

# FINK BIG

Successful Australian designer Robert Foster has been in New Zealand advising fledging Kiwi designers on his best survival tips for a life working in the creative sector. He spoke to **Ann Warnock**.

**L**EADING Australian metalsmith Robert Foster is perfectly positioned to advise emerging Kiwi designers on survival mechanisms within the industry.

“When I left the Canberra School of Art in 1985 to pursue a career as a fulltime designer, I stepped out into a great big void,” he says, over coffee near the Hawke’s Bay Museum and Art Gallery in Napier. “It was a malnourished environment out there and it was tough.”

Despite that shaky springboard in the late 80s, Foster went on to found one of Australia’s most celebrated design-led companies, F!NK + Co, in 1993.

Based near Canberra, his studio workshop manufactures a quirky range of household objects, from its flagship water jug – used on the tables of restaurants in New York and London – to a curvaceous butter dish, “squashed” storage vessels, an organic-shaped vase replicating a bird in flight and a platter inspired by a multi-purpose vessel used by Aboriginal women to carry water and cradle babies.

Foster says he wanted to challenge the notion that “functional means boring” or that “useful and visually exciting” are at loggerheads.

“I wanted to revolt against the symmetry of mass-produced products – so narrow and predictable – and I wanted to place my one-off works in a design arena and make them more affordable. To move into production . . . but with a particular quality.”

F!NK + Co objects are produced in small batches of 20-100 units at a time and are hand-finished. But its designer wares are not only the creation of its 47-year-old founder.

Fervent in his support for young artistic talent, Foster collaborates with a pool of nine emerging Australian artists and produces their design concepts as part of the F!NK product range.

“These collaborations are ongoing . . . even after the product has been developed. I feel very fortunate to be a mentor and a friend and to gain a colleague.”

Foster says while New Zealand and Australia now have established design communities with networks for their young designers, he believes it’s far more competitive and no less tough than 20 years ago.

He also says “homogenised and financially stretched” design studies offered by our learning institutes are not equipping our emerging designers with the comprehensive knowledge they require.

“Sadly, it’s now about bums on seats. Study is not personalised and there is little individual training. The focus is on a great smattering of general information but it’s all far less robust. And students emerge with far less understanding of processes and materials.”

Foster, together with his partner, Gretel Harrison – F!NK + Co’s marketing director – were in New Zealand last month as keynote speakers at the Hawke’s Bay Museum and Art Gallery’s recent design symposium, Balance, where they addressed 120 object-makers and designers about the rigours of pursuing a life in design.

Hawke’s Bay Museum and Art Gallery manager Douglas Lloyd Jenkins says Foster and Harrison revealed how they manage to operate a successful business model with the highest standards of design and production, yet leave room for innovation.

“F!NK + Co was one of the first generation of design-led Australia firms



**Creative minds:** Robert Foster and his wife, Gretel Harrison; top and right, examples of F!NK + Co design – jugs and a cream and sugar bowl.

to break through into international consciousness in the early 90s and it’s maintained that reputation for good design,” says Lloyd Jenkins.

Last month, Foster had two metal works – a sculptural piece hand-hammered from sterling silver and a forged and hand-hammered aluminium sculptural vessel – feature in COLLECT – an edgy international fair of contemporary objects at London’s Saatchi Gallery.

Foster says young Australian and New Zealand designers should view their geographical isolation from Europe as an advantage.

“The rest of the world is intrigued. It gives a freshness, a different perspective

not tied down by tradition. The colours we use, our visual language, is linked to our amazing, natural landscape.”

He says as a child, he was taken by his parents – who were teachers and art lovers – on holidays around Australia to visit aboriginal rock art.

“Back in the 70s, this was extremely unusual. Those holidays gave me a strong affiliation and interest in indigenous art. It’s a major part of my psyche and a sensibility in my work, that zoomorphic quality.”

He would advise young people intent on a career in the creative sector to ask some searching questions.

“Examine whether you really have the ability and drive to be in a creative

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to our work. We have no subconscious baggage about the European design aesthetics. We are

practice. To stick at it, to keep the integrity going. If not, then don’t pretend, but find a related field.”

He also questioned his commitment to a creative life when he took his first tentative steps.

“Early in my career, in 1992, I was extremely lucky to exhibit alongside two world-class silversmiths, both senior peers. The exhibition [of vessels] toured several museums in Europe. Later Alberto Alessi [head of the Alessi Italian design company] saw my work. He asked me to develop a fondue set for him.”

Foster says while he completed the drawings for Alessi, there were delays in production and eventually “too many compromises”.

“I wanted to tell a different story, I wanted to be altruistic. I decided to do it myself. Ironically, Alessi now collects F!NK. He has it in his Alessi Museum in Milan!”