

Interview with Johnny Hawkes and Fred Baier

Johnny Hawkes and Fred Baier are both what Johnny terms “woodies”, that is furniture makers and craftsmen. They could both be described as “maverick,” being visionary and inventive in their design and utterly uninterested in the vagaries of fashion. Fred is an internationally acclaimed designer and has taught at several institutions, including the Royal College of Art in London. Johnny, who is self taught, has also had great success in Britain and abroad and has pioneered inventions as diverse as The Hedgehog wheel for skate-boarding on grass and recently an experiment with what he calls “The Popstar” of all shapes” “*The Sphelix*” as well as being a cabinet-maker and designer. Despite coming from very different backgrounds they are good friends and have both made their homes in the village of Pewsey, Wiltshire. They talk to Kate Anstey.

It is a cold day, close to Christmas, and dark outside; we are sitting in the office of Johnny Hawkes’ workshop. In the background the tools of his trade whine and grind and next door the small showroom is lit by tall lamps fashioned from cones of veneer, the light glowing through a skin of wood and through knots and imperfections in its surface.

Although Johnny and Fred live in the same community, they have very different styles and totally separate working lives; I began by asking each to define the style of the other...

Fred: Johnny has a go at doing all sorts of things which are an adventure in manipulating wood in all sorts of different ways...he’s not very good at drawing so all the things he does are about having a go at doing it in a three dimensional way. He never went to Art School but he is enthusiastic and has taught himself by going to see objects and studying how they are made – like we all do – taking influence from the things that he sees. Then he marries that playing around with ideas, with two-dimensional plan and elevation development of drawings and puts them together very successfully.

Johnny: Fred works from drawings and his style revolves around geometric shapes that intersect each other using planar geometry. He’s refined and refined this using cones and squares to make absolutely fantastic objects. Incredibly high skilled, hands-on woodworking.

Fred: I fancied having a career doing woodwork – it seemed to be what I was best at – and I was reasonably academic – and people said that if I

added value to what I did through Art or Design – I'd have a better career. I was advised that my best option was to do architecture, but I couldn't imagine staying with it. It seemed so theoretical. The chance of being hands on seemed slight and the possibility of being able to get a project built, for anyone under forty, seemed unlikely.

Johnny: And it's expensive making a mistake in architecture! I got into it through having, like Fred, a good, traditional teacher. That, along with a lack of application in academic subjects and boredom. I loved making things...it was what I always wanted to do.

Had Johnny felt the lack of an Art School education?

JOHNNY: Not really. Rejection by the Crafts Council a few years ago was slightly gutting. They are orientated around and won't consider anyone who hasn't come through the college system, which is extremely narrow-minded. So, that is my only frustration. I think that Fine Art in particular is moving towards what they call Outsider Art, by people who are not formally trained. They don't conflict...it just creates differing working practices. I started straight into work and had to learn by my mistakes and failures.

FRED: But the workshop you were in was full of people who had been to Art School, so you were surrounding yourself with a peer group exactly as if you had been at college!

Did they think that there might, now, be too many people going to Art School and too few vocational/practical courses on offer? Are students being accepted onto courses when their talents might not be adequate enough to allow them to earn a living?

FRED: I don't think that that is the case at all. You have to have a vast number of people through the system to find the one or two good ones in each year...and the rest are not wasted. In every field it is the same. One or two excel and the others apply their learning in other directions.

JOHNNY: There is a great value in education per se and the more people who go to Art School the better – but to a certain extent, the current thought and style of Conceptual Art is slightly opening the flood-gates. Anyone can put dog-shit on a canvas and consider it worth something. The criteria could have become too loose and the teachers don't seem to be able to put the brakes on at all.

FRED: When I went to college it was all very different. Then, 10 to 12% of the population went on to Further Education, now it is 60 – 70%.

JOHNNY: And in those days you did a lot more hands on work at college...you really made things. Now, it seems to be coming back a bit but Craft has been shoved to the sidelines and become a really dirty word.

FRED: you can't allow the word 'Art' to happen to craft-led work in this country.

JOHNNY: But I see our type of furniture as Decorative Art or Applied Art...

FRED: But it is not Fine Art...

JOHNNY: I'm not saying it should be interpreted as such but the gap should be closer...the perceived value should be greater. As it was in France in the twenties and in Vienna...We in Britain, unfortunately had William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, which was pretty austere.

FRED: And William Morris would never have survived if he hadn't been wealthy anyway.

JOHNNY: He was a piss-poor carpet designer who got elevated because of his political stance and the ethics he was trying to sell. Christopher Dresser was a world-class Victorian craftsman, a genius, and he has hardly been heard of. Britain doesn't stand up very well when it comes to being receptive to new ideas.

FRED: The trouble with Britain is that we are such a small country. When I started about 1% of people bought contemporary furniture. Now many more people buy contemporary furniture, but the arty stuff we put all our passion into sell to a very small group of people. In this country we don't have the infrastructure to promote and develop that work. It can't support too many of us. It is feast or famine. Someone might want a whole house full of furniture and then nothing for a year.

JOHNNY: It is not a money-orientated business.

FRED: You do it because you are passionate about it and you get by.

JOHNNY: In Europe there is more of a system of patronage.

FRED: In other countries Fine Art galleries pause once or twice a year to show craft-based work and there are appreciation societies and collector groups. America is particularly good at this. Johnny's got a book called "The Woodwork Book". In America the exact same book is called "The Art of Woodwork". That says it all.

JOHNNY: I think we, in Britain, have been saturated with the furniture of the 18th Century. There was no other country in the same league and we've had a disinclination to accept the modern until maybe the 80s. Then Monetarism brought the wad-boys with huge amounts of disposable income to flash around. It has a lot to do with snobbery. The English Upper classes don't like putting modern furniture in their houses and if they can't afford the genuine article they buy this retro-shit. Then suddenly, in the Thatcher years, other people had money and they didn't care about being associated with the past. They bought new, so now people are more receptive and discerning. However, production costs are high in England.

FRED: it is very sad that manufacturing was pushed out in this country. Industry didn't join forces with Art/Design and therefore the Industry has died.

JOHNNY: Fred has just come back from the U.S where he was treated like a celebrity. And that is how it should be. He didn't go seeking attention but he got the respect due to someone who has done good work in his lifetime. They respect that there. But I wouldn't live in America.

FRED: I was originally going to live in Barcelona which was a bit dodgy because I didn't even know the Spanish for 'wood'. We were offered a Gaudi flat, free workspace but because it was all speculative, I took another job in the States, running a design project. It was a big adventure.

JOHNNY: And I went out to visit and we spent hours planning how we could go over the Niagara Falls in a boat...

FRED: Horizontal bungy jumping.

JOHNNY: The power of the water and the chaos and the noise.

FRED: If I was on my own I would be back in London. I do go there quite a lot. If I lived there I might drop into private views on the way home and then you automatically network. Here in Pewsey, you can't do that down the pub. In London you are bound to bump into people. You

see The Media have destroyed the possibility for anyone who is mediumly good at anything to be successful. In the past, if you lived in a village, even if you were not in the top five in any given discipline, but were good at what you did, you achieved a certain local notoriety and felt self-worth. But now The Media hype up the few and make other, perfectly worthwhile people, feel inadequate. The Media feed on new things and that is why it is worth being in London or New York.

JOHNNY: I wouldn't put all the blame at the feet of the Media. Historically we have suffered from the William Morris syndrome and latterly the policy of the Crafts Council utterly confused the buying public. They would get hold of some dog-turd piece of ceramic and tell everyone that it was desirable.

FRED: Their philosophy wasn't anything to do with manifestation of Craft...but that appropriate skills should be applied to an idea. It was concept-led.

JOHNNY: Fair enough in Fine Art...The Turner Prize...it creates debate...but with furniture it is harder to get your head round. I think it was a shabby waste of taxpayers' money.

FRED: I was one of their little favourites.

JOHNNY: You were their little pet-boy.

FRED: Yeah, well they were inventing themselves and I was exactly what they meant. So, they grabbed me to say "for example," and pushed me into the limelight. I was on a roll for twenty years.

JOHNNY: You have to be resilient to do what we do, because you are going to get massive knocks. Years ago we did a bloody great table for some accountants in the City and a) when we delivered it wouldn't fit through the door and b) when it had been there for a week, it had warped so badly we called it "The Crisp". All our money was tied up in it. You get it right in the end but you have to be tough. Work that you think is great, may not be liked by the public. Also, the beauty and nature of wood is that it is alive...you can spend your life with it and still end up not knowing very much. Unlike metal or plastic, you could create this beautiful piece and it cracks because the wood might be stressed or you haven't put it together right.

FRED: I'm not as much of a wood freak as you, but I'm sure we do influence each other. We are always chopping and changing...

JOHNNY: And going in and out of each other's workshops. We have a good time...and we've both got Nuam Gabo as a hero.

Success for both men has decreed that they run a business and employ a workforce, so how are they at man and business management?

Fred: Bad!

Johnny: Not bad! Four of us work here and that is a really comfortable unit. Before it was twenty-one people and I was just a 'suit'. I much prefer this - I'm free to do my own work, not just be part of a machine. During the World Cup we closed the workshop down...brought in some armchairs and a sofa and the television. Great! I'd never want to get to the stage where I was just handing over drawings.

Fred: It is quite nice to have some of the slog cut out of some of the process of making...or to be more prolific. If you never make more than one of an object it tends to be rather top-heavy financially. If you are re-inventing the wheel every time you make something, it is worth making a second version each time. When I am working to commission I will take the client along so far and then it might be better for them do one thing and me another, so I run a parallel version up to that point and work on my version later.

Both Fred and Johnny have built up a customer base by word-of-mouth and by taking work to design shows both in Britain and abroad. Fred felt that to keep his profile at a useful level he needed to be included in four or five shows a year.

Johnny: I like the freedom of exhibitions because you can make speculative work. You might meet advertising executives or maybe rag-traders - people who have an interest in modern design - and once you give them something that flatters their business and they like it, they'll be back for more. It is expensive to be an individual and for me it takes having a commercial set-up running parallel to fund my exploration and experimentation.

FRED: Whereas, I had teaching that allowed me to do my work. My next thing is to clear the decks a bit so I can make some new stuff...

JOHNNY: And I want to carry on creeping around the edge and if possible lessen the weight of gravity, that is, lessen the aesthetic expectations you have of yourself, or others have of you, and become more free.

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