

Fine Art Furniture

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By Mike Landry



One of Alisdair MacRae's handbuilt peices of furniture.

[The Shakers](#) may be so celibate they're on the brink of extinction, but they've fathered a killer show from Ottawa's Alisdair MacRae.

The installation artist has built 20 pieces of furniture from original, found and Shakers designs for a solo exhibition titled *A Thousand Years to Live*. The title comes from a quote from the Shakers' Mother Ann Lee who said, "Do all your work as though you had a thousand years to live; and as you would if you knew you must die tomorrow."

"They lived this incredibly chaste hardworking lifestyle. I can't stay I really aspire to it, but there's a certain appeal," says MacRae. "[The quote] puts you in a frame of mind where you want to take time with things and have patience, but at the same time make the most use of whatever hours you have in a day."

A hands-on type of person, building things is what MacRae does in his spare time. He isn't sure when he developed or forced his hobby into an art practice, but says the exhibition is more about an environment than the individual object.

Emphasizing the process of building—particularly the language of building—over the object itself,

MacRae has written descriptions about the building process to accompany each piece. He first became aware of the unique vocabulary of construction when a friend was trying to explain to him how to build art crates.

“It’s its own sort of vocabulary and I don’t pretend to know it that well, but I enjoy following through that process sometimes it’s kind of a challenge to understand what the other person wanted to do.”

MacRae’s accompanying non-fiction prose to some of the pieces is his attempt to get as much information across to the viewer. Like with one chair he built for the show that ended up being larger than the plans called for, MacRae says, “If a person were to see [the chair], all that information isn’t available with the chair itself.”

This mistake aspect of building is also an important theme for MacRae. He says his attraction comes from an interest in examining how the end result relates to the intended plan, and if his creation does justice to the original design.

“Look at civic planning for instance. There’s always parts of a city that people expected to be better than it did, but then it changes. But I don’t try to be too ambitious about it, so I stick to furniture.”

Have a seat at Ottawa’s [Atrium Gallery](#) and check out MacRae’s A Thousand Years to Live from Fri August 29-October 1.

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