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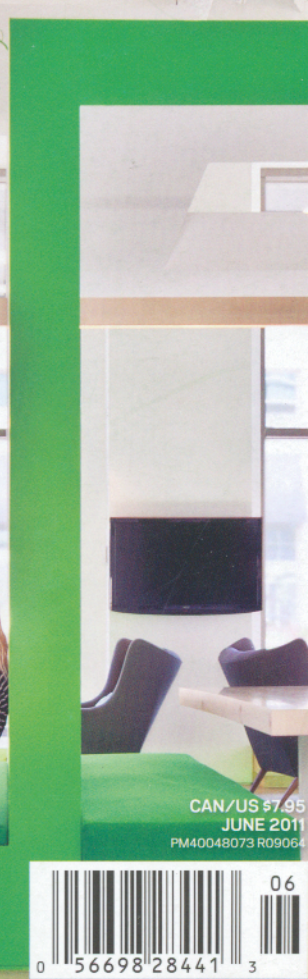
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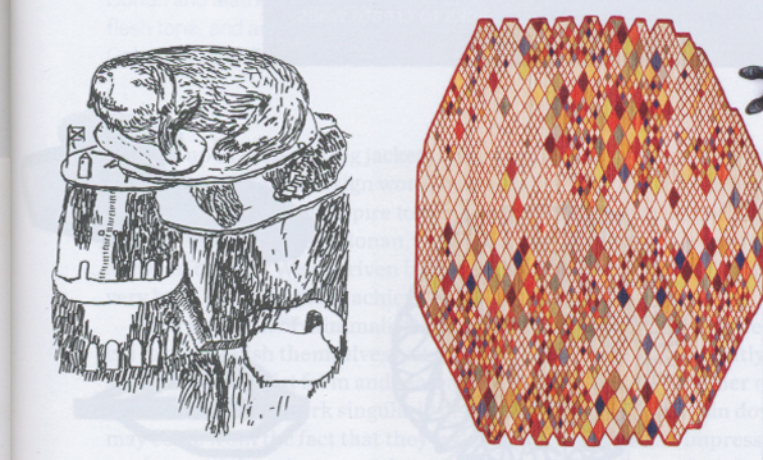
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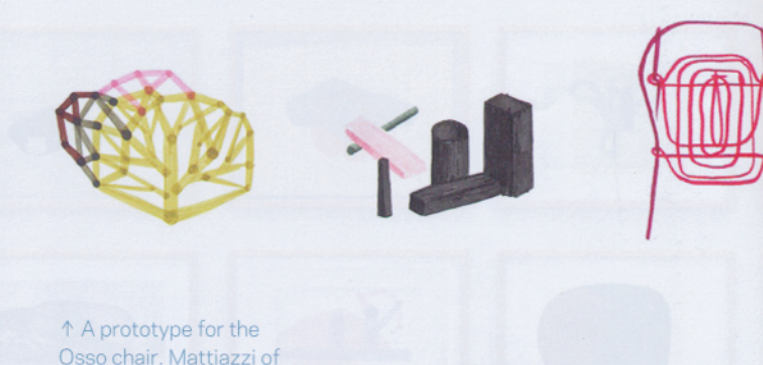
Over 900 drawings by the brothers Bouroullec were on display in Bordeaux, France, earlier this year. Both consider drawing essential to their creative process.

THE SEARCH FOR ORIGINALITY

French designers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec have reached the top of the design world in less than a decade, by exploring ideas with pencil crayons in hand / By Tim McKeough



Ronan and Erwan at their studio in Paris, photographed by Ola Rindal.



↑ A prototype for the Osso chair. Mattiazzi of Italy launched the seating collection at Salone Internazionale del Mobile in Milan this past spring.
↖ L'Oiseau, a simple wooden bird created for Vitra, joins another famous designer bird, Eames House Bird, also produced by the Swiss company.
← The ultra-spongy Ploum settee, for Ligne Roset, comes in three- and four-seater versions.

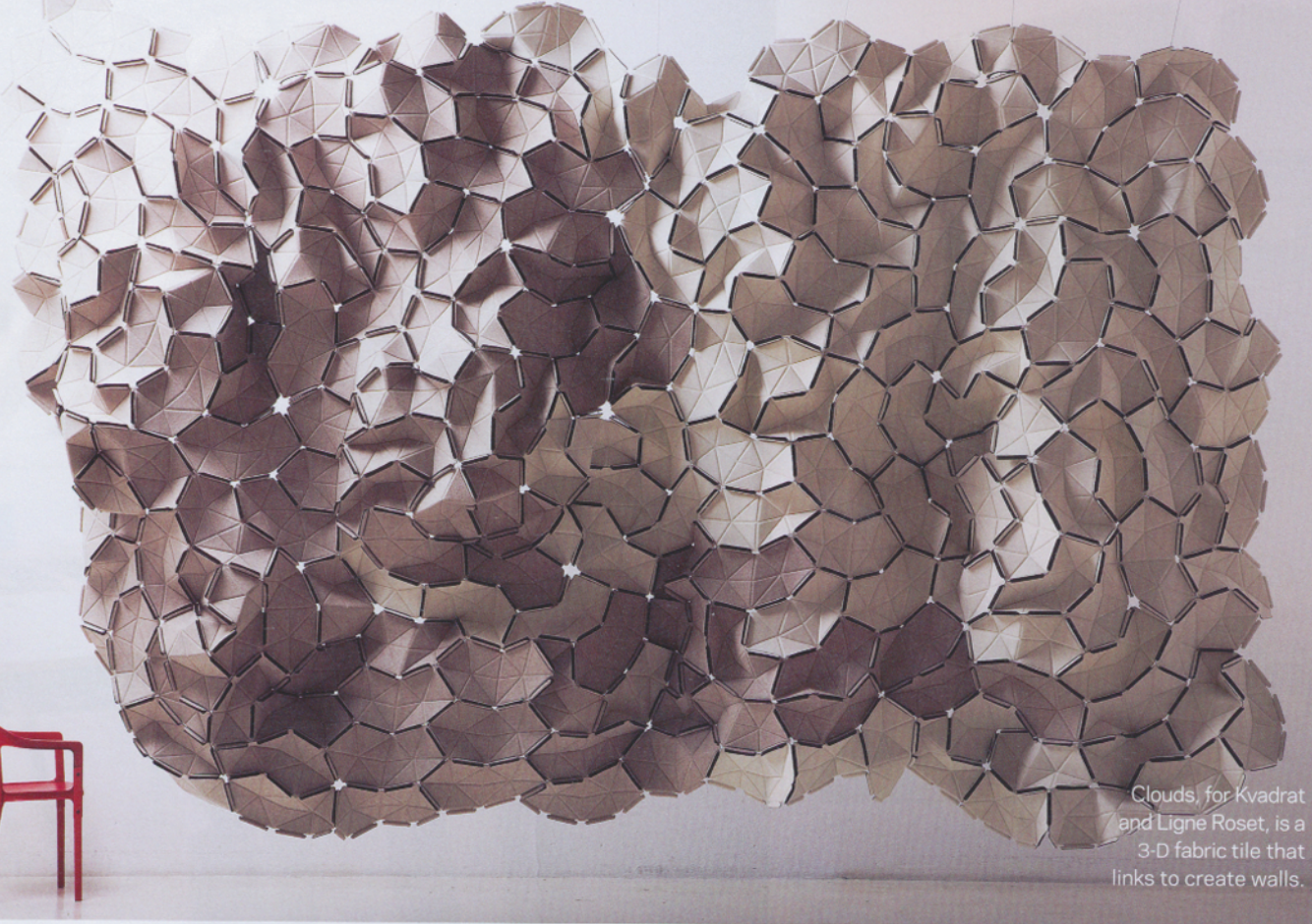
↑↑↑ Their latest design for Established & Sons is a shelf system featuring a quilted fabric door.
↑↑ The Joyn office system, launched in 2002, was their first product made for Vitra and remains a bestseller.
↑ Losanges, a multi-hued carpet created for Nanimarquina, is hand-crafted out of Afghan wool.
← The Bouroullecs typically skew familiar forms to give them new life. Not round but not square either, the Ovale tableware collection was designed for Alessi.

IN MILAN THIS PAST SPRING, THE BOURULLECS LAUNCHED SIX NEW PRODUCTS, but one – a small wooden bird created for Vitra – brimmed with symbolic meaning. Vitra, of course, is the producer of the Eames House Bird, a black, sparrow-like creature made famous by the mid-century design power duo, who kept a similar one in their house for years and frequently used it as an accent in photographs. Although few contemporary designers would dare compare themselves with the legendary Charles and Ray Eames, the Bouroullecs' homage seems to have arrived just as their own careers are achieving full flight.

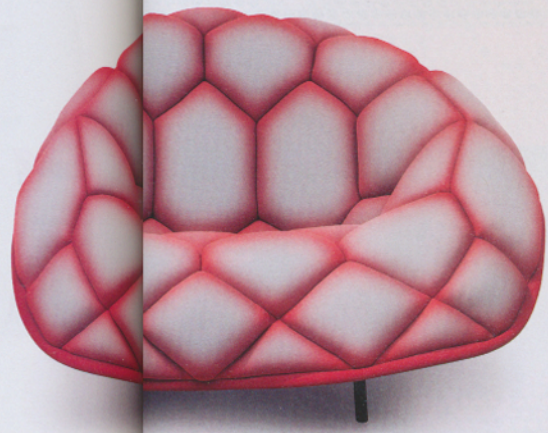
Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec are arguably among the most talented product designers now working – a distinction they've quietly earned over the past decade. Rather than making big statement pieces, their modus operandi has been to turn out a string of sleeper hits. Take their decidedly minimalist Joyn office system, released in 2002 by Vitra. It is essentially a conference table with modular components that together create one large communal workstation, ideal for encouraging collaboration among co-workers. The concept is so logical that in retrospect it seems inevitable. According to Eckart Maise, Vitra's chief design officer, Joyn has been endlessly copied since its debut. "It has become a very important part of our portfolio," he says.

Since then, the French pair has launched one hit after another, with such products as the bestselling Alcove sofa, released with Vitra in 2006; and two popular modular space dividers: Algues, a weblike screen made from moulded plastic pieces that snap together into wispy curtains; and Clouds, faceted Kvadrat fabric tiles for Ligne Roset that can be linked to create three-dimensional walls and enclosures. In recent years, their client list has ballooned to include such A-listers as Magis, Alessi, Kartell, and Axor.

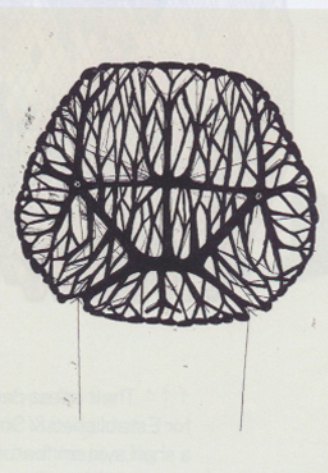
In person, they are very much like their work: quiet and unassuming, with a thoughtfulness in their manner and speech that's more sincere than scripted. Unlike the hackneyed cliché of design stars as extroverted geniuses, they are far more comfortable out of the limelight. Even at openings, they are inclined



Clouds, for Kvadrat and Ligne Roset, is a 3-D fabric tile that links to create walls.



↑ Quilt, *The Thing*, created for Established & Sons, is made of high-tech stretch fabric and is available in a duotone colourway that takes its inspiration from superheroes.
→ Lianes lights, made of fibreglass, Corian and leather, come in black and flesh tone, and are available through Galerie Kreo in Paris.



↑ "When a project leaves our studio," says Ronan, "it's because both of us are sure it's good."
↑↑ North tiles, made of compressed fabric and foam, are manufactured by Kvadrat.



↳ Alcove's high back sofa creates a private meeting space within open-concept rooms and offices. Made for Vitra.
← Also for Vitra, Slow chair is constructed out of a translucent textile with a lightweight tubular frame.

to show up in loose-fitting jackets and rumpled, baggy pants. And rather than conquering the design world by stamping their name on ever more products, they actually aspire to work on fewer pieces for longer. "We'd like to do less and less," says Ronan, 39, the older of the two (there are five years between them). "We're driven by patience, and we really want to do the very best. We don't often achieve it, but that's the goal."

Amid an ocean of minimalist design, it's almost impossible for designers to distinguish themselves, yet the Bouroullecs have consistently found subtle ways to twist form and materials into something altogether new. What makes their work singularly distinct, though, is hard to pin down. It may come from the fact that they've kept their Paris studio impressively modest, with just the two of them, four assistants and one administrator sharing a two-storey office with a makeshift fabrication workshop in the basement. It could be their almost monastic focus on getting the details right, or that they are avid critics of their own work. Speaking about *Album*, an exhibition on view earlier this year in Bordeaux, France, that presented more than 900 sketches, photos and other process documents, Ronan mentions one room dedicated to their chair designs. "The question of chairs is quite important for designers," he says, noting that the room contained some 200 sketches for seats. "We've produced maybe five of them, but there are only two that are good, one of which is better: the Steelwood chair." At the same level is the Slow chair for Vitra, he reveals, "but it is more a *fauteuil* than a real chair. I think those are the two most interesting chairs of our career."

Such honesty offers a glimpse into their day-to-day working process. Extremely hands-on, they relish the creative act of drawing and making mock-ups and then debating each other's ideas. When asked about their respective strengths, Ronan shrugs, indicating that there is nothing easily divisible between his vision and his brother's. "Every day, we need to let the creativity flow out of us," says Erwan. "In making drawings and mock-ups and things like that, we generate a complex system of information. In small details, we create points that feed the larger works." It can be as simple as squashing a circular form into a distorted square, which they did for their Alessi *Ovale* collection of tableware, or using a common manufacturing technique in an unexpected way. But there is usually something about their creations that appears ever so slightly – and delightfully – off. "Most of the time, we discover the language through some technical reasons," says

Erwan. "Even if the shape is strange, we help it by adding something familiar, like a hyper-visible stitch, or the way a screw connects to wood. This is the interesting normality. It's the flavour that you recognize. The way we assemble all of this is stranger than you expect. That's why our things are strange yet simple."

Even the manufacturers who hire the Bouroullecs don't quite know how to describe what makes their work so remarkable. "There's a never-seen-before quality to it," says Antoine Roset, executive vice-president of Ligne Roset's U.S. operations. Earlier this year, the Bouroullecs created *Ploum*, a sofa that looks like a giant marshmallow, for the French brand. "It takes a moment to process their highly original aesthetic," says Roset, "but once you have the opportunity to experience their pieces you realize they never compromise comfort."

Part of their success stems from a sort of internal quality control system. Nothing is released into the world without the absolute agreement of both partners. "We have to convince each other of our ideas," says Ronan. "We're always reconsidering if a project could be done in a better way. It never ends sometimes, this confrontation, this situation between Erwan and me. It take a very, very long time, because we don't always arrive at something the other thinks is clear."

With their bathroom collection for Axor, launched last year, they took nearly six years to develop the final 85-piece suite, which includes basins, faucets and mirrors. During that time, they developed two collections (one comprehensive) and then unceremoniously scrapped them before arriving at a final range. Similarly, their next big project for Vitra remains secretively under wraps, with no firm completion dates on the horizon. "When a project leaves our studio, it's because both of us are sure it's good," says Ronan. Among those lucky enough to escape this year (along with Ligne Roset's *Ploum*): a shelving system for Established & Sons that incorporates sliding textile panels made from quilted fabric; two chairs, the *Baguette* for Magis and *Oso* for Mattiazzi; plus *L'Oiseau*, Vitra's newest bird mascot.

Their successes rest mostly on knowing that their job goes well beyond furniture. "We're always thinking we have to make something that doesn't exist, that is particular, and that has its own character," says Erwan. "It's difficult to achieve, but we just know that we should focus on this question, and then once we find an interesting point of view we try to take out everything else." **AZ**