

THE DETAILS

After the Boom, a Better Kind of Art



Mbris Mbreno for The New York Times

During Art Basel, the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden displayed 103 lanterns by the artist Jorge Pardo. More Photos

By JULIE LASKY
Published: December 12, 2012

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SAY the words "design art" to Didier Krzentowski, and he makes a funny noise in his throat, as if something is stuck there. You don't have to speak French to understand that Mr. Krzentowski, a founder of Galerie Kreo in Paris, is expressing disdain.

We were at Design Miami, the annual show of design art, or limited-edition furniture and accessories, that ended on Sunday. The event began in 2005 as a satellite to Art Basel in Miami Beach, to attract elite collectors who want a rarefied sofa to go with their Gerhard Richter.

This year, Galerie Kreo was introducing a bookcase by François Bauchet. The work, called Cellae 9, had the look of thinly sliced gray marble but was made of felt impregnated with resin. Only eight were produced, plus two artist's proofs. The price was about \$29,000. (Like many of the figures quoted in this article, that may rise as the number of available pieces declines.)

Mr. Krzentowski, who founded Kreo in 1999 with his wife, Clémence, has long worked with designers to produce objects that have the conceptual depth and rarity of fine art. But he dislikes the idea of lumping art and design into a single category. The pieces he sells are experimental, but they are not freewheeling in the way of many artworks; they have a function or at least allude to one. "Design means constraints," he said approvingly.

The funny throat noise may have also come from the fact that, for many, the term "design art" means pretentious and opportunistic.

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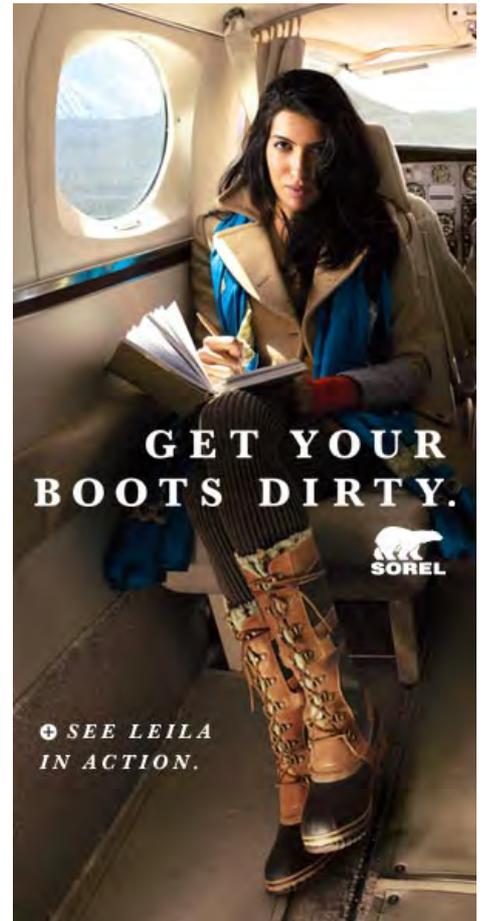
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Blame the art boom. When limited-edition design was canonized as a serious collectible a few years ago (about the time an aluminum lounge chair by Marc Newson fetched nearly \$1 million at auction), galleries took notice. Pieces by emerging designers were touted as blue chip investments. "Editions of 10" appeared in 10 different colors, diminishing rarity with every hue.

Like the rest of the art market, design art crashed with the economy, and for the most part, it has remained grounded. A version of a Ron Arad rocking chair called Loop Loom, which in 2006 sold at auction in Paris for \$160,000, went for \$75,000 at Phillips de Pury in New York on Tuesday, \$5,000 below the low estimate.

That's the economic picture. The creative picture is something else. Design Miami showed that design art (or whatever you want to call it) is thriving. The 36 exhibitors included not only contemporary-design veterans like Kreo, R 20th Century of New York and Nilufar of Milan, but also several newly hatched galleries.

Dealers reported satisfying sales, especially now that the fair is across the parking lot from the Miami Beach Convention Center, where Art Basel is based. Until three years ago, the event took place about five miles away, in a retail sector developed as the Miami Design District — not as easy a trek for the Richter-owning sofa buyer. This year, the fair's organizers reported that more than 30,000 people visited over five days.

MOST impressive, Design Miami had a vigor that was missing from Art Basel, which was seven times its size. "Because it's smaller, I have more space to play and more space to say something," said Sebastian Errazuriz, whose work was shown by the New York contemporary design dealer Cristina Grajales and was also part of an exhibition of outdoor benches that Ms. Grajales organized at the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden in Coral Gables, Fla. Mr. Errazuriz designed one bench with a crystal chandelier (\$24,000) and another with a pair of Julius Caesar busts (\$20,000).

"Design art has so much growth potential where I'm fortunate to be a spearhead of this new movement," Mr. Errazuriz said.

"Meanwhile, in the arts," he said, "it's so difficult to find something that stands out and proposes something new anymore."

The fair offered a bracing combination of living design legends like Wendell Castle and Gaetano Pesce, vintage masters like the Eameses and Jean Prouvé, and younger talents (like the Chilean-born Mr. Errazuriz, 35), whom gallerists say have established their bona fides through museum collections or monographs.

A version of this article appeared in print on December 13, 2012, on page D1 of the New York edition with the headline: After the Boom, a Better Kind of Art.

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Gabrielle Ammann of Cologne, for instance, showed a \$75,000 marble chair and ottoman by Satyendra Pakhalé, 45, an Amsterdam-based designer...

Maria Wettergren of Paris, a specialist in contemporary Scandinavian design, offered a chair by Mathias Bengtsson, 41, a Danish-born Londoner. The piece, which was 3-D printed in resin to resemble the cellular structure of bone and coated in silver, was priced at about \$65,200.

Still, there was skepticism at Design Miami that untested designers would hold their value. Predictably, this attitude came from dealers in vintage goods, like Mark McDonald of Hudson, N.Y., a respected veteran of midcentury modern furniture...

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Among the fresh faces were those belonging to the exhibitors themselves. Volume Gallery, which was founded two and a half years ago in Chicago by Claire Warner and Sam Vinz, made its maiden exhibition with the deconstructed furniture of Snarkitecture...

The Snarkitecture pieces included a cabinet of lacquered wood and cast silicone that gave the appearance of having been whacked by a cleaver. There were also corner shelves that looked like fragments of broken plaster.

OVER ALL, prices were not hair-raising. A star turn like the America table by Gaetano Pesce, 73, an 11-foot-wide map of the United States in painted epoxy resin set on legs that spelled the word "Independence," was \$155,000.

venice projects of Italy, was \$130,000 in an edition of three.

That may sound like a lot of money, but not when you think of the several months required to construct a mold for the trio of lamps, cast the metal and blow the glass, tossing out failed efforts at every stage. Or when you cross the parking lot separating Design Miami from Art Basel and find in the Chelsea dealer Andrea Rosen's booth a string of little illuminated white light bulbs on a wire. That 1993 work, "Untitled' (Last Light)," by the artist Félix González-Torres, was priced at \$550,000.

Paul Johnson, the owner of Johnson Trading Gallery, in New York and Los Angeles, was the rare dealer to exhibit at both Design Miami and Art Basel, thanks to a collection of vintage furniture painted by the late artist and "picker" Robert Loughlin (\$3,000 to \$9,000). This dual showing was permitted, he said, because the work was indisputably functional. (Design Miami bars objects that have no apparent use.)

By Thursday, Mr. Johnson had sold pieces in fairly equal quantities at both fairs, he said, including a \$6,500 Mies Brno chair to the Carnegie Museum adorned with Mr. Loughlin's standard iconography: a square-jawed man with a cigarette dangling from his lip, a Zippo lighter and a Chevrolet logo.

The layers of reference — 1980s East Village graffiti on top of 1930s-style found classic furniture — produced a richness that emanates from the best mashups of design and art.

Mr. Errazuriz, the designer, pointed out the philosophical and emotional potential of the conjoined disciplines. "We have our basic necessities covered," he said, referring to objects like coffee tables and benches that help us eat, socialize and relax.

Now the mandate is to "design something for when I feel lonely," he added. "For when I feel empty. For when I'm turned down by my love. For when I'm scared because I'm going to die. For when I lose a kid. Design now is fulfilling important things that for a long time were more expected from art, but that art today is failing to deliver because it's so immersed in itself."

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