

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Marc Newson talks Sydney NYE 2011

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Marc, you've designed cars, chairs, briefcases, bottle openers, rockets, jets, dildoes and everything in between. Yet you own almost none of it?

I'm not much of a fan or historian or archivist of anyone's stuff, let alone mine. I don't have a collector's mentality. I love the idea of creating things then allowing them to go off and live their own lives, each standing on their own merits... or faults.

You grew up in Gordon in Sydney's northern suburbs – what were your earliest creations?

Looking back, the genesis of my career was man landing on the moon. I was only six years old but I remember very clearly the feeling that moment gave me. I could see Utopia and I felt overwhelming optimism in mankind. That manifested itself in me as ambition. My grandfather had a garage workshop – a sort of no-go zone of strange tools and weird bits and pieces – and I started going in there, taking things apart and putting them back together again, then making stuff from scratch. I've never lost that

fascination, that obsession for creating. That child-like wonder informs everything I do. It's just that my billycarts are now cars, jets and rockets.

Was Sydney a great place to grow up?

Definitely. For a kid like I was, Sydney was fantastic. I never felt like there were any boundaries to what I could do or be. I think that's one of the great intrinsic things about Sydney's character – it's always a big, wild place with no frontiers. That overwhelming feeling of freedom in Sydney really fostered my imagination.

That imagination really came of age with the Lockheed Lounge, didn't it?

I guess so. See, I went to art school originally, I didn't study design. It was 1986 and I was at Sydney College of the Arts studying jewellery and sculpture but the reality was I just wanted to make stuff and improve my physical skills. The Lockheed Lounge was this vision that had been building in me for a while. I'd first sketched it in a Surry Hills warehouse. In my mind's eye it was this big globule of mercury, seamless and gleaming. One day I got this huge lump of foam and set it up in the backyard of a workshop I was sharing in Balmain. I traced some lines in felt tip and then attacked it, hacking away with a wire brush in a sort of frenzy. Shit was flying everywhere but I had the sense something monumental was happening.

How did you feel when you finished?

You know that quote from Michelangelo: "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free". It was like that. Only when the Lockheed appeared did it exist.

You handmade 13 Lockheeds, exhibiting them at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Paddington and sold a few for \$3,000 a pop. In 2009, a Lockheed went for \$1.6 million – the highest price ever for a design by a living artist. Yet by then you'd moved from sculpture into designs for the mass market. Why?

Functionality. For me it's the single most important thing in design. If a design doesn't have a practical purpose, you're not a true designer. That said, it's still very important to me to run riot every now and then and do more sculptural things like the Lockheed Lounge. So even though I work with big brands and a lot of corporate clients, in my own time I experiment. One of the things that defines my body of work is flexibility. I've worked across a vast spectrum of projects, from the very unfunctional like the Lockheed, to something like the Dish Doctor, which is highly functional... even though it doesn't appear so at first glance.

Many artists are driven by the quest for perfection but your driving force is more correcting imperfection, isn't it?

Absolutely. What inspires me is dissatisfaction with what exists already. I really resent having to buy ugly things! That's why I love rewriting what people take as written. The aviation industry is a case in point. You don't need to be a rocket scientist to know that sitting on an aeroplane for vast amounts of time is not

a hugely enjoyable experience. Yet most planes are badly conceived, top-heavy and over-engineered. They have been for a long time because there's been no mandate to change the status quo. My work for Qantas these past ten years has been about rebuking that and improving the practicalities of flight. Look around: so many aspects of our lives can be improved. Ultimately, my job is to look to the future and identify better ways of doing things so there are more choices for consumers.

Your new client is the City of Sydney itself, who have appointed you Creative Director for 2011's New Year's Eve. What have you got in store for us?

New Year's Eve in Sydney is so personal – it's an event for everyone. That's something I'm passionate about, and being a Sydney boy is the base-level qualification for this job. We all love our city and now I've got a chance to put it in lights. Our theme is 'Time to Dream' with a logo of an endless rainbow representing dreams for a brighter future and a better world. The colours I've chosen symbolise different people coming together at New Year's Eve. Violet is the colour of the Sydney dusk. Blue for sea and sky. The green evokes Sydney's trees and parks. Gold represents sun and sand.

But fireworks fade. How do you design a show that stays in the memory?

By making sure everyone comes away in a good mood. It's that simple. I want people to be optimistic about the year to come and feel good about the year just passed. At the same time, I want the fireworks to be a trigger to telling a wider Sydney story, not a literal one but one you feel... an experience totally celebratory. It's going to be an eye opener for me too because I'm not known for my creation of performances, yet here I am creating a very spontaneous, explosive and esoteric performance for my home town. It'll be fast... but fun.

What about a more enduring legacy – say a public art piece in Taylor Square?

I would love to do something like that. I feel I know Taylor Square intimately... although my memories are mainly of stumbling around from bar to bar! But yes, creating something functional for Sydney appeals to me enormously. I do feel Sydney has been blighted by certain designs these past decades – I've never been a fan of the Monorail. Of course, at the other end of the spectrum is the Opera House – absolutely one of my favourite buildings, so fantastic and extraordinary a design on so many levels. I also love Harry's Café de Wheels. It's my nostalgia for that rough diamond side of Sydney I grew up with, not the homogenised city it's slowly becoming.

Do you foresee a future where you return to Sydney to live?

Absolutely. I never let go of that thought. One of the things I've noticed about living overseas is everybody's life seems to revolve around holidays, getting out of their city and away from their day-to-day lives. But Sydneysiders aren't like that. Deep down they're always on holiday. Luck is always on their doorstep.