

# CO.DESIGN

## The Saga Of A Beloved Design Institution In Trump's America

*A year after being detained during Trump's travel ban, the New York design curator Juan Garcia Mosqueda returns to the scene with a group exhibition at Friedman Benda.*

**BY AILEEN KWUN**



1/12 Juan Garcia Mosqueda [Photo: Dan Kukla/courtesy Friedman Benda]

“The brief to the architects, other than to make furniture or lighting, was really open—I wanted to give them the freedom to present a microcosm of whatever was going on in their practices,” says the design curator Juan Garcia Mosqueda of his newly opened exhibition, *No-Thing*, featuring work by emerging architecture studios including MOS Architects, Leong Leong, and MILLIØNS.

On view at New York's Friedman Benda gallery through February 17, the show is a vignette for experimental and tongue-in-cheek works by ambitious young architects intent on reimagining common objects. An artfully arranged stack of colored plywood sheets is presented as a daybed,

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by the Belgian studio Jan De Vylder Architects. The young upstart Andy and Dave, which Mosqueda says a colleague of his found on Instagram, offers an aluminum bench with a tangle of geometric cushions that appear to demand no particular configuration. Elsewhere, the studio SO-IL has offered a circular lounge seat in the form of a low-slung, tubular-steel frame enveloped in a curtain of metal rings.



[Photo: Dan Kukla/courtesy Friedman Benda]

The collection is a clever foil to a concurrent show at the gallery, *Inside the Walls*, curated by Mark MacDonald, which features furniture by master architects from the 20th-century canon, among them Frank Lloyd Wright, Marcel Breuer, and Charles and Ray Eames. The tradition of architects who design furniture is rich—and while that tradition continues in *No-Thing*, the results are decidedly off the wall, “non-dogmatic,” and “aporetic,” Mosqueda says. “Most of the 20th-century masters had a very definite way of approaching architecture and design, in the way of a manifesto. Here, what you see is a certain skepticism, with proposals and uncertainties about how to approach practice with a level of subjectivity.”

*No-Thing* marks a personal turning point for the curator. Last July, Mosqueda closed Chamber, the celebrated art and design gallery he had founded in 2014. In its brief but lauded three-year run, Chamber had quickly become a social space for design aficionados, much in the way of the revered design gallery MOSS, where Mosqueda had cut his teeth, prior to its close in 2012. A gallery-boutique hybrid with a focus on limited-edition designs and a cast of guest curators, Chamber emphasized storytelling through narrative works and a non-precious, hands-on approach to objects.

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[Photo: Dan Kukla/courtesy Friedman Benda]

While the choice to close Chamber’s physical space had been on the table—Mosqueda had plans to pursue a master’s degree in cultural studies at Harvard University, which he began this fall—it soon became an unavoidable reality. On February 24, 2017, while his team at Chamber was readying an installation, Mosqueda, a legal U.S. resident with dual citizenship in Argentina and Italy, was inexplicably detained at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York for 36 hours before he was denied reentry and directed back to Buenos Aires, where he had been visiting. Mosqueda was unable to attend the opening of the gallery’s show, *Domestic Appeal*, concerning design for the home—a concept that began to unravel in his mind.

“On a personal level, I think that it took away my feeling of calling the U.S. my home—I thought it was. I’d been living in the U.S. for 12 years, and here was someone telling me I couldn’t come in to my own home,” says Mosqueda. “The experience took something away from me on a deep personal level, and led me to think about social mobility and question what it means to even refer to a place as home. It marked me, and changed me completely.”

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[Photo: Dan Kukla/courtesy Friedman Benda]

The following week, Mosqueda shared an open letter titled “The Visible Wall,” recounting his experience, that was swiftly met with shock and support from numerous voices in the design community. Yves Behar shared the letter on Twitter, and the online design magazine *Sight Unseen* also posted it in full, adding a statement that “We are strongly against this administration’s unfair and un-American targeting of immigrants—and not just those who are important design gallerists, but all those who seek to make a better life here.” A few weeks later in March, the publication’s founders, Monica Khemsurov and Jill Singer, launched a fundraising initiative called *Design For Progress*, through which they donated the proceeds from an auction of works by designers including Kelly Behun, Lindsey Adelman, Misha Kahn, and others, to a group of nonprofit organizations including ACLU and the Campaign Legal Center.

In May, Chamber mounted its last show, *A Room of One’s Own* (guest curated by Matylda Kryzkowski), featuring work by a cast of all-women designers, in a rare and lauded show of political focus. Upon its close in July, Mosqueda announced in an email that the show would be the gallery’s last: “No longer constrained to a physical space, we will continue to sell, promote, commission, and curate works of contemporary design through new channels and outlets: virtual and physical, local and foreign.”

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In spite of apparent challenges, Mosqueda says he has remained optimistic about his next solo venture, and the new types of projects he'll be able to pursue without the day-to-day pressures of a physical space—especially as real estate prices have led to a string of gallery closures in the past year. “I think I’m a little bit against the passé model of a traditional art gallery,” he says. “I think we’ll see that model eventually transition to something else, a new format.” Since gaining reentry into the country, Mosqueda has been based physically in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he’ll remain for now as he completes his degree.

For a gallery that always meant to do things a bit differently, he sees his own transition as a welcome and inevitable change. The curator is focused on his immediate prospects ahead—which include producing a magazine, and a solo show in Los Angeles—while he considers how the long-term future of curating might take shape in a digital venue, unbound by borders or physical limitations. Like the works on hand in his current show, Mosqueda has come to embrace an open-ended, undefined state.

“The idea that you could be working on a project one day, and be told the next day that you can’t come into the country, you can’t come into your own gallery and see your next show—it definitely makes you reflect where you do what you do,” he says, “and if you want to move forward knowing that can occur at any point.”

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