

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Grand designs



Marc Newson: "I have always been obsessive. Or selfish. It's a fine line."

Catherine Keenan

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Charm, talent and enormous ambition have delivered design guru Marc Newson an enviably glamorous lifestyle, writes Catherine Keenan.

Imagine a small boy growing up in suburban Australia in the 1970s. Any time he doesn't absolutely have to be elsewhere, he runs in his short pants to the garage to make things with his grandfather. He makes billycars mostly, or tries to, but he also loves taking things apart to see how they work: radios, bicycles, watches. It is an optimistic time. For the boy, because of his youth; for the world, because man recently landed on the moon.

Still, imagine how the boy's eyes would have widened if someone had said he would one day design a car, a jet, and a rocket. Imagine telling him that an aluminium lounge he would make in his early 20s would later fetch more than a million pounds at auction. Imagine telling him that his chairs would be displayed in museums around the world (including the NGV) and his dish rack would become a kitchenware icon. He would surely have laughed. A chair in a museum? Designing a dish rack?

"You couldn't be a designer back then," says Marc Newson. "It just didn't exist. I thought I might go into some sort of trade."

Since then, the Midas touch of design has danced over every corner of our lives, and few people have benefited from this as much as the versatile Newson. Now 45, he has designed, among other things, saucepans, a bicycle, watches, boats, a shoe boutique for Azzedine Alaïa in Paris, aeroplane interiors and first-class airport lounges in Melbourne and Sydney for Qantas, the Lever House and Canteen restaurants in Manhattan and Coast restaurant in London, cutlery for Alessi, sunglasses for Lanvin, clothes for G-Star, trainers for Nike, luggage for Samsonite, chairs for Cappellini, lighting for Flos. Even a vibrator.

In 2005, Time magazine named Newson one of the 100 most influential people in the world. Anne Watson, who worked with Newson when she was a curator at Sydney's Powerhouse Museum, puts Newson in the world's top 10 industrial designers, with names such as Philippe Starck and Ron Arad. Where he has shot ahead of the pack is at the very rarified end of the design spectrum sometimes called design-art: handcrafted, limited editions of pieces of furniture so sculptural they are more art than serviceable item. In 2007, Newson had a solo show at the hugely influential Gagosian Gallery in New York, the only designer in a stable of artists that includes Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons.

His chairs, tables and shelves were displayed like sculptures, and fetched comparable prices. But it's that aluminium Lockheed Lounge, one of which is currently on display at the NGV, a piece he designed just a year after graduating from Sydney College of the

Arts, that has become iconic. "It already had an international reputation when it was bought," says Kristy Grant, the NGV's senior curator of Australian Art. "In retrospect, it was one of those really great acquisitions."

There are just 15 Lockheed Lounges in existence; and when one recently sold at auction for £1.1 million, it set a record for a piece by a living designer.

Originally from Sydney, Newson moved to Melbourne, then Japan, then Europe. He now calls London home, has a house in Paris and spends much of his time criss-crossing the globe. Last year he married British stylist and former model Charlotte Stockdale, the daughter of a baronet who was once voted among the 50 most glamorous women in the world by British Vogue. Their life together is hectic. Stockdale says they both work hard, and unwind with the same intensity. "Oh my God, he's crazy," she laughs.

"He's just wild and fun and uninhibited." He loves to heli-board and every year, he and Stockdale race one of his four vintage sports cars - an Aston Martin, a Lamborghini, a Ferrari and a Cisitalia, all built between 1948 and 1969 - in Italy's Mille Miglia, a vintage car rally. They once drove the Aston Martin to Greece. "I'm not a motor head," Newson insists. "I don't like the new versions of any of those cars." He likes the old ones for the beauty of their design.

Newson was in Melbourne recently to pick up the top award at the Australian International Design Awards, for the economy-class seat he designed in his role as creative director for Qantas. He's been known to wear orange velvet Gucci suits, but when we meet he looks refreshingly un-designed: a little rumpled, the only hints of his distinctive aesthetic bright yellow boat shoes. Although it's some years since he modelled for Comme de Garçons and Yamamoto, you can still imagine him strolling down a runway with studied nonchalance. His manner is a little flat at first, though a cavalier streak soon rips through. He has a way of saying things that, in print, sound arrogant but in person simply seem candid, a refusal of false modesty.

Newson was raised by his mother. His father left when he was two and he hasn't heard from him since. "It is a bit weird, as he's probably read about me somewhere." He had a peripatetic childhood, spending time in Europe and then Seoul, when his stepfather was transferred there. (His mother, Carol Conomos, remarried when he was 12). He was a creative child, but not academic, and was often in trouble. The only thing he was interested in was making things. "I was obsessive about that. I always have been obsessive. Or selfish. It's a fine line."

People who knew Newson in his late teens recall his ambition above all else, and he concurs. "I was absolutely hell bent on doing something important," he says. Sydney College of the Arts rarely took people straight from school, but it took him. He enrolled in jewellery, though he ended up making furniture, and his talent and focus were apparent early.

Margaret West, who taught him in second year, recalls that he was fascinated by the radical 1980s Memphis Movement in design. One day he was sitting in the second-year studio poring over a book about its leader, Ettore Sottsass. "I remember him looking at me and saying, 'I want to be Ettore Sottsass the Second.' So I said to him, 'No, no. Why don't you be Marc Newson the First?' And he said: 'Yes.' And off he went."

After graduating, he moved to Melbourne to work with jeweller Susan Cohn. The assistant role didn't sit easily with him, and he was upfront about it being a stepping stone. "Marc was always going to be a star," Cohn says. "I think it was all too slow for him down here, or we couldn't open the doors for him. Marc was very much about Marc. But I think that's also young people ... Marc's a charmer when he focuses on you, but if he doesn't, you don't exist. I have enormous respect for him. He's done exactly what he set out to do."

Soon after his move to Melbourne, Newson was awarded a \$10,000 Australia Council grant, which allowed him to put on a show at a leading Sydney gallery. He made six pieces, only one of which, the Lockheed Lounge, sold, to the Art Gallery of South Australia for \$3000.

He later made an edition of 10 lounges, and the National Gallery of Victoria acquired one in 1990. "It's been one of the museums that's collected my work from the get go," Newson says. In the same year, a Lockheed was chosen by Philippe Starck for the lobby of the uber-chic Paramount Hotel in New York; three years later, Madonna draped over one in the music video for Rain.

By then, Newson's career was underway. In 1987, he followed a model girlfriend to Japan. (There are often women, usually models, at turning points in Newson's life. "Models were the only girls living this international lifestyle, so in a way it made sense," he says in his defence. It surely didn't hurt that they were also beautiful? "Yeah, that didn't hurt.")

One rainy day, this same girlfriend was crossing the road when she was invited to share a man's umbrella. He was Teruo Kurosaki, owner of Japan's chic design company Idee. Soon, Idee had put Newson's Embryo chair - originally commissioned by the Powerhouse Museum in 1988 - into production, alongside work by the likes of Philippe Starck. This led to offers from Alessi, Cappellini and Flos. Newson was off.

Louise Neri, who grew up in Victoria and is now a director at the Gagosian Gallery in New York where Newson shows his work, remembers him from this time. "Elegant and androgynous, with a long ponytail. He drove around in an old Citroen DS. Even then, Marc was cosmopolitan and sophisticated aesthetically. He had a cool and easy way about him - partly bravado, given that he was finding it hard to make ends meet at the time. His aesthetic ideas didn't seem to be like anyone else's, although in retrospect they were probably part of a larger international consciousness."

Newson believes being Australian has been an advantage for him, as he started designing free of the constraints of tradition. But he bristles when asked about Australian design in general. "I find it completely and utterly parochial to try to identify a type of design as being Australian. Design is design, and the great thing about design is that it's an international occupation."

There are individual artists and architects he admires: Melbourne painter Dale Hickey, and Melbourne architects Wood Marsh spring to mind. "I have a huge respect for what they've been able to achieve." He was also intrigued by the recent Bugatti exhibition at the NGV. "I thought it was a very interesting exhibition of engineering and decorative arts, and art. It really covered the three areas that I endeavour to work in. I work with art galleries, I work in the area of engineering with aviation, and I love old cars."

Newson sees himself as a gun for hire, jetting in to fix people's design problems. He comes up with many of his solutions thousands of feet above the earth - if he's flying Qantas, reclining on a Skybed he designed himself - filling notebooks with small, obscure drawings only he can understand. His biomorphic forms are not so much futuristic, as retro-futuristic, like a hopeful, now-lost idea of what the 21st century might look like. They are usually curved, almost molten-looking, and the early work, in particular, was often in DayGlo-like orange, yellow or green. Everything from his chaise longues to his lamps looks like it might move; it's easy to imagine his Embryo chair skittering across the room, like a benign science-fiction creature. A Newson piece appeals because it is at once brilliantly new, yet never alienating, and often fun.

Newson has ongoing relationships with Alessi, Cappellini, Magis and Flos, because they can get items like his green and orange Dish Doctor dish rack into homes around the world - something that matters to him. The benefit of success is that now, when he wants to take the corporate fetters off, he can make whatever he pleases and exhibit it in a gallery. The market for limited-edition furniture - beautiful, uncomfortable and extortionately expensive - has exploded in the past decade, and Newson is its poster boy. "I don't mean to brag but that's just the way it is." He sold most of the pieces he designed for his shows at the Gagosian galleries in New York in 2007 and London in 2008 at prices reaching hundreds of thousands of dollars.

But it's the Lockheed Lounge that continues to set records. He is irritated by the question, so often asked, of whether he considers it design or art. "I don't really care. And I don't know, really, how to answer that. You'd be better off asking someone who

just paid £1.1 million for it. Some people consider it a sculpture, some people consider it a piece of furniture. But the fact is, it probably lies somewhere in the middle."

Newson is still fascinated by how things work. "Something I've always loved about Marc is that he really understands materials and how things are made," says Gagosian's Louise Neri. "He can pick up any object and tell you a lot about it, in terms of appraising the techniques and methods used to make it and the material properties. He is both intuitive and knowledgeable."

Many of his projects are like fantasies. He's designed a concept car (never intended for production) for Ford; the interior of a \$40-million private jet; and, for Qantas, the entire interior of the A380, the largest plane in the world. He has even designed the interior of a space plane, which takes off like a normal jet but has rockets to propel it beyond the earth's atmosphere. Sadly, the financial crisis means it may be some time before people slip into the seats like solid hammocks, which swing as the plane rotates in space, and climb around in zero-gravity using the yellow handles Newson has dotted all over. "It's such a shame. I'd love to go up in it," he says.

For all his cosmopolitan sophistication, there is still something of the wide-eyed boy in Newson, thrilling at what he has been allowed to do. A design critic once said that he had used his career to live out his boy's own fantasies of speed and travel. Newson thinks about this for a minute. "At the risk of oversimplifying, yeah, I suppose I have." Then he's off, to catch another plane.

Newson's greatest hits

LOCKHEED LOUNGE The lounge was meant to be one fluid aluminium form but Newson didn't know how to create it. So he riveted aluminium sheets together, giving the piece a military aircraft feel. In April, it broke the record for the highest price paid for a work by a living designer, when it sold for £1.1 million. "It's become the most iconic piece of that genre that lies somewhere between design and art," Newson says.

EMBRYO CHAIR The first Newson chair to go into production, through the Japanese company Idee in 1988, and later with Cappellini. The Embryo chair looks familiar now, but its rounded shape was radically new 20 years ago. "No one was making things in bright colours that were curvy and seductive and sensual," says Newson. "I'd been subconsciously developing a style, and with that piece I think I defined what that style was."

ATMOS 561 CLOCK Long fascinated by the Atmos clock, which is powered by minute changes in temperature, Newson designed his own version. "It's an incredibly complex thing, but it was developed 85 years ago and essentially hasn't been modified since," says Newson. "I was trying to reinterpret it in a slightly more contemporary way, but at the same time, of course, be mindful of the fact that it's historically an incredibly important object."

QANTAS LOUNGE Newson designed the airline's first-class lounges in Melbourne and Sydney. He says he is inspired by the golden age of air travel, when it was exciting and glamorous, rather than a chore. "It's fundamentally about creating a consistent experience," he says of his aircraft cabin designs, "as if it was designed at the same time, that looks as though design was at the forefront of the process, and that works as a whole."

BIOMEGA BIKE Newson's sleek "modern urban" bicycle designs for Danish industrial design company Biomega feature everything from powerful disc brakes and a chainless drive system to a body glued together with Formula 1 epoxy - said to be the most adhesive and elastic bond ever made. He has even designed a glow-in-the-dark model. Cycling geeks have described Newson's bikes as either high art or wild ride - perhaps both.

WATCHES Since Newson first began designing timepieces in the 1980s, his wristwatches have been studies in elegant simplicity. His Ikepod collection of Swiss-made watches includes Solaris, named after Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 film where

dreams and reality merge. Newson's symmetrical design renders the concept of duality via two time zones, with one face visible and the other hidden.

THE SKYBED As the creative director of Qantas, Newson's first job was designing the Skybed, a plush business class sleeper seat. Next he took on the interior of the A380: its economy-class seat won the top award at this year's Australian International Design Awards, which were held in Melbourne recently. He is now working his way through the rest of the fleet.

FORD CAR Newson was hired by Ford in 1999 to rethink the car from the ground up. The result was the 021C concept car - never intended to go into production - which he based on the box-like drawings of cars we did as children. It featured a boot that pulls out like a drawer, swivel seats, and rear hinged "suicide" rear doors like those found on a Rolls Royce.

Melbourne designers to watch

MIKE CHIJOFF AND CARL JONES

Chijoff, 37, (left) and Jones, 36, started their industrial design company, Joneschijoff, last year. Their Paper Plane Academy (design fun for primary school-aged children) was part of the recent State of Design Festival and Jones' "Rackless Pannier Bag" was part of a range that won a Premier's Design Mark last year. This year, they lodged an intellectual property patent on a device used in the extreme sport of paint ball.

SOREN LUCKINS

Luckins, 30, is the founder of Buro North; his eco-friendly "Green Xmas Tree" won a Premier's Design Award in 2008. In 2006, he won a Young Guns award from the Advertising and Design Club of New York.

CHELSEA HING

Hing, 35, an interior designer, was commended in the emerging design practice category of this year's National Design Awards and has been shortlisted as an IDEA Awards emerging designer.

SIMONE LEAMON

The 38-year-old designer won the \$30,000 Cicely and Colin Rigg Contemporary Design Award this year for "Lepidoptera", her chair made out of recycled automotive fabric (see it until August 30 at NGV Australia). She lectures in industrial design at RMIT and is the creative director for Planex, which designs high-end office storage. In 2003, she took plans for a sexy motorcycle suit to Ducati in Italy. Instead, she ended up snaring a deal with the prestige lighting company Oluce.

ELLY GARDNER

A laser-cut, handmade partition curtain won this 27-year-old RMIT graduate a Victorian Graduate of the Year award from the Design Institute of Australia in April. She has worked stints at Akira Isogawa and Fibre Red, with another to follow with textile designer Beci Orpin later this year.

RONNIE LACHAM

Since Wallpaper magazine picked him as one of their 20 most interesting designers to watch in 2002, Lacham, 39, has designed a chair that made the top 20 in an international competition and he was accepted to do a research residency in New York.

LAMBIE CHAN

Her corkscrew-like recycled hardwood bench "Ribbon", was highly commended at this year's Cicely and Colin Rigg Contemporary Design Awards but her first prize was for a piece at the Fringe Festival in 2005. The Hong-Kong-born 27-year-old studied industrial design at Swinburne University of Technology and started focusing on sustainable furniture in 2006.

LISA VINCITORIO

In 2004, when she was 21, Alessi released Vincitorio's "Fruit Loop" fruit bowl; now 26, Alessi has released her "Zucch", a sugar dispenser, and one of her table ranges is out with Australian company Corporate Culture.

MATTHEW BIRD

Bird, 29, has worked with architects Ashton Raggatt McDougall and with Cassandra Fahey, where he won an RAIA award for interior architecture for his work on hip bar New Gold Mountain. His psychedelic apartment "Alphaomega" is currently shortlisted for an IDEA Interior Design Award.