

# Aesthetica

Hello Darkness, My Old Friend: Review of Marcel Wanders and Misha Kahn



Every so often, something happens on the gallery scene that pushes a fresh perspective into the wider cultural viewfinder. When Friedman Benda recently launched a splashy double show of designer-cum-artists in New York, we all left with the funny feeling that we'd been transported to somewhere new, somewhere that might be sacred, and somewhere that is softly transforming the frontier where art and design co-mingle.

Marcel Wanders, the illustrious Dutch designer born in 1963, filled the main floor space with visions from his personal underworld: a rocking unicorn, dysmorphic mirrors, haunting silent films—and a vitrine of girls wearing nothing but otherworldly lampshades—while downstairs in the basement, Misha Kahn, an American born in 1989

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and recently graduated from RISD, exhibited a cast of cartoonish stools, off-kilter chandeliers, an abstract linoleum floor, a straw and bone cabinet fit for the Flintstones aristocracy (if there was one)—visions from his personal underworld too—that reference the literal and metaphoric basement, with some astrology thrown in.

At first glance, these shows, born from pre and post-millennial sensibilities, may not appear to have much in common. But they are both emotional and voluptuous, and both lose nothing when also asked to be rational and pragmatic. Both mine a darkness that is too rarely touched in the hyper-retro-Modernist design space—in a way that art can't do either in the rendering of objects (that are not meant for sitting or touching or lighting a room, for example). Both occupy a curious in-betweeness where fantasy gives way to actuality and vice versa in a way that combines the best and most unexpected of design and art—but they come at this from opposite points of view. While Wanders explores the limitations and imperfections of reality, and falls through cracks of disappointment into monstrous dreams that contemplate the corruption of beauty and power, Kahn deliberately creates imperfections and a sort of slapstick furniture humour that force the onlooker to stop and ponder the presence, and the meaning, of objects.

“We know how to build chairs,” said Wanders about this new liminal territory, “What we need for the cultural development of objects is a more mature and complete design typology. We need holistic, romantic self-reflection—and the pedestal of art.”

In an era where the self stumbles curiously through landscapes of selfies, Kahn, whose generation invented the smartphone snapshot, doesn't see or heed the divisive hierarchies of art-versus-design. “I think a lot about object survival. To make a normal chair means people actually won't think about that chair. My unexpected shapes and material choices pull people out of this [complacency] and make them wonder what an object is, how it could have been made, where it came from. In the process of having those imaginations, I hope people get transported somewhere exciting.”

If we read these iterations with the backdrop of a generalized contemporary struggle to find context and connection in a digitalised world where everything from identity to survival is deeply in flux, being transported by functional objects is exciting, especially when it dawns on us that whatever design solutions there may be to our Aquarian age, that may be embedded in these works, come from the unconscious of before (Wanders) and after (Kahn) the Internet. The pre-millennial mind that matured before digital takeover offers the imaginaire as an escape into a moody paradise-on-earth. The digital native post-millennial mind grasps that slippery dream and pins it down into a wonky-looking off-pink chaise with a very long tail entitled *Fat, Ungrateful Little Piggy*.

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The combined oeuvres feel nice to be around. They are sensual and you are allowed to touch them and inhabit them physically. The sacred octave comes on when you realize that your soul is inhabiting them too—and when you hear their creators explain potential reasons why. “To express a true and complete self is new to design—if you’re playing a role, you know it’s a role and you know you are loved for the lies you tell,” the older one says from upstairs. Down below, from the basement, the younger one ripostes, “People who make democratic design objects think they can make a mass connection but actually people want their imaginations and their intellects to be stimulated. As art fails to do this outside its own sphere, a really compelling possibility for design to fill the void is opening up.”

Misha Kahn’s *Return of Saturn: Coming of Age in The 21st Century* and Marcel Wanders’ *Portraits*, Friedman Benda Gallery, until 9 April.

<https://www.friedmanbenda.com>

### **Credits**

**1. Installation photographs of Misha Kahn’s *Return of Saturn: Coming of Age in The 21st Century* and Marcel Wanders’ *Portraits*. Courtesy of Friedman Benda Gallery.**

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