



Al & Imo

When speaking to men and women who have seemingly dedicated their lives to the pursuit of a craft, they often don't think of themselves as craftsmen. Instead, thinking of the many roads they've travelled to perfect their craft as a series of trials, errors and mishaps that sometimes turn out ok. Al and Imo Roberts are no exception, but having blended their individual know-how the duo has fostered a business, home and a lifestyle steeped in quality craftsmanship.

Article by Alice Armitage

Photography supplied



Homemakers often daydream about the pieces that come together to create a space reflective of their truest selves and agonise over which makers might be trusted to deliver it. Whether you're investing in a work of art or a more functional edition to your home, there are a few rules worth following. For a start, find a maker that you love, bask in their creative pursuits and consider how their style could be blended with your own to create something you will love for the longest time. And if a quality piece of furniture is on your bucket list, Al and Imogen Roberts [known to many of us as their instagram persona, Al and Imo] should be at the top of your list.

In an era of ever-changing trends and replaceability, connecting with small production, quality craftsmanship is giving us all an opportunity to be more invested in the things that make up our homes. Many makers like Al and Imo hope we're heading for a new epoch where a higher value is placed on people, ideas and materials of place rather than mass production and sameness.

Before starting out, the couple already possessed the perfect combined skill set to create what has now become a recognised quality brand, Imo with a desire to start her own business and armoured with experience in marketing, and Al with his qualifications as a carpenter lending a basic understanding of the craft of making things with timber. But when Al and Imo first began to experiment with furniture, it was because they couldn't find anything suitable for themselves. "We had just moved into a new share house in Melbourne and inherited a king-size mattress from one of the previous tenants. We had this great mattress but no frame. I started looking online and I was really shopping around but everything I liked was way out of our budget. I showed Al the ones I really liked and he said he thought he could make it."

Keen to pursue a hankering for some DIY, their first bed base was made in a tiny carport on a lazy Sunday. The duo is a little hazy on when exactly this new found hobby became a real business but after making themselves a bed frame, Al's parents asked for one and interest from their friends and family grew. Within the year Imo set the entrepreneurial wheels in motion, launched a basic website and started offering a selection of handmade furniture for sale. Quickly the need for more space to make and create led the pair to leave the city, seeing them relocate to Freshwater Creek, ninety minutes south west of Melbourne where they still reside.

Large quality furniture like the bed frames, book shelves and draw units crafted by Al and Imo are all pieces of furniture that you typically only buy a couple of times in your life, almost in line with buying a car. The catch cry of the pair's

“I love timber as a product, it’s just so workable. You can make mistakes, you can dent a piece of timber and fix it. You can sand it out and plain it back. You can do all sorts of things to make it look new again the way you can work timber can just be changed to make something look so slick out of such a natural product that was once a tree that grew out of the ground.”



work is high value low volume but it’s also high respect for material and craftsmanship as well. Seeding an ethos of buying once and buying well into everything that they create. “We firmly believe in only making what is needed. Which is why you won’t find our pieces in any shop. One thing we love about our customers is our connection to them and that they are dedicated to sustainable living just like us,” said Imo.

It’s a reminder that when making affordable and long lasting quality products, makers don’t need to look to fancy business models or sales tactics. Instead, they simply need to forge connections with customers who value and understand their local craft.

Predominantly working with timber, the brand has come to be known for a selection of signature pieces offering simple design and the opportunity for more natural materials in our homes. Even though Al was far from a master craftsman in the beginning he’s continued to develop his skills working with an organic product he’s come to know and understand like an old friend. “I love timber as a product, it’s just so workable. You can make mistakes, you can dent a piece of timber and fix it. You can sand it out and plain it back. You can do all sorts of things to make it look new again the way you can work timber can just be changed to make something look so slick out of such a natural product that was once a tree that grew out of the ground. It fascinates me all the time and I love the features and the grains, everything about timber. It’s just a cool product and everytime I try to dabble with other materials I don’t get that same feeling,” said Al. “I had experience working with timber through my job as a chippy, and I was confident in my ability to figure out how to use the skills I learnt there to transfer over into making furniture. I was definitely not the best maker in the beginning, but I did very basic designs and was always looking for ways to improve and increase the quality in every successive piece that I made.”

But how do you turn a desire to make things into a business with longevity? For Imo, who focuses on the business side of the partnership, creating a business seemed intuitive. “I think the case is the same for all naturally entrepreneurial people. The reason they start is because they don’t want to abide by other people’s rules. I real-

ly enjoyed my time working in marketing and I knew I could take what I’d learnt and translate that into something that was my own. Al really enjoyed making things and saw a lot of opportunity. We just went for it.”

The pandemic brought with it an influx of interest in the pair’s business, giving Imo a real opportunity to demonstrate the craft she’d been perfecting as well – marketing and brand building. With Imo’s success leading to brand partnerships with the likes of Blundstone and Sage and Clare. Imo has also developed her own online course, designed to support other makers to build budding businesses from scratch. “Business exploded – covid was great for us. A lot of people were at home and had money to spend on interiors or doing up their homes rather than going overseas. That influx really solidified to me how much running a business like this is so much more than just the actual furniture making. Al and I are so lucky. He’s a great maker and then I’m good at the other stuff, it makes for a really good team. There’s a lot of makers out there who don’t have that person to help them so I’m trying to help those people through the course I’ve created.”

In the midst of all this, two additions have been made to the Roberts family with Al and Imo welcoming daughters Goldie and Daisy over the last couple of years – all while building their dream home together with the help of a few local trades. Eight years on from building that first frame, Al and Imo have created a business, home and a lifestyle reflective of their deepest philosophies.

When asked what it meant to him to have built a home for his family with his own hands, Al admits it’s quite surreal. It’s kind of a dream come true. Being able to have such a huge input into the house that I get to live in with my family is amazing. I am constantly looking around and remembering the days I was working on certain bits of the house. There is still so much to do so it’s a never ending project but there is so much satisfaction in every little job you tick off the list. I’m so grateful that we’ve been able to create such a beautiful house to live in. Being able to make a living by making things is also a dream come true. It’s been an incredible journey so far and we are excited to continue working on the house and the furniture.”



You can find Al and Imo here:
(at)al_and_imo
www.alandimo.com.au