



A man of mighty vision

A young Tasmanian furniture maker uses his senses of touch and hearing to influence his designs, as **Carla Caruso** discovers.

Furniture maker Duncan Meerding, who is legally blind, looks forward to one day being the “norm”.

The 24-year-old from Hobart has had much media interest - including appearing on ABC TV show *The New Inventors* - in his ability to create furniture using adaptive techniques and technologies, like a talking tape measure.

But, according to Meerding: “I kind of look forward to the day when my story is not the exception. I’d prefer to be the norm. I think in some respects it’s good that I’m getting media coverage, because it’s showing what someone with vision impairment can do. There are plenty a lot of people

out there, who can do things, but I think it’s just often they need the resources to be able to do so.”

Meerding, who began losing his sight at age 18, is vocal about employment opportunities for people with vision impairment. “I don’t see that there’s any real difference to me as a person - my brain still functions exactly the same [as when fully-sighted]. So, I think that’s quite central to my sort of ethos... I think there are probably a few misconceptions in the community about what people with vision impairment can and can’t do.”

Meerding was diagnosed five years ago with the degenerative eye condition, Leber’s hereditary optic

neuropathy, which is passed through the mother and predominantly affects young adult males. It left him legally blind within a year. What he can see now is similar to what you’d see if you put your fists in front of your face and used only your periphery.

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An uncle of Meerding has the same condition, but having it was still unexpected for the young furniture maker. “It also doesn’t always affect people, so we weren’t expecting it to happen, because one of my uncles had it and one didn’t. It’s random, even though I’ve got the gene.”

Meerding says previously simple things, like accessing information, became arduous. “I’d gone from someone who could just pick up a newspaper and read it to someone whose main source of information was basically through radio. [Though] that changed as I got more computer-literate, in terms of using assistive software.”

Meerding had been considering a career as a nurse, after working as a medical orderly in his gap year, but discovered he couldn’t get registered with his vision impairment. After hearing about other furniture makers in Melbourne, who’d completed a Vision Australia safety course in power tool usage, he decided to enrol. After that, he chose to alter his humanities university degree to include furniture design, along with history, graduating from the University of Tasmania this year. He has also since received a year-long scholarship to inhabit a studio space at design collective Designed Objects Tasmania.

Much of Meerding’s work features curved lines and surfaces, inspired by organic forms found in nature. Working predominately in timber, he often combines hand-carving techniques and bending. Pieces include a bird’s nest entrance piece, a lily-inspired lamp, a leaning leaf table, and cracked log lamps.

Meerding uses standard equipment, but employs different aids and strategies, like a talking tape measure and tactile depth gauge. He’s also in-tune with his sense of touch and hearing, feeling his way and listening to the machinery. Still, the question has to be asked: does he ever get in harm’s way? Meerding responds,

shrugging: “Everyone gets a bit of nips and cuts. I haven’t actually had anything too major. I’ll occasionally cut myself with the chisel, but pretty much everyone does.”

When he’s not making furniture, you’ll likely find him indulging his other passion – rock climbing. (There’s an outdoor rock climbing wall across from his abode.) When *Link* caught up with him, he was fresh from a rock climbing trip at Victoria’s Mount Arapiles, near the Grampians. To accommodate his vision impairment, Meerding will generally follow behind a leader, who will climb from the ground up, with the rope directly attached, while he, as the ‘second’, will belay the leader.

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He’s also a keen bushwalker, which is one type of occasion when he’ll use his cane. Though, he says: “I don’t use it as much as I probably should sometimes. I walk around town without it a lot. But, when I get to alternating surfaces, like bushwalking, it’s pretty much a ‘must’ having the cane, so I don’t fall over.”

As for the future? He says: “This [last] half of the year will be quite exciting, because I will be allowed to put a lot more energy into getting my furniture out there.” The nation awaits!

Duncan Meerding Furniture Design:
duncanmeerding.com.au

