

EXHIBITION

Designing for life in a curvier world

MARC NEWSON: DESIGN WORKS

The Powerhouse Museum,
Harris Street, Ultimo, Sydney
Until 3 February 2002

Reviewed by Cat Martin

The first major retrospective of innovative and idiosyncratic designer Marc Newson has now opened at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. The collection features more than 200 objects created by the Sydney-born designer since the Eighties, and displays a vast array of projects and techniques.

Spread over a series of rooms, the exhibition starts chronologically with the familiar silver spectacle of the Lockheed Lounge from 1986. The more recognisable works are shown alongside the unfamiliar, including rare hand-finished limited-edition items such as the aluminium Event Horizon table, created in 1992.

But Newson is happy to point out that these days furniture seems to be the last thing on his mind. After all, as he says: "You can only design so many chairs."

Also on display is a swarm of smaller objects: bath plugs, doorstops, bottle-openers, coat-hangers and hooks. What strikes you immediately about this collection is that Newson is on a crusade against the bland. We live in a serious world, but like an alchemist, he transforms the commonplace into precious forms.

The exhibition explores

Newson's uninhibited experimentation with various materials as surfaces are polished, rolled, squeezed and stretched. Newson welcomes the chance to develop new materials and new techniques: "Material is the vocabulary of the designer, I'm always looking out for new types – I won't limit myself to certain materials, and I use whatever is appropriate."

Refreshingly low on text, the show is punctuated by video footage and sci-fi film clips. Newson doesn't hide his influences; it's easy to see the impact of science-fiction aesthetics in the 1993 Alufelt chairs and Orgone stretch lounge, which not only show cinematic use of colour but uncannily resemble water suspended in zero gravity.

The items are not just presented as gleaming finished products on a plinth – the exhibition displays the behind-the-scenes sketches that go into developing Newson's ideas. "It's not only about the way things look, but about the way things are built," he explains. "Process is as important as the product."

While keen to point out that he is intimately involved in the conception and realisation of a product, Newson acknowledges the importance of computers in the creation of his curvier world. Drawings and hand-made models still play a part in the process, but his team goes on to develop 3D computer representations, as the software provides an immediacy



MARINCO KOJANDOVSKI

with which an image can be modified. But not all make it off the monitor. "Things I'm not happy with you don't see – if I'm not happy with the project it will never exist. The ideas are stillborn, they don't exist to me," he says.

The rampant diversity of the collection is a reminder that the majority of everyday products around us have little to do with pleasure. Newson's playfulness and self-expression are extended to the music that accompanies the interactive computer programs.

Thoughtful curation by Anne Watson has ensured that the exhibition is a sensory journey through object, imagery and sound. But as you wander through, there is a mounting frustration that these oh-so-tactile objects are restrained by barriers and display cases. Newson's boisterous 3D products demand to be experienced rather than viewed. But, despite being somewhat gagged, these isolated images still provoke a response from the throng of design students and casual visitors alike.

Fifteen years after Newson's first exhibition, he opines: "Design is no longer a hobby, it's a job." His roving lifestyle, which has made Tokyo, Paris and now London home, has provided him with an extensive collection of images and influences. He may have already realised his boyhood fantasies by designing for speed and power – the Falcon 900B jet – but he is now having fun tweaking the noses of global players who have decided they need the Newson magic.

"Everybody wants a bit of my DNA," he says. Currently breathing life into a number of

collaborations including shoes for Nike and ideas for Sony, Newson's style is still evolving. Increasingly concerned with function, the labour-intensive construction of his original forms is now giving way to the mass-produced, making some products more accessible to the design-driven purchaser.

Fashionable is by its nature more



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unaffordable, and Newson's highly coveted pieces are often accused of being beyond the reach of many. "I want to make them more accessible for everybody," says Newson. "But [as cost is affected by manufacturer and distributor] it's never the choice of the designer alone."

Judging by the multi-disciplinary creative talent exposed by this exhibition, and regardless of manufacturing technique, we can expect to see Newson continue to harness the influence of culture, technology, and process over a broad range of ideas for an ever-increasing array of clients.

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