

## What furniture and objects tell us about our time, our culture and ourselves

BY BETH DUNLOP



Slip bench by Snarkitecture

Design at its best tells a story of time and place, and under one roof — even a tent roof — it can be pretty spectacular. The story told at Design Miami is one of optimism, creativity and even joy — as if a new era were in the offing, one in which our discarded vases and fruit bowls would be turned into light fixtures of the old-fashioned (but new-fangled) kind or, in the alternative, chandeliers would feature thousands of kinetic light bulbs that frolic at the clap of a hand or a loud laugh.

Design Miami crossed the bay this year, taking up residency near the Miami Beach Convention Center and within walking distance of the thousands of patrons for

whom Art Basel is a shrine. The tent — for the last three years a work of architecture to behold on its own merits — was enlarged slightly, and the entry plaza was turned into a minimalist yet festive outdoor lounge featuring net-mesh swings by the fair’s Designer of the Year, Konstantin Grcic.

Some fans of the fair may have doubted the efficacy of the move from the Miami Design District to the Beach, but it was propelled by two primary forces: the need for more space to show the work and a fierce desire on the part of the dealers to be near the art collectors who flock to the main Art Basel show. And to hear the Design Miami participants tell the story, the move has paid off handsomely.

Ask Evan Snyderman, co-owner of the New York gallery R 20th Century.

“It was the best opening, not just in terms of sales but in terms of mood, of overall feeling, of the spirit of the show,” Snyderman said. His gallery, the first on the right as you enter, made some Design Miami history shortly after the show opened by selling a wood and reverse-painted glass dining table, chairs and sideboard (“as it was intended to be used”) designed by the Portuguese-born Brazilian Joaquim Tenreiro, who died in 1992, and also sold out a limited edition of Renata Mueller hand-sewn toys and three lamps by the recently rediscovered mid-century designer Greta Grossman.

This combination of cutting-edge new work and classic vintage pieces, an aesthetic that spans the decades, has been Design Miami’s formula for success. One showstopper

came from the New York gallerist Cristina Grajales: a specially commissioned “Piano Cabinet” by the Chilean-born New York designer Sebastian Errazuriz, a sideboard that looks sleek when closed and then opens up to transform into a far more avant-garde and sculptural work.

To understand the connection of past, present and future, all one needed to do was look up. Industry, a new gallery from Washington D.C., and a first-timer at Design Miami, offered work from the brilliant Dutch team of Tejo Remy and Rene Veenhuisen that included rugs from discarded wool, furniture that looks inflated but is actually concrete and, most notable, pendant lamps from discarded objects including vases and fruit bowls.

“What is normally on the table is above it,” Veenhuisen said.

“We’re not recycling,” Remy added, “but upcycling.”

The other end of the spectrum (quite literally) could be seen first at the Swarovski pavilion where the design duo known as Troika created an installation called Falling Light that uses crystal prisms and high technology to create what is more of an experience than a light fixture. Likewise, the chandelier called Swarm offered at Carpenter’s Workshop Gallery — another fair first timer — incorporates 9,000 LED lights, polished brass rods, 3,000 custom circuit boards with software, hardware and sensors. It’s the work of a Berlin-based design group called rAndom led by Hannes Koch. Clap your hands, and the lights “swarm” as if they were fleeing bees.

The slightly expanded tent let the 20 galleries — a number lower than in some years but nonetheless respectable — spread out a bit and look fairly glamorous in their setting. Ornamentum from Hudson, N.Y., even opted to add into its small-scale mix of one-of-a-kind art jewelry a piece of furniture, a prototype bench ready to be produced in an edition of 12 by the firm Snarkitecture, a collaboration between Miami-bred Daniel Arsham and Alexander Mustonen.

And there was room to create a room, or even a garden. The Paris-based Galerie Patrick Seguin offered an entire environment revolving around the 20th century designer Jean Royère, complete with wallpaper. For R 20th Century, the Brazilian designer Hugo França, working with Miami landscape architect Raymond Jungles, created a site-specific work out of the base of a 1,000-year-old Pequi tree that is the centerpiece of a tropical indoor garden.

The 2010 show is the sixth in Miami (there also have been five in Basel). Its co-founder, developer and collector Craig Robins, views Design Miami as “an opportunity and a mission to merge culture and commerce.” For Robins, the creative process of design is essential to the larger culture, for letting furniture and objects tell the tale of who we are and where. In recent days, that design story has been in a tent in the parking lot of Miami Beach’s Convention Center.