

AD

THE REPORT

At Design Miami, Chic Takes a Back Seat

This year, when it comes to collectable design, the blobbier the better

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A shimmering aquamarine cabinet (one of the first pieces to sell) by Christopher Schanck and other amorphous design trophies in the Friedman Benda booth at Design Miami.

Photo: Kevin Lu / Courtesy of Friedman Benda

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“People are spending money again,” dealer Todd Merrill told me excitedly on Wednesday afternoon at Design Miami, the function-forward arm of Art Basel that took place last week near the Miami Beach Convention Center. Merrill’s booth—which focused on rare pieces by 20th-century American masters Paul Evans, Phillip Lloyd Powell, and George Nakashima (due to the prevalence of contemporary dealers, he was asked to focus on vintage)—had almost sold out. “Tonight I’m going to re-install my booth with other pieces I brought because so much of what you see here is no longer for sale.”

The sentiment echoed through the halls of the fair early last week, where contemporary functional confections sat with vintage chairs, tables, and cabinets.

But what exactly are they spending money on? It certainly wasn’t the usual crop of Prouve, Perriand, and Royère, and their geometry-driven contemporary spawn. Sure, these perennial crowd-pleasers made their predictable appearances (the Chandigarh chair, it seems, is like a starfish: You chop one up and it regenerates into five!). But ultimately it was the unexpected—the warm, the rough-hewn, the what-really-is-its?—that wowed the market this year.

As I Ubered to the buzzy new Prada space in the Design District on Tuesday night after previewing the fair, the insightful Adam Charlap Hyman of firm Charlap Hyman & Herrero rattled off his running list of what’s in (and out, but we’ll let you decipher that for yourself).

“Dripping things, melting things, chunky wooden things,” he began. “Art Nouveau, booger-green, terra-cotta, two-by-four boards, made by hand, foam, cults, skin, rainbow metal, wall-to-wall carpeting, blobby shapes, boulders . . .”

He went on. And we all laughed. But he was pretty on point. Across the fair, vintage dealers served up earthy, woody wonders (Pierre Chapo at Magen H, Albert Frey at Converso, a rare Nakashima bench at Todd Merrill) while contemporary galleries (in noticeably greater supply this year) were overtaken by a look of blobby, globby brilliance—a drippy aquamarine cabinet by Christopher Schanck and a melting bronze cabinet by Misha Kahn (two of the first pieces to sell) anchored the Friedman Benda’s booth; the Campana Brothers collaborated with Liz Swig on a collection inspired by the globbiest of all materials: oatmeal.

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Norwegian Crafts' Curio booth proves that Scandinavian design isn't always quiet. In collaboration with Galleri Format Oslo, it's presenting *Insubordinate Creatures*, a showcase of bold, colorful work by Norwegian textile artist Ellen Grieg and ceramic artist Elisabeth von Kroghin. In the punchy installation, a setting devised by Sean Griffiths of Modern Architect enhances the perspective-pushing qualities of the works themselves.

“There is an increasing interest in overtly expressive gestural work where functionality plays second fiddle to concept,” reflected the Future Perfect dealer David Alhadeff, who almost immediately sold all of his pieces by Seattle glass artist John Hogan, and four amorphous, paint-splattered chairs by Reinaldo Sanguino. “Chris Wolston, Misha Kahn, Reinaldo Sanguino, Haas Brothers, Katie Stout, to name a few.”

It was a big year for Wolston, who debuted a new series of sand-cast aluminum pieces at the Future Perfect composed of gleaming body parts, puzzle-pieced into tables and cabinets. Meanwhile, in Patrick Parrish’s booth, he gave his earthy terra-cotta planter-chairs a new look: a coat of iridescent pink and green car paint.

Over at R & Company, cofounder Evan Snyderman says “there was a frenzy of activity this year with our collectors.” The Hass Brothers’ new series of irreverent Micro Beasts and Ferry Berries—weird little critters made of fur, bronze, and ceramic—nearly all sold out within the first hour of the show, and Katie Stout’s doughy girls—on larger display across town at Nina Johnson’s gallery—were admired by many (including my colleague Sam Cochran and, unbeknownst to him, Frank Ocean).

It’s telling that, walking through the fair, I find myself dishing, “That’s wild,” “How bizarre,” or even “It’s so ugly” as terms of endearment. But these furnishings—especially the contemporary ones—are total products of our time. They don’t fit in specific boxes. They embrace their weirdness and imperfection. They’re totally and completely themselves. And somehow “chic,” or even “beautiful”—those catch-all complements of yore—don’t even begin to do them justice.

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