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Andrew Nicholls traces Damian Barton's path from a furniture-making apprenticeship in Western Australia to recent design awards and international manufacture.

Damian Barton describes his design methodology as 'the fusing of function with welcoming forms'. This approach has inspired a distinctive line of studio furniture, ranging stylistically from the slick Mod elegance of his award-winning *Quark* table collection (and matching *Eclipse* credenza), 2005, to the engaging whimsy of his *Pet(lal)* chair, 2005 – originally entitled *She Loves Me Not, She Loves Me*. The chair's form was inspired by the final two petals remaining on a flower plucked during an idealistic moment. He has even provided a fresh take on one of the most (necessarily) mercenary items of furniture imaginable through his stylish baby's *Coo* crib. Its quirky good looks belie its unexpected versatility: the piece easily transforms into a toddler's bed by removing a front panel and interchanging the legs.

The Australian's work has attracted broad critical attention over the past year for its style and trademark wit, exemplified by his iconic *Mic* light, 2005 – a light globe attached to a microphone stand that he claims is both a tribute to Edison and a paean for free speech. 'I guess that's the Aussie in me coming out!' he says of the playful nature of his work. 'Wit is a great medium by which to reach people, and I think the *Mic* light captured that perfectly. My pieces have a positive language, and if people share that, then I feel my work is validated.' The design was aptly named one of 2005's most intriguing products by United States design journal *I.D.* Barton's *Quark* collection has also been highly praised, receiving the Design Institute of Australia's Excellence in Design Award and featured as a design discovery by *Metropolis* magazine last year.

Underpinning Barton's practice is the four-year furniture-making apprenticeship he completed in Western Australia before undertaking his industrial design degree, an experience that provided invaluable understanding of the pragmatics of his medium. 'The apprenticeship gave me the ability to realise my ideas,' he states. 'I am able to work through the prototyping stage more efficiently, which ultimately improves the end result. This short cuts the general manufacturing knowledge you really need to gain as a designer, and allows me to comfortably take on projects with an element of construction knowledge to them.' It also allowed him an instinctive feel for materiality. 'Working with wood for many years gave me an appreciation for crafting and craftsmanship. I have since spent a lot of time working with other materials, such as aluminium, learning their dynamics and capabilities.'

Barton opened his own studio in San Francisco following the completion of his degree, relocating there in 2003 to capitalise on America's infinitely larger design market and proximity to Europe. Last year he shifted again, to Miami's design district – the city he claims will be 'the next New York' on the strength of its international profile and burgeoning art and design scene.

In April, he exhibited in the 2006 *Salone Satellite* Furniture Fair in Milan, showing the hand-formed aluminium version of his *Pet(lal)* chair and *Quark* cafe table. His participation was an attempt to engage with an increasingly elusive international manufacturing market. 'It is getting harder and harder now for young designers to be picked up by manufacturers,' Barton states. 'In fact, most don't even want to produce any existing pieces, but instead may offer you a brief to design something new. I went to Milan with the intent of licensing my design to a European company, as I knew it would be a piece that could sell in volume.'

His instinct paid off, with an Italian manufacturer taking on the *Quark* table for development into potential mass production and international distribution. The table will also be on show again later this year in the exhibition, *Second Skin*, in Essen, Germany, through the Vitra and Cooper Hewitt Design Museums, before going on to show at Vitra. Barton's plans for the future are to 'grow and invent. For me, the greatest satisfaction will be the path of invention.' ■■■

Andrew Nicholls is an artist and freelance writer, designer and curator based in Perth.



Damian Barton, *Pet(lal)* chair, 2005, hand-formed aluminium. Photo: courtesy the artist



Damian Barton, *Quark* cafe table, 2005, sheet aluminium and tubular steel. Photo: courtesy the artist