

furniture | Jennifer Verrall

Clear the deco

A modern take on traditional construction has put Anton Gerner's 'contemporary antiques' on the map.

To attract attention at the recent DesignEx in Sydney, a town renowned for its high-camp tastes, Melbourne furniture maker Anton Gerner showed a range of arrestingly original pieces.

One was a small burr walnut table so highly figured that it looked like an animal pelt. The accompanying chairs were upholstered in faux leopard skin, a match that caused the suite to appear almost alive.

Another bigger piece was visually even sexier. The veneer on a large square cabinet was a checkerboard of macassar ebony. From a distance, it looks like a weaving. But it's not. It is smooth-to-the-touch wood.

Gerner, 34, has been in business for 15 years, long enough to be recognised by local architects and interior designers as a craftsman capable of making highly refined furniture to their specifications or, as he prefers it, stunning pieces that spring from his own creative instincts. His work regularly wins awards.

The grandson of a jeweller and son of an architect, Gerner knew from the age of 15 that his future was working with wood. At school, when other boys were making trays, he was constructing tables and chairs and itching to get into something much more complex.

He says the impulse to try new design and technique drives him through every piece. "By the time I'm 90 per cent done with a piece, I want to get onto the next."

At the outset, Gerner was entranced by the simplicity of American Shaker furniture. "I liked the design aesthetic and the plain timber," he says. "Slowly, though, as I started discovering different woods and techniques I started adding more detail and more interesting handles."

Inlaid details in contrasting woods started to appear. Patterns of squares across facades became his signature for



some seasons and, slowly, Australian woods gave way to an increasing use of fine European timbers. Gerner says Australian native timbers "don't always suit high-end furniture making, for which you need really smooth, perfect finishes."

"Anyway, a lot of Australian timbers are misused to create table tops that are just too heavy and chunky."

Much of his work is commissioned, and Gerner's current inspiration is not contemporary furniture but, increasingly, antiques. "I look at a lot of antique cabinets because, to me, the proportions are right. Stripped of the [Victorian or Edwardian] detail, they are very functional."

"I find much contemporary furniture cheap and badly constructed and finished. Like much that is fashionable, they are made for brand names and for people trying to get into the market."

"Too often they are too heavy. They have too many curves and they're just not comfortable. They haven't been well thought-out because simple things don't work. Tables are too high. Chairs are too low and drawers don't open very easily."

Gerner takes up to eight weeks to bring a piece to fruition. "I'm very fussy about finishing. You can feel my pieces on top or underneath and they are smooth."

The recent reorientation of Gerner's work towards art deco satisfies his creative curiosity and allows him to use the figured wood he hoards for years. "I've cleaned [traditional deco design] up and simplified it again. I think it works because it fits so well with contemporary environments."

"I started being interested in deco about two years ago and I see a lot of scope in it."

Still a young man, Gerner sees himself on the beginner slopes of a career that he says is governed by an overarching ethos of making tomorrow's antiques today. Top of his wish-list is to tackle whole-house projects and offshore clients.

For inquiries, phone (03) 9813 2422 or go to www.antonerner.com.au

Touch wood: from top, Macassar cocktail cabinet, Zebrano side table, nine-drawer walnut chest and, below, burr walnut dining chair with faux leopard-skin upholstery.

