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BRIAN REID

SERIOUS PLAY

BY PATRICK DOWNES

"I don't care much about function, though all my work is functional. I'm most passionate about design from a personal perspective. Things have to meet my own expectations, so primarily I make for myself."

I'm sitting with Brian Reid at his home on the Maine coast. His office, of sorts, is a comfortable room in a salty house. We talk over the drawing table while his wife, Monica, prepares dinner. Shelves of books line one wall. He pulls out a few: *20th Century Furniture Design, Kandinsky, Jay Kappraff's Connections*. "Each one has guided me," Brian says.

I once worked beside Brian at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship in Rockport, Maine, where he still teaches and presides over the fellowship program. I remember a man who often resembled a child at play. Children take their play very seriously, and Brian takes his own play—his vocation—seriously, too. Our conversation ranges back and forth between craft, his history and his work. He could talk intently one moment, lightly the next.

Born in 1957 and bred in pre-Microsoft Seattle, Brian grew up in middle class tract housing with a stay-at-home mom and a dad who worked as an insurance broker. He remembered having no art and little music in the house. "It was very quiet," he says. For sure, he had no early introduction to craft.

Brian began college in 1975, but he took his time getting through, graduating eight years later. After three years studying engineering, he dropped out and traveled. He drifted to Alaska, where he worked in

Photo above: *Flower Power* (2006); cherry, various veneers; 32" x 48" x 24"; photo by Jim Dugan.

EDITOR: TOM CASPAR

1. Detail of *Hourglass* platform bed.

2. *Hourglass* (2004); mahogany, various veneers; 96" x 76" x 76"; photo by Robert Millman.

3. *Asia Moderne* (2011); white oak, walnut; 34" x 60" x 12"; photo by Bill Truslow.

4. *Prince Albert* (2004); ash, white oak, various veneers; 71" x 38" x 24"; photo by Jason Dewey.

a cannery for nine months. Soon after, he made his way to Australia, New Zealand and Fiji, where the encounter with Aboriginal culture piqued his curiosity in anthropology. He returned to school and graduated with a degree in anthropology and a minor in engineering.

In 1983, living in Seattle and uncertain about what to do, Brian learned about Gompers, a local trade school that specialized in boatbuilding, carpentry and cabinetry. "I thought I'd work with my hands for a change," Brian recalls. Boatbuilding was his first choice, but it had a two-year waiting list. He enrolled in the cabinetry program, instead. Two years later, while surveying job prospects, he had second thoughts about cabinetmaking as a career. "I didn't want to spend my time turning out mass quantities of ordinary stuff."

Brian found a job with a company called Coastal Climate. Ostensibly hired for his background in engineering, he actually served the company as a designer. His primary work was to redesign equipment and devise packaging for instruments sent into the field. Brian reaches for an old portfolio. In photographs, the packaging appears compact, lightweight and very clever. "All the silkscreened computer housings were done in black-and-white," he says. "I finally asked if I could use color. I chose light gray with yellow lettering. I mean, I have to do what I have to do." He laughs. "I got slammed for it."

DISCOVERY

During this time, Brian discovered furnituremaking. Like so many makers of his generation, he started out teaching himself the craft by studying back issues of *Fine Woodworking*, a slow and

CALL ME DINOSAUR

by Brian Reid

Twenty-five years ago, when I was a young, carefree student, I felt quite ambivalent about my future as a professional engineer. This well-worn path seemed too straight and narrow. Worst of all, it looked boring. I realize now that I was yearning for a creative life. I needed a journey with twists and turns. I needed hills to climb and streams to ford. I needed to blaze my own trail.

Now that I am more than halfway through my life, with a dozen years of teaching under my belt, I see more and more students expressing the same desire. They take my class because they're not happy with the idea of working all day at a computer monitor. They want more than what an office seems to promise. They want to make something with their hands.

But there's a big difference between then and now. Many of my over-50 peers who make functional furniture came from a technical background, such as engineering, carpentry or mechanics, or from a liberal arts background, such as anthropology or sociology. Not today's students. They work in the design and marketing industries. They're business savvy, and they see their goals more clearly than I did.

These students recognize that there is a robust market for well-designed functional items made in small batches. I think they've taken their inspiration from the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) movement, whose ideals have been rapidly adopted by all the crafts. CSA clients want to know where their food comes from and who made it. My students are designing for the same clientele—people who also want locally made, high-quality wooden items made with sustainable materials. The craft, though, is only the means to the end.

I envy and maybe even admire them to some degree, if only because they seem so focused. However, I came to furnituremaking with more innocence than today's students. I already had a good grasp of how to make things, but I had no design training. I had no other desire but the urge to make things with my hands. I embarked on a rather selfish aesthetic journey, looking for my own style, irrespective of its marketability. I want to be a master at my craft, not a master of the marketplace. I'm a dinosaur, and I love it.

difficult process. Master cabinetmaker James Krenov had a strong legacy on the West Coast, and Brian emulated his style. Brian's collaborations with an architect friend, Joe Wagner, clarified how far he had to go. "I was ignorant," Brian says. "I didn't even know what Modernism was. I didn't know anything about the world of furniture design. Joe told me to get some training."

While working at Coastal Climate, Brian took a class with a local Seattle maker, Ross Day, who worked in the Krenov style. "I spent an intense six hours a week with Ross," he remembers. "I learned more in those nine months than in eight years on my own. And I learned a lot more about art and aesthetics." The next year, he applied to some top-ranked woodworking schools: North Bennett Street, Rhode Island School of Design, and Parnham, the British school founded by John Makepeace. "For every thousand makers," Ross Day would say,"two are successful. And they both have training."

Brian left his regular job in 1993 and enrolled at Parnham. He was lucky—only a

5. ***2700 Squares*** **(2009); cherry, white oak, Alaskan yellow cedar; 34" x 78" x 24"; photo by Bill Truslow.**

6. ***Screen with a View*** **(2009); maple, white oak; 60" x 56" x 2"; photo by Bill Truslow.**

handful of Americans have ever attended this extraordinary school. The first year of Parnham's two-year program is dedicated to a prescriptive course. All students make the same things at the same time under the tutelage of Robert Ingham. During the second year, students have more leeway to explore their own designs. For Brian, this was an awakening.

Graduating from Parnham in 1995, Brian had to figure out how to survive as a maker. For two years, he collaborated with architects. Finding this less than satisfying, he applied for a residency at Anderson Ranch in Colorado, where he stayed for two years. "Residencies plug you into the creative community," Brian says. "They give you permission. They tell you that what you're doing is okay."

Brian met Monica at Anderson in 1997, and they married three years later. The two spent roughly six years as itinerant teachers in residence at various schools such as Anderson Ranch, Penland and the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship. "It was exciting," Brian declares, smiling, "but it got old. I won't do it again. Except maybe one or

7. *Bleached Ice*—detail (2010); bleached white oak, western laurel, maple; 52" x 18" dia.; photo by Bill Truslow.

8. *Gingko* (2011); bog oak, white oak; 28" x 78" x 13"; photo by Dennis Griggs.

9. *Tartan* (2008); padouk, rosewood, macassar ebony; 30" x 72" x 30"; photo by Bill Truslow.

10. Detail of Tartan table.

two places." From Brian's expression, I can see that the excitement is hard to give up.

AT HOME

Brian never intended to be a teacher, but he loves it. He has served as a permanent faculty member at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship since 2003. He moved to Maine in 2006, and he and Monica have settled in, perhaps for good.

I ask Brian about his schedule. Between teaching and his own work, he puts in sixty hours a week. A couple years ago, he worked seventy. "I'm slowing down a bit," he says.

When I worked alongside Brian, he always appeared to be in the middle of a piece, large or small. He's a driven man. "In twenty-five years, I made one perfect piece. Every other piece has had an error, on the micro level." He thinks for a minute. "On the larger level, perfect doesn't exist. I'm never happy. Halfway through, a piece seems perfect. Then I think, this is garbage! I want to burn it."

The pieces he has been least satisfied with were collaborations with clients. "They're seldom resolved to my satisfaction," Brian says, with regret. He also makes pieces on spec. "The things I like least sell first. Why?"

There may be a bit of the curmudgeon in Brian, but no more so than in the child at play who wipes out what he makes with a stroke of the arm when it seems to go wrong. However, Brian is a happy man. He makes and makes his furniture, and his reputation is strong and getting stronger. In 2007, Brian was designated a "Searchlight Artist" by the American Craft Council. He was the recipient of the 2012 Artist Award from the Society of Arts and Crafts in Boston. And he is a member of the New Hampshire Furniture Masters.

Brian is excited about the possibilities in his current work. As seen in Asia Moderne (3), and Gingko (8), he pushes into aesthetic territory notable more for elegance than aggressive statements.

However, when I asked him about his favorite work, Brian cited two bold pieces, Prince Albert (4) and Bare Naked (11). He smiles broadly. "I built Prince Albert in my last year in Colorado. It's the greatest thing I've ever made." Both pieces challenge the viewer in different ways, and this is what I most enjoy about Brian's work—his pursuit of his own aesthetic and standard of craft, regardless of its tone.

"I've made pieces that I thought were beautiful, but others said they were ugly." Brian smiles mischievously. "I want to make beautiful furniture. And if it's beautiful to me it has to be beautiful to at least one other person. I'm not unique." Or is he?

11

11. *Bare Naked* (2006); ash, white oak; 33" x 20" x 20"; photo by Jason Dewey.

12. *Coming Up Roses* (2011); maple; 34" x 60" x 10"; photo by Dennis Griggs.

13. *Patchwork* (2006); cherry, various veneers; 44" x 66" x 86"; photo by Jim Dugan.

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