

D IS FOR DESIGN

An urban monk living in harmony

Mario Lafrenais shapes stone into sleek sinks and tubs

BY DANIEL DROLET

MONTREAL

The bathroom sinks Mario Lafrenais designs are, in a word, beautiful. Sleek yet substantial; modern but timeless and, though they are made of limestone, they seem to float.

His *Réservoir* collection drew many admirers at last spring's design show in Montreal, where he won a prize and captured the attention of people interested in distributing his designs — they now sell in Canada, Europe and Asia.

Today, as he prepares to head to a quarry to check on limestone for one of his projects, his phone is ringing off the hook.

For the hairstylist, massage therapist, former fashion model and construction worker, this success is a breakthrough, the kind every artist and inventor dreams of.

His challenge now is to follow up on the interest he's generated.

"I'm surfing on a wave right now and I'm very aware of it," says Lafrenais, a 41-year-old native of Sherbrooke, Que. "Now, it's all about the organization of the business."

Up to this point, about 80 per cent of his work has been individual custom orders. His next move — apart from designing custom sinks for Fruits & Passion body care boutiques — is moving his designs into stores and getting his website, www.moineurbain.com, up and running.

Tall with a shock of curly hair drawn back into a ponytail, Lafrenais is an intense man with piercing blue eyes. He talks a mile a minute, bouncing from topic to topic.

His home, an older house with a small yard in a bohemian part of the city near Carré St-Louis, is a testament to his creative drive.

He designed and built the kitchen himself, using cast-offs and appli-



Mario Lafrenais's award-winning designs show an intuitive appreciation for line and form and have an eastern sensibility. He says they reflect a spiritual journey that led him to India, Tibet and Nepal during an almost monastic existence focused on meditation.

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MARIO LAFRENAIS

ances bought at restaurant bankruptcy sales. He also designed and built his living room sofa and has been designing furniture since he was a teen.

By his own definition, Lafrenais is a "patenteux."

Patenteux is a Québécois word that's difficult to translate. In the 1978 *Les Patenteux du Québec* — a book

about folk artists who make unusual and elaborate lawn ornaments — it's defined as an ingenious, clever and artistic person who creates things using materials easily available to them. A *patenteux* is both an inventor and an artist.

Lafrenais definitely fits the bill, but his esthetic sense goes way beyond

folk art. His designs show an intuitive appreciation for line and form and have an eastern sensibility that gives them a peaceful, calm aura.

He says they reflect a spiritual journey that took 10 years out of his life and led him to India, Tibet and Nepal.

"I went through a period where I was trying to find out what I was doing on this planet," he says, adding that he led an almost monastic existence and focused on meditation.

The name of his company, *Moine Urbain* — urban monk — comes from the term *sannyasin*, the Hindu renunciate who wanders the cities with little more than the clothes on his back.

"To live as an urban monk is to live in harmony with everything around



Mario Lafrenais sinks are made from "noble materials", yet they seem to float. His award-winning designs sell in Canada, Europe and Asia.

us," he says, adding that the philosophy is the inspiration for his sleek, uncluttered designs.

His move from hairstylist to self-taught decorator/designer began when friends and customers started asking him to decorate their homes.

In 2000, he decorated an office and was inspired by his love of working with what he calls "noble materials" — stone, wood and metal — to create custom sinks.

He doesn't carve the sinks himself, but works with quarries that cut them to his specifications. Because limestone is porous and susceptible to stains, he has them specially treated with a sealant, and then buffed.

His *Réservoir* collection includes kitchen and bathroom sinks and bathtubs and showers. They are available in custom or standard sizes priced from about \$800 for a small sink; bathtubs can run upwards of \$5,000.

Until his website is up and running, orders can be placed by calling him at (514) 286-2673.

"When I do things, they have to last," he says. "In 200 years, if people take care of them, my sinks will still be there."