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Maria Pergay, 79, Furniture Designer

By RIMA SUQI

Last weekend, while New York City was overrun by design enthusiasts in town for the International Contemporary Furniture Fair, Maria Pergay, a 79-year-old Parisian furniture designer relatively unknown in this country, was ensconced in a nautical modernist room at the Maritime Hotel. She was in New York not for the furniture fair — an event, it turns out, that she has never heard of — but to show her latest work at the Demisch Danant gallery in Chelsea (including a sofa of broken bricks she is shown sitting on). Those expecting a woman of her age to produce soft, feminine, upholstered pieces appropriate for a Paris pied-à-terre may be surprised by what has been Ms. Pergay's material of choice for decades: stainless steel.

What is it about stainless steel that you love?

Everybody is scared of stainless steel, but we have a link — there is something deep inside between me and stainless steel. This material which looks so strong, hard and cold is sweet and not sharp, and it matches with everything. It is a good contrast for colors and other materials.

There are four pieces in this show, including cube tables that look like boxes after an explosion. It seems a little bit violent.

It's my desire that people have at home next to them something which asks them questions, you see. To make them understand that behind each thing can be hidden some other things. This cube — it's a plain cube, looks like any kind of cube — but it has a treasure.

You mean the snake wood you see through the blown-out front?

Yes. It is lively, colored and soft.

So you're peeling the steel off, like a layer, to reveal something else.

Yes, it's very French.

What about the sofa? The broken bricks look a bit violent as well.

Nothing is more popular and ordinary than a sofa, right? But this one is made of broken pieces of bricks. The bricks are solid bronze covered with nickel. It is a little bizarre. Bricks are something you build houses with; this is what is left after the pieces are broken down, but it is still something strong. You can take them and build something again.

Strength seems to be a theme in your work.

It is very important. You can show, in fact, that, yes, these pieces start to become accommodating and soft and familiar in your home. It's a mirage of my furniture. But I don't like the word furniture. People do not need my pieces to be furniture, to use as a place to put plates or blankets or whatever.

If your work isn't furniture, what is it?

An expression of — what can I say, maybe like it came from Mars or the moon?

You mean it's a little bit alien?

Yes.

Is that what you're like as a person — to other people, you might seem hard on the outside or just very independent, but inside you're delicate and fragile?

I don't know. In general, everybody has a pinch of poetry inside. Not everybody gets to see that, and that is the challenge: to light the light inside.

But they can discover something about themselves by looking at the pieces. If they pass by and they stop, that means there's a connection between the piece and themselves.

But an expensive connection!

I should choose another material that is not so expensive. I don't know why I have such a contact with this material.

Well, you have a long history.

Would you say that your relationship with steel is the longest relationship of your life?

Since I started everything, in 1957. It is my best marriage.

Through July 2 at Demisch Danant, 542 West 22nd Street (11th Avenue). Information: (212) 989-5750 or demischdanant.com.