

HOUSE & HOME/STYLE DESK

In Search of a Sofa To Go Under the Schnabel

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Miami Beach - THE piranhas were only on loan and would have to go back to wherever lethal predators stay between gigs. For the time being, though, they were in the lobby of the newly renovated Paris Theater here, two dozen deadly fish enclosed in Tobias Wong's and Emily Bauer's tropical aquarium-cum-chandelier-cum-artwork made from jagged strands of Swarovski crystal, dangling above \$12,000 worth of jet crystal "gravel" and anomalously titled "Iceberg."

The fish were tinier than one might expect, more delicate and vividly beautiful in their darting efficiency. They were also, it must be said, almost too easy a metaphor for the event that inspired their presence, the annual art and design fair and aesthetic feeding frenzy known as Art Basel Miami Beach.

"We considered using baby sharks," said Mr. Wong, one of a group of renowned designers commissioned by the crystal company to make chandeliers that were unveiled during the fair. "But for Art Basel we really wanted something that traveled in schools."

Since Art Basel Miami Beach opened in 2002, as an experimental stepchild of a venerable Swiss parent that has been a fixture on the European art circuit since the early 70's, it has rapidly established itself as the pre-eminent art fair in North America. With an estimated 35,000 visitors, 195 international galleries, a passel of lower-key and lower-budget satellite exhibitions (including the Aqua, NADA, Omniart, Pulse and scopeMiami fairs) and a bewildering variety of related events, it is also now an important migratory stop along the flight path of global collectors and fellow members of their supermoneyed, often boldface flock.

"Three years ago there were 70 NetJets jets landing here," said Dennis Leyva, the city's official entertainment industry liaison, referring to the company that leases shares in jets. Two hundred landed during the 2005 fair, which began on Dec. 1. "And that's a lot of rich people," Mr. Leyva said. With that rare cohort in mind, Art Basel Miami Beach bid to do for design in 2005 what it had already done for art, introducing Design.05, an invitational show of 15 international dealers specializing in the finest postwar furniture and objects. As if collectors at the fair were not already presented with a surfeit of activities (beachside performance-art extravaganzas, black-tie or rooftop dinners, parties and afterparties and afterafterparties in karaoke dives), they were now invited to add furniture shopping to their schedules.

"If you are at a level of income in our society, art is the new designer label," Mr. Leyva said.

Yet the frenzy of collecting at the art fair seemed to indicate that art label shopping is barely enough anymore. By now many collectors already own the requisite wall of Raymond Pettibon doodlings or Marlene Dumas strippers and have spent the necessary \$100,000 for a correctly anomic Andreas Gursky photograph to hang above the sofa. What they seem to need is something suitably important to sit upon.

"And it's very hard to find a great Mackintosh chair anymore," said Barry Friedman, a New York dealer who was among those selected to inaugurate Design.05, referring to Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the Scottish Art Nouveau designer for whose output Mr. Friedman had helped establish a market some 30 years earlier.

Eccentrically attired in a newsboy cap, a plaid coat, high-water trousers and a pair of well-worn Chuck Taylor sneakers, Mr. Friedman stood in the choice space allotted him in the airy atrium of the early 1900's Moore Building, the anchor building of the Miami Design District, during the opening-night party.

"Now you have to find the great things that are being done by young artists, whoever is of the best quality," Mr. Friedman said,

referring to Front Design, a group of four aggressively media-friendly young Swedish designers whose work he sells alongside pieces by Ron Arad, Gaetano Pesce and the Dutch collective Droog.

Next to Marcel Wanders's string chair, the most recognizable emblem of the Dutch design renaissance is surely Droog's cockeyed dresser made from scavenged drawers cantilevered and lashed with a packing strap. In spite of its ostentatiously Proustian title, "You Can't Lay Down Your Memories," this 1991 piece, designed by Tejo Remy, was one of the more affordable objects at Design.05, with an asking price of just \$22,500.

"They only made 49 altogether in 14 years," said Mr. Friedman, who added that he had sold versions to the Carnegie Museum of Art and the St. Louis Art Museum.

Across the Moore Building's four floors was arrayed the evidence not only of the high level attained by late-20th-century designers but also of a supply diminishing so rapidly that dealers now find themselves challenged to dig deeper and to open yet weirder new veins of design, to meet consumer demand.

Enthroned at the Antik gallery's booth was a superb, rare and uncontroversial "Chieftain" chair designed by the Dane Finn Juhl in 1949. What inevitably drew one's eye, however, was a vase perched on a nearby table and covered with a Freudian welter of what looked like breasts. Made by Axel Salto for Royal Copenhagen, it had a \$75,000 price tag, a figure that was apparently no deterrent to buyers: it sold on opening night.

Over at the Demisch Danant booth was a coldly seductive console created by Maria Pergay, a septuagenarian designer whose years of greatest production were spent in, of all places, Saudi Arabia. Ms. Pergay epitomizes the type of designer -- semiobscure, international -- whose reputation the art and design worlds like nothing better than to resuscitate. (A show of her work is planned for March 2006 at the Lehman Maupin gallery in Chelsea.)

With a base cast of bronze and a cabinet inset with jagged marquetry made of materials infrequently used together (bone,

Makassar ebony, palm wood and stainless steel), the Pergay console suggested a chic surgeon's cabinet, for the type of surgeon one might find in a Cronenberg film.

"I don't see there being any price resistance," Suzanne Demisch, who runs the gallery with her French partner, Stéphane Danant, said of the \$100,000 object. "The audience coming into Art Basel gets it about the design-art fusion. They're primed."

Little illustrates that reality better than the presale frenzy over a 1962 Pierre Szekely screen being sold by Magen H, a New York gallery operated by April and Hugues Magen, the latter a onetime performer with the Dance Theater of Harlem. Gorgeously eccentric, the screen was assembled from 136 pieces of wood sculptured and sandblasted into interlocking organic shapes.

Only twice since its construction had it changed hands; that it sold once again before the Design.05 fair had even opened surprised no one except sticklers for fair play. The buyer was the fashion designer Donna Karan, and the cost, Ms. Magen explained delicately, was between \$300,000 and \$400,000.

"Yes, it's scary money," Ms. Magen said. "But if you look at the auction house prices, with a Carlo Mollino table selling for \$3.8 million, the market can seem like a train speeding out of control."

Are these objects, Ms. Magen asked, worth the money that some people will spend to possess them? Perhaps not. Yet by the standards of the overheated art fair, where six-figure transactions in cash are far from unknown, masterworks like the Szekely screen can suddenly seem like a steal.

"The whole scene has this weird effect," explained the industrial designer Karim Rashid, who lives in Miami and was one of the dozen or so designers commissioned by Swarovski to contribute to the chandelier project, called "the Crystal Palace." Mr. Rashid's "Topograph" was for sale, along with light fixtures by Tord Boontje, Vincent Van Duysen, Matali Crasset and Ingo Maurer, the prices varying from \$5,200 for one of Yves Behar's tiny luminous nests to \$434,600 for the same designer's wondrous helical "Voyage."

(Buyers were found for all three sizes of Mr. Boontje's "Blossom" lamps well before the fair's end, and also for Mr. Van Duysen's ethereal "Cascade," priced at an earthbound \$121,700.)

"You see the crazy money people are paying for art, and suddenly your perspective shifts completely," said Mr. Rashid, who fled the opening-night party at the art fair to hit eBay, where he successfully bid \$16,000 for an orange Studebaker Avanti, a classic Raymond Loewy design. "I'd been wanting it for years and never let myself have it," he said. "Now it seems cheap."

Perhaps the market is moving too fast, suggested Alexander Payne, the head of 20th- and 21st-century design for the auction house Philips de Pury, with an expression that made it clear that the thought caused no discomfort.

And it is hard to dispute that the blue chip output of Serge Mouille, Charlotte Perriand, Jean Prouvé (three famous panels of his from 1950 sold for \$180,000 each on opening night at Design.05) and other design gods of the 20th century will soon be joined by a new wave of New Wave objects, as more art patrons are recast as design connoisseurs.

The starkly stylish catalogs for auctions at Mr. Payne's house (two 20th- and 21st-century design sales are scheduled for Dec. 8) read like blueprints for the future of high-end collecting, a future in which postmodern curiosities by the Memphis designers, among others, will be redeemed from 1980's joke status and presented as unsung classics.

In this way, too, design may be following art's lead, since wherever one went at Art Basel Miami Beach, one caught glimpses of Mary Boone, the diminutive art dealer whose lacquered hair and hard-nosed style came to define the 1980's art scene, at a time when Schnabel, Salle, Haring and Basquiat were the rage.

"A design show like this gives you a glimpse of where things are heading," said a grinning Mr. Payne. He was referring to the fickle dictates of taste, of course, although it is hard to believe that was all.

Correction: December 15, 2005, Thursday An article last Thursday about Art Basel Miami Beach, an art and design fair, misstated the given name of one of the designers of a chandelier built within an aquarium. She is Amelia Bauer, not Emily.

Photos: 92 DEGREES IN THE SHADE -- Designers pulled their chairs up to the table at Art Basel Miami Beach, highlighting their work under a Zaha Hadid installation, left. Right, from top: April and Hugues Magen, New York dealers, with a 1962 Pierre Szekely screen; Ron Arad with his mirror installation; and a visitor, Elke Rolff, beneath a Michael Gabellini chandelier made with Swarovski crystals. (Photographs by Richard Patterson for The New York Times)(pg. F1); PERFORMANCE PIECES -- Clockwise from left: artists from the Citizens Band; an inflatable Palladian villa by Luis Pons, at waterside; a Michael Gabellini installation using Swarovski crystal, best viewed from the floor; and a console by Maria Pergay made with steel, palm wood, ebony, bone and bronze. (Photos by above and right, Richard Patterson for The New York Times; left, Barbara P. Fernandez for The New York Times; below, Philippe Pons); UNDER THE TROPICAL SUN -- A free-form chair, center left, arrived with (clockwise from front), Charlotte von der Lancken, Katja Savstrom, Anna Lindgren and Sofia Lagerkvist of Front Design. Above left, Juliet Burrows, an owner of Antik, a TriBeCa gallery, with an Axel Salto vase; below left, marble, glass and bronze flooring by Mattia Bonetti. Far left, partying in Sofia Coppola's penthouse suite. (Photos by above, Barbara P. Fernandez for The New York Times; left and top right, Richard Patterson for The New York Times)(pg. F8)