

# THE PLANT

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# The Bourouillecs

*Interview*  
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*Photography*  
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Ronan Bouroullec welcomes us to the studio he shares with his brother Erwan in Belleville, Paris. Ronan is discreet in nature and his sharp intelligence is felt immediately. Even though he claims he is bad with words, he is much more expressive than he thinks. His considered pauses and observational manner say it all. The designer absorbs everything. For him – and he will tell you quickly – everything is design, in the sense that everything is to be reinvented. Since 1999, the two Breton brothers quietly took the French design scene by storm. Giulio Cappellini was the first to commission them for the industrial design projects *Lit Clos* (closed bed) and *Spring Chair*. They are also known for the *Softshell Chair* and *Belleville Chair*, both designed for Vitra, among many other rare, precise objects in addition to numerous collaborations with the likes of Issey Miyake, Magis, Kartell, Established & Sons, Ligne Roset, AXOR, Alessi and Kvadrat.

The Bouroullec brothers are utopians in the disguise of prolific designers. All they do is create vases, desks, textiles and spaces. They imagine architectural structures and cities, and the more they create and imagine, the more their mental universe flourishes. They present us with a better way of life. The Bouroullecs also convey a sentiment of rest, of the spirit and the body. Everything is but silence and pleasure. The best way to understand the Bouroullecs is from their sensitive side, from their emotive approach, which hides behind their vision of design. For this, it is best to peruse the intimacy of their drawings, published in the book *Bouroullec Drawings* (2013). The outlines of the drawings are honest and sober, almost naïve. Behind the technical excellence of their creations, there's always a quest for truth in its purest form. The world according to Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec is but a connector, a link, it is an extraordinary ecosystem where pragmatism and sensitivity, vision and popular instinct come together with a bright tenderness. And in the middle of all this, lies nature, which is essential for them. The brothers were born in Quimper, Brittany, in the 1970s. In their creations, vegetation proliferates as savagely as nature does in the Breton region of Finistère. Without being totally wild, it spreads with mystery. It manifests itself in incredible ways, in the middle of a living room, for example, as with *Algues* made from plastic elements styled after seaweed, which have gained cult status. In their four-part exhibition *Rêveries Urbaines*, which premiered in Rennes, the designers completely rethought the place of nature in the city, unlocking new ecological ideas. In their work, it is the vegetation that questions the relationship between mankind, society and human evolution: this is what we wanted to speak to Ronan about. And here we are in Belleville with young creatives moving between carpentry workshops and big iMacs. Everything is meticulous but has a slightly chaotic, meaningful and charming edge.

CLAIRE TOUZARD *Is your link to nature rooted in your Breton origins?*  
RONAN BOURULLEC It most certainly comes from there, without a doubt. Erwan and I grew up in rural conditions. I had a fairly solitary childhood because we didn't have neighbours. I went to secondary school in Quimper, which was a good fifteen kilometres away, so until I could have a moped I was quite isolated. I arrived in Paris at seventeen and haven't left since but I've maintained a complex relationship with nature. I had to get out of Brittany in order to realise to which extent this atmosphere, this landscape and this physical, almost organic link to the earth has become indispensable to me. Today, if I don't go back once a month, I miss it terribly.

CLAIRE *The sea, these landscapes of the north... There seems to be something of this in your creations.*

RONAN For many people, the horizon of the sea marks the end. For me, it's the beginning of everything. Those who have lived in Nordic countries often have a particular link to the quality of the light. Scandinavians, for example, always pay particular attention to the type of light bulb and the number of lamps in an interior. From one moment to the next, this gives off so much warmth. Coming from a rural environment in which everything is a bit harsh and brutal, I think I've sought to develop a little more sensuality and softness, all while keeping a very direct side.

CLAIRE *This wild and raw state of nature, does it speak to your essence?*

RONAN Our work is described as something rather simple, not minimalist, but simple. Our culture makes us want to create something of evidence, things that have been designed with common sense. Our main search is for the charm that can emanate from an object. A good project is a coming together of many aspects including comfort, the right weight and the right price but the charm is the most difficult to obtain. This is what makes all the difference, just like between two people. What

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really counts are not the perfect measurements but the charm that lets an object infuse and diffuse harmony, well-being and softness – a bit like a tea bag.

CLAIRE *You have produced plastic algae with advanced technologies. Can a recreated element still be authentic?*

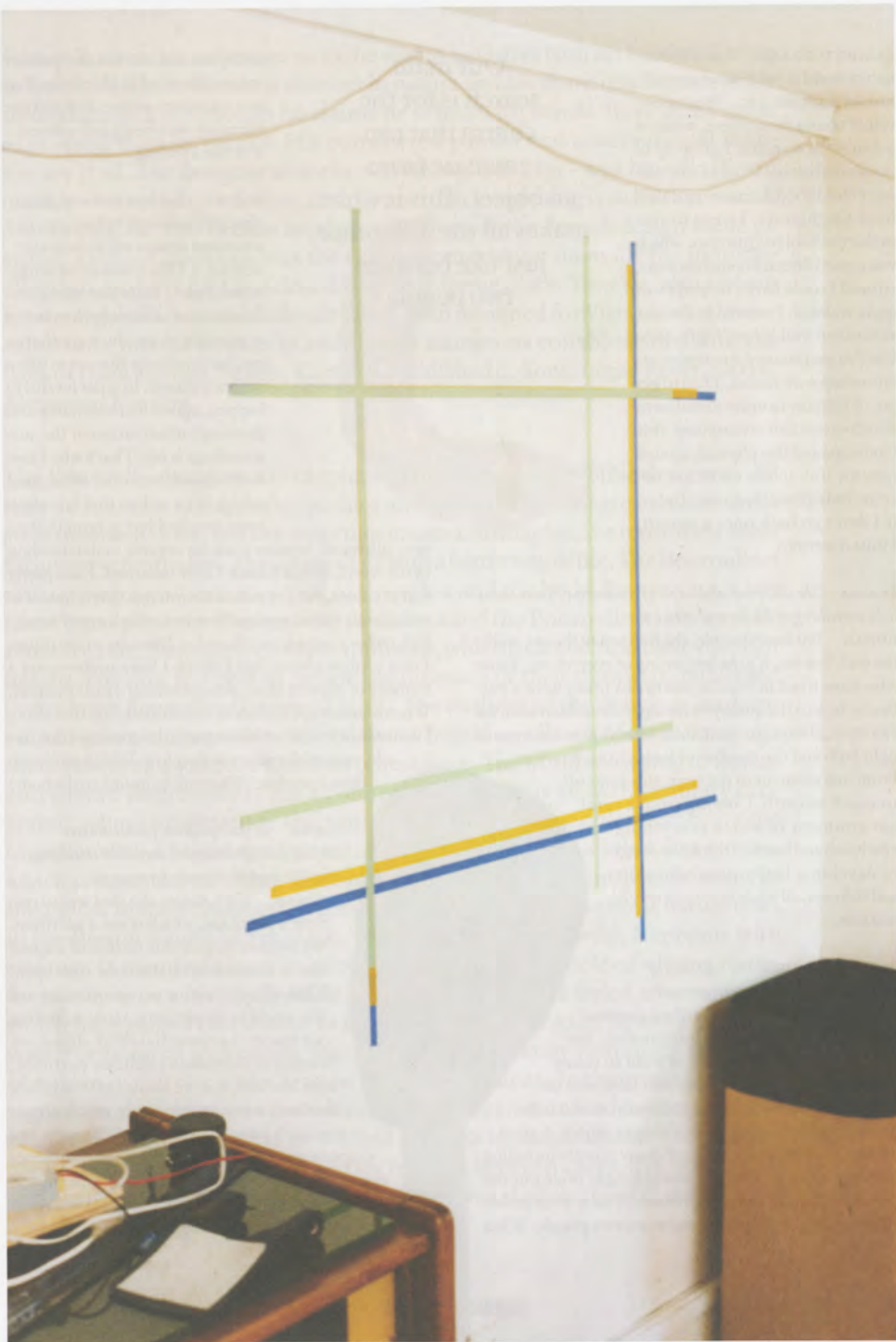
RONAN This is not a challenge. Sometimes, however, when circumstances come together well it is possible to produce synthetic, mechanic objects that seem like a natural element. In order for this to happen, a good understanding and thorough observation of the surroundings is key. That's why I love Brittany and the science of the rural world. It's a milieu that has often been mocked but is nonetheless

very cultivated because it has an organic understanding of the world, which I think I have inherited. I was pretty bad at school, but I'm rich in knowledge that is linked to sensations, rich in comprehensions, which are of a magical, rather than a scientific order. There are many things I don't know about, but I think I have understood a number of aspects in an almost metaphysical manner. When a prototype arrives here, normally the first thing I do is touch it without looking at it. I want to get this tactile, sensorial understanding first. Which sensation does it produce? What will be its link to the body?

CLAIRE *In your projects, plants always crop up in unprecedented ways, like with your famous module Algues, for example.*

RONAN With *Algues*, the idea was to recreate a partition, which is not a partition. We wanted to give this notion of a space that is defined and at the same time open. This allows having perspective, to see the world in its entirety. How we define our spaces is primordial. With *Algues*, we wanted to introduce a delicate partition, a bit like lace. But we also wanted to create finished, automatic elements, which people wouldn't have to assemble. Whatever the shape or quantity, it has an extraordinary effect even on the simplest wall. And at the same time, it can also work if it is arranged in tens of thousands on a huge surface.





CLAIRE *Technology and nature – do the two have to get along?*

RONAN Today it is very easy to sculpt a bas-relief with an automatic sander machine. If this machine is not very fine or delicate, it will end up in an absolute mess. For us, there's an important primordial aspect, which says it all in one word: vibration. Vibration, for me, is what makes things lively. In this day and age, our research is very much linked to the fact that we can use better-performing machines and the most advanced technologies, but at least we always try to give it this sensuality, and in some cases, this imperfection, which brings vibration.

CLAIRE *And how do you make sure that design integrates with the surrounding nature?*

RONAN How many historic streets have been ruined by orange or pink plastic chairs? I always mentally transfer every project I work on to Brittany. The landscape there is so beautiful that we constantly have to ask ourselves whether this terrace chair or any other designed object is not going to destabilise and deform the surroundings in a vulgar way. The same exercise can be done, for example, by transferring an object into a romantic painting of the nineteenth-century – what will happen if someone put plastic chairs here? Does this create a harmonious situation or a radical rupture? In some cases, the radical rupture can interest me but that has to be the end of it. I don't believe in the rupture of the rupture, this has no sense. Rupture in order to gain a new aesthetic or a new direction makes sense, anything else doesn't.

CLAIRE *You have also implanted design in public spaces, such as the Kunsthal Aarhus in Denmark. Does this make you reflect on your connection to society?*

RONAN I often think about what Niki de Saint Phalle once said about her work. She wasn't passionate about oversized pieces, she only created them because it assured her they would stay outside. I loved this statement and it has led me to conceive projects differently. I have always been fascinated by the object because it is simple and can easily be passed on. I have always liked good objects in their raw form because of their direct relation to society. This type of project in public space allows us to touch a bigger public, which is not always what we do with our creations.

CLAIRE *You created a new project Nuage (cloud) in Miami, which becomes part of the city...*

RONAN Yes, in the Design District to be precise. In this area, there are beautiful galleries and high-quality architecture, but its main road is south-facing so the sun is

very strong. The city of Miami was looking for a way of to make the street more comfortable, so we created organic pergolas that take on the form of a cloud – there are perforations which are covered in coloured glass a bit like church windows, and the sun can pass through. This gives off shade organically, reminding of the cool air of fountains and water reservoirs. It definitely pushed the potential of the space. It's quite entertaining. People sit down because they feel protected. They enjoy the gentleness and freshness of the pagoda. I'm curious to see how it will evolve with time.

CLAIRE *In your exhibitions like Réveries Urbaines (urban musings) in Rennes your desire to imagine a different world became quite apparent.*

RONAN *Réveries Urbaines* raises the question of public spaces in the city: What happens between two buildings in a street, in an avenue? I travelled a lot and noticed that public spaces are no longer seen as sensitive spaces. We no longer tend to think of cities in terms of circulation, as in, how do I get from one point to the other? Flânerie, or the pleasure of strolling, is almost forgotten about. Having nature at the heart of the city is a primordial concept. Still, urbanism always tackles it in the same manner – a lot of plans with a lot of greenery are drawn, but still, one cannot help but feel that it's not thought about properly, that the trees have just been randomly put around.

CLAIRE *How can we do this differently?*

RONAN There are so many ways of bringing greenery into a city such as lianas, climbing plants... *Réveries Urbaines* were actual dreams or urban musings. It was a sketchbook in which we imagined solutions, dreams, things that are beautiful but pragmatic such as introducing water into the city, there are so many ways of bringing pleasure. This should never be forgotten about, these moments where we go above the simple function of a thing. This goes from low fountains in which children can skip stones to very basic urban jungles consisting of ivy and clematis flowers emerging between buildings.

CLAIRE *What is the aim of the plant? Does it disturb or does it give depth to the space?*

RONAN It is this very organic side that creates a link between things. Take any good Bauhaus building, for example. For me, there's nothing more beautiful than witnessing how this architectural rigour and a Virginia creeper or an ivy meet. Our projects often evoke this encounter between the organic and the geometric. It creates a balance.



CLAIRE *It seems like you like this idea of nature going its own way.*

RONAN Yes, there is this idea of invasion in our culture. Previous generations like my parents' fought against nature. It is rare to see weeds grow in gardens, but they have so much charm and are so beautiful. Today, due to the ecological consequences of treatments, we are finally thinking about new ways of incorporating weeds and letting them grow. Weeds are wonderful things. I'd love it if they could appear everywhere. It is quite surprising how successful *Rêveries Urbaines* is. It moves from place to place. It has just been to Lodz in Poland, and now it's travelling to Hong Kong and New York. It is strange how we shine a light on a current topic, but we managed to do this in such a subtle and poetic manner with lots of sensuality and charm.

CLAIRE *There's always a certain vision of nature in suspension, which multiplies itself.*

RONAN Everything divides itself into different branches. It is suspended and associated. It's linked to our concept of design. Our work generally defines itself by the addition of details. The quality of the chair on which you are sat comes from the encounter between the curve of its backrest and the way it is pinched. What makes each of our projects peculiar is a reflection on the connection that things have between themselves – how they are assembled, how this piece of wood contributes to the whole, how the screws are visible. Whether it's *Algues* or this chair even, the narrative of our projects are anchored in their assembly.

CLAIRE *Fundamentally speaking, is design about thinking of a vision, a global connection?*

RONAN In the past – if you take the example of Alvar Aalto or Charlotte Perriand – architects were also designers, so they were interested in a doorknob or the quality of the curtains. And for me, it's that diversity that I'm passionate about. We're living in a time now where everything is very divided. Architects have certain rights, interior architects have others, designers create designs and painters paint. Everything that hasn't grown naturally from the face of this earth is design, and then there's the question of reflection, as well as the question of sensitivity – these are all subjects I'm interested in without

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exception. From urbanism to a tablecloth via a detailed sketch – all of this is design.

CLAIRE *Do you want to recreate an ecosystem of some sort?*

RONAN Our work is very diverse; it goes from the crystal entry of the Versailles castle to a minimal-cost wooden chair for Copenhagen University and other office solutions. I believe a lot in this variety of topics, it asks us to renew ourselves all the time but even projects change. Our aim is always to search for well-being and our approach stays the same: In a rapidly changing world, how does one solve the most delicate of issues in a modern and time-appropriate manner? I like this word a lot: delicate. What is in-

teresting is that the variety of topics always brings a variety of techniques. Everything is linked. Just how a Virginia creeper holds on to a surface, there is this idea of a solution that finds its own way of spreading out.

CLAIRE *There's always a look towards people...*

RONAN I'm fascinated by nomadic people and their objects. The lifestyle of Native Americans is all about only having true and well-thought-out objects around you – and I'm not just thinking of a simple functional revolution. What is fascinating is that behind the object lies a whole imaginary world of decorations. If you look at yurts, you can see that beyond their practical look there's an extremely delicate architecture made from painted wood. I'm just as keen on understanding historical objects as I am interested in magazines and contemporary culture of the 1950s. I collect a bit from everywhere. I especially like anything that comes from popular culture.

CLAIRE *You released a book of drawings, Bouroullec Drawings, and a new one will come out this year, Malachappe (Nieves). Does drawing allow you to have a bigger vision of the world, far from the limitations of production?*

RONAN I've been drawing since my childhood, way before I became a designer. Drawing has always been a pleasure and a tool. I have always had some difficulties expressing myself verbally, so it has been a good help for this and kept me company in my thoughts. Some are research sketches associated with my design projects. But I also do a lot of abstract drawings, which are autonomous and are



playing an increasingly important part. Erwan only draws for research purposes to think about chair pieces or find mechanisms. For me, it's almost independent of my practice as a designer, but of course, the one influences the other.

CLAIRE *This quest for simplicity in your pencil strokes is quite impressive. Do you want to stay naïve?*

RONAN Sometimes I express something very sensual in a drawing, there are other moments when there are explosions, and at times it is more meticulous, it is freer. I actually like being able to record another temporality, one that is more immediate. I'm a bulimic when it comes to projects and the design discipline demands a lot of time between the conception of the object and the moment where it sits in the vitrine. In drawing, a more impulsive approach reigns, something very instantaneous and direct, it is not something too thought-about nor constructed. This allows me to get over my frustration in

relation to the slowness of the production of objects. Then again, in essence, design is a collective project since it needs to be discussed with an engineer but I like being alone from time to time.

CLAIRE *A drawing, a chair, architecture, a plant... Could we, one day, live on a planet that was entirely thought out by the Bourroullec's?*

RONAN I love the concept of a total work of art – the idea that everything supports the other and yet all elements are of the same importance. There is a no hierarchy between a drawing and a chair. For me, a badly designed chair can be less interesting than a quick but successful drawing. Everything can be subject matter, everything is associated: I'm just as happy drawing cars and cities as I am dreaming up formulas for new flowers. Maybe I'd like to imagine a totalitarian country in which I have the full power (*He says with a smile*).





