

SEAN KELLY

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In Miami, Booth Furniture as Compelling as the Art



Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery

This week, hundreds of gallerists will head to Miami, packing painting, sculpture, and photography. But there's one less-publicized, and increasingly relevant, thing they'll have in tow: really good furniture.

"When we began doing art fairs 20 years ago, because of my particular interest in architecture and design, we always regarded the furniture in the booth to be as important as the art in the booth," says the art dealer Sean Kelly, whose New York gallery has amassed a sizable Modernist collection for fair purposes including works by late Danish designer Poul Kjærholm. "We believe that if you are showing wonderful things but sitting on plastic chairs, it doesn't speak highly of your taste level. The people, who have the disposable income and aesthetic sensibilities that our clients have, want to live with beautiful art and objects, but they also want to complement those works with good design."

At art fairs like Art Basel Miami Beach, with galleries looking to make the most of their allotted booth real estate, intriguing interiors have become part of the act. Design objects are strictly forbidden on fair grounds for sales purposes, but elevated, functional furniture lands within the acceptable guidelines and represents an increasingly competitive category for exhibitors looking to distinguish themselves from their peers.

Kelly isn't the only gallerist who has invested in a permanent exhibition set; Barbara Gladstone rotates pieces from her impressive archive, which includes heavyweights like Hans Wegner. "A couple of years ago in Miami, Eva Presenhuber had this beautiful table and chairs by Franz West. I admired it so much that I ended up buying it for my dining room," says Gladstone, whose most recent acquisition was a Rudolf Steiner set found in Paris. "I find that the right furniture enhances contemporary art. Prouvé tables and Le Corbusier chairs were our signature for a while, but recently we've tried to change it up. The pursuit of good design goes hand in hand with the art." Everyone's recipe is a little bit different.

New York director Matt Bangser shares Blum & Poe's go-to: "A comfortable leather sofa, a rug and a pair of side chairs by Cleo Balden."

Another popular strategy is to tap the experts. Come fall and spring fair season, inquiries flood the inboxes of design gallerists like Evan Snyderman of R & Company and Paul Johnson of Johnson Trading Gallery. "Fifteen years ago, you'd only see three designers at art fairs: Jean Prouvé, Charlotte Perriand and Le Corbusier," says Snyderman, who has bartered, loaned, sold and rented design pieces to outfit gallery booths. "It's now become a trend that contemporary galleries feature 20th-century design as their furniture of choice. Of course, different galleries have different aesthetics. I love seeing the furniture in this context. You can really see how people live with design and art together, which is what we constantly try to do. It's a perfect marriage in that way." He admits that he's seen an "increasing interest across the board" over the years when it comes to galleries incorporating design. "At Design Miami, we are used to thinking about the booth as an environment," says Snyderman, who for his own program employs a rotating selection of commissioned and archived work. "The galleries have caught on."

For art galleries with design programs, interesting furniture is easy to come by. "We compete so much with other galleries; we all know it takes more than hanging a bunch of artworks on a wall these days," says Salon 94 curator Fabienne Stephan. "Everyone really tries to present an experience to the fair visitor. I think having furniture you can sit on to discuss the art has started to make more and more sense to people." This year, Stephan and her colleagues plan to complement their booth, featuring art by Lorna Simpson and Sylvia Fleury, with furniture by Martin Szekely. In the past, they've commissioned designers to create work that responds specifically to their program — a favorite example is a living-room set created by Kueng Caputo to accompany a Robert Morris work at Frieze.

While more and more galleries become design conscious, Johnson, who has outfitted the booths of Metro Pictures, Lehmann Maupin and Pace, argues the market is far from the saturation point. "Established gallerists tend to be more thoughtful, but some people don't care at all," says Johnson, whose latest project was helping Andrea Rosen select vintage work for her fair arsenal. "The young ones will use a fold-up chair. They should just have their artists make them something."