

# The New York Times

## Mixed Signals, but Some Signs Point to a Comeback Season

By ALICE RAWSTHORN

Published: June 6, 2010

LONDON — When the Lockheed Lounge, the most sought-after piece by the most sought-after designer, Marc Newson, sold for a record price of over \$2 million at the same auction in which two other works by him failed to attract a single bid, what did that say about the contemporary design market? (Especially when a fourth lot went for a knock-down price to a lone bidder — reportedly his dealer.)



Phillips de Pury & Compan

The 1988 prototype of Lockheed Lounge, designed by Marc Newson, sold by Phillips de Pury.

That the market is unstable, unpredictable and still dogged by recession? Probably. Although it should be said that this particular auction, last month at Phillips de Pury in New York, had an unusually unhappy history. It consisted of lots being put up for sale by the creditors of the American technology entrepreneur Halsey Minor. Despite the roller-coaster result, more of Mr. Minor's design collection is to be auctioned at Phillips on Wednesday, including other pieces by Mr. Newson.

The results of that sale will not just affect the fortunes of his work, not least as Mr. Minor is said to have bought the record-breaking Lockheed Lounge for the higher price of \$2.25 million in a private deal three years ago. It comes at an equally delicate time for the rest of the contemporary design market at the start of the summer season. The Design Miami/ Basel design fair is to open in Switzerland on June 15 and Sotheby's and Christie's are to hold major design auctions in New York on June 16 and 17. The last thing they want is a flop.

"I came out of the first Halsey Minor sale feeling completely gloomy," said James Zemaitis, head of the 20th-century design department at Sotheby's, New York. "The estimates were conservative, but the results were disappointing. Though that's only one area of the market — contemporary design at auction. If you look elsewhere, it's a different story."



Joris Laarman Lab

Bridge Table, designed by Joris Laarman.

The liveliest spot, according to Mr. Zemaitis, is for mid-20th-century Modernist furniture by designers and architects, like Jean Prouvé, Serge Mouille, [Le Corbusier](#) and Charlotte Perriand. Even though most of the finest examples of their work were snapped up years ago, and many of the pieces now on sale were mass-manufactured for factories, schools and libraries, prices are rising rapidly and are almost back to pre-recessionary levels.

Mid-century Modernism will feature heavily at Design Miami/ Basel, as well as in the Sotheby's and Christie's sales, and an exhibition of postwar art and design in Paris opening next month at the Timothy Taylor Gallery in London. The Phillips auction is to include mid-century furniture and lighting designed by Le Corbusier and his cousin Pierre Jeanneret, for their architectural projects in the Indian city of Chandigarh. More and more of their work there has been auctioned recently, despite protests by architectural preservationists, who are fighting to keep the buildings intact.

Back to contemporary design, which will play a prominent part in Phillips's sale (partly thanks to Mr. Minor's creditors), but less so in Sotheby's and Christie's: "I'd like to think that we'll be more of a player in contemporary in our December sale," Mr. Zemaitis said. "But we have been very, very cautious for this one. We were offered some great works, but said no more than yes."



Sotheby's

Aluminum and brass floor lamps, designed by Serge Mouille in 1953.

That's understandable. The entire contemporary art market has been affected by the recession, but its impact has been particularly severe on the newest, frothiest sectors, like contemporary design, or "design-art" as it was branded.

At its best, the "design-art" boom provided capital for ambitious designers to produce experimental work, and accelerated the careers of rising design stars, including Joris Laarman and Maarten Baas in the Netherlands, Martino Gamper and Julia Lohmann in the United Kingdom. These developments helped to generate intellectual debate within the design community, and to nurture new movements, like critical and conceptual design, whose purpose is expressive and analytical, rather than commercial.

But at its worst, "design-art" tempted less-gifted designers — and artists, too — to churn out seemingly pointless, over-priced furniture. Design purists loathed it, not least because it reinforced public perceptions of design as a superficial styling tool. (Personally, I still can't bring myself to write "design-art" without quotation marks.) When recession struck, its flakiness proved fatal. "The reasons why the market collapsed are obvious," said Alasdair Willis, chief executive of Established & Sons, which owns a design gallery in London. "Prices were too high and too much work was being produced for the wrong reasons — commercial rather than creative reasons."

Demand for those speculative pieces is still depressed, but there are encouraging signs of renewed interest for challenging new work. Mr. Laarman staged a knock-out show at the Friedman Benda gallery in New York this spring featuring conceptual projects inspired by his research into scientific theories and new technologies.

The current exhibition of new objects designed by the French brothers, Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec, at Galerie Kreo in Paris has been equally successful. Spartan in style and shape, each piece is covered in beautifully worked leather. "The response from collectors has been unbelievable," said Didier Krzentowski, who owns the gallery. "For sure, the work is great, but it's evident that people are coming back to the market."

This recovery is one reason some larger design galleries, including Galerie Kreo and Contrasts Gallery in Shanghai, are to return to Design Miami/Basel, having dropped out previously. It has also encouraged more exhibitions of new work.

Sotheby's is collaborating with the Carpenters Workshop Gallery in London on a show, featuring the Dutch designers Studio Job, Atelier Van Lieshout and Demakersvan, at the 15th-century Sudeley Castle in southwest England this summer. Mr. Newson is now working on his second exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery in New York, which is to open in September.

"My first show at Gagosian was of furniture, but this one is all about transport, the new speedboat I've designed and existing projects like my car and space plane," Mr. Newson explained. "I know the Lockheed Lounge still dominates some people's perceptions of what I do, but for me it's ancient history."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/07/arts/design/07iht-design7.html?ref=design>