

# AGSA

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## Vale Khai Liew (1952-2023)

Celebrated as a shining light in Australian contemporary design



AGSA Director, Rhana Devenport ONZM says, ‘It is with deep sadness that the Art Gallery of South Australia acknowledges the recent passing of the remarkable South Australian designer Khai Liew (1952-2023). This loss will reverberate across the country. Khai remains undoubtedly one of Australia’s most influential and visionary designers and he leaves an exceptional legacy. Staff at AGSA – past and present – are immensely saddened by this loss.

Like many South Australian artists, Liew’s fifty-year practice is deeply embedded in the history of our Gallery. It has been a tremendous privilege for AGSA staff to work so closely with Khai in many capacities over decades - as a brilliant designer, an inspired advisor, and a great friend. A curator’s designer, Liew will be remembered for his deep knowledge of Australian art history, impeccable connoisseurship, and generous collegiality. Liew combined his knowledge of the past with a deep appreciation of traditional craft-based practices to produce a unique and original contemporary Australian vernacular in furniture.

He remains a shining light in Australian contemporary design, he leaves an outstanding legacy and has made an extraordinary impact nationally and internationally. He will be forever remembered as one of Australia’s most innovative, generous and nuanced

designers. We have lost a gracious and true gentleman who was respected by all who knew him, and loved by many’.

Born in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 1952, and of Chinese descent, Khai Liew grew up in a large close-knit family headed by his maternal grandmother. Early memories of colonial English-style architecture in his hometown as well as his family home - which drew on a Japanese aesthetic and modernist principles- had a lasting impact on the young Liew. In 1971, the family immigrated to Adelaide, his early career was heavily shaped by his father’s love for Danish furniture.

Liew first encountered Australian historic furniture as a student at Flinders University in second-hand stores. He later established his business dealing in historic Australian furniture specialising in works in the Biedermeier/Barossa tradition. In 1996 Liew began designing his own furniture when he was commissioned by the then Gallery Director, Ron Radford AM to make a series of benches for visitors. Drawing inspiration from the work of Charles Rennie MacIntosh in the Gallery’s collection (944F2 and 944F3), these benches are still in circulation today and have facilitated many wonderful visitor encounters with the collection.

Over his career as a designer, dealer and curator, Liew has referenced numerous influences in his practice, supported by his academic knowledge of the history of decorative arts. Those influences include Scandinavian modernism including the ancient cultures of Egypt and China, the British Arts and Crafts movement, as well as Australian colonial furniture. His masterful work has long been characterised by deceptively simple shapes, employing ‘ideas of rhythm, musicality and repetition in form’. Liew carefully selects his materials and employs the remarkable skill of a team of expert cabinetmakers to realise his vision for contemporary furniture design.

Khai Liew is one of Australia’s most respected designers working in furniture today. With an international reputation he is known for exquisitely crafted one-off commissions and short run editions in furniture. In 2010 he was awarded the South Australian of the Year Arts Award by the Government of South Australia, in 2016 he was inducted into the Design Institute of Australia Hall of Fame, acknowledging his important contribution to the Australian design landscape. In 2017, he received the Design Institute of Australia’s “Design Icon” Award, and in 2018, Liew was recognised as a Design Luminary at the INDE awards in Singapore.

An expert in decorative and fine arts, Liew combines his knowledge of the past with a deep appreciation of traditional craft-based practices to produce a unique and original contemporary Australian vernacular in furniture.

Liew’s work has been exhibited at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Design Museum, London and the Triennale De Milano. His work is represented in the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Australia, Sydney’s Powerhouse Museum, Art Gallery of South Australia, and the Art Gallery of Western Australia. As well as private commissions across the globe, he also created one off pieces for Louis Vuitton stores across the world.

The Gallery has long recognised the work of Liew, collecting examples of furniture by this well-loved South Australian.

The Gallery has 16 works by Liew; the earliest the *Deloraine chair* was designed in 1997, *Wanda* bench designed in 2000, *Jeannie bench* designed in 2001, *Spoehr chair*, 2007, *Love cube*, 2004, *Rem chest on stand*, 2009, the seminal 2010 Collec+ors series of works and exhibition in collaboration with the craftspeople; Julie Blyfield, Kirsten Coelho, Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, Jessica Loughlin, Bruce Nuske and Prue Venables. More recently the Gallery acquired a two-seater, or love seat titled *Alice and friend in Wonderland* which includes a simple bench seat with splayed legs, the back, like two-rabbit ears sits surrounded by a dramatic arch. The form of this chair plays with perspective; from the front

the chair looks simple, even flattened in form, yet from the back a curvaceous behind is revealed all created in Queensland blackbean a native hard timber.

This chair comes from a body of work produced by Liew by the Sydney-based businesswoman and philanthropist Judith Neilsen's inner-city home. For this, Liew designed 190 pieces of furniture exclusively for her home called *Indigo Slam*. Taking inspiration from her young grandchildren, many of the works employ an element of quaintness. Liew describes,

'I thought the most important thing in this palatial home was joy and laughter and what better way of bringing joy and laughter into a home than having grandchildren visit. So, in a quietly devious way, I made all these items of furniture that would bring Judith's grandchildren to the house – an Alice in Wonderland chair, a sunflower chair, penguin side table and Shaun the Sheep lounge chair. They're all things that adults wouldn't have a clue about, but kids understand the language.'

This work, *Alice and friend in Wonderland* comes from this commission for Neilsen and draws on the whimsical story told in Lewis Carroll's 1865 novel, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Originally made as *Alice in Wonderland*, a single seat made for Nielsen, Liew has extended this idea to a 'love seat' or two-seater exclusively for the Gallery currently on display in Gallery 6 alongside two works *Bruce* [cabinet on stand] and *Kirsten* [armchair] from the 2010 Collec+tors series in collaboration with artists Bruce Nuske and Kirsten Coelho.

Liew's legacy and contribution to the arts will be forever remembered, 'Despite Khai's sudden passing, his legacy will continue to inspire and resonate with our visitors every day here at AGSA. Khai recognised the importance of creating employment and harnessing skilled labour in ensuring the continuity of craft and design. We are immensely grateful for the influence and support he generously gave to fellow artists and AGSA.' Rhana Devenport said.

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**IMAGES** <https://agsa.sa.gov.au/media/valekhailiew>

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**Header image credit:** Khai Liew with his work *It was born like this*, 2018 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: *Divided Worlds*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. Photo: Saul Steed.