

Gary Bennett, furniture maker

One of the brains behind the influential Jah Roc Gallery, Gary Bennett's beginnings as a respected artisan were fairly inconspicuous. Creating furniture with one of his surfing mates (his now business partner David Paris) just because he loved woodwork, pedalling early designs around the streets of LA to reasonable success; their diversion rapidly became a career.

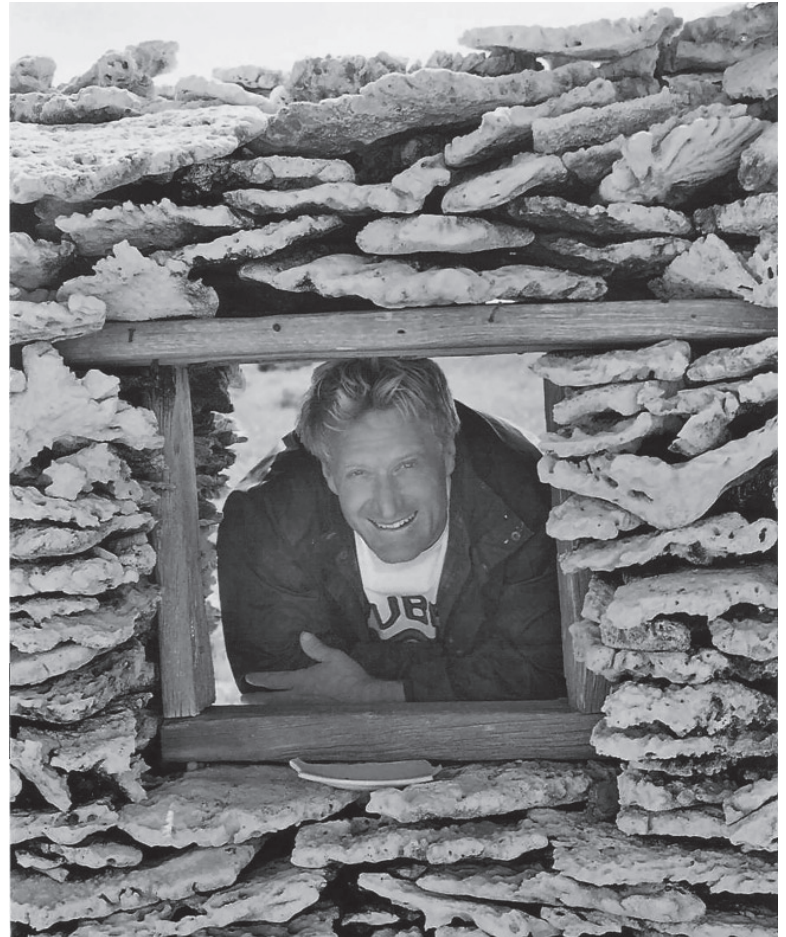
Buying an old flourmill in York that became their workshop and gallery, Gary recalls this renovation as a career highlight – before casually mentioning that he and his wife lived in a tent for a year whilst this highlight occurred. “She was pregnant by the end of it, but I told her I'd buy her a two-man tent for her and the baby... we bought a house.”

Unable to stay away from the surf too long, they opened a Margaret River gallery in 2003 and watched business double overnight as they ran the galleries in York and Margaret River simultaneously. Unable to keep up with the work, they have sold the York gallery and workshop, and will be based entirely in Margaret River.

“It's a bit sad to see York finish, but we're just excited to be back here. And Dave and I will be in the same workshop again, doing what we love and coming up with new ideas together.”

How would you describe your personal style?

I'm not a trained designer, so I don't really know what you'd call what I do! I just like simple things with a bit of shape to them, and if you're going to sit on them, they've got to be comfortable. I try and make them practical as well as nice to feel – to have a nice touch to it. But I don't know. I'm kind of your 'make it up as you go' sort of bloke.



ABOVE: Jah Roc's Project Abrolhos Lagoon coffee table made from black butt, ebony and mother of pearl. TOP RIGHT: Gary Bennett.

What inspires your work?

Certainly our surroundings, it always has been that way. In York I did a lot of big, chunky things, because we were living in this big, chunky old building and using old materials from that area, and down here on the coast we've just got the power of the ocean and the amazing shapes, the things you see in the forrest, right up from the little seed pods, to the straggly looking trees – we're pretty nature-based. We can't help ourselves, we're surfers. If you're going to be a creator, you've got to find some way to be driven, and that's what we're driven by our – environment.

Who do you most admire from a professional perspective?

I've always been a big fan of Sam Maloof's work – I guess because he's a self taught guy as well, and I just love the way that he puts things together, and it always looks nice, and resolved, and right. Otherwise, I'd go back and say Michelangelo too, but that was a long time ago. But he is, without a doubt, the master of all artisans. That guy was still creating his best work in his late 80s, so when I look at history, I'd pick him as well because he was multi-skilled – a painter, sculptor, architect. All, from what I can gather, without a formal education. That's incredible, I reckon. I really admire people like that.

What is the most important element when creating a piece of furniture?

The satisfaction of getting it right. That tingle you get up the back of your neck when you stand back and look at it, at the end of a job. It doesn't happen every time, but sometimes it does, and you just stand back and go; “Yeah. I've got this one right.”

Jah Roc Gallery, 83 Bussell Highway, Margaret River (08) 9758 7200 