

The craftwork revolutionaries

Combining traditional skills with computer-based technologies, these designers are creating compelling pieces that push the boundaries of craftsmanship and challenge the idea of handmade

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Christopher Jenner

The first question that springs to mind when meeting Christopher Jenner is: why would a South African-born interior and product designer take such a profound interest in traditional British crafts? As we talk in his studio, an extraordinary sculptural chair with a seat woven from rush sits next to us – it is a prototype and nobody is allowed to sit on it until the *House & Garden* photo shoot. Christopher has spent much of the past two years investigating a number of other skills, including ceramics and carpentry. 'It's about giving yourself knowledge, allowing yourself to experience these crafts to add to who you are as a designer,' he says.

He is, however, keen to combine these hard-won skills with digital processes. Interestingly, when Christopher first approached the Bedfordshire-based rush weaver Felicity Irons of Rush Matters about his idea for the chair, he came away from their meeting in something of a panic, uncertain of precisely how he could employ technology to update a craft so closely associated with nineteenth-century designers such as Ernest Gimson.

Using 3D computer-aided design applications, Christopher modelled the human body in what he describes as 'classical colonial cocktail pose' (sitting on a balcony in one of the old colonies with a gin and tonic in hand and a copy of *The Times* folded on the table in front). This provided the basis for the shape of the chair's English oak frame. The fluid finished form was then made from 28 different sections, cut using a CNC router, a computer-controlled cutting machine. The flat sections have a metal rod running through them,

while dowels were used to keep the curved pieces together. The seat's frame was then split in half and the rush fills the void, effectively sandwiched between the two pieces of oak.

Meanwhile, it took seven weeks for Felicity to complete her part in the creation of the chair, in which she weaved the rush around a polystyrene mould in the shape of the seat. 'The best thing about this project was the wonderful shape I was given to work around,' she says. 'That's the beauty of the material – it will take any form.'

However, when Christopher first showed the design to frame maker Matt Craze, his response was: 'You're nuts.' Christopher was unperturbed. 'This is a classic example of bringing ideas that are infused with technology and innovation to craftsmen,' he explains. 'The first thing they say is that there's no way they can do this.' Since he had the digital models, he could show Matt exactly how the chair could be pieced together. 'We're able to model it in 3D and guarantee that all the components fit together, which means there's no reason it won't come out the way we've designed it.'

So how does working with makers compare to his day job of designing products for companies such as Globe-Trotter, Eurostar and bathroom manufacturer Drummonds? 'This is more challenging,' he concedes. 'There's no narrative, there's no other product, there's no story. This is about the much deeper process of a designer discovering who they are.'

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