

how they did it

Design by a thousand kerfs

BY JONATHAN BINZEN

Gareth Neal (see the back cover) explains that he was using a computer modeling program, working with different layers in the same drawing, “when suddenly by accident I saw one shape inside another, overlaid with all these lines.” Inspired, he was soon out in the shop trying to duplicate what he’d seen on the screen. For his first pair of tables he did all the kerfing himself at the tablesaw, raising or lowering the blade for each new cut. It took five days to make the legs for two tables. Since then he’s sent parts out to be kerfed in shops with CNC machines. Neal’s own workshop is in London’s East End, but he’s worked with CNC operators in various parts of England. “I look at CNC as just another tool,” he says. “There’s good and bad CNC work, just as there’s good and bad hand carving.” Carving is what first drew him into the field, and he still enjoys it. “At home in the evening,” he says, “I’ll whittle a spoon, carving with an ax and a gouge.”

Digital dexterity.

After milling the blanks for his pieces and cutting joinery—often Domino tenons—Neal sends the blanks and his CAD files to a shop with a CNC machine to have the kerfs cut. The CNC at right is shaping a fluted vessel Neal designed.



Excavation.

Once the piece is assembled, Neal chisels off some of the fins of wood, creating an erosion-like effect and exposing the 18th-century-style table within.



The presence of the past. Viewed at just the right angle, the Queen Anne hall table and side chairs emerge from within their blocky, modern outer forms.



Silhouette of the Past within the Present

Growing up in England, Gareth Neal would trail his archaeologist father on digs. He reveled in the search for Roman coins and artifacts, and enjoyed tinkering with the wood and nails available on site. Flash forward a few decades and he's been trained as a furniture maker, and much of his work explores and reinterprets the skills and styles of the past. But Neal also embraces digital technology, doing much of his design work on a computer and some of his making on CNC machines. It was while designing on the computer that he made a mistake—accidentally creating one shape inside another—that inspired this cabinet and a series of pieces like it, rectilinear outside but kerfed to reveal the sinuous lines of a period piece inside. It was a lucky mistake, Neal says, “because I wanted to build furniture that could talk of the past and talk of the now at the same time.” Neal mills the parts for the carcass, then has them kerfed with a CNC machine. After assembly, he takes up a chisel and chops away some of the wafers of wood, more clearly revealing the shape of the piece within. A little like an archaeologist on a dig.

—Jonathan Binzen



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Photo courtesy of Gareth Neal