

Tony Wolfenden: Kite Ambassador From Down Under

When Tony Wolfenden, fascinated by them since age 6, first saw friends flying kites made with sophisticated fiberglass rods and brightly colored ripstop nylon sails in the mid-1980s, it was a love affair renewed. "I went right out and bought a sewing machine---an industrial model---to make my own," he says. "I just knew these new kites were the sport for me."

Since then, Wolfenden, an Australian with his own small business in Elwood, Victoria, a suburb of Melbourne, and enough time to seriously pursue a hobby around the globe, has been making dramatic kites and flying them at kite festivals in Asia, the U.S. and Europe. He has established himself as a stalwart on the world circuit.

Wolfenden's career was perfect training for creating beautiful aerial objects. A native of England, he studied the visual arts before immigrating to Canada where he worked as a sculptor and furniture designer. Moving to Melbourne, where he has lived for the past three decades, Wolfenden evolved his own thriving design business. Furniture for the high court and parliament buildings in Canberra, the nation's capital, were ~~award-winning~~ ^{notable} projects of his.

With children grown, Wolfenden rediscovered kites---"my addiction took hold," is the way he phrases it. "With my design background, I felt I could make an original contribution to the sport," he says. "I'm interested not in how kites look on the ground but how they 'read' in the sky; they should be strong, bold, reduced to the guts. I want them simple, refined, original."

Pursuing these goals, Wolfenden found himself working with a reduced palette of colors. A perfectionist, he makes models of his kites first to assure himself how they will look flying in the sky. Not surprisingly, he goes in for single line models of large size.

He makes a rokkaku, which is flat and has six sides, that mysteriously conveys the illusion of being a three-dimensional box kite, or cube. Also a variant rokkaku shape with ultra long, streaming tails. And the 'genki'---a high flying flat kite with flares on the bottom and, in recent versions, swept wings. The design was developed by Dutchman Nop Velthuisen and the word means "good health" in Japanese. "The design is a perfect platform for my graphics," says Wolfenden. His striking decor on his seven "genkis" is Western but with an Oriental flavor to them. In kites at least, East and West do meet.

Wolfenden acknowledges that designing, sewing and

practice

assembling kites is lonely work, but then he has to fly them and this takes him out and about. "When you fly, you become outgoing because you're putting your kite up in everybody's sky. I find I can talk with strangers. Kites open doors for me. They've taken me around the world on festival visits. Kites have changed my life."

But while Wolfenden has discovered the pleasures of flying kites and traveling the world, his major joy remains in designing his aerial objects. "The creative act is what's important to me. My best kite is the next one."