

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

RICHARD FRINIER MASTERS THE OUTDOOR ROOM

Story by **Kevin Chan**

As the first quarter of the year comes to an end, daylight prolongs the sun's warmth, slowly subduing the chill of what seems like an eternal winter. The winter months usually evoke imagery of snow-covered landscapes and leafless trees, but in the land of palm trees and endless beaches, Los Angeles embodies the climate of one perpetual season: summer. Like any place with year-round sun exposure, the City of Angels is luxurious in many aspects, but one inherent amenity that stands above the rest is the hybridized space that blurs the boundary between living room and garden — the outdoor room. While this space has become a regular environment in the homes, resorts, hotels and nightlife venues of cities similar to Los Angeles, no other name is more associated with the concept of outdoor leisure spaces than Richard Frinier.

This fall marks the 30-year anniversary of Frinier's introduction to the design industry and since that time, Frinier has reinvented the perception of the outdoor room by elevating its standards through the intervention of his timeless designs. He has been able to remove the boundaries created by traditional typologies and has pushed the concept of outdoor leisure spaces, even influencing environments such as the Vatican and royal palaces and luxury resorts around the world. In 2009, he was bestowed with the Lifetime Achievement Award by the International Casual Furnishing Industry and has won more than 70 awards since the start of his career. When asked about the key to his design process he answered that the core value he stands by is his "attention to details."

Frinier's legacy as a product designer, however, did not begin with

wood or steel but instead, with clay and fire. While pursuing a master's of fine arts degree in sculpture at California State University, Long Beach, it was through happenstance that Frinier would transcend his artistic skills from fine to functional art. While pursuing his degree, a colleague of Frinier's (who managed a local furniture company) tapped his creative abilities to develop ideas for a new bedroom collection. The subsequent result was a five-year collaboration that led to success in the form of 9,000 sets of bedroom decor being sold. Frinier's maturation as a product designer would skyrocket thereafter, curtailing his aspirations of becoming a sculptor.

In 1981, while teaching a wood furniture class at Cerritos College, an aluminum chaise lounge on the cover of *Los Angeles Times Magazine* caught Frinier's interest. Upon perusing the magazine, he came across a spread of outdoor furniture designed by the already established company Brown Jordan. Having worked primarily with indoor furniture, Frinier said "[he had] never given much thought about outdoor furniture until then, but then again, [he] wasn't really looking." Brown Jordan's work inspired him so much that he was compelled to develop his own ideas that addressed the outdoor room. After contacting a design manager at Brown Jordan, he presented his ideas and found himself in a series of interviews ending with an offer to become a part of its design team. His acceptance led to a career that blossomed into a 20-plus-year tenure, resulting in his appointment as Brown Jordan's chief creative officer.

It was during his time at Brown Jordan that Frinier developed a reputation for being a progressive figure in the outdoor leisure furniture industry. His designs drew high acclaim for their attention to detail,

"Everyone has a theory as to how the outdoor room came to be. Some profess that they invented the outdoor room or were responsible for it becoming a trend, [but] over the past few years, this phenomenon has changed the way architects design homes and how the family room moved outside. Some would say that the economy, over the past few years, was the beginning of the home resort, the 'staycation.' It is a trend that isn't going away."

— **Richard Frinier**

translation of traditional elements and use of new technology. Frinier's design philosophy injected new life into what was a seemingly complacent industry. As he describes it, he "creates furniture that is approachable and comfortable, with no mystery and nothing hidden. While many designers have a 'look,' [he has] a 'feel.'" An example of his influence on the outdoor room is Brown Jordan's "Cloud Nine" collection. Available in a variety of finishes and fabrics, "Cloud Nine" exemplifies Frinier's artistic approach to furniture design. The curvilinear lines and seamless transitions produced by this collection represent the level of detail with which Frinier operates. Seemingly innocuous, the form of the love seat alludes to two figures sitting side by side, forming a hauntingly beautiful illusion.

For the past three decades, Frinier has honed his selection of materials to "[focus] on outdoor-worthy materials, primarily aluminum, teak, stainless steel, bronze and plastics," he said. "Even the upholstery must be completely weather resistant, as you never know where the furniture will be placed. The limitations are as much a part of the creation as comfort, proportions and purpose." Personal experiences from his travels are a primary source of inspiration; where the cultures of exotic destinations are translated into design concepts. Currently, Frinier's work revolves around co-branded and exclusive collections. His collaboration with high-profile companies such as Sunbrella, Dedon Worldwide and Century Furniture has produced myriad designs such as "Daydream" (by Dedon) that have injected a sophisticated sense of luxury to the outdoor leisure furniture industry.

Even with his level of acclaim, it is no easy task to appease his critics. Frinier believes that the high expectations for his work are proportional to his rise in fame, but be that as it may, the challenge of creating exceptional work is what he enjoys about the pressure associated with success. "The outdoor room was around long before me," he professes. "The early film studios created Los Angeles and the outdoor lifestyle. Hollywood made outdoor living glamorous. I just helped to furnish it."

This spring, Frinier will accomplish another aspiration in a career already filled with highlights — traveling to Cuba. His trip to Havana has been a personal goal and will surely provide fuel to fire the proverbial kiln that is his creative consciousness. For him, this may be another achievement, but for us, it may be the beginning of yet another revelation in the perception of the outdoor room. ■

