

THE SATURDAY PAPER

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DESIGN

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Customisation and collectible editions

The design market is turning to two distinct trends – mass customisation and limited edition collectibles.



FLEUR WATSON



The "Briggs Family Tea Service" by Trent Jansen.

SCOTTIE CAMERON

The past few weeks have seen the international design media alight with the news that Australian designer Marc Newson has joined the Apple team to work directly with his friend and senior vice-president of design Jony Ive. The announcement seemed carefully orchestrated less than a week before Apple launched the new iPhone 6 and the highly anticipated Apple Watch – a product where the humble timepiece has morphed into a multifunctioning platform of “wearable technology”. Although it’s not clear if Newson was integrally involved in the design of the Apple Watch, his influence is clear in its curvaceous form and retro-futuristic details. Its DNA appears grounded in Newson’s much earlier work with Ikepod – a brand of experimental, luxury timepieces that Newson founded with Oliver Ike in 1994.

Unsurprisingly, Apple has been quick off the mark to mainstream the phenomenon of the market’s increased desire for “mass customised” products – objects that are still essentially mass-produced but speak to the desires of the buyer for a custom-made object. As a result, the Apple Watch comes in a huge range of interchangeable “part” selections of materials, colour, band type and clasps, along with various iterations for programming options. Also available, somewhat paradoxically, are “limited edition” versions in pure black sport or plated gold.

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This dichotomy points to a shift in the design market in two quite distinct directions – that is, the embrace of digital production allowing for more responsive, “co-designed” products within an essentially mass-production process, or limited edition commissions that present design as a highly collectible commodity parallel to the art market.

Interestingly, Newson sits at the forefront of both. Famously, he holds the record for the highest auction price reached for a “design object” with the acquisition of an edition of his Lockheed Lounge produced in the early part of his career – literally a working prototype, made by hand. The \$US1 million-plus sale set a precedent for the

value of design objects in the collector market and came after Newson’s commissioning by New York’s Gagosian Gallery for a collection of limited edition works produced from precious materials.

Indeed, the Gagosian, along with the then-named Phillips de Pury auction house and furniture company Established & Sons (co-founded by Stella McCartney's husband Alasdair Willis), was an early leader in the limited edition design market, which flourished in cities such as New York and London, then quickly felt the pressure of the global financial crisis. One of the more interesting leaders in this matrix is Australian-born, London-based Libby Sellers, who commissions limited edition works for exhibition at her eponymous central London gallery.

Sellers' staying power lies in her background as a curator at the Design Museum, where she developed the ability to nurture and translate the ideas and working prototypes produced by emerging designers to gallery-standard exhibition. An example can be seen with Sellers' recently commissioned series by Swedish-Chilean designer Anton Alvarez, whose raw, conceptual experiments focus on the design of systems and the creation of tools for producing products. One of these tools, the Thread Wrapping Machine, creates objects by binding the different components such as legs, seat or back with thousands of metres of vibrantly coloured, glue-coated thread. For the exhibition *Wrapper's Delight*, Sellers worked collaboratively with Alvarez to identify forms and processes that transcend the working experiments into a series of refined, resolved works ready for the collector market.

The value Sellers places in limited edition prototypes lies in how they drive new ways of making, and she is deeply critical of the term "design art" as being "an implied displacement of design as a marginalised sector of the art industry". Sellers believes in the power of objects to offer insight into our cultural context and tell stories of the time. In an article for *Design Week*, she points to the Arts and Crafts movement of the late 19th century as being a historical precedent – a movement that "sought to elevate the status of the craftsman and give due recognition to the individual through a reappraisal of the role of the applied arts in society as a whole... Similarly, the patrons of today's market are seeking considered collections of both art and design."

It is a position that resonates with Melbourne-based creative strategist Lou Weis – co-founder with Vincent Aiello of Broached Commissions. Founded in 2011, with a launch collection entitled *Broached Colonial*, Weis commissions limited edition objects that attempt to reinterpret stories from an examination of Australian history into objects that are imbued with stories of the local condition. “What we discovered with the launch of *Broached Colonial* was that our buyers were mainly entrepreneurs and this kind of collector wants to buy and invest in narratives and stories,” explains Weis. “The reason that prototypes from leading designers sell for so much is that what entrepreneurs want is to locate the seed of a good idea – they want to position themselves within this thinking. What Broached does is create ‘perfect prototypes’ – objects that have a strong narrative and represent new interpretations on our cultural stories.”

For each collection, Weis commissions a specialised curator to write an essay and mentor the selected designers on the period and context that they will take their inspiration from. The launch collection concentrated on the colonial period while the second, *Broached East*, focused on Australia’s relationship to Asia during the Australian gold rush.

For *Broached Colonial*, the “Briggs Family Tea Service” by designer Trent Jansen attempts to represent, via a family of objects in the form of a tea set, the story of the marriage of George Briggs – a free settler to Tasmania – to Woretermoetyenner of the Pairrebeenne people and the four children they raised. The teapot represents the porcelain water-carrying vessel from England, while the sugar jar represents the bull kelp water-carrying vessel of the indigenous north-east of Tasmania. The couple’s children take on a symbolic hybridisation of materials, including porcelain, brass, copper, bull kelp and wallaby felt. For Jansen, the opportunity to work on a commission such as this meant a release from the usual pressures of production work, spending significant time in Tasmania researching the family’s history and what impact the marriage had on their experiences of their society.

It has proved the most collected commission to date, despite the fact that the tea set is purely ornamental – in theory it is useable, but only by unclipping all the appendages. As Weis explains: “Ultimately collectors bought the work because it represented such a significant story – that of the trauma of the hybridised society that emerged in the early colonial period. It spoke of people fleeing rapidly industrialised England in the early 19th century alongside Aboriginal Australia in retreat due to the brutality of their displacement.”

After two collections and with a third in development, works from the *Broached Colonial* and *East* designers have been acquired by private, institutional and corporate collectors across the east coast of Australia, Asia and the Middle East. Weis points to plans for a range of production pieces that would see some of the ideas developed in the limited edition teased out into a more affordable context.

The tension here clearly lies between the iterative process of production design that supports the development and rapid testing of ideas and the lengthy process required for commissioning experimental, limited edition work that’s acceptable to the market as collectable work. Weis concurs, saying: “One of the challenges of working within a limited edition model is that it’s fixed as soon as it’s designed – it’s locked off; that’s it. Yet at the same time, the more a limited edition piece is shown internationally, the more the collectors’ ownership of one edition of it increases in value and the more it encourages the next body of work.”

Both Weis and Jansen are quick to acknowledge the inherent dilemma of commissioning limited edition objects that speak to difficult social and political issues and yet are very expensive and rarefied. It sits uneasily with the Marxist notion that those who control the means of production control the power and, ultimately, limited edition is clearly controlled by the culturally engaged and intended for the wealthy.

Reflecting on this, Trent Jansen’s response is circumspect: “I design these objects as a vehicle of expression, to communicate a particular narrative or event of historical importance to a broader audience. This audience doesn’t have to access the narrative by owning the actual object; they access it through the media and exhibitions ... In this way we can all consume the ideas that are communicated within limited edition design, without having to own anything.” ●