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Collective.1: a redesign for Manhattan

By Gareth Harris

An ambitious design fair aims to shake up New York



Objects on sale at the fair include, left, Ron Arad's 'Shadow of Time' clock (1989), and Philipp Aduatz's 'Melting Chair' (2012)

Architect Steven Learner is nothing if not evangelical about his ambitious new project, which could transform the flagging design market in Manhattan. Tomorrow, 23 modern and contemporary design dealers, mainly from the US, will descend on Pier 57, nestled between the gallery mecca of Chelsea and the Meatpacking District, for Learner's new design fair, Collective.1.

Learner is convinced that one of the most important commercial and creative hubs in the world is lacking a key platform for the design collector and connoisseur. "For me, as an interior designer and a collector, I just found that New York did not have a design fair of the calibre that it deserves," he says.

He's not alone in his opinion, and has brought together 12 like-minded, heavyweight gallerists, designers and critics, including the co-founders of the Tribeca-based R20th Century gallery, Zesty Meyers and Evan Snyderman, and curator Nessia Pope. They concur that the city urgently needs a new motor, or, as their mission statement grandly exclaims,

“an environment where discovery and education are celebrated”.

It was only a matter of time before a new fair piggybacked on Frieze New York, with the aim of attracting the throng of collectors in town for its second edition which this week again takes over Randall’s Island in the East River. The launch of Collective.1 indeed comes at a critical point in the development of this still-nascent market.

“The idea of collecting design is a relatively new concept. You can still buy a major, major masterpiece of design for well under \$1m, even for under \$100,000,” says Snyderman. Since the financial meltdown of 2008, the market for contemporary design has been simmering rather than boiling (“classic” modern design is a different story, with 20th-century names such as Eileen Gray and Jean Prouvé fetching stratospheric prices at auction).

Learner, Meyers and Snyderman, an astute and sparky trio, debate who is buying contemporary design today: essentially, are art collectors moving into the design market? “The art collector who has 3,000 pieces of art in a depot somewhere, try to convince them that they love this table and that they should put it next to their Paul McCarthys. They can’t do it,” Meyers says. But he notes that veteran art dealers who emerged in the 1990s have started to bring their clients to design galleries.

Learner’s worthy mantra is “inclusivity”. “Everyone should have the opportunity to have good design. At Collective.1 someone can acquire a \$40m Prouvé house or a \$40 Sebastian Errazuriz T-shirt.”

Whether the fair will deliver on this front remains to be seen, but his ruminations on the processes and new technology powering design are impressive. “We’re showing both Art Deco and 3D printing [at the fair]. If you think about the history of design – the industrial revolution, Bauhaus and today’s design developments – it’s always been about the evolution of material technology. We want to demystify the [design] process.”

The DesignMiami/ fair, which launched in Florida in 2005 and then in Basel a year later, proved a fillip for the design sector. “There wouldn’t be the same market in New York if Miami and Basel didn’t exist,” says Learner. But he’s keen to shift the axis to what is, for many connoisseurs, still the capital of the art world.

But who will come to Collective.1? Alberto Eiber, a Miami-based physician who has been collecting 20th- and 21st-century design for more than 30 years, notes that a number of “excellent” dealers will be there. “But I do think there are way too many fairs and auctions. I guess it’s because the press is educating everyone that design collecting is cool,” he says.

Local interior designer Kevin Isbell is equally sanguine: “I would say it has every chance of succeeding, assuming that they deliver on their promise. But New York is wrought with fairs, trade shows and expos.”

This issue of “fartigue” is now a common grumble in the art world. Learner cannily points

out that the absence of European dealers on the fair roster is down to the packed fair calendar (there are only two European galleries in contrast to 20 US dealers, 14 of them from Manhattan). One of the Europeans is the Stockholm-based 20th-century gallery Modernity. “I am hoping we see the same kind of international crowd that attends the Pavilion of Art and Design fair in London in October. People fly in from all over for that fair,” says the gallery founder Andrew Duncanson.

The Swedish gallery is showing a selection of high-end pieces by the likes of Gerrit Rietveld, Marcel Breuer and Finn Juhl. A stunning 1930 “Septima” lamp by Poul Henningsen, priced at \$47,000, should appeal to connoisseurs with a taste for Art Deco. Another highlight is an intriguing early Ron Arad piece, the “Shadow of Time” clock from 1989, with a price tag of \$63,000.

Meanwhile, the Philadelphia-based dealer Lewis Wexler sees Collective.1 as a prime showcase for his contemporary glass artists, hoping that works by key names will appeal to a new tranche of clients: “Lemon/ Blue Lyrical Movement” (1988) by Harvey Littleton, considered the father of the studio glass movement, is priced at \$80,000; Joanna Manousis’s taxidermied peacock “Fertile Ground” (2012) costs \$15,000.

Prices at local gallery Cristina Grajales range from \$3,500, for limited edition jewellery by Tabor & Villalobos, to \$125,000 for the work of French designer Alexandre Noll (1890-1970). Another New York dealer, Todd Merrill 20th Century & Studio-Contemporary, will test the market for contemporary designers such as Joseph Walsh and Niamh Barry.

The last word goes to Snyderman. “The idea that New York can absorb a design fair is a no-brainer. There’s huge interest here and a massive client base and no one has been able to put it together,” he says. The stakes are high; this week, we’ll discover if New York really is ready for Collective.1.

Runs May 8-11 collectivedesignfair.com

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