

INTERVIEW

# Ryan Connolly

## Have generations of makers influenced your work in unique or unexpected ways?

Growing up I worked weekends and summers in my family business as one of the many upholsterers there. Without realising it at the time, this was moulding me to think in terms of efficiency and manufacturing. I think it is still shaping how I work and as years go past, I occasionally reintroduce traditional upholstery techniques into my work. Talking with my father about his experiences as a teenager working in a local shoe factory inspired me to work with leather in some of my projects, and we unearthed some of the old leather sewing machines lying dormant in storage.

## How does this influence manifest in your work?

My father was always active, as a young man he was well known as a hard worker. When he found his niche as a furniture maker, he made a business out of it, growing year on year. He made functional furniture, in Ireland in the 1970's and 80's there wasn't room for anything but function. If you took the time to make something with your hands you made sure it was made to last. Nothing was wasted, everything had a use, if not today, someday. Time has a different value nowadays, but if I can continue to incorporate my father's attitudes in my own work and materials, I feel I will stay on a sustainable path.

Working in wood in my opinion is a luxury, thinking of all the useless and disposable items made each day in plastic is frustrating. Knowing that what I make can continue to be used for generations is humbling, wood is the first material in the original craft.

## What is the most important thing you have learned from previous generations of makers within your family?

I have learned many techniques and traditions from around the world, from many different makers, but the ability to problem solve and think calmly through potential problems is something I can attribute to my father.

## Describe the relationship between generations of makers in your family.

My brother works alongside my father in the family business, I rely on his advice on a daily basis. Our relationship is hugely important both professionally and privately, we look out for each other and support each other's work. Although we have different products and clients, our work can complement each other's positively.

### **Can you trace the evolution of your inherited skills?**

Inherited skills are the foundation to good work, the knowledge I hadn't realised I had gained from my previous generation helped shape me. I often take these skills for granted but at times when working with others I can see a lack direction in their process.

When working on new work, I try to set aside time to allow the piece to develop rather than force it to happen, problem solving is key in these situations and the results hopefully show. Retaining these skills is key, they may develop and merge with other techniques to form the basis of ability.

### **How do you balance respect for tradition with innovation, against current design trends or the need to respond to the demands of the marketplace?**

Innovation should work side by side with tradition, the tradition of making has been tried and tested and should be understood and respected before innovation can take place. There is a lot that can be learned from makers in the past. Current trends are easily superseded with quality work. Ultimately, I try to help clients obtain the perfect piece for their needs, but I won't compromise on quality in order to meet a passing fad.

### **Have you found your own voice, or do you feel that being part of a family tradition can restrict your creativity or originality?**

I feel that my work has gone through many changes during recent years, and my style is evolving although it stays within my set standards of quality. I feel that I have my own voice in my work, independently of my family business. I am lucky enough to have lots of support and at the same time freedom from my family business. In my case I don't see it as any restriction.

### **How important is it to pass on your skills and culture of making to the next generation or ensure a sense of continuity?**

I would like to pass on my skills and knowledge of making to the next generation, but like the previous generation I would also like to pass on the support and freedom to make, rather than restriction to creativity and innovation. I would be happy if a lineage were to continue, with a sense of continuity in quality, which is most important to me.