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RETAIL DISCOVERIES, SECRET FINDS AND THE VERY LATEST WORD FROM THE STREET

beyond MEASURE

MELBOURNE STORE CRITERIA
SALUTES CRAFT-MEETS-SCULPTURE
IN ITS HIGHLY CONSIDERED EDIT.

PHOTOGRAPHER **SHARYN CAIRNS**
PRODUCER/WRITER **ANNEMARIE KIELY**

A Bec Brittain 'SHY 8.2' light in oil-rubbed bronze hangs above a Ringvide Studio low 'Weave' cabinet, a Matter-Made Range Life II 'Palette' table, a Re-imagined 'Tall' chair by Nina Tolstrup for 19 Greek Street and a Jo Wilson table sculpture at new Melbourne store Criteria.



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In a refreshed warehouse, hidden in a creative patch of post-industrial Cremorne in Melbourne, Rachael Fry — the co-owner of a gallery given over to mostly art-edged American design — explains the name and curatorial nuances of her new venture, Criteria. “If you are coming into Melbourne as a furniture retailer, you have to do something really different, otherwise you bore people,” says the New Yorker, who pre-empts all question of her arrival in Oz with an introduction to her business partner, Amon Carson, the Melbourne-born investment banker she met four years ago in a Manhattan bar and married. “Our focus is pretty much on art-object US design, and that’s our point of difference. But our mantra is more than just ‘Made in America’; our portfolio is determined by two factors: I have to have a strong visceral reaction to a design — I have to love it — and it has to combine strong craft principles with a sculptural quality.”

Fry, an alumnus of New York’s prestigious Parsons design school, searches for an exemplar seat in a showroom scraped back to bare-brick beauty by designer David Flack, and presents a great shape cushioned with conceptual content. “This chair is from the Re-imagined project by Danish designer Nina Tolstrup for London gallery 19 Greek Street. It is made from re-purposed office furniture... it is sculptural, sustainable and speaks of seeing new potential in old stuff.” No, it’s not American, she concedes of Tolstrup’s high-backed nod to post-modernism, but why limit to one nationality when art is embedding in the everyday, everywhere? “Take Jo Wilson’s works,” she says, pointing to the hand-turnings of old telegraph poles by the Melbourne artist. “After years of making functional pieces, Jo is returning to her fine arts practice with aplomb.” But it is ‘hometown’ design — sourced mainly from small New York studios run by makers who typically combine backgrounds in fine arts, architecture and/or philosophy — that floats Fry’s boat. She recalls some of the creative crushes that have converted into business contacts. “One of the first designers I approached was Bec Brittain; her work blurs the line between art and design, which is right at the heart of what we do.” >

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: Jo Wilson’s ‘Rolling’ sculpture; an Andre Hnatöjko ‘Popper Tilt’ lamp is suspended above Matter-Made’s ‘Shaker’ chair and a Rosanna Ceravolo ‘Vieni’ table with Fort Standard ‘Marble’ platter and ‘Crest’ bottle openers; Souda’s ‘Kawa’ vessels and vases; Matter-Made’s ‘Windsor’ chair (left). **OPPOSITE:** owners Amon Carson and Rachael Fry, who sits on a Nina Tolstrup for 19 Greek Street’s Re-imagined ‘Sofa’. In the background are Fort Standard ‘Dry Goods’ vessels and Souda ‘Kawa’ vessels.



A display wall features, top row, from left, Blakebrough + King's 'Kite' stool and Baxter's 'Nepal' armchair; middle row, from left, Forestier's 'Crumple' table lamp, Matter-Made's 'Mother Ann' chair and 'Shaker' chair and (below) Chen Chen + Kai Williams' bookends; bottom row, from left, Souda's 'Kreten' side table, Nina Tolstrup for 19 Greek Street's Re-imagined 'Tall' chair, Neri & Hu for De La Espada's upholstered 'Duet' chair and Matter-Made's 'Affordances No. 1B' marble table. In the foreground is a Nina Tolstrup Re-imagined 'Sofa', with a Matter-Made 'Discus' chandelier above.

< Fry lifts her eyes to a fractal-form pendant light that glows with retro-futurism and declares Brittain's industrial design to be like large-scale jewellery. "And then there was Apparatus; it serially hit the ball out of the park." She refers to the New York studio that handworks vintage lighting components into luminescent pieces such as the 'Cloud' — a cumulus-shaped 'atmosphere' of frosted glass orbs that are both timeworn and totally new. It's their play with polarities (commentary on a culture of contradictions) that appears to repeat across much of the design to which Fry is drawn. Might it constitute a third criterion: making simple sense of modern matters? This proposition prompts Fry to talk about Matter-Made, the autonomous line of furnishings put into production by Matter gallery in Manhattan. "They are drawing on America's rich history of craftsmanship, refreshing the Windsor chair and shaking up the Shaker." She lists other stand-alone ateliers coveted by Criteria — David Weeks Studio, Stephen Kenn, Pietro Russo, Doug Johnston, De La Espada, Blakebrough + King and Megan Callahan — but defers all talk of testing her 'criteria' to Carson. "I come from the 'is this a good idea?' school of establishing marketplace acceptance," says the banker, diminishing his role to backroom support. "We spent nearly two years talking to local architects and interior designers before committing any capital. Yes, we had differentiated the business, but were we kidding ourselves about its local appeal?"

As the doors open on a venture that hopes to hybridise into a creative hub — gallery, arts library, café and event space inclusive — it's safe to assume that the feedback was favourable. "Very," says Fry, with wide-eyed emphasis. "My criteria must have struck a collective chord." *Criteria, 66 Gwynne Street, Cremorne Vic, (03) 9421 2636; criteriacollection.com.au. VL*

