

Design Royalty

Words Alice Blackwood Photography Christine Francis

Awarded The Luminary title for the 2017 INDE.Awards, founders of the eponymous studio Hecker Guthrie, Paul Hecker and Hamish Guthrie, are considered design royalty within their sector. Their sensitive and considered design approach has already left an indelible mark upon Australian interiors.

Eight years ago Paul Hecker and Hamish Guthrie (HG) drew a line in the sand. They were already in an established partnership, but the goal-posts had recently changed. “It was important for us to use that moment to take stock and clarify the kind of work we wanted to do; how we wanted to be perceived as a practice,” says Guthrie.

Together they had almost 40 years design experience. The body of work was there and the moment ripe with possibility. But Hecker and Guthrie were keen to put some definition around their practice. “We wanted to keep the work close, and maintain a sense of doing good work, which we felt connected to,” says Guthrie.

In that workshop – a rare opportunity for the duo to step back from the practice and take time to reflect – they were asked to bring a single object that they felt represented the HG approach.

Hecker brought a Tom Dixon Offcut Stool, speaking to its materiality, simplicity and connection to heritage, (the piece being a modern take on the traditional milking stool). Guthrie brought a spinning top, handmade in natural timber, which he’d bought from a Venetian wood turner on a trip to Italy. “The spirit of that object lay in its craftsmanship, its beautiful sculptural form, and the sense of play and whimsy about it,” he says.

These were all qualities that spoke to the design values for which HG has become known: authenticity, consideration, emotional connection through design, and rigorous refinement.

“We always wanted to be considered and relevant. From our perspective a successful interior is where you make someone feel a certain way intentionally,” says Hecker. “While our aesthetic may not be unique, it’s the subtleties borne from long experience that make the difference,” he says.

Eight years on, HG are on the cusp of new development. “We’re reassessing, reconnecting with our team. Challenging

ourselves to articulate the fundamental ideas underpinning what we do. It’s cathartic,” says Hecker. When Hecker and Guthrie started out some 30 years ago, the Australian design industry was a very different place. “There were literally five design firms and it was very defined, very corporate,” says Hecker. “There was little in the way of domestic design.” Since then the industry has developed into a diverse and pluralist culture. “You have to work harder to define yourself,” he says.

This new period of ‘refinement’ for HG sees them re-examine the process in which they work: “How to keep our people engaged and motivate them, give them the tools they need to exceed, and be engaged in the design process.” Forefront in their minds, too, is the legacy they leave behind. While everything they do is of an award-winning or print-worthy standard, the question remains: “Have we created our legacy? Hecker Guthrie’s body of work is a legacy, whether you love it or not. But more and more we’re striving towards a legacy we can feel proud of, that also excites us.”

In a world where reinvention is often treated as the solution to survival, Hecker and Guthrie firmly believe in the power of refinement. “The problem with reinvention is that it’s a prototype – you reinvent at your own risk,” says Hecker. To constantly hone – to question the norms and critique one’s own concepts, processes and outcomes – “it takes guts”. And a brave client, willing to join them on the journey.

Guthrie returns to the Offcut Stool, Tom Dixon’s homage to the traditional milking stool: symbolic of heritage, design pedigree and modern refinement. Symbolic of the Hecker Guthrie approach. Really a legacy in its own right.

The Luminary Award was sponsored in 2017 by Wilkhahn.

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Hamish Guthrie, co-founder, Hecker Guthrie.