

Shine On

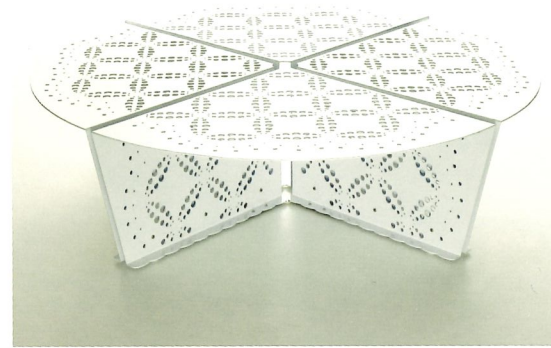
Many would argue that for three-time finalists, **Kelly Freeman and Rina Bernabei**, their win in the 2007 Bombay Sapphire Design Discovery Award was long overdue. Heidi Dokulil introduces us to the designers behind the winning bernabeifreeman brand.

Like many Australian designers, the work of Kelly Freeman and Rina Bernabei is diverse, not only from a product perspective but also from a studio standpoint. They are part of the world of academia while they maintain a commercial design studio. They enter into factories and workshops to understand the materials and processes behind each of the designs they produce. Unlike many designers, for them, the day-to-day extends beyond the drawing board and the computer and into prototyping amid the myriad of metal workshops around the country. And, when there's a new material or process to learn, well that's when it's 'boots on' and things get really exciting.

Freeman and Bernabei first met at the University of New South Wales. Bernabei was teaching and Freeman was a student. After graduation Freeman worked with Bernabei, then travelled for a year overseas, returning to join forces full time in 2002. Their first major commission was the *Peony Chandelier*, launched for *Sydney Design* 2003. Since then, bernabeifreeman has designed a collection of carefully folded and perforated tables, an installation of wallpaper seen at *Sydney Esquisse* in 2005, and an expanding collection of experimental lighting that includes *Lace*, *Crisscross* and *Seams*.

Process and experimentation are central to the work of bernabeifreeman, and inform the development of new projects. Ask them what their most important projects are, and they both agree it is the *Presence of Things* exhibition that toured Victoria in 2006 and 2007 and was both challenging and influential. Freeman remembers:

the process involved working with the Victorian Embroiderers' Guild, selecting laces from which we developed the *Emma* pendant light, and the *Brodie* table that evolved from Broderie Anglaise. Our new light, *Seams*, is also a real favourite. We have a great relationship with our current metalworkers and we like to challenge them and really push the materials and processes – in this case, folding capabilities. We also spent a lot of time cardboard model-making, and it was great to see the design come together as it did.



Bernabei's career began in Sydney. She then moved to Milan and gained experience working with car companies including Alfa Romeo and Lancia, Fiat, Disano and Loricca. Returning to Sydney in 1997, she established Ovo Design with Ruth McDermott, which was the start of what has become a continuing exploration of textiles and the domestic interior.

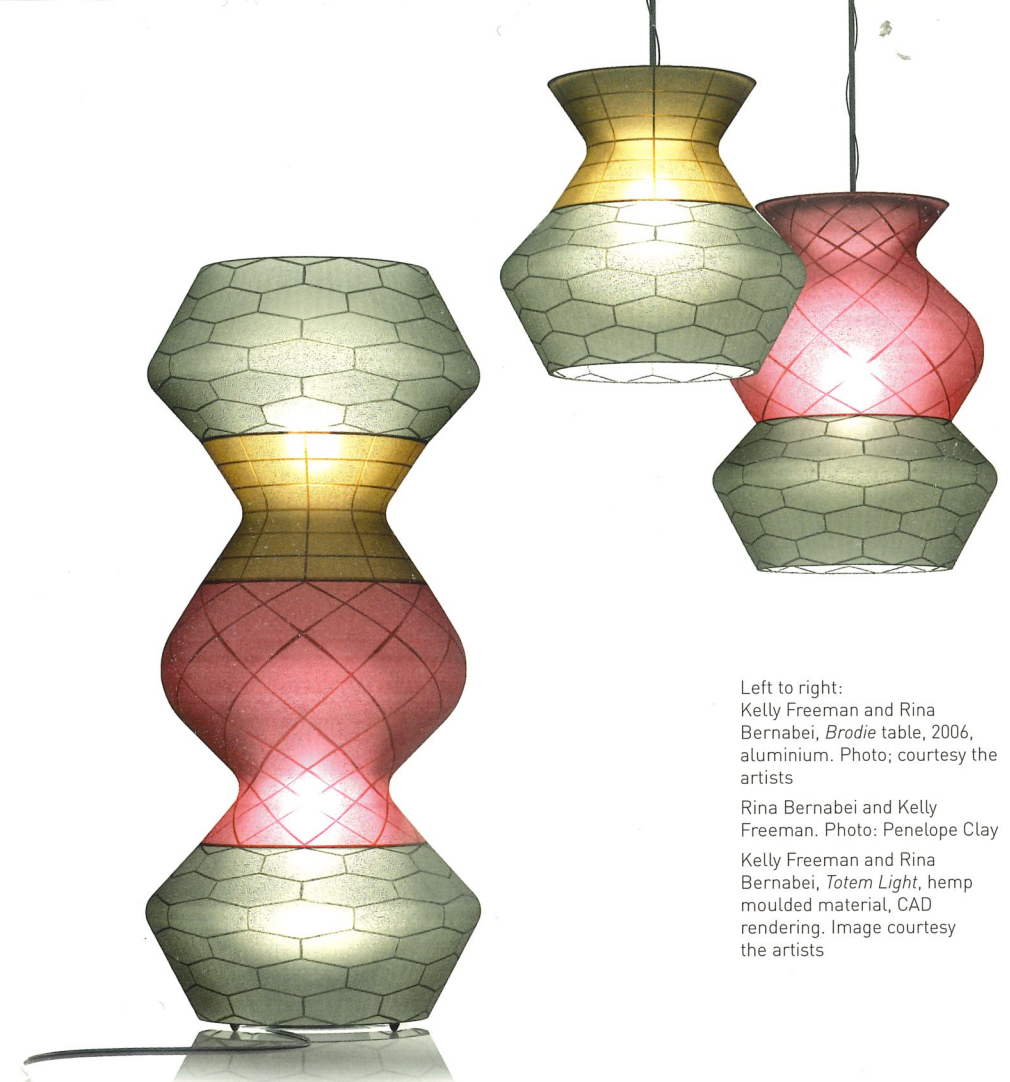
Both industrial designers, Freeman and Bernabei share many interests and their strengths are complementary. They work together creatively on ideas, with Freeman taking the lead on drawing and focusing on the application of decoration through to manufacture.

The sensory and decorative qualities of the materials, as well as the handcrafted and mass production techniques, are all-important aspects of bernabeifreeman's work. Their ideas are often inspired by botanical or geometric patterns, translated through traditional handcrafting and created by machines.

'We have always said we are fundamentally industrial designers,' remarks Freeman:

We have a loyalty to the factory, and through our work we do decorative products that speak of the home and try to have a domestic connection. People do describe our products as feminine. If anything, we have been aware of that and tried to make things more masculine. Part of the way we work is pushing the process. I have this belief that the whole decoration movement is the result of the huge surge in technology. It has come out of more technology, and that's the way we have always worked, asking 'what can sheet metal say now?'

The latest project to be developed by the studio is *Totem Light*. Having worked with pressed metals over the past five years, the team wanted to challenge themselves with a new palette. When they stumbled across a sustainable resin made of hemp in the northern reach of New South Wales, they started looking at how they could use it.



Left to right: Kelly Freeman and Rina Bernabei, *Brodie* table, 2006, aluminium. Photo; courtesy the artists

Rina Bernabei and Kelly Freeman. Photo: Penelope Clay

Kelly Freeman and Rina Bernabei, *Totem Light*, hemp moulded material, CAD rendering. Image courtesy the artists

'We find that you really need to get a good relationship with the manufacturer,' remarks Bernabei. 'Initially, we had nothing to show the resin manufacturer that would fit into what their material could do. We then revisited an idea we had had for ages about stacking bangles, mixing them up, stacking and playing. We did lots of drawings and when we were on the plane to Melbourne one day it just worked. The resin manufacturer then helped us to resolve its shape and form.' On the inside of the light, Freeman and Bernabei developed strong geometric patterning that was inspired by traditional cut crystal glassware, mixing the organic shapes of each light while referencing heirloom ideas and the stories they evoke.

'You need the story to connect,' remarks Bernabei:

We don't really need new products, we had to have this story. That's why we try to implant what we call 'triggers'. Our designs have some sense of a nostalgic interior that we learn from in some way. In the past it has been lacework and patterns. *Totem* was more from the influence of cut-crystal objects – they feel like glasses of the

past, and that's how they find their place in the modern interior. I like Marcel Proust's description of things: as you pass down the table with the wine stain, that's when an object gains a life. Being a sustainable designer is also about giving a product the longest life you possibly can. I think all you can do is to plant an idea that will connect with people ... our triggers are about domesticity. We hope that through that connection our designs will stay longer in people's lives.

www.bernabeifreeman.com.au
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Heidi Dokulil is a former editor of *Monument* magazine and is co-founder of the design agency, Parcel. She has recently completed her first book with Thames & Hudson on the career of Sydney design firm Burley Katon Halliday, which was launched internationally in October 2007.

KELLY FREEMAN AND RINA BERNABEI ARE THE 2007 WINNERS OF THE BOMBAY SAPPHIRE DESIGN DISCOVERY AWARD, WITH THEIR ENTRY, TOTEM LIGHT. THEY RECEIVED A\$30,000 CASH PRIZE, AS WELL AS A TRIP TO MILAN IN 2008 TO ATTEND THE SALONE DEL MOBILE FURNITURE FAIR. THE BOMBAY SAPPHIRE DESIGN DISCOVERY AWARD EXHIBITION WAS SHOWN IN SYDNEY AT OBJECT GALLERY (11 SEPTEMBER – 4 NOVEMBER 2007) AND IS TOURING NATIONALLY IN 2008.