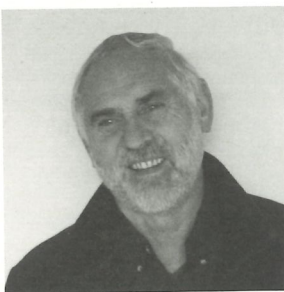


# the kevin perkins by richard flanagan

WORDS BY RICHARD FLANAGAN



Above: Kevin Perkins photographed by his daughter, Megan Perkins.

Opposite: Kevin Perkins, *Blackswan*, 2007, Huon pine, artists oil. Photo: Megan Perkins

**In Tasmania some simply call him the Master, a consequence of both a body of work seen to be peerless and a lifetime of teaching that has inspired many. His reputation reaches far from his island home and his influence beyond the parameters of the timber furniture with which he made his name. So coveted is his work that American buyers fly by chartered jet to Tasmania simply to meet the maker.**

In consequence, he has exhibited rarely and his name – with the exception of collectors and makers – is nowhere as well known as it should be. Yet he is one of the few great artists Tasmania produced in the twentieth century. His work has borne witness to much that is wrong, more that is lost, yet at their finest, his elegies for a vanishing place and time transcended their own concerns to become objects of an often astonishing beauty.

Born in Tasmania in 1945, Kevin Perkins grew up in a netherworld of bush, farm

and country life that then existed on the fringes of the coastal town of Devonport. His father worked in sawmill where Kevin Perkins first learnt about the nature and possibilities of timber, and helping rear the milking cows and Muscovy ducks in the few acres his family worked to augment their income, there began a lifelong joy in, and fascination with, birds and animals.

Apprenticed to a joinery shop at 14, conscripted at 20, he spent his early adult years subsequent to his national service teaching building at Hobart Technical College. But the ferment of the times and his own desire were leading him far from a conventional destiny.

He had, as he puts it, good hands, but he wanted to learn to put a spirit into things. His spirit.

He specialised in sculpture at the Tasmanian School of Art, and the combination of the influence of sculptor Peter Taylor and a visit to Tasmania by Canadian designer-maker Don McKinley inspired him. He recognised his passions

and abilities would henceforth be best expressed in furniture design-making.

By the early 1980s he had a national reputation as a designer-maker. His furniture made of Tasmanian timbers combined an earthy passion with a sophistication of finish, mastery of detail, and an eye for design that seemed to have drunk in both the natural wonders of his own island home and the grand traditions of modernist art to produce cabinets, chairs and tables at once of great elegance and intense mystery.

They spoke passionately of a world that was vanishing as Perkins celebrated it, mourned it, revered it. The sad irony of such masterpieces as his *Tiger chest*, 1995, with its thylacine patterning achieved by a sawtooth alternation of tiger myrtle sourced from endangered forest in the Tarkine, and Huon pine, another rare rainforest timber, was not lost on Tasmanians.

He ruminates on the forest and animals and birds disappearing from the island and how the only surviving testament of



all that was special, 'of what good things we used to have' will be 'what a few whittlers have left'.

His career mirrored the tragedy of Tasmania's forests, the wood chipping of which began in the early 1970s. His work was both an act of love for that natural world that was vanishing and an argument for an entirely different forest industry, based on treating the unique Tasmanian timbers as precious as rare stones. For many years he worked with industry and government agencies in the hope of establishing a designer furniture industry combining a high design sensibility with a selective use of Tasmanian timbers.

His vision foundered on successive Tasmanian governments' embrace of a woodchipping industry widely perceived as corrupt and corrupting. On an island where to speak the truth is to suffer, Kevin Perkins, in the course of a long and illustrious career, has not received a single grant from the Tasmanian government.

Alternating between commissions and teaching furniture design have been major collaborations with architects, beginning with Robert Morris-Nunn on the trailblazing Launceston General Hospital Chapel, 1979, and continuing both with Morris-Nunn, as well as Romaldo Giurgola, for whom Perkins designed and made the furnishings for the Prime Minister's suite in the new Parliament House, 1985–88 and worked with again, more recently, on the Parramatta Cathedral, 2001–08.

When then Prime Minister John Howard banished Perkins' desk in favour of one used by Robert Menzies, Perkins made headlines calling Howard an aesthetic vandal.

Perhaps the power of his pieces – so palpable when seen but hard to apprehend in a photograph of his work – comes from him always working to liberate the possibilities of the wood, rather than battling the material. He constantly seeks, as he puts it, to celebrate 'the treeness of the wood'.





**Right:** Kevin Perkins, *Rape*, 2008, Huon Pine figure, acrylic on MDF. Text by Richard Flanagan, 2003, 'The Rape of Tasmania', *The Bulletin*, summer issue 2003-04. Photo: Megan Perkins

**Below:** Kevin Perkins, *Bench Seat*, 2000, quilted Eucalyptus Regnans. Photo: Peter Whyte  
 Kevin Perkins, *Tiger Chest (thylacine)*, 1995, Huon pine, tiger myrtle, purpleheart. Photo: John Farrow



Whether it is the high modernism of his 1990s cabinets, exemplified in his bewitching *Cape Barren chest* – a work of subtlety and emotional splendour rarely encountered in furniture; the sumptuous minimalism of his quilted eucalypt bench seat, 2000; or his more recent inspired Brancusi-like sculptures of the female form – happy, free works that connect back to the more monumental sculptural work he first became celebrated for in the 1970s; unchanging in all his pieces has been a superlative choice of timber; measured composition; and consummate craft made manifest as exquisite detail and impeccable finish.

His works' abstracted simplicity has always hidden a torrent of emotion tempered and transformed by a subtle artistic instinct. It is perhaps this that grants everything he makes the compressed energy they seem to radiate.

His home, which he built in a forested range of the Huon, is a joyful journey through his soul. Boats hang from ceilings, axes his father once used decorate walls, birds fly around rooms,

an orphaned wombat lies in his lap, skulls and leaves and feathers seem to gravitate toward him and he at the centre marvels at each and everything, astonished even now at the gauze green shimmer at the edge of a peacock feather, the infinite veining revealed by a dried blue gum leaf.

This gentle and generous man finds wonder and glory in all things, and his chairs, tables, cabinets, his sculptures of swans and women, are the myriad transformations of his enchantment.

Romaldo Giurgola once remarked that Kevin Perkins could make wood sing. Furniture is much used, sometimes described, and occasionally praised. But how rare it is that it creates a feeling beyond words. ○

*Richard Flanagan is an author, historian and film director. His latest novel is called Wanting.*