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# DRAGON'S DEN

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Technology is like a dragon, says Erwan Bouroullec. "The challenge is to be able to harness it". Together with his brother Ronan, he has just designed a TV that is anything but an ordinary wallflower. Salka Hallström Bornold pays a visit to the leading stars of French design in their Belleville studio.





Erwan and Ronan with the *Serif* frame. The furniture TV is to be released by Samsung this fall. The prices will not be considerably higher than for an ordinary Samsung TV.

As usual, the French journalists are late. They don't even seem to be on their way. Ronan Bouroullec says that it's starting to get on his nerves.

– It's always, always like this. 30 minutes late is ok. But after that... it's not flattering!

So we wait. Lucky for me, as I get to take a tour of the whimsical studio. The outbuilding in picturesque Belleville, Paris is a quaint old shoe factory where the floors have been shoved in like baking sheets into an oven. The windows have ended up in the wrong places and the rooms have been crammed into what resembles a chaotic carpenter's laboratory. Montserrat Alvarez, the Spanish employee who calls herself "a mountain working for Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec" on Twitter, plows through boxes and cables to show us the brothers' documentation, a comprehensive binder for every project they've done: beneath the surface, things are in meticulous order.

A humble space, considering all the fame that emanates from here. From Belleville to Kvadrat in Denmark, Vitra in Switzerland, Japanese Issey Miyake, Italy's Magis and Cappellini. On my way here, I read in the flight magazine about what the brothers have been up to in Japan. Days later, I land in Helsinki and see their new collection *Kaari* in Artek's window.

With us in the studio now are five representatives from the Korean electronics giant Samsung, including the design director for tv and audio. The brothers from Quimper, Bretagne, have a low-key, almost seamless way of finishing each other's sentences, like two heads on one body. It takes them a long while of reasoning to present the product they've been developing for the last three years: the furniture television *Serif*.

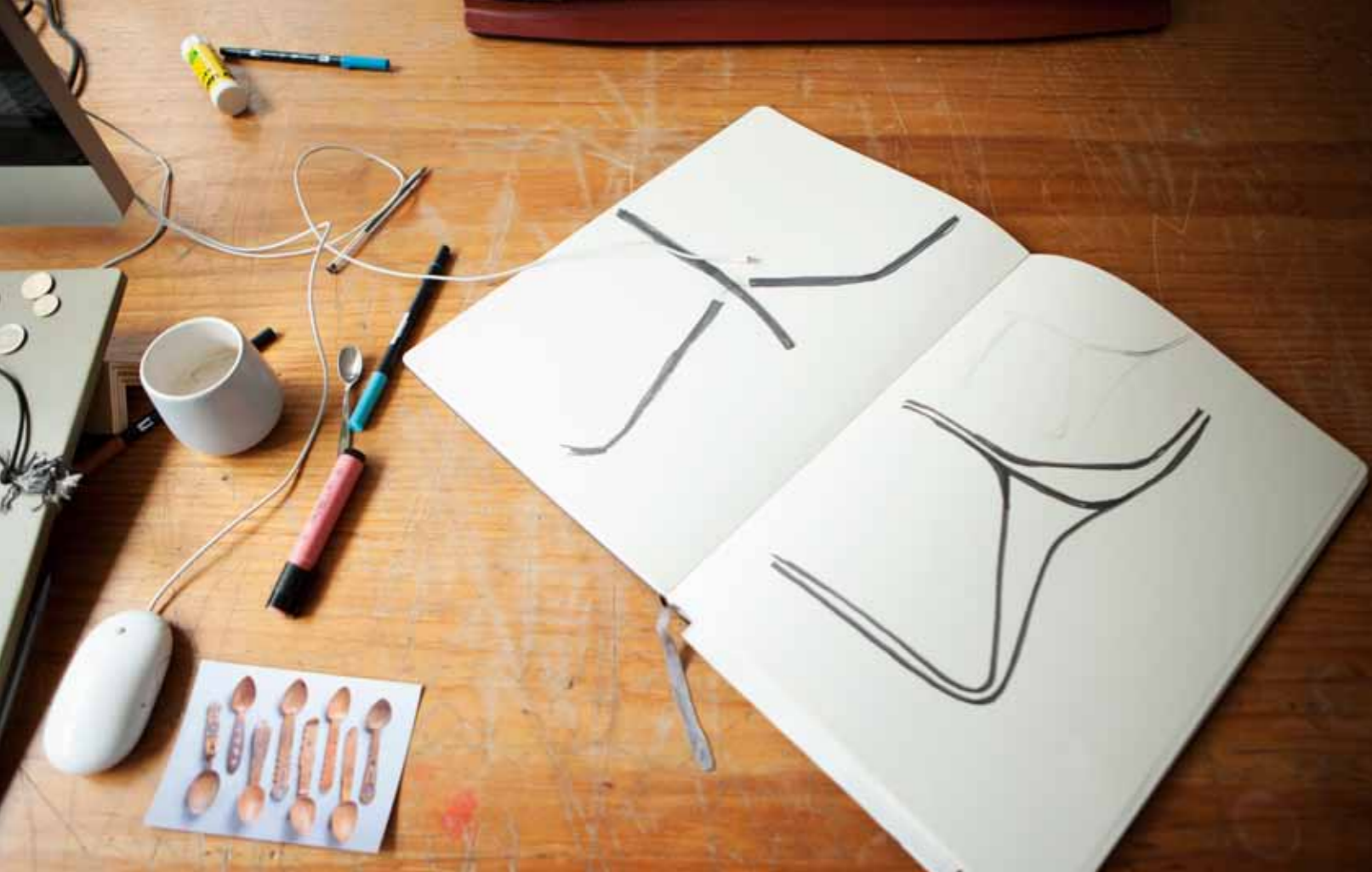
– It has been an intense, passionate project and it's very surprising how much they let us work freely, Ronan says.

– When they asked us to design a TV we said yes, maybe, but since ten years TV design has been limited to the thickness of it. So we said, maybe we could come back to the TV as an object, a physical thing that you can manipulate and move around. And, last point, we wanted to work on the interface.

*Serif* is thus designed for people like the brothers themselves: the aesthetically conscious class, who prefer to watch quality films on their laptops rather than suffer a flat TV on the wall. It reclaims the function of the fat TV as a shelf for cats and plants without being unsophisticated: from the side it has a silhouette like a Greek column, the back conceals the unsightly cables with colour matching textile. The screen has also been equipped with a curtain mode that hides disturbing images behind a pleasantly waving pixel

*Stampa Chair* for Kettal 2015, in the basement workshop.





Ronan prefers to draw by hand and Erwan is more computer-oriented. In 2013, the brothers published a collection of archive drawings in the book *Drawings*.



drapery. In a way, it's a step into a more metaphysical design genre. I sit down alone with Erwan and ask, how do you actually look at new technology?

- Technology is like a dragon that has its own life and motifs. It's so quick, so the challenge is to be able to harness it, he says.

- Me and Ronan were a bit scared in the beginning. We were asking ourselves, can we enter this field, will we be able to harness the dragon? In the end, it turned out to be completely normal. One of the issues of design is to give shape to culture. With screens being part of our environment, we have to be there and work with them, to be in the real game of giving shape to culture.

- One of our limitations is that we want to stay as free as possible. It's a conscious decision to keep our studio quite small. On the other hand, now that we have a bit more experience - if we would get a proposal to design a car, we would probably go for it.

The feature with the curtain mode that you can use to blotch out advertising - what's the story? Wasn't it conceived as a quite radical step to take?

- What is clear is that Samsung believed in the power of design. I mean, when you look at us it's also clear that we're not TV consumers. I don't have a TV at home, I'm a screen man. This curtain that we proposed was something that they had searched for, for a long time. A lot of people react badly to TV because of the connotations to the seventies, when the state was in control of it, and new technology has been about freedom and access. So, Samsung were convinced since the beginning.

And this project has made you more interested in electronics?

- Inhouse designers probably have the best methods, because they dedicate their lives to one single product field - whereas we, as external designers, don't have an understanding of every parameter. What we may be able to do is open new doors. The designers at Samsung explained to us that it's important that this project succeeds because internally, it's sometimes difficult to cross borders. I just hope that the reaction to *Serif* will be positive, so there might be a second or third generation. It's always a paradox to me that when I finish something, I already know how to make it better.

What do you think about the ongoing debate about technological singularity and artificial intelligence?

- I have read thousands of science fiction books and I'm totally fascinated by robotics. It's been a great pleasure to me. When I was a kid, I learnt programming but I quit when I did my artistic studies. I think artificial intelligence and robotics are incredible tools. What we have to face, again, is the story of the dragon. If all the cars of Paris, for example, would be controlled with artificial intelligence, it would have such a different logic from us. Our intelligence is limited by our bodies, but this new field is something entirely different.

So, you are more interested than afraid?

- I'm fascinated by it. I'd like to send out a bottle in the ocean here, that I would love to design robots, more than anything. Can you write that down? Maybe it will reach somebody out there. ☺



Above: Ronan Bouroullec. There's an extensive archive in the Belleville studio.

