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When Worlds Collide

The mind of an engineer and the heart of an anthropologist meet in Maine furniture maker Brian Reid's distinctive work.

BY NATHANIEL READE

When Brian Reid was in his early thirties, he called in sick to work a lot. "At first it'd be occasionally," he says. "But after a while, sometimes I'd call in sick on Wednesday and wouldn't make it back to work until Monday afternoon."

Now fifty-nine, Reid is a tall, joking man with gray hair, a stubble of gray beard, and a voice like Tom Hanks's. He grew up in Seattle and studied engineering in college, but didn't love it. So he dropped out, traveled through New Zealand and Fiji, and ended up living with an Aboriginal family in Australia, working in a sugarcane field. "It was my first exposure to a culture other than my own," Reid says. "It made me interested in the larger world beyond math and science."

When Reid returned to

college he switched his major to anthropology, but after graduation took an engineering job. For eight years, he encased scientific instruments inside metal tubes. One day he suggested trying a different color scheme for the instruments, which were always white lettering on black, and the boss agreed. Reid made one that was light gray with bright yellow lettering. "I thought they were going to love it," he

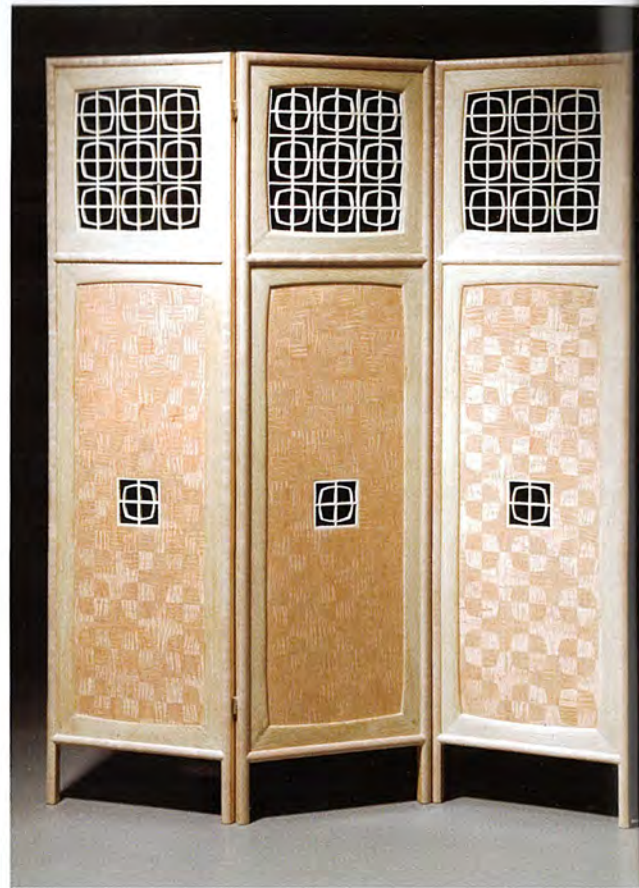
says. "Instead, they said, 'Brian, you are never going to pick the colors again.'" He vented his creativity by calling in sick and making furniture in his garage.

Finally, at age thirty-four, Reid realized he had to change his life. He broke up with his girlfriend, sold his house, and moved to England. "And that," he says, "was the best decision I ever made."

Reid spent two years at Parnham



TOP: The marquetry pattern in *Tartan Desk* (2008), padauk, rosewood, and macassar ebony, 72"L x 18"D x 24"H, was inspired by the shape of 1950s televisions; Reid says his designs are often influenced by the modern American furniture in his home when he was growing up. LEFT: *Ginkgo* (2011), bog oak and white oak, 78"W x 13"D x 28"H.



College, a furniture-making school in Dorset, England. "You have a heightened awareness when you study in a foreign country," he says, "and you work harder because you don't have friends and family to go hang out with. Plus, it happened to be the best program in the world at the time."

Reid worked seven days a week, learning craftsmanship and design ("They made us take a day off every once in a while," he says). Then back to Seattle, where he worked for architects, building

cash-register surrounds for snowboarding shops and bookshelves for the Nike design library. "It was the most money I ever made," he says. "But I was in it for the creativity." So he became an artist in residence, making furniture at an art center in Snowmass, Colorado, where a mentor said to him one day, "Brian, you're here to experiment." He took her advice.

Over the next decade, Reid developed his particular, indefinable style. The engineer in him loves precision, and the anthropologist loves decoration inspired



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Hourglass Bed* (2006), veneers of twelve varieties of wood, 96"L x 76"W x 96"H. *Screen With a View* (2009), maple and white oak, 56"W x 2"D x 60"H. *Giant's Causeway* (2012), American black walnut and bleached red oak, 20"W x 10"D x 30"H. *Tartan Console* (2007), padouk, rosewood, macassar ebony, and white oak, 73"L x 18"D x 24"H. Detail from *Hourglass Bed* platform. FACING PAGE: The artist in his studio.



by cultures around the world.

"I'm trying to get the right proportion and balance in my furniture," he says, "between color, texture, positive space, negative space, and pattern. I don't know if I've found it yet, but I'm trying."

Peripatetic for much of his adult life, Reid moved to Maine about ten years ago. In the red barn attached to his house, he is now working on a piece he says "synthesizes all that has come before."

While he lived in England, Reid was able to buy two logs of "bog oak" from trees that fell into bogs upwards of 5,000 years ago, where the acidity turned them jet black. He says it's the rarest wood on the planet.



He dried his bog-oak boards for seven years and built a table with some of it, but wasn't happy with the result. He put the rest of the wood away. Now, twenty-five years later, he says, "I'm ready."

"I'm trying to get the right proportion and balance in my furniture," says Reid.

In a small, quiet room upstairs in his barn, he sits at a bench surrounded by three rolling carts of tools and two scroll saws. Because the bog oak is so precious, Reid doesn't want to use it as solid boards, so he has cut it into 1/8-inch-thick veneers. He then stacked the veneer and, using a scroll saw, created patterns of geometric shapes, which he glued into sheets. This will inspire the cabinet's final design.

The white oak he's cutting smells faintly of vinegar, and the bog oak like moist earth. Reid is wearing sawdust-covered Carhartt clothes and . . . slippers. "I do get dressed," he says. "I don't work in my bathrobe."

He also doesn't call in sick anymore. He points out the two windows he faces. "I sit here," he says, "and I look at the land, the apple trees, and my little stream. And it's really quite idyllic." •

EDITOR'S NOTE: To see more of Brian Reid's work, visit brianreidfurniture.com.

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