

NORTHERN STAR

Ciaran McGuigan, creative director of Newry/New York furniture company Orior, chats to **Brenda McCormick** about bringing the brand his parents founded to a world stage and changing conversations around Irish design.

What comes to mind when you think of Irish furniture design? Beautifully crafted wooden pieces, perhaps, or fabrics that evoke the landscapes of the West? Northern Ireland's Orior, with its bold designs and seriously cool aesthetic, is proudly Irish, but it's very much blazing its own design trail. As Ciaran McGuigan, Orior creative director puts it, it's got "style with attitude" and this Newry/New York brand combines the best of heritage and contemporary design.

The sleek, stylish pieces created by Orior seem to be both modern and classic. Many items find their beginnings in the designs Ciaran's father Brian McGuigan created decades ago when he and his wife Rosie founded the company. The pair had moved from Newry, Co Down to Copenhagen during the Troubles and fell in love with Scandinavian design. Moving back to Newry a few years later, they set up Orior in 1979 and navigated the ebb and flow of success by adapting the business to include contract projects for clients.

Eldest son Ciaran came on board in 2013 and heads up the "bread and butter" Orior brand (Orior Contract now operates as a separate division). While he very much sees himself as the gatekeeper of the company his parents founded, and are still involved in, the former art student was full of ideas about where the brand should go. "Obviously, Orior has been going for such a long time but in 2019 we had a rebrand and we really pushed what we're about and what the company was founded upon," he explains. This included opening a studio in Tribeca, New York with bright, creative people, many of whom Ciaran met at art college in Savannah, Georgia.

Meanwhile, back in Newry, there is a factory full of highly skilled craftspeople who have worked with Orior for decades. They have known Ciaran since he was a child and still tease him about his softened Newry accent whenever he comes home from America. The New York design team get a gentle ribbing from the Newry fellas too, but it's a true collaboration and one that is, Ciaran says, very special. "We've got all of these amazing craftspeople juxtaposed with the New York team who come and push our conversation. You have to think of the two sides: we've got our team in New York, with an age demographic of between 25 and 40. They get to design whatever they want, and in the factory all these old-timers are taking the mick out of them," he laughs. "I've got over 500 years of experience on the factory floor that I'm able to tap into at any time. While the studio in New York is pushing the design conversation they're also learning from the guys who are making it. It's collaboration in the truest form which is a humbling experience."

Everything Orior designs is steeped in that heritage too, and Brian's original archives are a constant source of inspiration. "We always revert back to my dad's archive," Ciaran explains. "He's been designing since the late '70s. So we go into his archive and pull out a chair or a sofa and we reimagine it in a different shape, or with new legs or just a tiny detail that makes it more relevant for now." Ideas come too from staff suggestions, casual brainstorming meetings with a sketchpad to hand and even, occasionally, a conversation with a visitor to the showroom.

The furniture is still produced in the factory in Newry and Irish materials, including woods and various marbles,

feature often. However, Ciaran was a little reluctant to fly the Irish flag too high at first. "It's strange, at the time of the rebrand, I didn't really want to come across as being Irish," he says. "I'm very, very proud to be Irish but I didn't want to come across as... 'diddly eye'. When you think of Ireland you think of art and of crafts, you think of other really beautiful artisans. You don't necessarily think of an interesting piece of high-end furniture. We had a conversation with someone from a branding agency and I said I want to be European. And he said, 'No. [Being Irish] is your value proposition, this is what you do, you foster relationships.' So instead of thinking 'twee', I started thinking 'attitude' – and putting Ireland on the map with that look and feel, a bit rock and roll with that kind of flash photography and how we present ourselves."

Orior is just one contemporary Irish brand that is being recognised for its cutting edge design of late and Ciaran cites designer Joseph Walsh, artist and designer Niamh Barry, and glass designer and sculptor Eoin Turner as

particularly exciting Irish talents. "I think we're starting to get a bit of a reputation, not just for the craft and materials, but now the design element as well," he says. "There are people doing great stuff on the fashion side too. I'm a little bit aware of that through our Katie," he adds. Katie Ann McGuigan, Ciaran's sister, is a fashion designer and recently worked with Orior on a range of handwoven rugs, marking the first official collaboration between the siblings. "Katie's work, her ethic and her creativity are so inspiring," says her brother. "When she comes into our New York studio everyone just perks up a little bit!"

As for designing interiors his own his own life, Ciaran says he's drawn to whatever works within a space. "I love mixing and matching, a bit of colour and nice materials," he notes. "When I'm in Ireland I go to Killian McNulty's place, The Vintage Hub, in Lusk, Co Dublin. My office here in Newry is filled with his stuff. In New York, I love The Future Perfect. You walk in there and you're just completely inspired by other makers and designers."

◻We've GOT ALL of these AMAZING CRAFTSPEOPLE juxtaposed with the NEW YORK team who come and PUSH our CONVERSATION◻



The Easca table, left and Artic credenza, below left, are among Ciaran's favourite pieces



HOME



Ciaran with his sister, designer Katie Ann McGuigan who designed a rug collection with Orior

When it comes to favourite pieces in the Orior line, he points to the Arctic credenza and the Easca coffee table. "From a business standpoint, sometimes there doesn't need to be great expectations for sales, you need great pieces to elevate conversations and the Easca is one of those pieces. It's made from recycled crystal and it's got beautiful Irish Green stone legs. In person it's phenomenal."

Perhaps even more than design, relationships are at the heart of Orior's story, from the family origins to the family-like team of craftspeople that have been with the company for decades. It's one of the things Ciaran loves about what he does. "My partner works with the company. My mother is the managing director of our main HQ factory – she doesn't allow us to make a mistake, she's so good. My old man's on the floor too so I see these people that I grew up with and work with on a daily basis. The important thing as well is we're in Newry, in the middle of the country, and we have some of the most exceptional workers and craftspeople making our product which is shipped to LA, Florida, Berlin, and Paris every week. I love seeing pieces come to fruition and go out to all corners of the world, it's really special."

"But I'm just adding to it," he's quick to say. "The foundation was already there; Brian and Rosie had created the brand, I just added a few tweaks that helped make it a little bit more relevant for today's kind of market. Basically, all I'm doing is being the gatekeeper of their brand and I don't take that lightly. It's a very much a family and friends company."

While Covid-19 derailed some of Orior's plans – the opening of a place in LA last year was postponed – there have been some positives. For one, Ciaran has spent much of the last year in Ireland, which has given him time to work on designs and prototypes, as well carrying out a long-planned conversion of a shed into a studio on a waterfront.

It has been a good year business-wise for the company too, as more of us are focusing on our homes and what we want from them. "People are spending a lot more time at home and when you're at home you can't help but see things that you want to have within your space," Ciaran says. "It's the one place you spend the majority of your life and the whole premise of a home is that it feels homely and it's your space. It's an identity and a reflection of who you are."

The brand's profile is growing too and there is much planned for the future. Longer-term, there are ambitions to make the Newry factory more of a sustainable enterprise and to set up an apprentice programme. The aim is to capture the knowledge the Orior craftspeople have and train up future generations of skilled makers. More immediate plans include the summer launch of Orior Objex, a new line of limited edition pieces created with leftover materials including scrap stone, wood, crystal, and leather, giving consumers a chance to buy into the brand at a lower price point. It's hoped a studio in Oslo will be up and running this year too and an Orior-designed hotel, Bernard Thomas House (named after Ciaran's father) is set to open in Savannah, Georgia.

Throughout, the aim is to expand on those relationships that are so important to the business and to showcase the Orior brand in entirely new and unexpected ways. ●

oriorfurniture.com

FINISHING TOUCHES



Lea cushion, from €109.46, Sweetpea and Willow; Faux eucalyptus sprays, €47 for three, Audenza; Ash bowl, €60, Royhumphreyswoodturner.ie; Orcal rug, €5,470 €14,500 Orior; Irish green marble bookends, €700, Orior; Bella side table, €780, Worlds Away at Julianne Kelly Interiors