

Black Key Chairs

Miles Potter

"My designs have always been tempered by the search for stillness in the work. I have always loved the early Chinese Ming Dynasty and Japanese aesthetic which has influenced the written aesthetic. My forms and shapes have changed over time, but my language has not." Khai Liew (2021)

As a young designer, I used this practical to develop and discover my artistic language. I took inspiration from Khai Liew, vernacular designs from the Ming Dynasty, Europe, and Australia, as well as the intriguing explosion of furniture in the mid-century. I aimed to design a piece which emulated "stillness" from my interpretation: calm – simplicity – grace; a chair which fits into the room it is in; a versatile design meant to be used daily and in every moment. The minimalistic angles, parallels, and squares, paired with Australian black walnut and weave work simultaneously to create a chair which nestles into and enhances the beauty of a space, blending simple aesthetics with functionality and grace. To surround the piece, I developed a signature and design identity. I produced a signature in the form of a laser cut vintage key, a mark I have used in past designs, and see myself continuing as a personal symbol. The brand identity married the vintage key with the modernist chair. I used the words "Black | Key | Chairs" to represent the material (black walnut), signature (key) and product in the minimalistic font: Sergoe UI Semi Light., displaying the words in full and as initials, separated by the vertical bar which represents how each element is brought into one.

My inspiration to make a chair stemmed from my father who is a furniture designer and maker. I have always been surrounded by handcrafted chairs and the prospect of designing and crafting my own piece had always captivated me. Around this time, I had recently discovered the intriguing indoor focus of mid-century architects like Frank Lloyd Wright, Frank Gehry, and Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe, who noticed the difference in the modernisation of exterior and interior where buildings were being negatively affected by ill-fitting, old furniture. While my favoured aesthetic is very much influenced by mid-century and Danish modern minimalism, I began at the origins of the designs to trace how time and change has developed the forms and shapes, while preserving the roots of the artistic language. Vernacular design is the root of all design. It is the undated, unidentified, designer, made for functionality in the community and tradition with the royalty. Because vernacular design is so entwined with the beginnings of mid-century modern, I decided to step away from a modern inspiration and draw on the base ideas of design. After talking with one of Khai Liew's employees, Adrian Potter, I conducted an interview with Khai and he kindly allowed me to use his workshop to cut and shape the larger parts of my piece. Liew was a key inspiration with his insightful interview, and the research and analysis I conducted on his recent Moon and Bell chairs. These modern, minimalistic designs with inspirations from integral forms (moon and bell shapes) sparked my inspirations for a back rest in the simplified shape of an open book.

I developed the chair systematically from the preliminary sketch. I drew up various angles and adapted them into realistic proportions. From Liew's insight, I began to notice the importance of material, presence, and shape. I was fascinated by the idea of a piece "having its own spirit", and I developed a relationship with the chair as I made it.

As I produced the piece, I began to understand more that the material was once a living natural organism, a tree, unique in colour and grain. The black walnut provided limitations as well as benefits. While I initially wrestled with the handsaw over imperfections in the wood, I quickly built the understanding of how to work with the material. I added spacers and used domino joints for strength and finished it off with a clear wood oil. The efforts put into joinery, measurement and balance meant I was able to forgo a solid seat and create a joined frame and woven seat. This reduced the weight of the piece and the slight flex of the 2.5mm nylon cord added comfort. The simple, fundamental shapes evolved into a cohesive, gracefully modern design while the dark, clear oiled walnut retains a natural beauty. While the initial sketch and plans are quite far from my final design, I believe that the artistic language and intended aesthetic has remained the same.

The experience of a piece is incredibly important to the user, especially with a design which is made for constant use. Therefore, I adapted my plans for ergonomics, spent time adjusting the measurements of the seat and back rest to best suit the user's back, and paid special attention to textural qualities.

To complement the piece, I designed a signature and brand with the intention of creating a unified identity which represents myself as the designer in the signature and my aesthetic style in the brand design. I designed the signature from an old key I keep on my key chain, simplifying it to be laser cut. From there, I began to develop an identity; how I want the presence of the piece to be conveyed to a viewer, which I developed into a brand. As part of the brand, I designed a logo on Adobe-Illustrator and staged an exhibition with three posters which I felt captured the presence of the piece and the spirit I felt in making it.

The chair's presence speaks the story of its conception and when I finally realised this, I understood my father's deep devotion to his creations. Overall, I believe I have achieved my intentions in creating a piece which provides beauty and functionality to any space, but more importantly, I have created a cohesive brand and product which display the continuation of artistic language and the mastery of a craft.