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Wallpaper's hot pick of the latest global goings-on

Newspaper*

SHOW BUSINESS
Assemblage #4, 2004,
by the Bouroullecs – one
of Galerie Kreo's
pieces on offer at Design
Miami/Basel 2006

BUT IS IT ART?

The world's smartest galleries can't get enough of it, auctioneers are asking huge sums for it, and at this year's Art Basel it got its very own show – design is certainly the new collectable, and perhaps much more





just one of the 17 invited to be part of a show called Design Miami/Basel. So that's design, not art.

Hugues Magen is the first to admit that terms everyone thought they understood are suddenly in dispute. 'There is this conversation about art and design meeting – form, function, art, design; all those ideas are up for grabs at the moment.' (And you can't really apply the 'decorative art' tag either. You would not really call much on display in Basel 'decorative'; it is much more and much less than that.)

Design Miami/Basel is an offshoot of Design Miami, a show launched at last winter's Art Basel Miami Beach (itself an offshoot of Art Basel). It was created to allow the world's leading design galleries, mostly from New York and Paris, to meet, greet and accept cheques from the rich vein of contemporary art collectors who are learning to love design both as object and investment. Take, for example, the twin powers of the luxury goods world, François Pinault of PPR and Bernard Arnault of LVMH, serious art collectors who have both invested heavily in 20th-century design recently. They are not the only ones. At the inaugural Design Miami, the Magens sold a 1962 Pierre Székely screen to fashion designer Donna Karan for around \$350,000.

Design Miami/Basel is directed by Ambra Medda, a 25-year-old curator, and backed by her partner, the Miami property developer and design enthusiast Craig Robins (the man behind the development of the city's Design District). Medda, one of those super-bright young beauties who ends up doing things like this, says the show answers a growing demand from collectors and galleries. 'Everyone was waiting for this kind of thing. And they definitely wanted something attached to a major art fair.'

Sam Keller, the now-outgoing director of Art Basel, was also keen that a version of Design Miami come to Basel. And quickly. He obviously thought it was just the kind of sideshow that would help pull in visitors to the art fair, though it's clear that a number of the galleries in attendance are starting to feel they deserve to be thought of as much more than a mere sideshow.

Most of the pieces on show at Design Miami/Basel are rare (prototypes, limited editions and one-off commissions), and most are either the work of the usual midcentury suspects or contemporary designers, from Prouvé, Perriand, Mouille and Nakashima to Arad and the Bouroullecs. There's a smattering of Sottsass, but products from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s remain difficult to sell and are largely absent. (The theory goes that most of us have a problem with the designs that we grew up with, which is why so many midcentury pieces arrived on the market during the 1990s – the owners died and their kids couldn't wait to get rid of it.)

The gallery owners know that their core clientele, the serious design collectors, are often also collectors of contemporary art. They came to Basel looking for more of the same but coming from the other direction. Design is now being bought like art, traded like art and, increasingly, produced like art. Galerie Kreo in Paris, a pioneer in these matters, not only sells contemporary design but produces limited-edition pieces from the >>

But it's art,' shouted the tanned, well-dressed American gentleman. And then he shouted it again. He was a charmless sort, confident we all needed to hear his opinion, but he had a point. He was directing his argument at a large, stainless-steel, low-lying hammock. Behind it was what looked like a domestic-scaled Richard Serra sculpture. And nearby was an odd, swollen bronze cradle and a tall, carved piece of wood that served no clear purpose, but which looked very lovely nonetheless. It was an extraordinary room set. But was it all art?

If this wasn't art, then what were such things doing here, looking like they did, presented as they were, in Basel during Art Basel, the world's biggest art show?

The strange metal chaise longue item, known as 'Sailaway' and designed by Forrest Myers in 1990, the cradle, designed by Philippe Hiquily in 1986, and the tall carving, by François Stahly, had all been hauled from New York by Hugues and April Magen, a handsome couple, of the Magen H Gallery in the East Village. The Magen H Gallery is a design gallery,

PIECES OF THE ACTION

Ambra Medda (above), of Design Miami/Basel, is bringing design, such as a François Stahly carving (right) and Philippe Hiquily's 'Cradle in Bronze' (below), to a new wave of collectors





likes of Jasper Morrison, has exclusive rights to limited-edition pieces from the Bouroullec and Marc Newson, and, as the gallery's Clémence Krzentowski explains, is spending a good deal of time preparing catalogues and exhibitions and generally trying to educate new collectors in the ways of contemporary design. It is functionally, perhaps, the closest the design world comes to an art gallery. But there are others operating in a similar manner, and it is clearly seen as the way forward for many of the galleries showing at Design Miami/Basel. No wonder there is confusion. What was once defined by its mission and purpose at production, its form and function, is being redefined because of the way it is being consumed and collected.

The poster boy for the design-as-art movement is undoubtedly Marc Newson. As a struggling young designer in Sydney, he produced a series of chaises longues, the most iconic being a nuts-and-bolts blob called the 'Lockheed Lounge'. One sold at Sotheby's in New York recently for \$968,000. That Larry Gagosian, the most powerful dealer in the art world, is exhibiting Marc Newson at his flagship Chelsea gallery in New York this September is the clearest indication of the emergence of a new sort of market for design.

And it's not just Newson who is fetching such high prices. Last December, a prototype of the 'Aqua' table, by Zaha Hadid for Established & Sons, was sold for \$296,000 at auction in New York. But the sale that changed the game was last year's auction of a 1949 Carlo Mollino table for \$3.8m (against an estimate of \$150,000-\$200,000) at Christie's in New York.

Indeed, it was rising prices for midcentury pieces that really got the 20th-century design market moving. Most credit a number of Parisian galleries – Patrick Seguin, Jousse Entreprise and Galerie Downtown – with changing the way such work was exhibited and sold. Throughout the 1990s, the galleries bought up what they could of the works of Jean Prouvé and Charlotte Perriand, among others. They catalogued them, checked provenance, controlled supply and presented the pieces in large and lovely gallery spaces; in Seguin's case, one designed by Jean Nouvel. They treated design like art and eventually people bought it like art. In contrast, when midcentury modernist pieces started to appear in numbers in the US, there was little attempt to manage the market in such a way, even though, of course, it was a much bigger market. It's a mistake the New York galleries do not want to repeat, so they're taking notes from the Parisians.

Richard Wright's eponymous Chicago auction house has also been hugely influential. It was, and remains, unique in focusing entirely on 20th-century design (even its catalogues are now highly collectable). But it was Christie's that took a punt and proved that contemporary design could also achieve big prices, and it became the first to auction pieces by the likes of Tom Dixon and Ron Arad.

Now Sotheby's and, even more so, Phillips de Pury, are committed to 20th-century and contemporary design. A 20th-century design sale by Phillips this June split the sale into Design, that is 'functional' design,



and Art, that is 'conceptual' design. It looked like an attempt to bring new parameters into play.

What is clear, as Evan Snyderman of R 20th Century, another New York gallery showing at Design Miami/Basel, points out, is that 'the tipping point has been reached'. The art collectors who first made the move into design are telling their friends. The friends are telling friends. And now we are talking serious money.

For up-and-coming young designers, the development of the design-as-art market opens up the possibility of a kind of twin-track career; designing mass-produced pieces for major companies such as Moroso (not that Moroso *et al* can really be considered mass producers), as well as limited-edition, more adventurous pieces for galleries, using more expensive materials and different production techniques.

It also means that design galleries will increasingly have to function like art galleries and dealers, providing the funding for designers to produce one-off pieces, while more 'traditional' design stores, such as

DISPLAY IT AGAIN

Items on show at Design Miami/Basel included, from top, a 1970 painted iron sculpture, by Costa Coullentianos; Ron Arad's 2005 'Bio-Void'; George Nakashima's 1980 coffee table

Murray Moss's eponymous store in SoHo, New York, will add galleries and put together exhibitions.

It is an idea that will take some getting used to. Some designers are still saddled with the quaint idea that design should have some democratic intent, that it should be designed to be produced industrially, in big numbers, over and over again. Konstantin Grcic, speaking at one of a series of excellent talks run by Design Miami/Basel, insists: 'I never, ever thought of doing limited-edition design. I didn't even think of that as design. I have always thought of myself as an industrial designer, designing for companies.' But even Grcic is coming round. And he's blaming the big design companies for forcing his conversion. 'The wider industry is not doing anything interesting, so I think there is a niche now for low-volume pieces that allow designers to make statements.'

Of course, it is wrong to suppose that all contemporary art collectors are suddenly going to be jumping all over design (there was much talk in Basel of the European collector being a more cautious beast than his American counterparts). Or that they will be particularly adventurous when they do. As Ivan Miettton, a slightly disgruntled young chap staffing Paris's Galerie Italienne at Design Miami/Basel, puts it, 'I could sell Prouvé all day. I could just stand there and it would sell.' His point was that many of the people coming to his stand were not quite ready to invest in the high-gloss polygons of Marco Zanuso Jr. 'People want to know a name. They see Ron Arad on our list and immediately they ask to see the Arad. They don't really understand Italian design. It's too colourful, conceptual and funny.' He questions how much the new wave of art collectors really appreciates design. 'A lot of the art collectors don't understand the prices of our pieces. They know 18th-century furniture. They understand the value in that.'

There is much left to be worked out about the potential and pitfalls of the 'design art' market. There is still little sense of stability or of logic in the prices being paid; no sense yet that design is a rock-solid, only-way-is-up investment. And some design gallerists still question whether design can be fed through the same kind of commercial machinery as contemporary art. Design really isn't art, they say. You can sit on a Henry Moore. But you're really not supposed to. And there is still something important about that. ★