

BLOUINARTINFO

Q&A: Marc Benda on the DNA of Design and His Gallery's 10th Anniversary

BY LISA CONTAG | APRIL 28, 2017



Fernando and Humberto Campana, "Pirarucu Sofa," 2014, Pirarucu leather and bamboo, 27.5 x 80.75 x 33 inches, Edition of 8 (Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Fernando and Humberto Campana Photography by Adrien Millot)

New York design gallery Friedman Benda is celebrating its 10th anniversary next month, with an exhibition showcasing the works of 21 designers the gallery has collaborated with in the past decade. Conceived as a survey that also reflects the work processes of the artists and designers represented, the show aims to “shine a light onto the beautiful chaos that is contemporary design” with exhibits and contributions by blue-chip studios such as Wendell Castle, Marcel Wanders, nendo, Misha Kahn, Ron Arad, Humberto & Fernando Campana, Paul Cockside, Joris Laarman, and Front Design. BLOUIN ARTINFO caught up with gallery founder and director Marc Benda to talk about the exhibition’s concept, new developments in the field, and the fault lines between art and design.

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“dna10” is on view from May 4 to June 10, 2017 at Friedman Benda New York. [Click here](#) for more information.

You are celebrating the gallery’s 10th anniversary with a survey of eminent designers from five continents. For the title you chose “dna10.” Could you explain?

The title refers to the way the exhibition is conceived, it is meant to illustrate how the gallery collaborates with designers/artists/architects, what made us pay attention to their work in the first place, what excites us about the work produced by the studios. It is an attempt to not just look behind the scenes, but synthesize the dna of the gallery and its thought-processes through words and work.

We play a role in generating artwork and in helping bring to life projects that otherwise may remain ideas. These projects usually involve material research or finding innovative methods of making things. That way we also form a little part of the dna of the design world. Further, the mission of the gallery was to bring design into the art world, to allow for designers’ work to be evaluated along similar criteria as visual artists’ work.

Do you think the DNA of design is changing at the moment?

Yes, definitely. We see a lot today that processes are being hybridized in studios, a hybridization of the craft, the handmade, and the machine-made, the digitalized. It’s an area that’s very interesting because it is something that is relatively democratic in the sense that access to most technology is given all over the world now. You don’t need to spend millions on certain machines and technology any more. We see a lot of interesting movements in emerging countries where there’s a hybridization of processes. It’s always difficult to single out individual studios, but we see that happening in South America, South Asia, on the African continent even. We see the approach to design move away from the home-grown towards what is digitally available.

Tell us about the designers and artists represented in the anniversary exhibition.

It is a very disparate group! We don’t attempt to homogenize the designers in what they make or how we communicate their visions. Rather, we conceive of the gallery as a platform where relevant voices have a home, where each designer or artist is unique in what they do. Each studio’s research and every work we show is hopefully complementary to the next, each generation of designers builds on the last rather than emulates the past. The gallery is meant to be a vibrant place where ideas manifest themselves, where visions become objects. This means in turn we choose to work with artists and designers with big visions and big voices. We aim to develop collaborations that make a mark both within the design world and in the wider art world.

You opened the gallery in 2007 together with Barry Friedman, and in an interview you once said your goal was to pair the “giants of design” with emerging young talents. How successful has this approach proven, and are there especially interesting encounters from the past ten years that come to mind?

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It is an ongoing approach, something I am very proud of. It means we are able to gain the trust of those who are much more experienced than us, and at the same time appeal to designers and artists who have their whole lives ahead of them and choose to share at least part of the journey with us. This type of success is hard to gauge in real measures. What I do know is that building a program that represents a slice of design history as well as a good glance at what the future holds for us has been a fascinating journey.

Your first exhibition in 2007 featured Ettore Sottsass, who passed away that year and who is also represented in the upcoming show.

Ettore informed a lot of my thinking on design, in some ways he opened my eyes to life around me. If I had to dumb it down, I'd say he's the Picasso of design in a way, because he touched every aspect of design thinking and making, the way Picasso touched every aspect of visual arts; the same way Picasso went through his phases, made collages, ready-made sculptures but also sculpted in plaster and bronze, Sottsass trained as an architect, started with interiors, then worked with Olivetti and designed some of their best-selling items ever, like the Valentine typewriter which became a lifestyle item; he collaborated with the industry, interior decorating companies, from Baccarat to Alessi, and in each case made extremely successful objects, while on his own he also made visionary projects that were so ahead of their time. He was a medium; a medium of his time, all the cultures he visited. He's somebody who opens your eyes, introduces you to a meta level of seeing things, understanding things.

Tell us more about his work in your exhibition.

Ettore is represented in the show with a single work, an original Totem from the 1960s. It is the first time the gallery exhibits such a Totem on our premises, though we have placed several in museum and private collections. It is likely the first piece the visitor will see upon entering the exhibition space. It is from one of the famed bodies of work from a key period in Sottsass' oeuvre, extremely rare and an extraordinary object.

Generally speaking, how has the world of design changed since you've opened the gallery?

A lot of excitement has centered on methods of making things, process has come center stage. This includes technological advances as well as a return to the craft of making things by hand. The world of design has substantially increased its geographic and demographic footprint, perhaps it has also become a bit more democratic through digitization of vast swathes of the world's population.

Have you also noticed changes in the field of collecting design?

It has grown in several ways, but it has also shrunk in that we have lost a number of important voices. The growth has come primarily from two sources: More and more people choose to live with cutting edge design in their homes, parallel to the increasing number in contemporary art collectors worldwide and to the commitment many of these collectors make to displaying

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challenging works of art in their homes. A larger number of museums are now building important collections in contemporary design.

What's your advice for design collectors and lovers who would like to start collecting?

Always the same starting point, no matter who it is I talk to: buy books, learn as much as you can, see as much as you can in museums, online, in shows. Try and see monographic shows as that allows to learn about a single designer's vision rather than learn anecdotally what makes up their visions. Speak to people who are knowledgeable, often they are happy to share the knowledge. Learn the history of design, learn who were the leaders in the discipline and who made important work. The market can distort such criteria in the short term, but not in the long term.

Look first which designers' work you relate to, and within their work which series are exciting. Find people you trust and watch what they do, learn to listen but also learn to trust your own instincts. Collecting beautiful or exciting things is a privilege, it is something that requires time, intellect and discipline.

What qualities does good design have, in your opinion?

The same as a good work of art, an outstanding meal, music, landscaping, writing; in short any area that requires talent and excellence, a greatness of mind and a sensibility to the human condition. For me this quality is hard to define, but I personally apply a very simplistic criteria: If there is nothing you could conceivably add or take away to make it better it is complete.

And where would you draw the line between design and art?

I don't. I distinguish between the functional and the visual, but that fault line runs partly counter to the division between art and design, I have learnt. For me the line between disciplines is somewhat arbitrary and is usually based on perception in the wider world.

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