hired you to design embellishments to complement a new sideboard. Experiment with folding white paper to create new geometric forms. Use these to create a miniature prototype of your overall design.



image: Installation view, Gallery 6, Art Gallery of South Australia, 2017. Bench designed by Khai Liew, 1996.



image: Donald Judd, United States, 1928 – 1994, *Chair*, 2003, designed 1983, San Luis Obispo, California, Douglas fir, 76.2 x 38.1 x 38.1 cm (each); South Australian Government Grant 2003, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. © Estate of Donald Judd/Licensed by Viscopy, 2017

RESPONDING

If you were designing a piece of furniture would you begin with form, or function? Which is more important and why?

Liew's aim is to create beautiful and functional objects. What is the function of beauty when making furniture?

Liew's work has been described as having an 'oriental' sensibility. Investigate furniture objects from the Ming Dynasty and make links to Liew's designs. Identify other Asian influences in *Bruce [cabinet on stand]*. Research other Australian designers or artists who have been influenced by Asian cultures.

Artists and designers help us to see the world differently. Sometimes this is done by exposing the audience to different traditions and styles practiced elsewhere. Discuss the importance of travel for artists and designers throughout history. What impact has travel had on their art making? Investigate other artists who have been influenced by travel, to support your statement.

Compare *Kirsten armchair*, 2010 by Khai Liew and Kirsten Coelho with the following chairs in the Gallery's collection:

- Wiggle side chair (2001, designed in 1972) by Frank Gehry
- Zig-zag chair (c1937) by Gerrit Rietveld
- Chair (2003) by Donald Judd.

Discuss how these chairs are beautiful and functional. What other similarities do they share?



Liew was inspired by furniture of the Bauhaus including Scandinavian designers such as Hans Wegner and Arne Jacobsen who sought simplicity and truth in materials. The Bauhaus was the most influential modernist art school of the 20th century which aimed to rejuvenate design for everyday life. The abstract and pared-down aesthetic of the artistic movement De Stijl was also of inspiration to Liew. Find links between furniture created during this time and the contemporary work of Liew.

Investigate other contemporary Australian furniture designers. What have these artists been influenced by? Is their work indicative of design during this era? What historical influences do you recognise?

TIP Visit the JamFactory to see examples of contemporary design in Adelaide.

Liew arrived in Australia during a time when the White Australia Policy was in the process of being dismantled. Today immigration policies in Australia continue to be debated, as many refugees seek asylum due to conflict that has resulted in their displacement. While some people claim refugees place pressure on resources, some people fail to highlight the tremendous value immigrants contribute to our community and economy. Imagine if Liew was not permitted to migrate to Australia. How would life in South Australia be different without immigration?

Liew created a floating exhibition space in the Museum of Economic Botany (MEB) using a three-way mitre joint. He also used this particular structure when creating the *Gallery Bench*. Investigate the mitre joint and explain why this traditional Chinese joint was an appropriate choice for Liew when constructing the *Gallery Bench* and the exhibition space in MEB. Consider its aesthetic qualities and structural capabilities.

Considering what you have learnt about Khai Liew's designs, curate an exhibition for Liew. Include works of art from the Gallery's collection that you think would most appeal to Liew's personal aesthetic.

image: Khai Liew, designer, Australia, 1952, Kirsten Coelho, ceramist, Australia, 1966, *Kirsten [armchair]*, from the *Collec+tors* series, 2010, Armchair, Norwood, South Australia; porcelain, Ethelton, South Australia, American white oak, linen, porcelain, 70.2 x 128.0 x 66.5 cm (armchair); Gift of Michael Armitage, Susan Armitage, Philip Bacon AM, Colin and Robyn Cowan, Julian and Stephanie Grose, Andrew and Hiroko Gwinnett, Jim and Andrea Katsaros, Diana Laidlaw AM, Sonia Laidlaw, Macquarie Group Foundation, David McKee, Pam McKee, Jillian Russell, Peter and Mary Sutherland, Janet Worth to the *Collec+tors* Appeal through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation 2012, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. photo: Grant Hancock

MAKING

Liew was self-taught, learning restoration and French polishing techniques by taking old furniture apart. Collect a variety of unusable items from second-hand stores or items at home that would have ended up on landfill. Take the object apart and investigate how it was made. Restore the object or reinvent it by creating something new. Perhaps combine another material such as ceramics or metal like Liew has previously done when collaborating with other artists and designers.

Liew collaborates with other artists whose work complements his designs. Select a work of art by a different artist on display and imagine they collaborated with Liew. Design a work of art that merges their two practices together. Imagine if Sydney Ball and Liew had collaborated – what would this piece of furniture look like?

Liew creates beautifully crafted objects influenced by a range of styles, artists and art movements. Consider your own personal aesthetic. Brainstorm all of your influences. Create a work of art that combines your influences seamlessly into a work of art or design.

Liew's wooden bench *Jeannie*, located outside the Gallery café, is inspired by bird life stretching their wings. This bench was a prototype for seating that would later be made from stainless steel and featured along Adelaide's Riverbank Promenade. Design new public seating that is both functional and sculptural.



image: Sydney Ball, Australia, 1933, *Strata span*, 1968, Collinswood, South Australia, synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 228.0 x 441.0 cm (assembled, 2 piece); Gift of Michael Coventry under tax incentives for the Arts Scheme 1978, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide



image: Khai Liew, designer, Australia, 1952, Khai Liew Design, Norwood, Adelaide, manufacturer, *Jeannie bench*, 2003, designed 2001, Norwood, South Australia, stainless steel, cement sheeting, mosaic tiles, 100.0 x 250.0 x 142.0 cm; Gift of Arts SA 2003, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. © Khai Liew