

ART

WENDELL CASTLE SETS UP HOUSE AT FRIEDMAN BENDA GALLERY

By ERICA BELLMAN

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The environment—a whimsical "nest" that appears to levitate above a spiral staircase set into an iron base, encircled by sensually curved furnishings—hovers somewhere between fantasy and functionality. Wendell Castle's "A New Environment," now at Chelsea's Friedman Benda gallery, echoes the sculptor's 1969 "Environment for Contemplation," a monastic, pod-like chamber that viewers could enter for a moment of solitary meditation.

Castle's latest, however, inverts the relationship between viewer and environment. Whereas the 1969 work encouraged private reflection, "A New Environment" urges collective consideration of the relationship humans have with the spaces we inhabit.

Castle hopes viewers will be able to engage physically with the work. Despite the hazards this type of engagement might pose for the piece, Castle strives to sustain the playful spirit imbued in his work. "I loved my tree house when I was a kid," Castle says. "I felt incredibly safe there, in spite of it being, quite literally, out on a limb."

"A New Environment" posed complex technical challenges for Castle. "The environment needed to float, in spite of its real and imagined weight," Castle explains. "I created an armature inside the central staircase that required some delicate engineering solutions." The structure weighs close to 1,000 pounds, and disassembles into more than 50 components.

Castle is known for a design aesthetic that is often fantastically imaginative. "Incorporating fantasy into my designs has long been a part of my process. I often design things that make no practical sense, and I typically don't have the chance to realize them." Working with Friedman Benda and Barry Friedman, however, afforded Castle the chance to make one of his dreams reality.

The 80-year-old sculptor isn't missing a beat. Up next is an outdoor commission for the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery's Centennial Sculpture Park, set to open in April, and an exhibition at Carpenter's Workshop in Paris. "I see myself continuing to invent, distort, deform, inflate, and even confuse until I find something that excites me," the artist says. "I tend to obey only my own instinct and intuitions. I have faith."

"A New Environment" will be at [Friedman Benda gallery](#) in Chelsea through Feb. 9. Photography by Jon Lam. Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Barry Friedman Ltd.



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