

THE DESIGN EDIT

—✂— FOR COLLECTORS AND DREAMERS ✂—

EXHIBITIONS

Erwan Boulloud – Evolution

By combining ideas drawn from nature with intelligent designs and virtuoso craftsmanship, Boulloud makes magic with metal.

Twenty First Gallery, New York
20th September – 15th November 2019

By Judith Gura / 15th October 2019



Erwan Boulloud, 'Fétiche', 2019
COURTESY: Twenty First Gallery

“I LOVE ALL materials ... but I know metal best,” Erwan Boulloud says, explaining his relationship to the medium he learned to work with at Paris’s legendary Ecole Boulle, the 133-year-old training ground for master craftsmen in the applied arts. His intimate knowledge of metalworking is obvious to even the casual observer of his intricately-detailed, sumptuous furniture designs. Boulloud uses techniques that date back to the 17th century French ébénistes, but the results are entirely contemporary.

The 46-year-old Frenchman is having his first solo exhibition in the United States, at Twenty First Gallery in Tribeca, New York. Titled 'Evolution', it includes 50 objects, each a virtuoso exercise in melding traditional craftsmanship with new technologies. The exhibition includes cabinets, tables, mirrors, lighting and seating pieces, all unique or limited editions. Most are of metal – brass, bronze, steel or aluminum – but some use wood, concrete, stone, lacquer, and even a piece of meteorite.

The most attention-getting object is his 'Cabinet de Curiosités', which Boulloud says took some 500 hours from concept to completion. Small wonder – the façade of the 88 1/2" tall piece is covered with 240 colourful butterflies, each preserved and individually mounted in its own glass-fronted compartment. Gallery owner Renaud Vuailat adds ruefully that the butterflies, which took more than 10 man-hours to install, were delayed by customs inspectors and didn't make it to the gallery for the opening reception. (A colour photograph was a stand-in at the event).



Erwan Boulloud, 'Cabinet de Curiosités', 2019
COURTESY: Twenty First Gallery

The butterflies are an undeniable attraction, but for sheer virtuoso skill, the tall and slender 'Noothécie' cabinet has it all: fine proportions, intricate detail and superbly-executed finish. Standing on shapely brass legs, it is a tour-de-force of brass marquetry; asymmetrical, wave-like forms undulating seamlessly across the surface of the piece, seeming never to quite repeat themselves. To achieve the complex design, Boulloud explains, he drew it by hand, then laser cut and applied each piece to a wood understructure. Acid polish achieved the gradations of light to dark in the finish.



Erwan Boulloud, 'Hierophane' mirror, 2019; 'Noothécie' cabinet, 2019
COURTESY: 21st Gallery

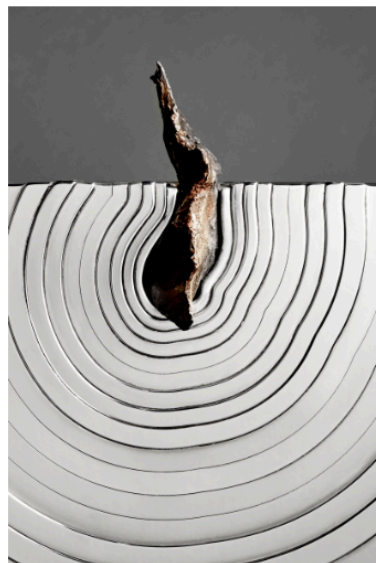
Soft spoken and articulate in English, despite occasionally needing an associate to help translate a difficult word, the designer is more enthusiastic than egotistical when showing off his designs. When a visitor admires a small detail on one of the pieces, he is openly appreciative that his extra effort was noticed.

BORN IN MONTREUIL, near Paris, Boulloud still maintains his home there, and a working studio nearby in a converted warehouse. After obtaining his degree, he worked for other designers including Hubert le Gall and Hervé van der Straeten, and perfected his craft skills working for a company that made exhibition materials for some of France's most important museums. He launched his own workshop in 2003, taking on whatever jobs were available. "I made lots of doors and window frames," he says, but after several years began to make objects. He developed the business with dogged persistence, exhibiting for the first time at Paris's 'Maison et Objet' in 2009. Nothing sold, but he continued showing there for several years, still without selling anything. Wasn't he discouraged? "Not at all ... people have to get to know you, and after that they trust you." He began to meet galleries, and orders gradually came in.



Erwan Boulloud, 'Meteorite' cabinet, 2016
COURTESY: Twenty First Gallery

"He is as much an intellectual as a craftsman"



Erwan Boulloud, 'Meteorite' cabinet, 2016 (detail)
COURTESY: Twenty First Gallery

"... and that intelligence is reflected in his designs"

Boulloud has described his work as "sculptural furniture". He doesn't follow a specific style so much as a specific approach, drawing ideas from nature, whose processes intrigue him: insects and the cracking of concrete were among the inspirations for pieces in the current exhibition. Although he never repeats himself, he feels that a successful work should generate others, like a family that shares characteristics, with the offspring like mutations of the original. "The idea comes first," he explains, "and every piece leads to another piece, like the evolutionary theory of Darwin."

Working on several projects at a time, Boulloud enjoys the in-depth research that may be required – as with the butterfly cabinet, another project inspired by African fetish figures, and one he’s presently developing inspired by Mamluk culture. He is as much an intellectual as a craftsman, and that intelligence is reflected in his designs. To his way of thinking, a work must express an idea; aesthetic appeal is not his primary objective, though it is an expected result, as is functionality.



Erwan Boulloud, 'Kâmpô' armchair, 2019; 'Trois Gouttes Seches II', coffee table, 2018; 'Loran' cabinet, 2019; 'Cigales' mirror, 2019
COURTESY: Twenty First Gallery

In expressing his ideas, he likes to play with surfaces: finishes that are polished or plain, rough or smooth, burnt, decorated, slashed or cracked or acid-etched. It is unsurprising that he has been called “a poet with materials” for his skill. He has occasionally punctuated the surface of a piece with inlays of lapis, or rock crystal, and in the restaurant of Paris’s Drouot auction house, he surfaced the bar with brass, encrusted with precious stones.

All of Boulloud’s designs begin with a rough sketch, “in order to not forget”, and move to a computer drawing, from which the final design is developed. “I try a lot of things,” he says, “Sometimes there’s a good idea, and sometimes not.” From the growing buzz about his work in Europe, and now America, it appears that the good ideas are predominating.

Twenty First Gallery – limited Edition Furniture & XXIst Century Decorative Arts.

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