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Retail Therapy: From meat hooks, beautiful things



Nathalie Atkinson's Retail Therapy column, from the Toronto magazine:

In his garage/workshop, Ian Milne is tinkering with a brass cylinder -- though left just as it is, it could easily be a sculpture: It's elaborately machined from a single, solid piece of brass and has elegant raised ribs. Milne is transforming the one-of-a-kind find into a lighting installation, wiring the cylinder into a lamp that will project images from slides through the tiny slits between its ribs.

The cylinder's original function is long forgotten and now impossible to determine, but here in his Hillcrest studio, Milne gives the obsolete objects of yesterday new life and a new function. While Milne has a broadcast journalism degree from Ryerson University, he has been fiddling with mechanical parts, bits of

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metal and electronics since he was a kid. "My Lego always had a motor on it; so did my Meccano," he chuckles. To find these nostalgic treasures, Milne scours the back rooms of scrap metal dealers around town, where everything -- whether it's fine cutlery or a decommissioned parking meter -- is sorted by metal type and sold by weight. Here, Milne rescues interesting parts just before they are broken into pieces ("just on the brink"), sorted then melted down to be made into raw materials again.

Design inspiration comes from the found objects themselves, so the organized lost-and-found clutter of Milne's studio is full of possibility. Rows of obsolete items -- curiosities, really -- are patiently awaiting inspiration and new purpose on shelves that reach up to the ceiling: tall mesh-grid stainless cylinders that may have been filters for dairy farm apparatus; a vintage steel taxi meter with an illuminated pull-down lever ("someone had scrapped a mountain of those, I only took a few"); a red light indicator from a former hospital radiology department. Under tables are stacks of shaped glass and aluminum light fixtures; on the stainless shelves, several bins of old Cinema-Scope and movie and camera lenses (one, a spherical lens, corrects the tilt when filming buildings); never-used Bunsen burners (from some high school science class) with red silicon handles, and antique meat hooks that Milne says may become the arms of a chandelier, for the right client.

Milne demonstrates a sleek aluminum baton that's really an ingenious pepper mill, its once-polished steel now an artfully scratched patina from daily use at Ferro, the popular neighbourhood restaurant that Milne manages.

Milne's increasingly time-consuming hobby started a few years ago, after he took a jewellery class at Harbourfront. He began salvaging old typewriters -- an Underwood No. 3 sits on a shelf, many of its keys missing -- and made keys into cufflinks, pendants and earrings. He then started to work with larger items, like the now-popular oval clocks with Ouija board faces, details of time zones from vintage world maps, Manhattan street maps from the 1970s or antique number plates. They came into being when Milne found some old aluminum casings he didn't know what to do with (the clocks, \$325, are available to order through Ezra's Pound, on Dupont, a cafe whose understated sign Milne fashioned from vintage steel letters). Signage is among his sidelines, like the discreet and simple steel-cut square quietly demarcating Mark McEwan's new One Restaurant at the Hazelton, or the hip Rushton in his own Hillcrest neighbourhood. But the clocks are a fitting signature item, since the look Milne favours is timeless, "or at least, not made yesterday in China."

Plastic irritates him. "I love what you might call the Soviet aesthetic," says Milne, "when everything was made from metal and solid. Everything that's made from plastic breaks, like little tabs on things, and you can't fix them, let alone find replacement parts, so the object becomes useless. Metal lasts forever."

Milne's sleek modular menorah, each piece lined up like sentinels at Stonehenge, is now carried in the gift section at tony William Ashley. It evolved by accident out of Milne's original Five Easy Pieces candlesticks: Coming across lengths of hexagonal solid core stainless steel, Milne chopped them into interlocking, stacking candelabra pieces but found that only menorah candles fit the drill hole, so he figured he might as well make menorahs out of them. Each candle sits in a separate pedestal and the set now comes in polished stainless or brass (\$300 to \$400 at Ashley).

Since his items are mostly handmade and available only in the limited production quantities inherent to the salvage process (and often, unique), does that make what he does art? Is he an artist or a designer? Milne pauses to consider the question. "I haven't quite figured that out yet." - Ian Milne Design, 416-937-1360, ianmilne.ca

Photo of Ian Milne by Peter Redman / National Post

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