

# PRACTISING PERFECTION

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Gray Hawk at work.

**S**KILLS. I LOVE PEOPLE WHO KNOW HOW TO DO SOMETHING WELL. To sing, to dance, to slip under a rip-curl on a surfboard – I have such admiration for anyone with those physical abilities.

For much of my life, however, I've been particularly fascinated with people who know how to make things – and make them really, really well.

We can all do some things moderately well, or even quite well, but the people who fascinate me most are serious and professional craftspeople. Some lean towards art, some tend towards design and some may cross over both. But whether they make for function or adornment, contemplation or celebration, for themselves or for others, all have at the centre of their involvement, their enjoyment of the materials they have chosen, the skills and technologies they use, and the challenges of bringing those understandings together.

Their ideas are to do with here and now, but what they make is usually founded in understanding the often long cultural histories of what the forms might mean, and of how the materials and decoration may have been used over time. I respect the ways in which they can combine traditional technologies with new ones, and how sometimes they collaborate with skilled artisans in related specialist industries. Hand skills in glassworking, weaving, potting, woodworking and metalworking can be combined with new technologies for designing, casting, cutting, forming and printing – and communication.

I am especially fascinated by the ways their making process contributes to the idea. When these people start working with their material the original thought can expand and develop as it takes shape. They know how their materials behave. They astonish me with conversations that reveal deep understandings of, perhaps, science, geology, chemistry, engineering and physics, alongside well-understood social and aesthetic interests and concerns.

These makers find audiences in people like me who enjoy recognising evidence of such skills, knowing that closely behind the work lurks

a person, to whom they can talk, if they're lucky. And I am lucky – I correspond with people like this almost every day of the week. Here's Gray Hawk from Adelaide, chatting about a special commission for eight chairs and a table:

"I feel the weight of history in this work and it demands impeccable craft and consideration. Fifteen years ago I chanced to be sawing long-fallen ancient red gums in the riverbed of the Gawler River on the Adelaide plains. Often I found old trees that had been used as live anchor points in post and rail fences. This tree originally stood on the bank and has rectangular mortice holes near to its base. It would have been the last by the river adjoining a concrete dam, long breached and washed away apart from residual footings and diversion channels across this vast flood plain. It was a huge skeleton, undercut and lying down into the dry sandy channel.

"The 'flame' pattern comes from the fork of this large tree, which had two massive branches. You have to have a knowledge and vision of the flame in the crotch of this massive block of wood, otherwise you would be daunted by the task of cutting away tons of wood just to be able to access a millable block. In this case the block was 1.5 metres long and 1.2 metres wide and high. This I cut into boards 50 millimetres thick, which then cup and twist while the timber is seasoning. Then I rip them into 400-millimetre wide boards, plane the twist out, veneer and rejoin them into tabletops and stuff befitting its history and origin. I sound like an old codger ruminating! When I was young I took the past as entitled pillage. Now I'm overawed and, well, inspired to excel and step with awareness."

I will always enjoy talking to makers in the different craft professions, like Gray Hawk, who through their skills, bring such individual insight into the ways their ideas interact with their materials. *(inside)*

For more information about Gray Hawk please go to <http://www.hawkdesign.com.au/>