

Seriously funny

\_\_\_\_\_ There is a need for context, to enable some understanding of the complex nature of Les Mason, seen through my eyes. I am frequently given cause to reflect on Les, to put an eye to a peephole, to peer into the personal space of this incorrigible but genuine character, to recall the early 60s when we first met.

\_\_\_\_\_ Leslie Leroy Mason blazed his way into the Melbourne design scene and into our unsuspecting lives, turning the profession on its head, changing the design discourse in Melbourne forever for the better. He was the spirit of an era, who left a legacy of legendary stories and memories, endlessly entertaining escapades that I and others treasure. Most of the escapades were funny, many were absolutely hilarious.

\_\_\_\_\_ Was Les a stand-up comedian as much as a stand out designer? I think perhaps he was.

\_\_\_\_\_ Les was acutely adjusted into the world, with his finely tuned radar turned on, nothing escaped his attention nor went without comment. He had a wonderful sense of humour, laughing out loud at people's idiosyncrasies whilst celebrating with gusto life's absurdities. 'Its a mad world' he would say, shaking his head slowly from side to side in amazement and wonder.

\_\_\_\_\_ For more than fifty years Les was a dear friend whose company I now miss immensely.

\_\_\_\_\_ Having never set foot inside a design school I was a willing candidate for some plain talking about design. Les generously accommodated that need. He was both my mentor and occasional travelling companion, as he was for others. Les was a paradox: talented, intellectual, bawdy, non-judgemental, caring, fearless, passionate about life and art, inexplicably contradictory, a truly rare individual. In reflecting on his colourful past in America, it seemed he had decided in his late teens on the path he would tread, his life would be richly rewarding, experienced in full and lived on the edge, it would be absolutely nothing other than what he would make of it. It wasn't until he was in his 30s that he decided to dedicate his time to uncompromising visual expression.

\_\_\_\_\_ That's the way I see it.

\_\_\_\_\_ Artistic expression was the key that unlocked many doors for him. He regarded art as all important although, if it suited his purpose, he would be contrary and construct a convincing argument that dismissed art as a useless pursuit. I have at times wondered whether art may have been a way of maintaining his sanity, since he was deeply troubled by the state of humanity, although very careful to keep those parts of himself hidden, disguising his vulnerability behind outbursts of expressive bravado or by placing himself on his hypothetical perch, just out of reach of the crowd.

\_\_\_\_\_ Les craved new and original thinking. He imagined and played out many different ways of being in the world. He had accumulated wisdom, although I sensed that doubts grew with knowledge and age. I'm not sure whether he was searching for some kind of meaning in life or he was completely content without it. 'There is no such thing as reality' he would expound.

\_\_\_\_\_ I often wondered what shaped his complex personality. Was it growing up in California with Harvey Jackson Mason his successful, free spirited, self-educated entrepreneurial illiterate father doing rural real estate deals and property developments?

\_\_\_\_\_ He was a wealthy man who married eight times and whose only office was his briefcase. Was it Les's experiences as a 21 year old year old managing a bar on the border of Mexico and Texas with his older brother Herman, a silent mountain of a man, a reformed alcoholic and religious zealot who later in life, ran a half-way house with his wife? Or Gladys his devious sister, who with Herman smuggled all the gold bars from a bank in Mexico over the border into Texas, by-passing Les' share of the inheritance? Was it his stint in the merchant navy as a breakfast chef?

\_\_\_\_\_ I have no idea, but Les was instilled with a keen sense of justice and a distaste for hypocrisy. He could not stomach pretension, he could smell bullshit a mile off. His 'famous cat among the pigeons' routine became a regular performance,

\_\_\_\_\_ setting up then devouring his unsuspecting prey. He was a refreshing antidote to the superficial social interaction of the design and advertising community of the day. The Mad Men TV series is an accurate portrayal of that time.

\_\_\_\_\_ He was indeed an enigma, interested in art, design, politics, philosophy, social history, culture, business, finance and people. He was well travelled with insights into many different places, cultures and peoples. Facts seemed less interesting to him than ambiguity and fantasy. He was logical and down to earth with conflicted emotions about things that mattered to him. In discussions, disruption and humour were tactics he practiced to great effect. He was masterful at adopting contradictory philosophical positions, on a whim to facilitate a fleeting purpose. Or was it just a way of stimulating his alert mind?

\_\_\_\_\_ Les made memorable occasions out of public speaking opportunities, his off the cuff dissertations were delivered with brute force and raw passion. At times I felt he thought it was his duty to entertain. People came to expect it of him and it wasn't long before the colourful audacious behaviour, fuelled by artistic integrity, nervous energy and more than one vodka had become an integral part of the Melbourne design scene. Some behaved as though they had a claim on him, perhaps because he lived out their unrealised fantasies? Those who misunderstood him dismissed him as the loud American, but I loved what he stood for, the recklessness, his values, his sincerity, the complexities, contradictions, the bravado and the endless stream of jokes.

\_\_\_\_\_ In his advanced years he retained his rare sense of wonder and amazement as he observed everyday things with sheer delight, seemingly through the eyes of a child, wide open to the world, almost as though he was experiencing something for the first time. Sometimes I thought he was oddly innocent, given that he had experienced much more in his action packed, 'enjoy every moment' lifetime than anyone I knew.

\_\_\_\_\_ Les was drawn to people as they were to him. He embraced the poor, showing genuine respect and compassion for those that were less fortunate than himself. On our journeys together I recall many extended conversations with people he chose to engage with and embrace, his caring attitude, his fertile mind leaping randomly from one unrelated topic to the next, punctuated by jokes, by raucous laughter and just one or two more vodkas.

\_\_\_\_\_ The Les Mason era has passed, but the spirit lives on in the numerous stories around this unique designer and seriously funny man.