

INTROSPECTIVE MAGAZINE

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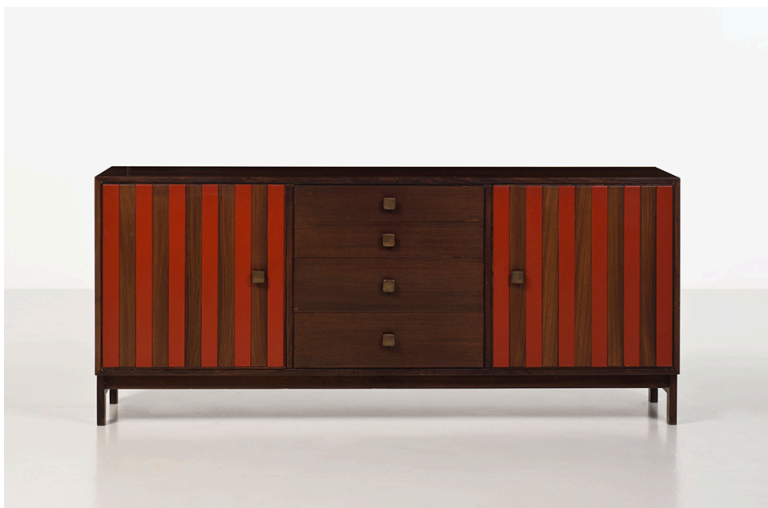
SHOP TALK

FRIEDMAN BENDA
ADVANCES DESIGN*by Greg Cerio | photos by Emily Andrews | September 28, 2015*

In less than a decade, this New York gallery, located in the heart of the Chelsea art district, has become a dynamic platform for masters of modern and contemporary design, as well as a showcase for experimental works.

The current exhibition, “Ettore Sottsass: 1955–1969,” at Manhattan gallery Friedman Benda will be a revelation to those who know the late iconoclastic Italian architect and designer only through his manufactured works, such as the snappy Valentine portable typewriter he designed for Olivetti in the late 1960s or his flamboyantly styled laminated furniture and lighting for the Memphis Group, from the early 1980s. There’s a sense of his personality conveyed by the brushstrokes on hand-decorated ceramics and his painted abstract compositions on the tops of custom side tables. Even conventional furniture pieces by Sottsass bear his distinctive stamp, playing with color, form and scale in a way that anticipates his later postmodern designs. But the show also reveals much about the minds behind Friedman Benda. The single most striking item on view is a massive wall-mounted bookshelf and cabinet unit, designed by Sottsass in 1965 for an Olivetti executive. “We bought it ten years ago,” says gallery head Marc Benda. “But we waited until we could find many things from the period and show them together.”

Here’s the thing: 10 years ago, Friedman Benda did not exist. The gallery opened in 2007 — in Chelsea, the heart of New York’s high-end contemporary art market — and the long gestation of the new Sottsass show says much about the foresight of its principals. Now retired, Barry Friedman — a New York dealer with a career of more than 40 years in the modern-design market — surely brought the virtue of patience to the enterprise. And the young, Zurich-born Benda brought the creative vision.



Cerio, Greg. “Friedman Benda Advances Design,” *Introspective Magazine*, September 28, 2015.

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Friedman Benda partners Jennifer Olshin and Marc Benda sit on a 1965 Califfo settee by Sottsass for Poltronova. The wall features several of the designer's *Il Sestante tondi*, 1958–60, and a 1958 mirror by Sottsass for Santambrogio & De Berti. The 1957 ceiling light is by Sottsass for Arredoluce.

With his gallery partner Jennifer Olshin, Benda has forged a program in avant-garde and contemporary design that features an international, multi-generational roster of talents. These include legends such as Sottsass and Wendell Castle, the studio design maverick still going strong at age 82; stars in mid-career like Dutch design guru Marcel Wanders and Brazilian brothers Fernando and Humberto Campana; and blossoming prodigies such as Joris Laarman of Holland and the members of the Japanese cooperative nendo. “Barry and Marc created a powerful platform for designers working today,” says Richard Wright, head of the Chicago auction house that bears his surname. “Their efforts have raised the bar for everybody in the field.”

A shared interest in Murano glass first brought Benda and Friedman together. In 1998, Benda was a student and small-time design dealer under research in New York for Art Recovery. Needing cash, he showed the veteran dealer photos from his Venetian glass inventory and Friedman purchased a piece. (“And I was paid quickly, which was rare,” Benda notes.) Four years later, Benda joined Friedman’s gallery. Friedman had never shown contemporary work; aside from Italian glass, his particular specialty was French design of the 1930s and ’40s. But after Benda organized popular exhibitions of work by Sottsass in 2003 and London-based industrial designer Ron Arad the following year, Friedman fully trusted the younger man’s judgment. The gallery subsequently underwrote new work by Wanders, Laarman and the experimental Swedish group Front Design. In 2006, a successful pop-up show of designs by Arad, held in a Chelsea garage, Benda says, “gave Barry confidence that there was a clientele to sustain a contemporary design gallery.” And Benda was certain that design could hold its own with the art in neighboring galleries. “When you take design out of its domestic context and put it in a white box,” he explains, “it takes on a different meaning. It attains the kind of significance that artworks are allowed to acquire.”

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The exuberant works of Misha Kahn greeted visitors to Friedman Benda's booth at the FOG Design+Art fair in San Francisco earlier this year. Photo by Joseph Driste

Friedman Benda showed art as well as design until this September. But Benda says the “two elements began to compete for time, space and money.” To remedy that, a new fine art gallery, called Albertz Benda and led by Thorsten Albertz (co-owner of the new gallery), has now opened in an adjacent space, dedicated to burgeoning talents and the work of under-recognized artists. Given the provocative new designs Friedman Benda will unveil this fall amid a chock-a-block schedule of events, it's likely no one will miss the art. A new Wendell Castle show opens uptown this October at the Museum of Art & Design. Also that month, Friedman Benda will bring new works by Marcel Wanders, Paul Cockledge, Misha Kahn and the Campana Brothers to the PAD London fair; in November, the gallery will present an all-encompassing environment by the Campana Brothers at the Salon: Art + Design showcase at New York's Park Avenue Armory. And for this year's Design Miami fair, the gallery plans to display the international breadth of its designer lineup, in a show with the working title “Five Continents.”

Their next exhibition in Chelsea is the kind of project dearest to the gallery principals' hearts: entitled “Freeze” and opening October 29, it's a showcase for new work by the young British designer Paul Cockledge. For it, Cockledge has created a group of tables made of copper and aluminum and crafted by pure physics. He froze the copper sections, causing the metal to contract by the tiniest fractions of a millimeter. He then fitted the copper pieces into the aluminum parts, and as the copper thawed, a seamless joint was formed, locking the two metals together. Other dealers might have told him it was too risky. “Our gallery is a platform for designers to attempt ambitious dream projects,” says Olshin, a deeply knowledgeable design expert who wears her scholarship lightly. “We try to foster even small kernels of ideas, especially when they speak to the imagination or to the impossible. We value prototypes because they manifest that initial spark. We've seen how an unrestrained foray can open a new chapter in design.” As Olshin and Benda understand, it's good to know design history, but even better when you can perhaps help write it.

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TALKING POINTS

Jennifer Olshin of Friedman Benda shares her thoughts on a few choice pieces.



Wendell Castle bronze Temptation settee, 2014

"Revisiting the volumes and voids of Castle's recent years, the monumental bronze Temptation is a sculpture made to sit on. It is confident, exquisitely crafted and part of Castle's ongoing exploration, since 2014, of bronze that will culminate in a new body of work to be shown at The Museum of Art and Design this fall."



Byung Hoon Choi, afterimage of the beginning O15-422, 2015

"Made of ancient stone, this gestural chair appears tenuously poised on its carved base — while being completely solid. Its seeming dichotomy is also its strength."

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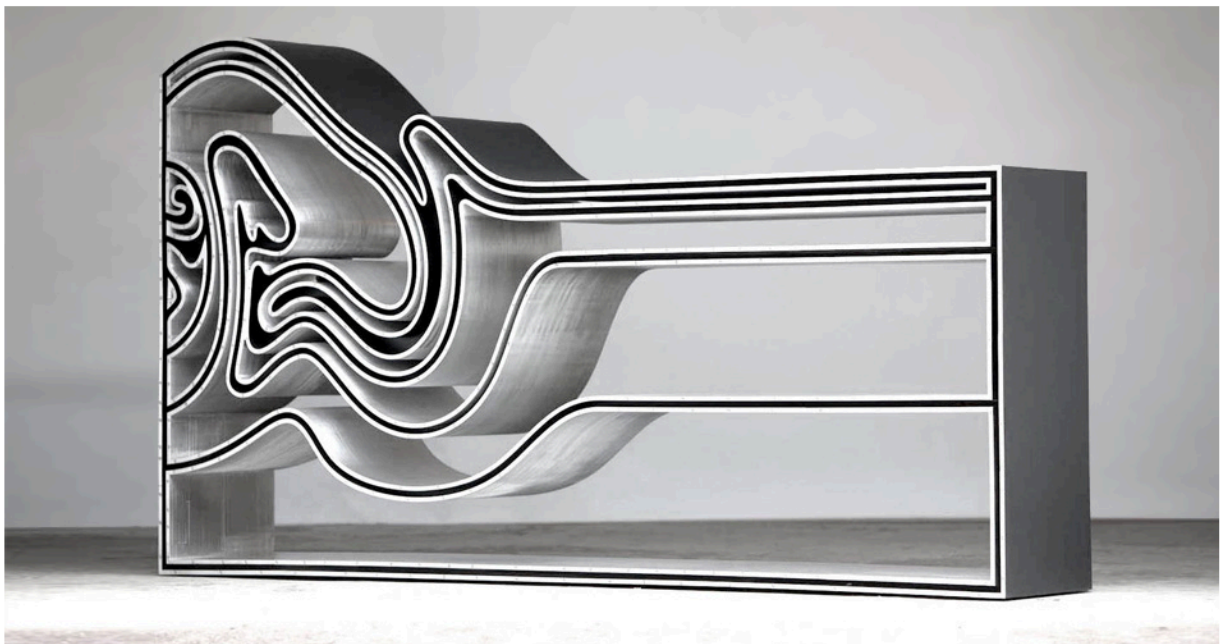
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Adam Silverman stoneware vessels, 2015

"Silverman, who formally studied architecture, has a seemingly endless well of inspiration, from local to international and ancient mentors. His work shows humility in craftsmanship and is like jazz music — playing on a standard theme while continuously honing surfaces and shapes."



Joris Laarman Vortex console, 2014

"This piece examines aesthetics based on physical processes in space. The console is completely customizable in scale, but always true to an algorithmic concept: Beauty in nature and nature's law. Laarman has taken the international community of institutional and private collectors by storm. His most celebrated current projected project is a printed bridge over a canal in the city of Amsterdam."

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