

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Architectural Digest
3 Winter Design Shows That Are Sparking Wonder Right Now
David Sokol
22 January 2021



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Alternatively collaborative and inventive, the efforts are sure to help dispel at least some seasonal gloom

The social-distancing axiom that “we come together by staying apart” is a cue that the world’s leading art and design dealers have clearly taken to heart. This month, a trio of compelling exhibitions are the product of collaborations between gallerists and curators, who are also making the fruits of their labor available for both online and IRL consumption.

The most ambitious of these partnerships is “DNA.” The project from Friedman Benda, Galerie kreO, and Salon 94 Design combines 84 works from the three powerhouses into a single online platform. Users may experience the website traditionally, scrolling down the landing or e-commerce page; or by organizing works by designers who include Najla El Zein, Kwangho Lee, and Jaime Hayon.

Visitors may also click the Essays tab for a more guided tour: On this page, curator and writer Glenn Adamson has reorganized the 84 pieces into groups of three, in 28 categories that include “Daily Enchantment” and “Electric Dreams.” Any one of these categories reveals a brief essay in which Adamson meditates on a theme common to that group. “Daily Enchantment” convenes three objects that bridge everyday life and spiritual practice, while “Electric Dreams” identifies the gap between industry and studio-led design. Other essays focus on anthropomorphism, comfort, and translation.



Scandinavian design on view as part of the delightful Stephen Friedman Gallery exhibition.

Image: Courtesy of Stephen Friedman Gallery

“DNA’ provides a generous cross-section of where design is today, and some of the pathways that have brought it here,” Adamson explained in a statement, adding, “Seen three by three, in 28 different configurations, [the 84 works] are seen afresh. Even the most replete and self-sufficient of them become part of something bigger, as the groupings accumulate into a single shared story about design.”

Speaking to AD PRO, Salon 94 founder Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn says of the initiative’s impetus: “Normally, dealers spend time in one another’s design booths during the long art fair days— we trade production stories, prices, and design practices. Missing this interaction, we built a virtual dialogue [by] playfully grouping together favorite works from our galleries.”

Asked whether his 28 commentaries support one overarching narrative of contemporary studio design, Adamson cautions against painting in broad strokes while also noting, “Design can be an experimental space in which art and psychology, craft and technology, and history and criticism all encounter one another in a dynamic way.”

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Image: A plaid-coated space inside “Split Personality.” Photo: Courtesy of Friedman Benda

Concurrent with “DNA,” the platform’s cosponsor Friedman Benda has staged its seventh annual guest-curated exhibition. Titled “Split Personality” and curated by Alice Stori Liechtenstein, the show is dedicated to the symbolic or cultural meaning that can attach to practical objects. A seat by Emma Fague looks like a folded mattress at first glance, while the work’s title—Daydreams of Mashed Potato Squishy Stucco Loveseat Minus the Lover—shows that the RISD alum was not just fooling around with trompe l’oeil. Or consider the Mischer’Traxler studio’s Limited Grasses, in which a powder-coated metal grid that may have been intended as a pouf or side table has been reconceived as a flower frog by the mere addition of some stems.

Friedman Benda’s Marc Benda tells AD PRO that while the exhibit could be interpreted as a rejection of mass-produced furniture’s anonymity, for him personally, “I detect more of a nonhierarchical embrace of the duality of function and narrative.” He also praises Liechtenstein’s capacity for creating forums “far from market-driven considerations.”

In January’s third notable collaboration, Stephen Friedman Gallery at the London House of Modernity combines works by artists from Stephen Friedman Gallery’s talent roster and a selection of Modernity’s midcentury Nordic designs inside 14 Cavendish Square. Modernity hung its shingle outside this Palladian-style Georgian mansion a year ago, and it has been exhibiting vintage furniture, lighting, and objects within the dilapidated interiors until restoration takes place. “When Modernity reached out to me last summer about the possibility of a collaboration, I was delighted,” gallerist Friedman recalls via email. “It offered the perfect opportunity to combine the best of midcentury Scandinavian design with a curated selection of international contemporary art. The Grade II-listed mansion was the icing on the cake.” Artworks by Jim Hodges, Ged Quinn, and Yinka Shonibare, as well as furniture by Josef Frank and Finn Juhl, resonate particularly strongly with the setting.

For art and design enthusiasts viewing it from quarantine, the exhibition potentially speaks to COVID-19. “During this time as we work mostly from home, we are more attuned to the dynamics between objects in our living space,” Friedman says. “[So,] we have strived to create an idealized setting which incorporates objects of beauty and art of cultural significance. The lesson, if any, is to show how works which are seemingly disparate can seamlessly meld and create a unique environment. Hopefully, this will allow viewers the freedom to play with items in their own home.”

But make no mistake: The gallerists enlivening spaces and screens this month embraced collaboration well



before the pandemic, and they plan to continue doing so. “These shows offer points of view that follow a narrative fostering dialogue and permitting experimentation,” Benda says, with Friedman adding, “We gain so much from sharing information and ideas, and now, more than ever, it is time to be collegiate.”

Image: A chair included in “DNA” thanks to Salon 94 Design. Photo: Courtesy of Salon 94 Design