

wave break

by kate bowden | photography stephen blakeney

Here's an inspiring story of 'local boy done good'. A young bloke and his surfing mate create a business because they're down to their last dollar. That business becomes an international success and the two mates are back on the waves and riding high.

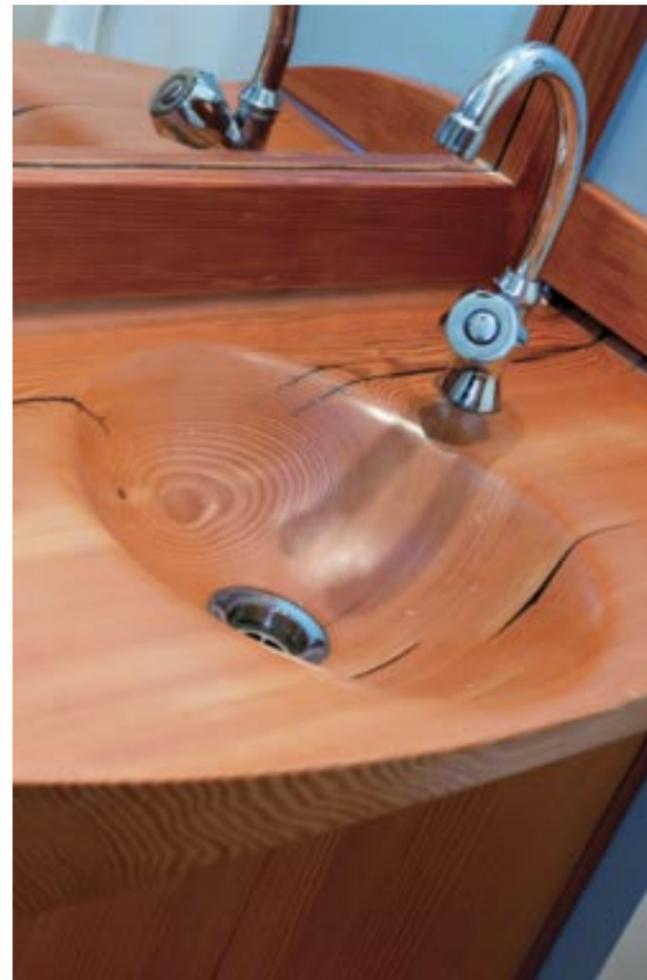


HOME GROWN | Pieces from the Jah Roc Silhouettes collection fit perfectly in Gary's living area, overlooking the Indian Ocean.



PREVIOUS PAGE | The influence of the surf is apparent in many aspects of Gary's house. The design of the house has a nautical theme and the front door is home to a diving dolphin.

WOOD GRAIN | Timber is a focus of the house, seen here in the guise of a detail of Gary's bedhead and the unique basin in the children's bathroom.



GARY Bennett is the charismatic co-director of internationally renowned furniture design company Jah Roc Galleries. The business began in a disused flourmill in York with surfing mate and business partner Dave Paris, but the boys couldn't stay away from the surf too long. A second gallery opened in the surf mecca of Margaret River and its owners soon took up residence.

Now there's nothing to keep the surf-mad pair from the waves and a valid excuse for the purchase of more surfboards – without risk of retribution from their wives. Assistant editor Kate Bowden took a trip to Margaret River and discovered that life is a beach for the talented artisan and his partner.

H&L: When and why did you move 'down south'?

Gary: We moved in 2001 because after nine years in York I realised there was no surf there (he jokes!). I love it here in Margaret River and I think I'll be here until they cart me out of the house in a box.

H&L: Your house is not quite finished yet. Tell us about the progress of the house and why the five year plan has turned into a ten year effort?

Gary: We designed the house so it would be a resort-style home that incorporates space for me to continue designing for Jah Roc, and also provide work areas for Lara and the kids because we all like making things.

Our location is fantastic in terms of the views and access to the beach. This has caused a bit of an issue in terms of distraction. It's virtually impossible to work when the surf is good because it's just so in your face.

In fact, I'm in the process of having blinds made to cover the windows in my workshop on the bottom floor because I know I'll never get any work done if the surf's good. I've come to terms with it though. It's as simple as this – if the surf's good I go surfing! I figure five, 10 or 15 years – who really cares if you're having fun? My excuse is 'good things cook slowly'.

H&L: What are your future plans for the house?

Gary: At the moment I'm working on the downstairs area which will be a studio for Lara and the kids, as well as a games area and a music/media room. Once that's finished, I'll go back upstairs and finish the lap pool and courtyard. The kids are hoping I'm going to finish the pool before they leave home...



“It’s virtually impossible

LOOKING FORWARD |
Assessing the surf is easy from the balcony at the front of the house.

H&L: Tell us about the features of the house.

Gary: I’ve built the house using lots of recycled materials just like we do with our furniture. A lot of the glass came from old buildings. My workshop has huge glass walls that came from an old ANZ bank and also the Morley Squash courts. In fact, we’ve got a shower screen in the guest area that says, ‘white sole shoes only’. This definitely keeps the guests thinking. So far, I don’t think anyone’s had a shower with his or her Dunlop Volleys on. I made 25 doors and the staircase when I was still living in York, using salvaged Marri. The Oregon floors in the living areas and beams for my workshop came from the Kalgoorlie Boulder reservoir.

The lap pool will be great when it’s finished because it forms the wall to the music/media room and has underwater windows that bring light into the room. It also butts up against the kitchen and the guest area on the first floor, which gives another visual connection to water.

H&L: What are your future plans for the business?

Gary: Now that Dave (Paris) is down here too we want to spend more time coming up with new designs. We enjoyed working together on the Silhouettes range (inspired by the Margaret River region) so we’re really looking forward to getting inspired and

to work when the surf is good....”

mixing a bit of ‘work and surf’ together.

We’ve had a few people approach us with a view to set up Jah Roc Galleries in other cities. We’re thinking maybe Sydney or Melbourne, or both, because we already have a presence in Hong Kong. Who knows where it will all end up? I’m up for any new challenges as long as they don’t take me away from Margaret River – particularly between Feb’ and June when the good surf is on. This year Lara and I went to Italy for an exhibition. I didn’t enjoy it much because I knew the surf was pumping back home.

H&L: Tell us about Lara’s lights and where the inspiration came from for the new felt and silk pieces.

Gary: We went to Milan four years ago as part of a furniture study group with the Furnishing Industry Association of Australia (FIAA). That year at the Milan Furniture Fair they had 10 acres of lighting. The contemporary work there was fantastic and Lara, who has always been into textiles, was really inspired by some work from Egypt. Lara came home and got stuck into it. Her mood lamps are very simple forms and she hand-makes the fabrics using silk and wool. In the beginning they had wooden bases, but she didn’t like having to wait for me to make them so now they just sort of float about the surface which actually works better in terms of how they look and it saves me a job.

“I made 25 doors and the staircase . . . using salvaged Marri”

H&L: What are your favourite things to do around the Cape?

Gary: Duh!! Surf of course! Apart from that we love taking the kids camping to places like Boranup Forest and Beach. Often, we just hit the beach in front of the house for an afternoon.

H&L: It's rumoured you can lift your head off the pillow in your bedroom to assess the surf in the morning. Did you plan that vantage point?

Gary: Yes. As you've probably noticed I'm a bit obsessed with the ocean. I guess nine years of living in the Wheatbelt had me wanting to make the absolute most of being close to the ocean. Our bedroom was specifically designed so I could see the main break (Surfers Point) from my pillow. Actually, I don't even have to lift my head. The whole house is like that. The surf can be seen from almost every room. We wouldn't want to miss an offshore now, would we?

H&L: Do you see the future of Jah Roc as being intertwined with where you and Dave are living?

Gary: Of course. Jah Roc has been a part of our lives for nearly 20 years. We live and breathe it. The combination of Wheatbelt and Ocean is completely unique; so York and Margaret River are pretty good addresses for our business. The convenience of location from York to Perth to Margaret River gives us everything we need. Plus, Margaret River surf gives me everything I need.

H&L: Any new pieces being made for the Silhouettes range?

Gary: Yes, in fact I am working on a single bed at the moment that is a variation on the king size one in our first collection. The first ones will be for my kids so I've designed them to have pullout storage underneath and upholstered pads on the bedhead. That way they can sit up and read in bed.

I'm also working on a small writing table and some low cabinets as audio units.

H&L: How do you like to spend an evening relaxing when you get home from work?

Gary: With a stubby of Rogers on the balcony with Lara. Sometimes the kids come out and we crank up the music and have a little dance while the sun goes down. ■ ■ ■



hometruths

Who lives here?

Gary Bennett, furniture designer and co-owner of Jah Roc Galleries, his wife Lara and their three children Emily, 11, Rosie, nine and Frank, five.

What's the biggest attraction of living down south?

The surf!

Who would you like to live next door to?

My mate and business partner Dave because then I wouldn't have to wait for him to drive over when we want to go for a surf.

If your house was a celebrity, who would it be and why?

Stuffed if I know.



LIGHT ATTRACTION |
Lara Bennett's lamps are constructed from silk and other natural fibres.

FAMILY AFFAIR | Gary, Lara and the children Emily, Frank and Rosie (L-R) retreat to the balcony.



thelist

Architect	Frank Acs	Furniture	Jah Roc Gallery
Art	Shaun Atkinson	Landscaping	Lara Bennett
	Greg Baker	Lighting	Morris Electrical
	Shane Moad		Retravisision
Builder	Ralph Stanton	Kitchen appliances	Ausdens Joinery
	Gary Bennett	Windows	Peter McCartney
	Jarrold Holst	Rammed Limestone	