

FRIEDMAN BENDA
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METROPOLIS

Glenn Adamson, Stephen Burks, and Design's Most Ambitious Conversation Series

Since the pandemic started, the duo has been interviewing a broad roster of international figures in architecture and design for gallery Friedman Benda.

By Osman Can Yerebakan
October 29, 2020

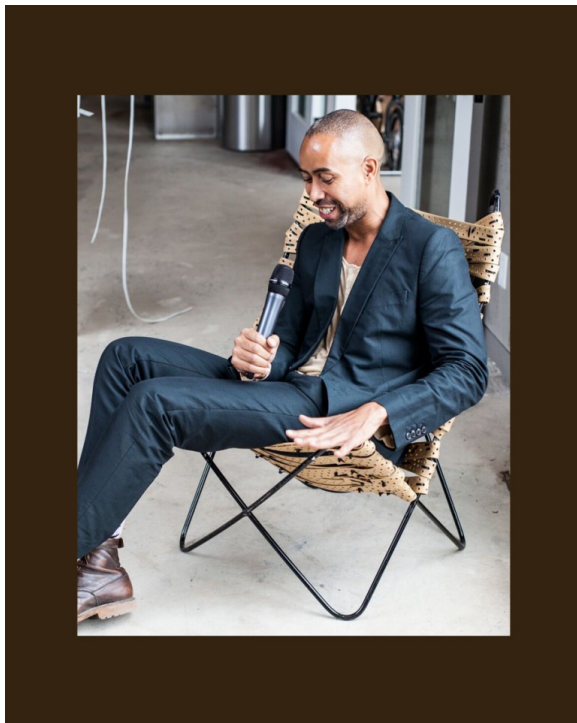


Courtesy Friedman Benda

The pandemic may have put an unparalleled halt on design and architecture sectors, but it was this abrupt stoppage that made Glenn Adamson and Stephen Burks's Design in

Osman Can Yerebakan, "Glenn Adamson, Stephen Burks, and Design's Most Ambitious Conversation Series," *Metropolis*, October 29, 2020.

Dialogue conversation series for Friedman Benda gallery possible. “All of a sudden, everyone’s calendars opened up and whoever we’d like to interview became available on Zoom—from Ron Arad to Paula Antonelli,” Adamson tells *Metropolis*. Industrial designer Burks was initially a guest in the lineup, which Adamson inaugurated with designer Misha Kahn on April 1, but “when I told my story, it became clear there weren’t enough voices of color being represented in design,” Burks, founder of design studio Man Made, recalls. Following Burks’s episode, the two joined forces. His first guest was Switzerland-based Nigerian-American designer Ini Archibog (his second participation in the series, after a conversation in June in the wake of George Floyd’s killing).



Stephen Burks

Within six months, the series has formed a who’s-who of design, all stored on Friedman Benda’s Vimeo channel. There, you can listen to Cooper Hewitt curator Alexandra Cunningham Cameron talk about the museum’s current exhibition of streetwear designer Willi Smith, then tune in to hear how design expert Lidewij Edelkoort envisions the near future for design. Stay on for Byron and Dexter Peart’s discussion of their e-commerce site GOODEEy.

Wednesday discussions are hosted by Adamson while Fridays are by Burks. Both host invites speakers from an all-encompassing range of geographies but also pay attention to tell their stories as filtered through locality within the industry. Like basically any other field, architecture and design has witnessed a surge in virtual panels and discussions since March, but Burks

emphasizes their vision is based on consistency and inclusivity. “We are not just pulling top names but also look to the margins,” he says. “We’re interested in territorial projects and artists who are using design to step up people’s lives.” Inclusivity in language is another criterion for the duo. “If we’re engaging in dialogues to cross cultural barriers, we cannot limit our subjects with English-speakers,” says Adamson. For an interview with furniture designer Andrea Branzi, they invited design historian Catherine Rossi and their conversation will be presented in Italian with English subtitles.



Glenn Adamson

Given the precarity of this year, the duo has not lacked topics to cover. Breaking news, however, occasionally outdid their timing— their conversation with Lebanese designer Najla El Zein, for example, came right before the Beirut blast. In that talk, El Zein talked about her bodily design that blurs the distinction between art and function, but the devastating explosion was yet to come.

“Beirut is an inspiring city with its madness and euphoria—a city that can slip through your fingers and yet there is something very tangible to it,” El Zein recently told *Metropolis*. “Any creative mind who lives in Beirut feeds from the city, but today there’s not much left, its soul has died.” She thinks the city’s design scene will face difficulties in picking up; on personal level, she observes that quarantine has made social interactions “restrained, hesitant, calculated.”

Living between Amsterdam and Beirut, the designer thinks the experiences of this year will make her future work incline more toward the need for connection.



Najla El Zein. Courtesy Damien Arlettaz

Another current, yet, in today's turbulent climate, often overlooked, subject is the Census, which has been extended due to the pandemic. A Design in Dialogue episode with artist and educator Ekene Ijeoma about his project A Counting: A Voice Portrait of the United States demonstrates the series' efforts to stay current. Ijeoma lives between Brooklyn and Boston, where he is an assistant professor at MIT Media Lab, but his interest—to illustrate portraits of urban areas through their spoken languages—extends more broadly and investigates entitlement for representation in data. The participatory project records languages spoken in Omaha and Houston, in addition to New York, where over 600 languages are spoken. Participants dial in a phone number and count from 1 to 100 in their mother tongues. Each participation contributes to illustrate the diversity in urban areas where the Census tends to undercount minorities. “I started as an artist who drew things I could see, but I later realized data is something I could draw with people’s experiences,” he told Burks during their August conversation, “not just personal experiences, but those that are collective.” Language is an example of this collectiveness; however, when civic efforts fall short, art can come in handy. “The last census in 2010 only reported around 250 languages,” noted Ijeoma. Each “counting portrait” varies in its sequence of languages, but number 1 is always spoken in Lenape, the language of people indigenous to modern-day New York, New Jersey, and Delaware. “It’s an acknowledgment for the language of this land,” Ijeoma said



Ekene Ijeoma. Courtesy Kris Graves

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Now nearing its 70th episode, what is next for Design in Dialogue in a post-pandemic landscape? “The series is a time capsule about a very particular time for the creative world,” Burks says, pointing to Archibog’s first conversation as a the perspective of a Black American living abroad son the country’s turmoil. An important asset for Adamson and Burks is their diverse backgrounds in design, which gives the show a vibrancy and multiplicity in approach. “We approach design from different angles, me as a critic and Stephen as a designer,” says Adamson. “I don’t want to speak for my partner, but I don’t think we are going to run out of people to talk to.”

You can tune into Design in Dialogue through Friedman Benda’s [website](#) and [Vimeo](#).



Seduction by Najla El Zein