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Design Practice Reflection:

Joseph Walsh

Marc Ó'Riain sat down with Joseph Walsh in the Bulman in Kinsale, a few miles from the workshop, to chat to him about his work. It turned out to be an engaging discussion.



Joseph Walsh

Q. Joseph, would you call yourself a self taught designer or maker? What was this journey like?

Essentially I am a self-taught many things, for design, making and enterprise. I'm really constantly curious, and perhaps this is because no one gave me the answer, so I am always learning. This was perhaps the benefit of leaving formal education at the age of 12. Perhaps as a result I have an enquiring mind. Having said that, of course I was educated, by those around me, just not in the same formula as school and I had to do a little more of asking the questions and seeking the answers which is surely a good thing. Books are great; I bought my first book, from the Geffrye Museum in London. I read and memorised every page and every image, I knew that book intimately. I really value knowledge. My journey is mapped by a passion for knowledge and a curiosity about how things are designed and how they can be made.

Q. Many of your pieces can fall into the category of Art, how do these pieces inform the functional work?

Whilst Zaha Hadid did not conform to the norms of the architectural industry, her work brought culture to new heights. My thinking is a counterbalance to much of the design world. Every piece of art is a political statement and the galleries control the making. Our work is real, uncontrived and uncontrolled by such influences. It is not outsourced in any way. The work has meaning and represents the efforts of the makers.

I hope work, the output from my studio, from my team and I are the result of a passion to further our work to raise the standards, to explore in our time to the best of our ability. In my instance, this is a creative journey guided by certain sensibilities, the materiality, the tactile nature of wood or stone, the mastery of making, the characteristics embodied in each piece shows the passion and the

commitment to excellence, a response of my direction, the makers response in making and a respect of the material employed.

I'm not sure if I fit into the world of furniture design or if I fit into the world of Art; that is for others to decide.

Q. Maker or Designer? Where do you stand on these often-diametric worlds?

In New York, they want to categorise your work and put you in an 'Art' box. The parameters benefit the viewer rather than the creator. The Design museum recognises the importance of making and craftsmanship, which may allow us to question 'what is craft/design/art?' Some of my work goes into public collections. My work is created with a relevance to my time and in order to do this I move freely between what some consider Art, Design and Craft. We create music to express things we cannot put into words. I like people discussing the definition of the work.

Q. There is durability to your work, it's intended be here for a long time. How do you feel about the disposability of the design world?

There must be a purpose for us being here. Rampant capitalism has turned a former culture of responsibility to a society of consumerism and disposability. There is a social responsibility for design. I engage with some people who take a longer cultural view; unlike much of society today, their view is to commission work not for the sake of ownership but to commission and support the best of our time.

Q. Are the skills of craftsmanship disappearing? Does it matter?

I realised that in previous generations the great landowners commissioned interiors work to maintain and nurture the skills of the makers and craftspeople of their time. In a sense we have been fortunate enough to have



clients and patronage who are motivated to not only retain these skills for the next generation but to challenge and elevate them in our time. The reality we create now in realising the work has become a significant motivation of mine, the objects should be the outcome of a challenging environment, where we challenge skills and raise standards.

Q. How has technology informed your process?

I see technology as a tool in the same way as a hand plane is, so we try to be as knowledgeable as we can be about the tools that are available to us but at the same time not getting distracted by them and having the tools drive the direction of the work. Technology is not a key strength of mine so I rely heavily on my team in this area when we do complex CAD drawings and simulations.

Materials and technology are great, but I would say that the people who I have worked with have specific values. These values become transcribed into the objects. I feel that

clients don't value the object but rather the engagement with people who care deeply about their work. Staff care about what they do and what they create. They might go home tired but there is a sense of achievement in the effort and the object entails this great level of commitment, effort and care.

Q. You have a very international team, how does this influence the work?

I have always wanted to raise the bar, to do the best work with the best people. I work with great and talented craftspeople and I collaborate with the people who share a similar view and aspiration.

Q. What pushes innovation in your work?

The desire to improve on the last piece!

Every piece realised is a piece to reflect on and build on; exhibitions are opportunities to speculate and fortunately, great clients that you build a relationship of trust with can often share your passion and want to be part of enabling to push boundaries.



Q. Why are you based in Kinsale?

My workshop is on the family farm, beside my grandfather's farmhouse. I am very lucky to live here. I have a very real life, an ordinary life, which I cherish. It leads to honesty in the work. We are very privileged to live in Kinsale; I compromise on other things to hold on to life here because I think we potentially have a great quality of life if we choose to recognise it.

Q. Were there any key moments of transition in your practice?

I realised at the New York exhibition in 2008, when looking at my own work, in the stark environment of a gallery, that there was a gap in connectivity between the original sketch and the finished pieces. The exhibition gave me the opportunity for reflection, which became an enormously important transition point in my practice. Prior to that, much of my focus was divided on setting up the workshop and managing its activity. I hadn't had the space or opportunity to be objective about the translation of the concept into the final piece. The self-reflection exposed the controls of making rather than the aspirations of the creativity. One piece which was far more experimental, Enigma, where more was left to chance, became the most successful piece. That piece resulted in an explosion in demand. This became the point of transition in my work. To push your work to the edge, you need to be a little scared all of the time.

Q. Where next? What are the current challenges or studies you are exploring?

We have started to work on a large-scale architectural installation, which is going into the National Gallery, which must interact with the world around it. We have been exploring pieces that have a greater level of interaction with architecture that perhaps challenge the definition of our work as furniture.

Q. How are you so successful in promoting your work? What's the secret?

Well, I'm not sure. I was lucky early on to meet a great photographer (Andrew Bradley) who I got on really well with. This always helps and he, along with Graphic designers, Kunnert and Tierney approached the documenting of my work in a creative and confident way. It was not cheap but once I started working with them I enjoyed it, the results were strong and the media started to really pick up on the imagery which has resulted in major features in the Financial Times, Wall Street Journal, New York Times and most of the major design publications.

We have never paid for PR, but we have paid for photography.

Q. A last word?

In the end it's about doing something well, sometimes it takes a little longer

