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Misha Merzliakov on Fusing Superyachts and Cinema

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How do movies, music and modern architecture translate into superyacht designs? Yacht designer Misha Merzliakov speaks to Superyachts.com about his unique approach to telling a story through design, and the importance of crossovers in breaking out of the box.

'It can be beautiful'

Australian-born to Russian parents, Misha Merzliakov was very much expected to follow his father's footsteps into medicine, only for creative impulses and an affinity for the ocean to forge a new path. Weekends spent onboard his friend's 50-foot Cheoy Lee yacht planted a seed that Misha knew would lead him to work in the maritime industry, as he recalls "life on the water was beautiful."

During his time at The Australian Maritime College, Merzliakov was often told 'good luck' when he expressed his intention to design superyachts rather than warships or tankers. Finding the right mentorship allowed Misha to "take off like wildfire" towards a future he had already strongly envisioned. After graduating, Misha dropped everything and headed to the UK, where time spent at Tony Castro Yacht Design drew him closer to his dream.

"It can be beautiful," says Misha, when asked about the most important lesson he took away from his time at the Southampton-based design studio. "I landed in the UK and knew I was in the right spot as far as an epicentre of design goes."

"I worked with people from Germany, France, the UK, Holland, and the thing that's kept me in the faith speaking to all these people is that the language of design is very much different culturally, and it is more valued and revered in Europe."

On his return to Australia and joining Austal & Oceanfast, Misha found there to be "a bit less of a priority" in terms of superyacht design. His European exploits had been a crucial step to immersing himself in the industry, learning to respect the processes of superyacht design and building relationships that still serve him well today.

The cinema of design

"It's funny what inspires you sometimes," says Misha, who admits that ideas can spawn from any aspect of daily life. Primarily, Misha finds that music, movies and architecture provide his greatest sources of creative inspiration.

So, how can film become the essence of a superyacht design? "Often through the narrative of the story, sometimes it's just how they compose the visuals," explains Misha. The range of cinematic influences on Misha's work stretches from James Bond to The Secret Life of Walter Mitty and, believe it or not, the two share something in common. Misha has an appetite for the visually spectacular, and there is one director in particular who encapsulates this.

"Joseph Kosinski, the director of Oblivion and Tron Legacy, is actually an architect as well as a director. The Tron universe is created entirely visually and is very architectural. I'm a lover of light and light in design, so that's quite an inspiring movie. It's an extravaganza in terms of visuals. I can watch it over again and still pick up new things from it because I'm more focused on composition, cinematography and lighting."

The relationship between film and superyacht design may be much deeper than we imagine, and influence some of the most renowned names in the industry. Superyachts are often used to harness a sense of adventure on the silver screen, but film has its own imprint on the history of superyacht design.

"Jon Bannenberg did set design early on before he got into yachts. The interesting thing is crossovers, because you can take ideas from one thing, reinterpret them and inject them into another industry. I spoke to Michael Breman of Lurssen about this topic. He said, 'the best thing about Bannenberg is that he wasn't from the maritime industry.' You can often get boxed in with what's been done before. In the 80s you would have been shocked by some of his designs, but this is what made Bannenberg so successful at the time."

Film is one of the many cultural influences on Misha Merzliakov's portfolio. Superyacht design is about ideas, and ideas can be found anywhere if you tune in. From his travels, Misha has drawn inspiration from architecture, especially on visits to the Middle East and Asia. "Those things inspire me just looking at a cityscape," says Misha, but there is one source of inspiration that will never find a substitute, one that led him on this very journey in the first place. "I still have to see the ocean every few days or I lose my mojo."

Timing and taste

Browse through Misha Merzliakov's distinctive and diverse portfolio and you will notice a multitude of differing hull configurations. The experience of working with Australian shipyards explains Misha's comfort with multihulls, considering the country's strong history in the ferry and naval industries. For Misha, this once-controversial approach gives him flexibility to create more unique arrangements, benefitting from the extra beam afforded to multihull vessels. As more people understand these advantages, the initial apprehension towards different designs has faded, and interest is being registered some years after the initial releases.

"Pushing the envelope is definitely something that's thrilling," says Misha, who was a Young Designer of the Year finalist for his 52m Catamaran concept 'Eva' in 2011. "When I did Eva, that was 2010 so the design is 10 years old in execution, but when people see it now, they often ask 'where has this come from?' I laugh because I got mixed reviews 10 years ago, whereas now it's coming into the norm."

Eva, named after Misha's daughter born in the middle of its design, has brought a lot of success so far. Not only is there a client in the early stages with Eva, but the concept has also opened the doors to other interesting projects for the Brisbane-based designer. When working with Echo Yachts, the shipyard learnt more about Eva and commissioned Misha to transform the idea into a custom project they had ongoing with clients. An early lesson taught Misha the virtue of patience, so he is never surprised when an enquiry pops up. "Always keep your designs and ideas because you never know when the time is right for an owner to pick them up, its all down to timing and taste."

One exciting project in the pipeline is 40m Explorer superyacht GCX40, a very much Australian-made project in collaboration with Evolution Yachts, and Misha is excited by the wealth of expertise working with him. "Teaming up with industry stalwart Kevin Altera (founder of Evolution Yachts) was advantageous. He's been a great mentor and partner on the project. He brings a wealth of ex Bannenberg era Oceanfast experience with him. Once we got past the conceptual stage, we needed to review practical aspects of the design. So, we enlisted Practical and Technical advisor Peter Cook, who has 30 years of experience as a superyacht skipper and is a boat builder by trade."

SuperyachtsMonaco are acting as the exclusive broker on the sub 500GT long range superyacht, with several enquiries being discussed, and Misha is working on a variety of bow options to tailor the design to individual taste.

Filling the void

There are many reasons to be optimistic about the future of the superyacht industry in Australia. New charter legislation will lead to a growing migration of yachts to the region, while a heavy investment in superyacht infrastructure along the East Coast covers all servicing needs to allow for longer stays. Misha is excited about what the future holds for superyachts in Australia.

"With it will come refits and the changeover of vessels. If the refit industry grows, then the shipbuilding industry grows too."

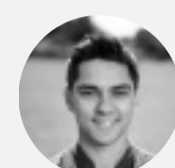
Explorer yachts are going further afield. This hemisphere is generally not as explored as the North. At a recent Australian Superyacht Rendezvous, even Jonathan Beckett was talking to us about this region. Coming across is becoming easier and more connected, and they're realising that even if they get down here, they can still service their vessel."

With a big decade ahead for Australia, what can we expect from Misha Merzliakov?

"Before you start you have these crazy ambitions. Now, I just want to still be drawing superyachts. There's a bit of patriotism in me, so I would hope for continuing relationships with Echo and Evolution, and for yachts to come out of those partnerships from my drawing board. That would make me happier than anything, to see Australian-built superyachts emerge."

"I would love to do a 100m Trimaran. You never say never."

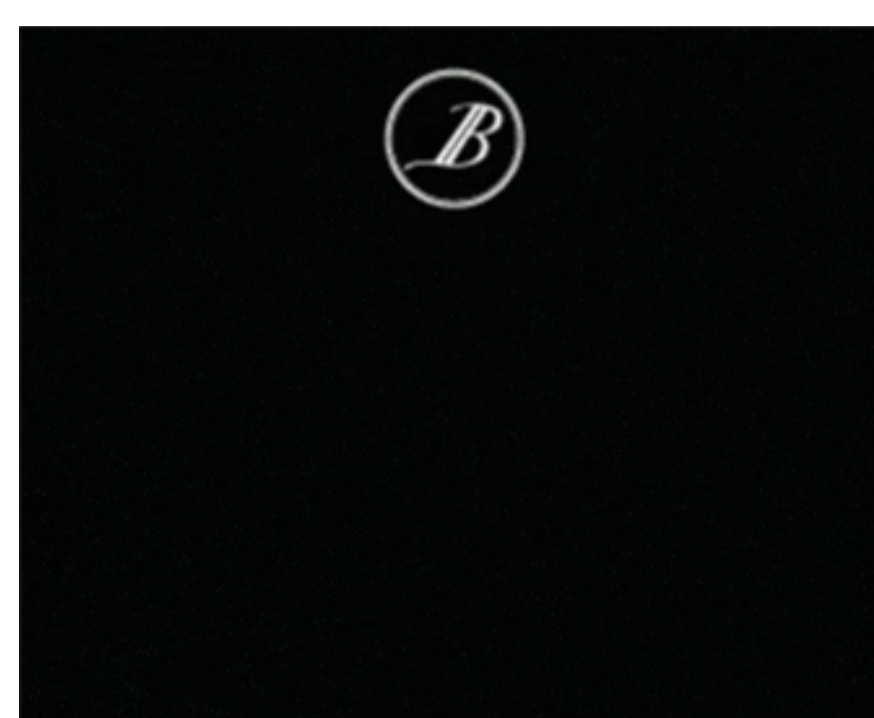
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By George Bains

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Misha Merzliakov



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