

Tea for two?

By Alison Beard

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This past Monday, just after 1pm, 19 people seated around a lunch table at Browns restaurant in Mayfair turned a young furniture designer, Sebastian Brajkovic, into a museum-quality artist.

They decided, with a simple show of hands, that his Lathe Chair VIII should be purchased by champagne house Moët Hennessey and placed into the permanent collection at London's Victoria and Albert Museum.

But the judges weren't the real kingmakers at the table. The man Brajkovic needs to thank is V&A curator Gareth Williams, who had spent the previous 18 hours evaluating DesignArt London, a show of limited edition contemporary and 20th-century furniture and objects. He opted to put the Lathe chair alongside two other pieces on the judges' shortlist.

"I've been watching his work for a while so it was a straightforward and easy one for me," Williams says. "We're working on an exhibition, *Telling Tales*, looking at the design-art movement, the rise of limited edition work by designers, particularly those who have stories to tell related to history or paradigms, and this piece fits in perfectly."



Sebastian Brajkovic's Lathe Chair VIII

Such decisions are important because "design-art" is a fledgling collecting category. It has been buzzing in recent years, with a proliferation of fairs around the world and some six-figure sales of limited edition or one-off works by stars such as Zaha Hadid and Mark Newson. But the global financial crisis could easily dampen demand, especially for less established designers, making institutional endorsement and investment even more critical.

Williams began his work at 6pm on Sunday night with "a bit of a recce" to the DesignArt tent in Berkeley Square, where the gallerists and dealers were still setting up their stands. "Trying to shortlist from a show that wasn't yet built was difficult," he acknowledges. But he had a brief – to select a piece by a living designer – and a budget – £15,000 – so found a "a handful" of pieces to consider.

What the judges said: 'It all came down to personal taste'

Designer Tom Dixon summed up the dilemma of several DesignArt judges with the words: "I have no idea what I am voting for. Is it someone dead or alive?" In the end, he chose a tree growing through the exhibition tent in Berkeley Square, **writes Janice Blackburn.**

Eventually, we were told we had to make four decisions: first, to pick which of Gareth Williams' shortlisted contemporary pieces would go into the V&A collection; second, a best stand; third, the best work by a living

On Monday morning he returned to narrow his choices and speak to dealers about discounts, since most will take 10 per cent or more off for museum buyers. He settled on two pieces: Brajkovic's, a classic chair split and stretched into two seats, cast in grey-coated bronze and upholstered with embroidery, shown by London's Carpenters Workshop Gallery and priced at £16,000; and *The Elegance Throne*, a seat made of rusted, deactivated firearms by Mozambique's Gonçalo Mabunda listed at £15,700 by Paris-based Perimeter Editions.

Choosing the third was more difficult. One option was *Rock Fusion Soft*, a £19,950 patchwork blue felt sculptural stool or bench designed by Arik Levy and shown by Paris's *Mouvements Modernes*. But, at the other end of the tent, London's *Rove* gallery had two earlier iterations of the "faceted" *Rock Fusion* design in bronze and stainless steel, the latter priced at about £25,000. The problem with both was price.

At 11am Williams was scheduled to reveal his choices to the judges but, looking for their own "best in show" picks, with champagne glasses in hand, they proved impossible to corral.

designer in the show; fourth, the best by a past master. Inevitably, it came down to subjective personal taste.

Williams described Rock Fusion by Arik Levy in stainless steel as “very exhibitable”. But I didn’t think that was a good enough reason for selecting this somewhat predictable work. I much preferred Levy’s more original piece in a patchwork of felt fabric on the Mouvements Modernes stand.

Gonçalo Mabunda’s one-off pieces with de-commissioned weapons are undoubtedly powerful. But the idea is hardly original. Alex Rey, a young Texan I wrote about in this newspaper last year, is among other furniture-makers using guns in their work.

So I voted with the majority in favour of Sebastian Brajkovic’s creative love seat. The reimagined classic, in cast bronze with embroidery, cleverly links historical and contemporary design and is most appropriate for the V&A.

For best stand, the final contenders were two Parisian galleries, HP Le Studio and Mouvements Modernes, and London’s David Gill Gallery. But HP won hands down. As one panellist said: “It was the serious level of pieces that gave a coherent view of what the gallery is about.”

I agree. A pair of white revolving bookcases by Claudio Salochi and walnut bookcases by Franco Albini from the 1950s were perfect examples of pure, stunning design. Aspiring young designers should look and learn from their subtle understatement.

When it came to best in show, opinions were deeply divided.

Spaghetti Cortem, a flamboyant outdoor bench by Argentinian designer Pablo Reinoso at Carpenters Workshop Gallery was popular, while lighting by Christophe Côme at Christina Grajales’ stylish stand was deemed “poetic and beautifully simple”. Other favourites included a table by Matteo Bonetti and stunning work by Zaha Hadid, both at David Gill.

He used the time to give V&A director Mark Jones a quick private preview of the “mutated” Brajkovic chair, one of a limited edition of eight; Mabunda’s “found objects” throne, a one-off; and the soft Levy piece, one of nine. They ended at the Rove stand, in front of the metal Rock Fusions, and Williams huddled with the dealer, Kenny Schacter, for a moment. One word – “discount” – was audible and Schacter later confirmed he had agreed to “donate” his upside to move into the V&A’s price range.

Finally, at 12.30pm, Williams gathered the judges. Some had already peppered him with questions: “What gaps do you need to fill?” “How much do you have to spend?” But he would only say he was looking for contemporary pieces “amid all this mid-century modern” and that the Moët gift was “generous but it’s not going to get us a piece by Zaha”.

And so the tour began. Sidestepping ladders and vacuum cleaners, Williams led the judges to the still-under-construction Carpenters Workshop Gallery space, where the Lathe chair was hidden in a corner. “Four people, clean hands,” snapped dealer Loïc Le Gaillard, summoning employees to move the heavy piece into the light. He provided Brajkovic’s background – Dutch-Indonesian mother, Croatian-Italian father, now based in Amsterdam and focused on “reinventing” classics – then Williams gave his pitch. “It’s directly looking at history but inspiring something new, which is a good theme for the V&A,” he said. Plus, “it would go straight into an exhibition next year, which is important for us.”

Next up was The Elegance Throne. “This designer was born in 1975, I believe the year war broke out in Mozambique,” Williams explained. “I have to admit I didn’t know about him before but I’m pleased to discover him. I found this a really powerful piece. And we’d like to extend our collection of African material.”

The Mouvements Modernes stand with the soft Levy piece was just opposite but, instead of stopping, the curator walked past, judges in tow, heading for the Rove stand to show them the metal Rocks. “This would be good to have on the grounds that it’s an aesthetic advance by an established designer and we don’t have anything by him,” Williams concluded.

Tour complete, the judges trooped off to eat and vote for their favourite. Brajkovic’s won by a large majority and Williams says he wasn’t surprised. “I could make a very strong case for that one because that was the piece I knew we could fit into a project. I think it’s quite important that we show it and use it rather than put it away.”

As for the non-winners: “I’d love to show Arik Levy’s work if we can find the right piece at the right price. And I’m very taken with [Mabunda’s] work now too. I think we’re going to pursue that piece.”

Whether non-institutional buyers will spend money on design-art in these straitened times is another question. Williams hedges his bets. “One scenario is that it’s seen as an area with potential for growth in values when compared to contemporary art. People are wondering where to put their money and at least these are tangible assets. Conversely, it’s such an emerging market, it could get knocked for six. [But] I hope those with the ability to support designers and museums continue to recognise the long-term gain.”

DesignArt London, until October 19,

But half the judges wanted older, historic pieces to be recognised instead, prompting an argument – and Dixon's frustration. The result was a compromise: two bests in show for Côme's Double Loukoum and a bookshelf by Italian legend Gio Ponti.

My own personal choice would have been more unconventional: Betty Woodman's exuberant porcelain sculptures tucked away on a shelf at an overcrowded Sèvres porcelain company stand.

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