

K H A I

L I E W

Wakefield Press
1 The Parade West
Kent Town
South Australia 5067
www.wakefieldpress.com.au

First published 2010

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Author: Ward, Peter, 1938- .
Title: Khai Liew/Peter Ward.
ISBN: 978 1 86254 895 4 (hbk.).
Notes: Includes bibliographical references.
Subjects: Liew, Khai.
Designers - Australia - Biography.
Artists - Australia - Biography.

Dewey Number: 709.94

This series of books showcasing the works of South Australian living artists is initiated by the SALA Inc. Board and is published with the assistance of the Government of South Australia through Arts South Australia. This is the twelfth book in the series, following *Annette Bezor: A passionate gaze*, Richard Grayson; *Kathleen Petyarre: Genius of place*, Christine Nicholls and Ian North; *James Darling: Instinct, imagination, physical work*, Daniel Thomas; *Nick Mount: Incandescence*, Margot Osborne; *Ian W. Abdulla: Elvis has entered the building*, Stephen Fox and Janet Maghan; *Deborah Paawe: Beautiful games*, Wendy Walker; *Michelle Nikou*, Ken Bolton; *Aldo Iacobelli: I ♥ painting*, John Neylon; *Julie Blyfield*, Stephanie Radok and Dick Richards; *Gerry Wedd: Thong cycle*, Mark Thomson and *Angela Valamanesh: About being here*, Cath Kenneally.

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Grant Hancock: jacket, pages 4, 7, 17, 19, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32-33, 34, 35, 42-43, 44, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50-51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60-61, 62, 63, 82-83, 84, 85, 88-89, 90-91, 92-93, 94-95, 96, 97
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John Tassie: page 98

Thanks to Nichole Palyga for her help in the preparation of the this book.

Designed by Liz Nicholson, designBITE
Printed in China at Everbest Printing Co. Ltd

Jacket: Detail, *Medhurst* side table, 2008, Eco-Core white birch multiply, 73 x 55 x 266 cm.
End page: *Sami* daybed, 2000, Blackbean (Castanospermum australe), upholstered, 70 x 60 x 198 cm.
Endpapers: *Long Weekend* furniture ideograms, Khai Liew, 2001.

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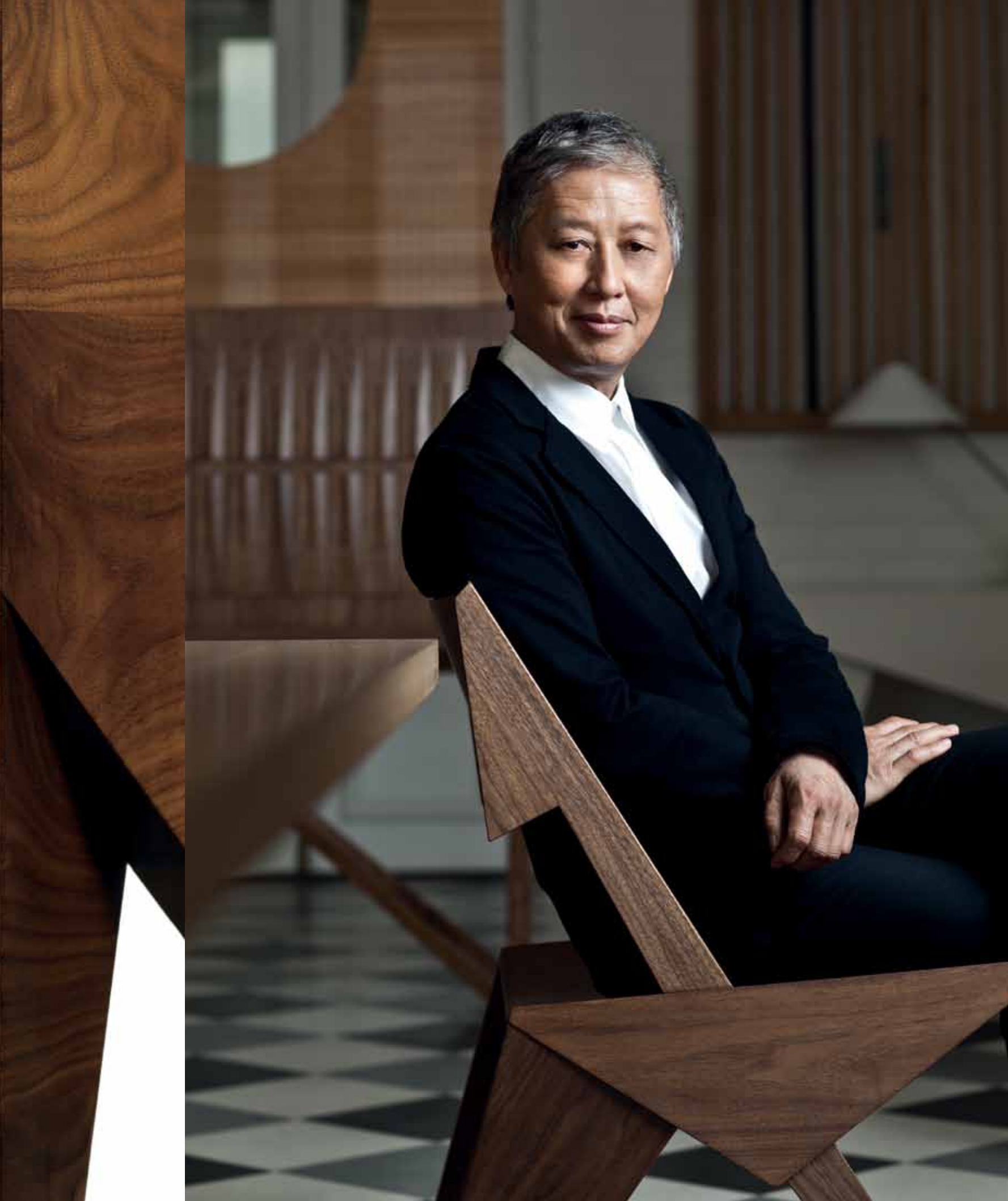
C O N T E N T S

Khai Liew
Peter Ward
6

Gallery
27

Khai Liew
Curriculum Vitae
100

Index of Images
103



Seen but hardly noticed

In 1995 the then director of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Ron Radford, took a leap of faith. With multi-million dollar extensions to his institution well underway, he turned to the next matter on the project's agenda: gallery furniture. The new galleries, designed by the architect Andrew Andersons, would need at least eight benches, each strong enough to withstand hard public use, long and wide enough to comfortably seat three people, and elegant enough to be seen but hardly noticed. Bombastic design was not in the brief.

There were a number of capable and experienced furniture designers in South Australia and elsewhere who would have been keen to accept this handsome commission, but he decided against them all. Instead he decided to approach the Adelaide furniture collector, conservator and dealer, Khai Liew.

Liew was well known to the gallery as a discerning consultant on early Australian furniture. A number of his Barossa German discoveries had entered the gallery's decorative arts collection and he had been commissioned by the gallery to conserve items of furniture, as well as restore and reproduce its early 20th century vitrines and a number of 19th century picture frames. Radford had known Liew since 1980 and over the course of their 15-year association had been impressed by his markedly refined and confident aesthetic judgements and sense of the fitness of things in joinery and restoration. He was so confident of these qualities and of Liew's consequent ability to design in his own right that he was prepared to put that judgement to this critical test.

As Radford recalls, the conceptual starting point for the benches was a modern Filipino lattice coffee table he came across by chance in Sydney.¹ However for Liew the starting point was the latticework on the gallery's recently acquired chairs by the Scottish

architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868–1928), which were shown to him by the curator of decorative arts, Christopher Menz. Menz had made the initial approach to Liew on behalf of the director.² The precise sequence does not matter in the light of the outcome. What neither director nor curator expected was that in developing his design, their tyro designer would meld the modern lattice idea onto a frame with a fixing that is as old as Chinese joinery itself: the three-way mitre joint.

To the modern eye, the joint has a modern clarity: three minimal diagonal lines reveal where vertical and horizontal wood stock meet at the corner of a frame. Liew first came across it as a boy in Kuala Lumpur in a 19th century kitchen table. Much later in Adelaide he found it in furniture brought to him for repair and notably in 1980 in a small Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) stool. He was struck by the simple external elegance of the mitres and intrigued by their complex hidden strength where, in the classic form, three internal mortises and tenons tenaciously interlock. Such surface simplicity and internal complexity seemed to him to be an epitome of Ming functional elegance.

Yet in the history of Chinese decorative arts, one might say the Ming period is practically yesterday, while Chinese joinery traditions go back millennia, as the scholar Gustave Ecke demonstrated in his influential Beijing study of 1944, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*.³ In tracing the sources of Chinese domestic design Ecke instanced bronze simulacrum of wooden boxes from the middle of the Zhou Dynasty (c1050–256 BCE) whose doors and frames illustrate “the tongue and groove device, the mitre, and the dovetailed clamp of the panel so typical of Chinese joinery . . . the Chinese joiner was very early acquainted with the technique of the mitred frame and with its aesthetic value.”

Peter Ward



Clockwise from above: Three-way mitre joint; mitre example in the *Jess* chair (1997); half lapjointed lattice in the *Gallery* bench (1995-1996); detail of mitre example in the *Jess* chair (1997).



Eurasian fusion

Copies of Ecke's book, with its many illustrations and detailed drawings of joints and joinery, circulated in Scandinavia and influenced post-war Scandinavian furniture design. In the mid-1980s Liew's interests expanded from Australian colonial and rustic furniture to take in modern European design classics, especially Danish, and inevitably this development saw him acquire Ecke's book. From these sources and influences, then, came his first commissioned furniture: a fusion of early modernism and ancient Chinese functionalism. Mackintosh is there in the half lap-jointed lattice, while China is there in a modification of the three-way mitre joint that enabled the use of a mechanised mortice and tenon jig. Instead of triple interlocking mortices and tenons, the horizontal stock are cut to receive a V-shaped tenon at the top of the vertical stock. This joint gives them great compressive and lateral stability across their 175 cm spans and, importantly, obviates the need for stretcher support of the legs.

The results are benches (pages 7 and 28) that have a singular multicultural style. Their immediate success prompted further bespoke projects and these further impelled Liew along what has become a remarkable career path in contemporary Australian furniture design. He has been rightly called an "adult prodigy."⁴ Fifteen years on and the Khai Liew style can be easily recognised: changing the meaning on an otherwise discredited noun, it can be called Eurasian fusion.

Khai Liew's world has always been culturally multifaceted. He was born in 1952 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, of Straits Chinese parents, one of nine children in an extended family over which his Southern Chinese paternal grandmother presided as the family matriarch. "At home I was raised under strict Confucian instruction, combined with Buddhist ideals, but at school it was Catholic doctrine and Christian values," he says.⁵ "As children we accepted these vast cultural and religious differences as a normal part of life. My grandmother, always suspicious of the Catholic teachings was, however, pragmatic enough to realise that the Christian schools provided the best education in a newly independent country, and their English language classes were the key to economic opportunity. So essentially, I grew up with temple joss sticks in one hand, and rosary beads in the other."

The Kuala Lumpur of his first 17 years was a small bustling colonial town undergoing radical political and social transitions. Post-war Malay nationalism, a communist insurgency, the formation of the independent multi-racial Federation of Malaysia in 1957 and, with the incorporation of British-ruled colonies, of Malaysia in 1963, followed by the expulsion of Singapore in 1965, and a fractious relationship with Indonesia throughout, provided a tense political and communal background to his childhood and teenage years. Yet he remembers those years with pleasure and even nostalgia for "the aroma of curry and coriander, mixed with Chinese five-spice and Malay lime leaves [which] permeated the humid air."

A sharp awareness of the physicality of the built environment and of the artefacts within it was also with him from his earliest days. His school he remembers as a "Straits Settlement Victorian English-style building . . . reminiscent of the wedding-cake-style of architecture you would find in post-gold rush Bendigo," while another vital aesthetic contribution was provided by his merchant father, a cultivated man who performed with Kuala Lumpur's Chinese opera group. "My home was my father's idea of a Japanese-



Gallery bench, 1995-1996, Queensland walnut (*Endiandra palmerstonii*), 45 x 70 x 175 cm. Art Gallery of South Australia public seating;
National Library of Australia public seating.



DeLoraine armchair, 1998, American black walnut (*Juglans nigra*), 60 x 49.5 x 49 cm.
Art Gallery of South Australia; Art Gallery of Western Australia.