Awkward is a portrait of social unease, constrained and vulnerable... a life study in altering the anatomy of discarded chairs, drawing references to my own personal awkwardness.

Karen Ryan’s description of the Awkward collection points to the frequently autobiographical nature of her design practice. In her dynamic installation of conjoined furniture all is laid bare, with found forms from the recent history of furniture reduced to their essential characteristics. The naked anatomies of whittled chairs appear particularly exposed and defenceless in their precarious relationships with their more robust, ink-stained hosts. But this duality of roles is not so cut and dried - as can be seen in the prostrate whittled chair that lends its support to the blackened desk, which lacks a leg.

It is not a fixed tableau, but offers the possibility of rearrangement, as chairs may be detached from the composition to provide the alibi of entirely functional seating. Holes in the surfaces of the furniture, that permit the anchorage of whittled chairs, also resemble knots found in wood, and even inkwells. Each element of the installation is rich in connotations.

Ryan’s use of contrasting black-stained and natural wood seems to relate to a modernist design language. But a Modernist’s desired state of perfection is immediately undermined by a missing slat, or in the unexpected interruptions of sawn-off sections. This partially deficient state is resonantly summed up by her as ‘severed aesthetics’. Rather than utopian visions, she presents us with the stoical survivors of circumstances unknown.

This is a significant point, as her redeployment of the unwanted is not primarily a matter of necessity or social conscience. Rather, it comes from an interest in engaging with the biographies or back-stories of things - as well as from a desire to challenge views about what ought to be valued. And Ryan’s argument is compelling: Awkward elevates dismissed artefacts by revealing their distinctive temperaments and peculiar beauty, offering an affecting meditation on the way we relate to the things that surround us.

Karen Ryan is a contemporary British designer based in Portsmouth, England. She completed an MA in Design Products at the Royal College of Art in 2001. Her work has been exhibited widely in Europe, including Cubitt Gallery; Rabih Hage Gallery; Aram; Liberty’s; 100% Design and Designersblock, London; Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth; Object Rotterdam; Salon de Meuble, Paris; and Rossana Orlandi, Milan. In 2009, her work was included in Li Edelkoort's Wish List exhibition and auction at Pierre Berge, Brussels. Her most recent exhibitions have been ‘Custom Made USA' presented by Balloon Contempory at the 2010 Chicago Art Fair and 'Custom Made in England' Vanity series at the Spring Projects exhibition ‘Straw Dogs’ with Jake and Dinos Chapman, Hans Stofer and Jason Brooks in London, summer 2010.

Marsden Woo Project Space is curated by Tessa Peters