

FRIEDMAN BENDA  
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# CURBED

## The Year in Design That Would Have Been

By Diana Budds  
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Photo: Daniel Kukla/Courtesy of Friedman Benda

It's tempting to wonder what 2020 would have brought us were it not for the pandemic. In the design world, the annual procession of fairs and exhibitions that introduce us to new work was canceled or postponed, but that doesn't mean makers weren't making and creatives weren't creating.

Enter “What Would Have Been,” an exhibition of work from 30 studios — including Misha Kahn, Ini Archibong, Daniel Arsham, and Faye Toogood. It’s on view at the design gallery Friedman Benda in Chelsea until December 12 as well as, of course, online.



Photo: Daniel Kukla/Courtesy of Friedman Benda

Gallery owner Marc Benda denies any “sentimental interpretation” of the show, however. “The idea was very pragmatic. I wanted everyone on the roster to have the chance to have a physical show, because they weren’t going to otherwise.”

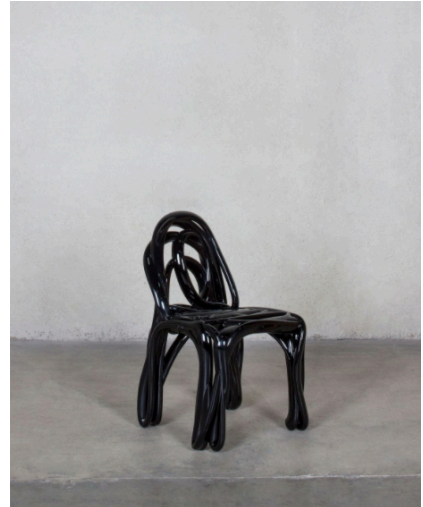
And the physical show is an important one. For the past decade, design has been moving deeper into narrative territory, particularly with the set that Friedman Benda represents. The works are about concepts, ideas, and emotions rendered in three dimensions, not about a particular appearance or style. “Objects travel with more baggage,” Benda explains.



From left: Misha Kahn's *Slide to the Left* sculpture (2020) is made from stainless steel, concrete, glass, fiberglass, ceramic, bamboo, and wool. Photo: Timothy Doyon/Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Misha Kahn. Toomas Toomepuu's *Rain Dance chair* (2019) is made from plywood, various hardwoods, glass, steel, silicone, foam, and rubber. Photo: Courtesy of Friedman Benda and the artist

Plus, having the year-end show helped the artists and designers keep working and engaging with what's happening, which sometimes changed the trajectory of the works. Archibong, for example, changed his *Theoracle* installation at the Dallas Museum of Art — the installation is composed of lights on totems arranged in a circle and was originally about creating an identity as a child of the African diaspora — to address issues of racial injustice. Meanwhile, the intimate sculptures of Najla El Zein — a Lebanese designer who is now based in the Netherlands — which address themes of human connection, carry new weight during a time when many of us are away from loved ones.

"These artists don't create into a vacuum; they don't create things for the lofty few," Benda says of the works. Even if you can't (yet) afford them yourself, it's fun to look. "They do this because they want to engage with an audience."



From left: Fernando and Humberto Campana's Pirarucu buffet (2017) is made from cast aluminum and has a texture inspired by a freshwater fish native to the Brazilian Amazon. Photo: Fernando Laszlo/Courtesy of Friedman Benda and the artist  
Front Design's Materialized Sketch of a Round-Back Chair (Black) (2005) is made from thermoplastic powder. Photo: Daniel Kukla/Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Front Design



From left: Chris Schanck's Grotto Mirror: Lavender II (2019) is made from steel, polystyrene, polyurea, aluminum foil, glass, and resin. Photo: Clare Gatto/Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Chris Schanck  
Ini Archibong's Obelisk (2019) is made from marble and glass. Photo: Andreas Zimmerman/Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Ini Archibong





Faye Toogood's Maquette 259 / Canvas and Foam Seat, Rust (2020) emerged from a project she had done in secret over the past few years: Quickly made maquettes using inexpensive materials turned into full-scale furniture. Photo: Angus Mill/Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Faye Toogood



From left: Najla El Zein's Fragmented Pillar is made from plaster and sand. Photo: Daniel Kukla/Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Najla El Zein Thaddeus Wolfe's Untitled (2020) is sculpted from glass. Photo: Joe Kramm/Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Thaddeus Wolfe