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on exhibit

ETTORE SOTTASS AT FRIEDMAN BENDA

Still a Rebel at 90



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ETTORE SOTTASS, THE PRETERNATURALLY YOUTHFUL

Italian architect and designer, is best known internationally as the guiding light of the 1980s Memphis design group that defined the post-modern style of an era. At 90, he continues to produce work — and lots of it — that exudes artistic feistiness and the energy and spirit one might reasonably expect of a much younger artist. In recent years, Sottsass has focused his explorations in the realms of cabinetwork and glass.

Manhattan's new 6,000-square-foot Friedman Benda Gallery in Chelsea chose Sottsass' new work for its inaugural exhibition (September 19-October 27), showing 15 new pieces of furniture, some of them 10 feet tall, and 25 exuberant works in glass. "We didn't want to initiate the space with an emerging artist," says gallery director Jennifer Olshin. "We wanted to show a giant."

Sottsass certainly is that. His contributions have ranged from philosophical writings to industrial design (his iconic piece is the bright red 1969 Valentine typewriter for Olivetti) and monumental works of architecture, including Milan's humanistically designed Malpensa 2000 airport.

The intricate and vividly colored Sottsass-designed glass of recent vintage is the result of continuing experiments with color and form and the pioneering use of wire and glue to assemble glass elements in dynamic compositions. The new furniture is an outgrowth of earlier work, famously cartoon-like creations such as 1981's Casablanca sideboard and Carlton room divider, their rakish angles clad in multi-colored and patterned plastic laminate, these new pieces are more refined. Their asymmetrically stacked geometric shapes are essentially rectilinear and have subtler coloration. Architecture in miniature, they combine the warm tones of natural wood with hard materials like polished aluminum and slabs of clear acrylic. "They still bear the hallmarks of his Memphis pieces — humor, irreverence and architectural impossibility," says Olshin, along with "unexpected angles, un-classical proportions and sometimes startling color combinations." But unlike Memphis, which had strident Utopian intentions to improve people's lives through design, "the new pieces are mature works of art," Olshin says. "They are more balanced, and they speak to his own investigations more than to a larger manifesto."

Even in his 10th decade, Sottsass continues to challenge prevailing design wisdom at every turn. "Taste, functionality, the accepted and the mundane bore him," Olshin says, which explains why his work has often been termed Radical Design or Anti-Design, but never, ever dull. ■

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The uniquely subversive vision of celebrated architect Ettore Sottsass is evident in these cabinets, all created within the past three years. The plastic laminates of Memphis days are long gone; Sottsass works exclusively in exotic woods such as highly figured tamo, or Japanese ash (opposite) and stained or dyed rosewood (this page); the piece below includes an element of oxidized aluminum.

