




COVER STORY

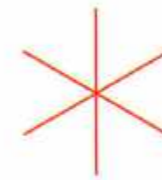
FOSTERING DESIGN DRAWING ON A POOL OF RAW TALENT

To find out how F!NK and Co. has prospered over the past ten years **Merryn Gates** spoke with founder Robert Foster and some other Australian designers of the F!NK range about production, processes, mentorships and the integrity of design.

Aluminium off-cuts and heart brooch, F!NK and Co., 2006.
Photography by Keith Saunders



THAT JUG. YOU
RECOGNISE IT
IMMEDIATELY.
YOU PROBABLY
KNOW IT IS MADE
IN AUSTRALIA.
YOU MIGHT KNOW
IT IS DESIGNED
BY ROBERT
FOSTER FOR
F!NK AND CO.



You find it in restaurants around the world, from the Australian National Museum in Canberra to MoMA in New York. Gallery shops love it; the Powerhouse Museum has collected it.

But where did this Australian design icon come from?

The F!NK *Water Jug* was originally a commission for a Canberra restaurant in 1993. It was a small edition made with a simple press, old pieces of steel and wood from a fence post, typical of the designer known for his physical strength and determination.

Foster had experimented with anodised aluminium while still studying with hollow-ware master, and first major influence, Ragnar Hansen. While Foster's one-off works are idiosyncratic, his 'technical facility', it was noted, 'remains deeply within hollow-ware traditions'.¹ Aluminium offered an alternative to the expensive metals, such as silver, with which he was making curvaceous and quirky teapots. The jug owes its highly resolved form to these handbeaten vessels, a side of Foster's practice for which he is equally well known and which continues to feed into the F!NK production range. 'I don't draw an ideological line between my one-off works and F!NK,' he states. 'I have learned to see them as notions of operation, that dwell on a sliding scale between objects only made possible via handmaking, through to the objects only made possible by manufacturing technology'.²

Foster immediately saw aluminium's potential for production processes. The aluminium tubing from which the *Water Jug* is formed, he realised, already contains the volume, minimising the work traditionally needed for hollow-ware vessels. After further development, the *Water Jug* became the first F!NK product, and is still the mainstay of the company. It encapsulates the qualities of F!NK and Co. that have distinguished it since it was established in 1994: distinctive design, rethinking function and technical innovation.

The F!NK range resurrected the use of anodised aluminium for quality designer tableware. After a brief moment of glory in the 1950s, the material was put to more utilitarian use in building and industry. Foster, who calls aluminium a 'harlequin of metals',³ has exploited its unique properties, shaping the raw material through pressing and folding, and developing innovations in forming. For example, the *Blast Vase*, 1999, was formed using high explosives and produced in collaboration with pyrotechnician Zeljko Markov, and the *Antipasto Set*, 2001, designed by sculptor Rachel Bowak, is made through hydroforming.

His colleagues admire the way Foster works on the verge of what is possible with industry, pushing

manufacturers to their limits. Reliable anodising was always difficult to source. For many years, inconsistent quality led to high attrition rates. F!NK has now set up its own anodising facility, and in fact provides precision work for scientific equipment and satellite components. Foster is amused that 'the same degree of precision is required for tableware and space exploration'.

From the outset, F!NK and Co., as the name suggests, was intended to support a network of people: other Australian designers, as well as providers of outsourced work, graphic designers, photographers, printers and interested students.

Sean Booth first worked with F!NK on a commission to make tableware for the Hyatt's three restaurants at the National Museum of Australia when it opened in 2001. Students from the Canberra School of Art Gold and Silversmithing workshop were brought in to cope with the increased workload. 'We've all been grunts,' says Booth with a laugh, referring to the group gathered for this issue of *Object* to discuss their experiences with F!NK, but highly specialised skills are required of all those who work at F!NK. Booth's connection was continued through an Australia Council Mentorship in 2003, so that 'there was a direct dialogue between us about my work'.⁴ A Craft ACT exhibition⁵ celebrated the mentorship, and Booth has since designed a candelabra for the F!NK range. Like flatware designer-maker Oliver Smith, another graduate of the workshop who has worked for F!NK, Booth valued Foster's experience with industry and his approach to tooling for production. Tooling takes up a large percentage of Foster's time, as he remains closely connected to this part of the process to 'maintain the sensitivity and integrity of the design'.⁶ The eye, he believes, is more sophisticated than machines. By keeping his hand in the making of the tools, more personality and humanness – the subtle characteristics of design – is retained in the multiple.

Foster realised that his hesitations about production processes 'were really issues about integrity'.⁷ He does not, in fact, draw a distinction between his one-off exhibition works and the production lines. This is a model from which emerging designers can draw inspiration – it finds a way for craft and design to meet, without denying either tradition. The training they all had in craft has given Smith and Booth a 'hands-on material understanding that informs the design of the tooling'.⁸

Booth has written that, during his mentorship, the discussions he had with Foster about the 'motivation and discipline of a full-time practice'⁹ were the most valuable. For Smith, whose *F!NK Fatware*, 2005, has recently joined the F!NK range, the development period was the most exciting.

He remembers 'the explosion of ideas, all the fun of playing and pulling these things together into making a product', adding, 'The discipline of making multiples means that you have to design a consistent production system – a system that is built on solid research into functional and aesthetic questions, combined with an understanding of the commercial market.'

Foster, too, enjoys the cross-fertilisation. He is generous with his experience and willing to share, whether it is in formal mentorships,¹⁰ collaborations, or by inviting others to design for F!NK. The experience benefits everyone, he says with satisfaction. It 'gives emerging designers credibility and some income from royalties', while it also allows 'a meeting of my production and commercial experience with different ways of seeing things'.¹¹ For instance, Foster invited Adelaide-based Bronwen Riddiford to F!NK. She saw the new rotation-moulded plastic bowls designed by Remi Verchot with Foster, and immediately realised its potential for an ice bucket. A new product was born, the *F!NK Wine Chiller*, 2003.

Elizabeth Kelly collaborated with Foster on the *Citrus Squeezer* (F!NK's second product, launched in 1994) while she was researching coloured glass and lecturing at the Sydney College of the Arts. Kelly credits Foster with initiating an interest in the largely forgotten method of handpressed glass. 'Working with Rob initially brought toolmaking into my thinking, and through further collaboration with Michael Wilson, it has entered my practice,' she acknowledges.¹²

The shot glass set was the first of Kelly's designs successfully generated and marketed as part of the F!NK range. It took four years of material research (1995–1998) and technical support to resolve the product, and can be directly credited to Kelly's collaborative research with Wilson, a toolmaker and design engineer–glassmaker currently living in New Zealand.

Kelly and Wilson paid particular attention to the form of the shot glasses, so that the colour deepened through the continual curve of the base and was highlighted through the lip, with an edge that is crisp yet tactile on the lips. Through her research into coloured glass, Kelly has been able to offer an exclusive range of colours for the F!NK designs. 'The colours I have used are specially for those products, to complement an anodised surface colour. They share a chromatic density – both surfaces are about refracting light,' she explains.

The commercial production of the shot glasses commenced in Adelaide, where Kelly was head of the glass studio at the JamFactory Craft and Design Centre.¹³ This production was concurrent

with further research and development into industrially-designed processes of pressed, centrifuged and direct cast objects.

Unlike other F!NK products, the pressed and blow-moulded glass is made by Kelly and a team of skilled assistants in her Studio Tangerine.¹⁴ Kelly later developed a glass version of Foster's *Blast Vase*, 2004.

For his part, Foster has sought mentors among his international colleagues. In 2000 he produced a prototype teapot for Italian design giant Alessi. In that year, he also spent three months in the studio of Munich-based lighting designer



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Previous page:
Robert Foster, *The F!NK Water Jug*, 1993

Top: Rachel Bowak, *The F!NK Antipasto Set*, 2003, anodised aluminium and stainless steel

Left to right: Sean Booth, *The F!NK Candelabra*, 2005, anodised aluminium and stainless steel

Remi Verchot and Robert Foster, *The F!NK Feature Bowl*, 2002, rotation-moulded plastic
Bronwen Riddiford and Robert Foster, *The F!NK Wine Chiller*, 2003, anodised aluminium and rotation-moulded plastic

Bottom: Robert Foster, *Plink Lamp*, 2003

All photos this and previous page: Damian McDonald

Ingo Maurer. Maurer had expressed interest in Foster's lighting designs¹⁵ and invited him to work with his 12-strong design team. Foster's lights were, ironically, too similar to Maurer designs already in development to be taken up,¹⁶ but he revelled in the company of the designers and engineers who worked with Maurer. The studio takes on large installations, such as the 2005 UNICEF snowflake in New York.¹⁷ Despite Maurer's frenetic pace, Foster was able to spend some time with him, and forged a professional friendship. Foster values Maurer's frank and perceptive feedback on his work, and assisted Maurer with the installation of his exhibition at the 2005 Milan Furniture Fair.

One can detect the influence of this European design-studio model in the way that FINK engages with other designers. They retain copyright in their designs, and their name remains associated with the product (all advertising actually highlights the designer's name). They continue to receive royalties on their designs. There is an ongoing connection with the company, so that while their designs are distinct from their own individual practice, Booth, Smith and Kelly all agree that they are very conscious of their professional reputation being attached to the FINK product. As Smith also noted, 'what is justifiable in a one-off piece may need to be taken to another level of resolution as a multiple – in this sense, design makes you lift your game'.¹⁸

Ideally, FINK supports Foster as an artist. 'The business allows him to concentrate on commission work, product development and tooling, while giving him time to make his own one-off pieces,' explains partner Gretel Harrison, who joined FINK in 1997. Her background in marketing has built a strong visual identity for the company, which sends the right message about FINK: quality, Australian-made and designed, innovative, about people and with a sense of quirkiness.

FINK's suite of promotional material is supervised by Harrison, working with longtime associates graphic designer Louise Ragless and photographer Damian McDonald. The impact of their work can be seen on the FINK website: there are graphically strong product shots, with people holding or using the product, all of which gives scale and personality to the site. The design continues through all the branding such as packaging, advertising, brochures and point of sale signage.

'Gretel is the frontline of the business,' Kelly notes. It is Harrison who deals with clients and retailers, and attends international trade fairs such as the International Contemporary Furniture Fair (ICFF) in New York each May. 'Maintaining a presence at the international fairs is an investment, particularly in the US market, as it builds commercial confidence,' Harrison stresses. 'Buyers are not interested unless they know you are in it for the long term.'

She uses her contact with buyers for market research, product development and customer feedback, which is a vital part of the process that gives FINK a competitive advantage in the marketplace. She identifies gaps in the market, so that innovative products can be placed to greatest effect, such as the brief for the *Candelabra*, 2005, which was given to Booth, and a *Cream and Sugar Set*, 2001, which was designed by Foster.

About 30 per cent of FINK's business is in exporting. Client MoMA, which runs the biggest giftware mail-order catalogue in the United States, need to be able to take an item off the shelf and post it anywhere. Harrison turned this to an advantage, cross-selling by including information about the FINK range with every product. FINK places high importance on quality packaging. Harrison has determined that many of their products are, in fact, given as gifts.

In 2005, FINK and Co. won the Small to Medium Manufacturer Award in the ACT Chief Minister's Export Awards, and was a finalist in the 2005 Austrade Australian Export Awards. Hopefully, this valuable exposure will encourage potential investment capital to the company. The FINK product range is carefully expanding, with each new addition requiring expensive research and development. FINK's commitment to innovation drives the growth of the company and underwrites this costly investment in research. The unique profile FINK has established, its high-calibre design and technical bravura all set it apart from other manufacturers.

In the ten years since FINK and Co. was established, it has realised Foster's vision of being truly a company of designers. ■■■

www.finkdesign.com

- Judith O'Callaghan, *The Eloquent Vessel*, exhibition catalogue, Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Germany, 1992, p. 7.
- Andrew Nicholls, *Vast Terrain: Design and Aluminium*, exhibition catalogue, FORM Gallery, Perth, 2005, u.p.
- ibid.
- Sean Booth, in conversation with the author, 18 January 2006.
- A New Mark*, Craft ACT, Canberra, 23 April – 30 May 2004.
- Robert Foster, in conversation with the author, 29 December 2005.
- ibid.
- Sean Booth and Oliver Smith, in conversation with the author, 18 January 2006.
- Sean Booth, Craft ACT report, www.craftaustralia.com.au/articles/20050222.php, Articles, 22 February 2005.
- Foster has been partnered in three Australia Council/Craft ACT Mentorships to date: with Aidan McDonald, 1997–1998; Sean Booth, 2003; and Marcela Zavala-Baeza in 2006.
- Robert Foster, op. cit., 29 December 2005.
- Elizabeth Kelly, in conversation with the author, 18 January 2006.
- Elizabeth Kelly was Head of the Jam-Factory Glass Studio from 1997 to 2000.
- Studio Tangerine, established in 2004 at ANCA Studios, Mitchell, ACT. Sean Booth and Oliver Smith share another studio in this complex, and it was where Robert Foster started FINK. ANCA (Australian National Capital Artists) studios are artist-run, purpose-built studios in Canberra, established through an innovative ACT government and arts community initiative. Two complexes (in Dickson and Mitchell) provide tenancy for over 40 artists. These studios encourage artists to stay in Canberra, a city without the vacant factories or shops that are the traditional sources of low rent studio space.
- Readers may remember *Visions Combined*, Foster's solo exhibition of lighting prototypes at Object Gallery in 1998. The designs featured innovative ball-bearing joints and magnetic switches.
- Ingo Maurer's designers were developing magnetic switch and ball joints in lighting designs at the same time. Foster made a group of prototypes, *Dimly lit I, II and III*, while working in the studio.
- See www.ingo-maurer.com.
- The seventeen-foot structure, which replaces a nineteen-year-old snowflake, contains 462 LED and strobe fittings and 12,000 faceted prismatic Baccarat crystals.
- Oliver Smith, op. cit., 18 January 2006.



Robert Foster with *The FINK Water Jug* and Rachel Bowak with *The FINK Antipasta Set*

Elizabeth Kelly with *The FINK Shot Glass*