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and new beginnings



THE SATURDAY AGE

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Trent Jansen's Briggs Family Tea Service evokes the clash between settler and indigenous cultures.

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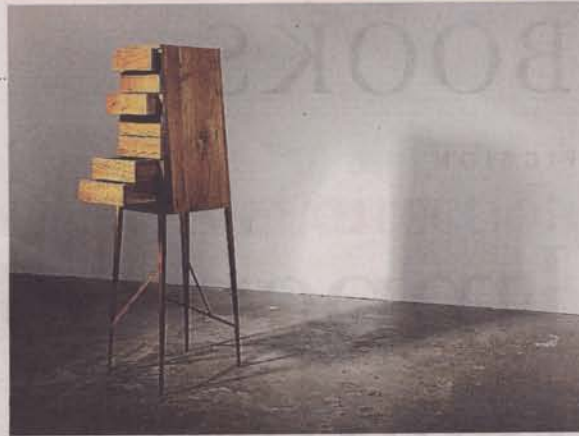
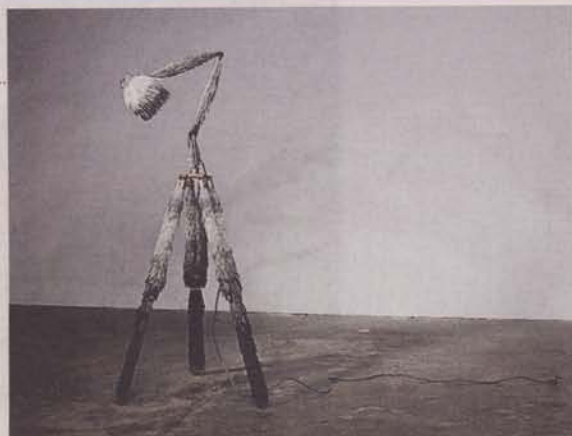
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Jacinta Chivers
Chivers' image on both sides of Geelong's award details 2011 exhibition booklet. Courtesy of the artist.

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BY RAY EDGAR

IT'S hard to imagine George Briggs using a teapot, let alone being the inspiration for one. For designer Trent Jansen the story of this British free settler — who travelled to Tasmania at the age of 15, became a sealer on the unforgiving Bass Strait islands and "married" the daughter of a Tasmanian tribal chief — personalises two wildly disparate histories.

"I wanted to capture in the teapot a harsh, unforgiving character, almost like a pirate or a scallywag — a rough character."

Jansen is one of six leading contemporary designers who for the past 18 months have been immersing themselves in our colonial history for one of the most ambitious conceptual projects in Australian design, Broached Commissions.

With its curly ceramic spout and pristine white lid, the George Teapot embodies 18th-century British gentility, while its brass base

alludes to his maritime occupation. Onto this relatively regimented form, Jansen has crafted "rough edges" — "all these gnarly, knotty elements that represent his need to evolve into a person that could live in these very harsh conditions."

Lou Weis, founder of Broached Commissions, describes the project as "a fundamental exercise in Australian design history and how it's framed in the global context."

Instead of complaining about the decline of our manufacturing industry or despairing about our distance from the European design capitals, Weis and three designers — Jansen, Adam Goodrum and Charles Wilson — developed the idea for an annual, limited-edition series, exhibited in specially designed pop-up galleries.

His pitch? "Design is a set of incremental improvements to the functionality and beauty of the things we use in our daily lives. I want to go back and look at how those ideas arrived here and how they changed."

Broached Commissions divides Australian history into increments

— early Colonial, the Gold Rush, the Great Depression among them. Along with a core team "willing to collaborate and ride the bumps together for the new business", Weis invited guest designers whose work and approach would be appropriate to this year's commission: Australians Lucy McRae and Chen Lu, and Englishman Max Lamb to provide a perspective from

"It's the bleeding edge of the design market."

the former Empire.

Weis likens the venture to haute couture. "A mixture of art and design installation, it's the bleeding edge of the design market," he says. These highly experimental pieces (just two to eight are made of each design) cost from \$8000 to \$45,000. The first commission, Broached

(From left) Max Lamb's sandstone furniture; Lucy McRae's lamp; Charles Wilson's tall boy from the Broached Commissions collection.

Colonial, taps the era from settlement to 1840. It's a period of design marked by simple furniture made by convicts. But this isn't about slavishly copying work. Nor is it ironically postmodern.

The idea of colonisation is "vexed", Weis says. "In a way it looks at the contribution of the ones that have done so much damage to the communities of indigenous Australia and yet have created this industrial, first-world country."

With the Briggs Family Tea Service, Jansen evokes the clash and fusion of two cultures through materials and traditional techniques. Exquisitely rendered by the finest craftspeople (among them Vicki West, a descendant of the eastern straitsmen), it juxtaposes slip-cast porcelain, copper and brass with indigenous materials such as bull kelp and wallaby pelt. It's both refined and slightly surreal.

McRae's lamp also explores materiality and alien encounters.

From a distance, its long legs and feathered texture evoke an emu but close-up its 250,000 colour-graded toothpicks form a protective skin like an echidna's spikes. McRae says the lamp was inspired by the "struggle and alienation" of women convicts "forced to grow a stealth second skin in order to survive".

For his collection of abstracted sandstone furniture, Lamb takes inspiration from Mrs Macquarie's Chair, a seat carved out of a rock ledge where the Governor's wife enjoyed views over Sydney Harbour.

"History is the glue for us," Weis says. "We've inherited this in one way or another. It's asking in what way is this meaningful now?"

■ Broached Commissions can be seen at 21 Bouverie Street, city, October 27–November 6. Lou Weis moderates a discussion between historian John McPhee and designers Trent Jansen, Charles Wilson and Adam Goodrum at 2.30pm on October 29. broachedcommissions.com

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