



Two's company—while away the hours with another on the Tete-a-Tete Rocker

## Rock Star

One woman's whim turned a stone tablet into a stone table and transformed the life of US furniture sculptress, Laurie Beckerman

“On a whim”—that’s how Laurie Beckerman describes how she came to create her first item of furniture. It was a small table made out of stone that she hand-carved herself. She was working at the Cathedral Church of St John the Divine in New York City, which also ran an apprenticeship programme for locals to learn the art of stone masonry and carving. The department brought in highly skilled artists from Europe to teach the traditional skills to local youths, mostly living in Harlem, as a way of finding staff to continue to build the church.

Looking back at that time, she says: “The idea of being a furniture designer hadn’t occurred to me. I was the only one in the architectural department who enjoyed going out to the cold and dusty stone yard and it wasn’t long before I started carving during my lunch breaks.

“When you learn to hit the stone in the right place, the impact of the chisel makes a melodious ring. That’s when you know you

have hit it right. It had such a nice sound and then you get into this ‘zone’, maybe in a similar way to that experienced by die-hard runners. You don’t even feel any difficulty in hitting a hard limestone block. What I did feel, however, was a deep respect for the material.”

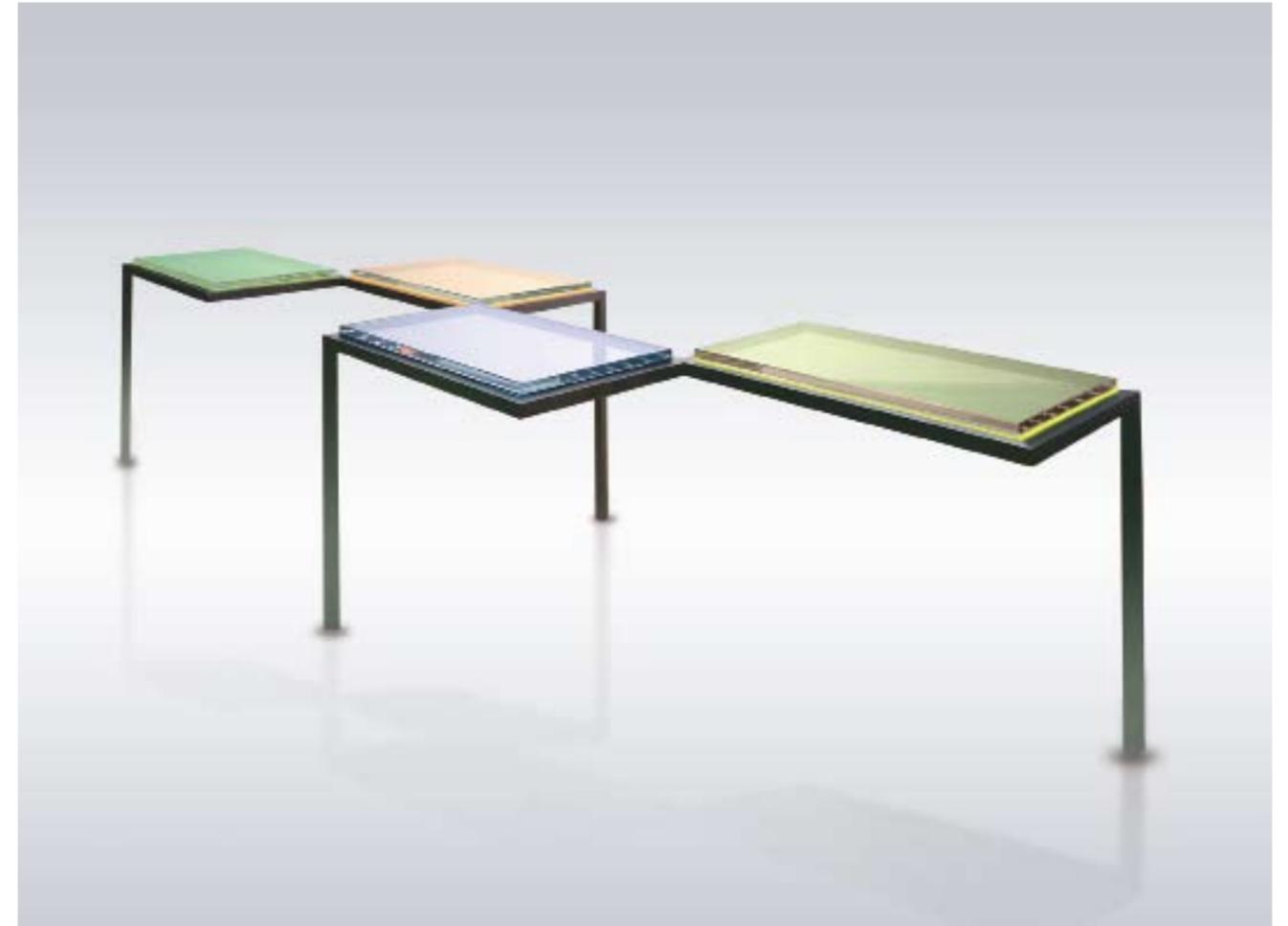
She decided to make a table, something simple enough to handle with her limited experience. To her surprise, it received a positive response. This got her thinking that furniture design was possibly a way to integrate her architectural training with a form of sculpture that was manageable for one person to create. Her creative world really opened up when she realised there were so many more materials than just stone that she could work with.

Her most famous piece is the distinctive ‘Tete-a-Tete Rocker’. When she designed the piece, Beckerman was actually unaware that tête-à-tête style furniture existed. The style of the seats date back to pre-Victorian times to facilitate a comfortable, private conversation between two people. She says: “I had no idea that tête-à-tête furniture was out there, which in a way was good. If I did it would have inhibited me from continuing.”

The inspiration behind the Tete-a-Tete Rocker came when she was visiting a friend in the countryside. The friend’s property had



The Cobra Desk with its pair of stainless steel serpents, poised to strike



Crystal-clear starfire glass floats on coloured acrylic panels set in a stainless steel frame

once been a horse farm and was composed of an amazing variety of landscapes, from open fields and gardens to orchards and wooded passages that suddenly surprised walkers by randomly opening up into secret clearings. Upon entering one of these small clearings, she imagined how wonderful it would be to suddenly stumble upon a beautiful object that invited two friends to sit down, talk and relax while enjoying their natural surroundings.

Her goal became to design a two-seater chair that was very comfortable and offered just the right conversational distance between people. She did not want it to be simply a one-note design that was only good to look at, she wanted it to be a chair that people would truly enjoy sitting in.

She envisaged two people trustingly leaning back on two seats that were joined together by a single arm. Neither seat could possibly maintain its upright position if it

was not for the other seat holding it up, so in this way, the two people were not just interacting through the words they spoke, but were also working together in harmony to keep the chair balanced. The soothing rocking motion was intended to put the two occupants in an open frame of mind; the perfect prelude to a delightful conversation.

Her efforts were rewarded when the Tete-a-Tete Rocker scooped a Merit Award in the Outdoor Furniture and Seating category in *Interior Design* magazine's Best of Year Awards in 2007. This made the industry sit up and start taking notice of

the fledgling furniture designer. It has since become her signature piece.

Her modern-day tête-à-tête design uses all the material advantages that the 21st century offers. It is made from Corian, a solid surfacing material, consisting of acrylic polymer and alumina trihydrate produced by the American chemical company, DuPont. She says it is a "seamless and sensual material, perfectly suited for the outdoors." Through the flexibility of this material, she was able to refine the Tete-a-Tete Rocker to a greater extent than she had previously imagined.

**“When you learn to hit the stone in the right place, the impact of the chisel makes a melodious ring. That’s when you know you have hit it right”**

She used the same material to construct the 'Filing Tree', a mobile organisational system consisting of open branches ready to accommodate anything, including documents, books, magazines and even record albums.

Reflecting on her design, she says: "Since I'm not the most organised person, I have a fascination with organisational solutions. One of my biggest problems is not having a 'pending' filing place. It got me thinking about a unit that was mobile and could easily be moved to working areas, where papers were easily visible and accessible. Of course, it also needed to look great.

"The response to the Filing Tree was as overwhelming as that for the rocker—there must be many others out there with the same organisational needs as myself."

It was actually ten years after completing her first piece that she started to exhibit her work, initially in a group booth at the International Contemporary

Furniture Fair (ICFF) in New York City in 2006. She says summoning up the confidence and courage to publicly display her work for the first time was the biggest challenge of her career.

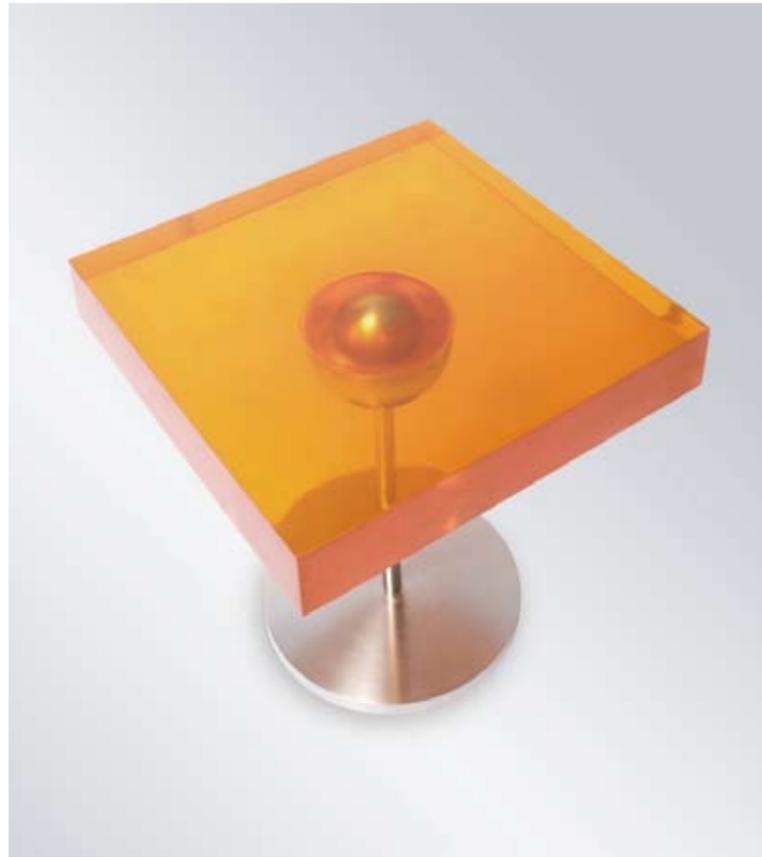
Beckerman was born in Brooklyn and has two degrees—a Bachelors degree in Anthropology from New York University and a Bachelors degree in Architecture from the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. She also has her own company, Laurie Beckerman Design Inc., located in Manhattan.

In the eighties she worked part-time at Steven Holl Architects in New York, during which time she found it fascinating to observe the successful architect Holl at work and see how his creative processes began. She says it was truly instructive to see just how focused, visionary and idealistic a truly successful architect needed to be. It was also revealing for her that work and play seemed

seamlessly intertwined for Holl. She knew then that this was something she wanted to emulate at some point in her own life.

She joined the Architectural Collaborative at the Pratt Institute, whose raison d'être was to design low-income housing in Brooklyn and Harlem. She would go into the poorer areas of New York with her hard hat and enter crumbling old buildings with the goal of renovating them for low-income families. "This was a kind of rebellion against the high-fashion world of architecture," she says. "It appealed to the more humble side of me."

But her favourite job was working at the Cathedral Church of St John the Divine in New York City. After this she decided that she didn't want to return to architecture, saying: "It just didn't feel right to go back and work in an office, and to work for someone else. I was not the fastest or best draftsman in the world and I wanted



Lollypop Table



The seven-foot high Whistle Lamp



The Filing Tree helps banish those organisational woes

to work for myself—to be free to make my own mistakes and work on my own designs at my own pace.”

While other designers may find a particular material that they excel at using and choose to stick to it, exploring all its possibilities in many variations, Beckerman tends to like variety and tries to keep her designs as fresh and surprising as possible. Her ‘Whistle Lamp’ for example—exhibited at the 2009 ICFF—is a seven-foot high floor lamp made of mirror-polished bronze that would not look out of place towering over Manhattan among the other architectural wonders that make up the New York skyline.

The inspiration for the Whistle Lamp came from the form of church organ pipes, an image stashed away in her memory from the incredible instrument at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine. She says: “The reason for making it out of mirror-polished bronze is simply because I like the look and idea of big brass bands. Thin

sheets of bronze are rolled into long tubes, which although they look simple, is an extremely difficult process. The fabricator, a high-end metal shop in New York, didn’t want to do it at first, but caved in to my persistence. I just couldn’t wait to see how the bronze matched up to the way it looked in my imagination.

“I also wanted the tubes to look like they were filled with warm glowing light that radiated out through cuts at different levels from all around the lamp. The whole lamp is purposely designed so that each view is different as you walk around it.”

As anthropology major, it is perhaps not surprising that she describes her style

through the qualities she admires in other people. Through simplicity and strength she strives to break a piece down to a simple, powerful form from a single inspiration. She attempts to reflect truth, beauty and elegance through the honesty of the form and its visual pleasure conveyed through proportion, peacefulness and poise.

She also wants her pieces to be full of spirit and passion, whilst also reflecting that life should be fun and enjoyed. Finally, each piece must display a natural intelligence—not something that is contrived through the manipulation of fact, but an intelligence that comes from something deeper.

“I wanted to work for myself—to be free to make my own mistakes and work on my own designs at my own pace”

Text: Terry Baxter

It is the sheer joy of creation that drives her on. She says: “Art that is also functional is so appealing. I really love each of my pieces and put a lot into each one. I’m a great daydreamer and particular enjoy the first stage of creation—that is, just relaxing and brainstorming and playing with all the different forms in my imagination without the constraints of any reality. Designing is really just an exercise in the act of creation.”

This attitude is an expression based on the philosophies of her two greatest influences. Although she can easily list the great designers that she admires—Santiago Calatrava, Le Corbusier, Noguchi, Marcel Breuer, Charles and Ray Eames, Gaudi and John Lautner among others—it is words

from the Greek writer and philosopher Nikos Kazantzakis and the theoretical physicist Albert Einstein that “have inspired me to live life as a fearless designer.”

Citing her favourite quotes from them, she says: “Kazantzakis once said: ‘By believing passionately in something that does not yet exist, we create it.’ While Einstein is famously quoted as saying: ‘Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.’”

As well as an ultimate ambition to return to the medium that first sparked her love of furniture design—she hopes to one day create the sort of majestic stone sculptures that stand proudly in front

of public buildings—she also wants to develop the style that has so far defined her work.

Up until now, her pieces have been expensive, limited edition-type pieces, not particularly out of choice, but because this has always offered her a path on which to find her way.

She says: “The most natural route has been to just go all out at doing the best design I could without worrying about price. Now I’d like to take it to another level and work on pieces that are more affordable.”

How she does intend to do that?

As yet she admits she is uncertain, but the industry will be keeping a close eye on how the transition pans out. 