

FRIEDMAN BENDA
515 W 26TH STREET
NEW YORK NY 10001

METROPOLIS

A New Exhibition at Friedman Benda Explores the Split Personalities of Design Object

Guest curated by Alice Stori Liechtenstein, Split Personality offers a diverse survey of contemporary design work that prioritizes story-telling over functionality.

By Adrian Madlener
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Jonathan Trayte, *Kula Sour*, 2020. Courtesy Friedman Benda

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In his seminal 1968 book, *The System of Objects*, French sociologist Jean Baudrillard wrote, “Could we classify the luxuriant growth of objects as we do a flora or fauna, complete with tropical and glacial species, sudden mutations, and varieties threatened by extinction?”

By this, the post-structuralist thinker suggests that everyday items have two lives—serving a purpose and acquiring symbolic value. Over time, objects are inevitably untethered from their primary functions as cultural, subjective, and philosophical associations evolve to reflect shifts in society, taste, and technology. They then can assume different identities via multiple layers of meaning, either ascribed by the designer or the user.

For Austro-Italian curator Alice Stori Liechtenstein, this tension reveals the underlying problem of defining the ever-expanding field of design. “It’s hard to know where art ends and design begins,” she reflects. “It’s something that’s always there, but every so often, you’re confronted with the question of whether or not an object is relevant. There are a lot of designs out there that are not what they appear to be and instead carry strong narratives about other things.”



Courtesy of Friedman Benda / Daniel Kukla

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Liechtenstein often grapples with this issue when hosting residencies, exhibitions, and talks at her home and design center Schloss Hollenegg for Design, a 12th-century castle in the Alpine foothills of southern Austria. She invites contemporary designers to come and ruminate on topics as varied as natural reclamation, the dining table, and slow production. It comes as no shock that she chose to explore the theme of double identity when asked to mount this year's seventh annual guest-curated exhibition at Manhattan's Friedman Benda gallery.

Featuring an eclectic array of existing and newly commissioned works by 17 artists and designers, Split Personality paints a full picture of contemporary design through cosmic mirrors, loveseats formed out of polyurethane foam, and lamps made from reclaimed waste. Some of the exhibitors count among Friedman Benda's extensive roster, while others came through Liechtenstein's avid global scouting. "My main aim was to present design objects which are not primarily created for a function or in which the function is not necessarily the way you use the objects," the curator explains. "There are objects in this show that are stools and tables, but their primary purposes are not to be sat on or to hold a water glass; it's to tell us a story."



Katie Stout, *Vanity*, 2020. Courtesy of Friedman Benda / Daniel Kukla

Though Dutch artist and designer Christien Meindertsma's Flax Field carpet might appear to be just that, it is a measured statement about the existential threat of climate change. Brooklyn-based designer Katie Stout's *Vanity* riffs on the age-old tradition of

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wicker furniture but also a method of production that might seem outdated in our contemporary interiors. The object's purpose is the literal and metaphoric reflection of the person who activates it, imposing their personality, needs, and rituals on the object.

“Sometimes the story is about the ethnography of people that made the work, sometimes it's about the environment, how our production systems work, racism, or migration,” Liechtenstein adds. Mexican designer Fernando Laposse's Totomoxtle Camo Table was created using heirloom corn husk marquetry, a new hybrid technique he developed with the goal of regenerating Mixtec agriculture and craft traditions in the Puebla region.



Untitled 00 and Isitulo (Chair) by Nobukho Nqaba. Courtesy of Friedman Benda/Daniel Kukla

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Unlike previous guest-curated exhibitions at the gallery that focused heavily on set design, such as 2019's Blow-Up curated by Felix Burrichter and designed by Charlap Hyman & Herrero, *Split Personality* is presented within Friedman Benda's bare white cube space, except for South African artist Nobukho Nqaba's Untitled 00 interior installation which occupies the small nook within the gallery. The show relies heavily on "classic captions," which Liechtenstein drafted through interviews with the exhibitors. Presented as wall texts and videos, the interviews offer didactic insight into the narratives behind each work.

A year in the making, Liechtenstein embarked on this project before the COVID-19 pandemic. The curator was able to mount the show from afar using scale models and video communication. She will never see the show in person, which poses a challenge for someone like herself, who typically relies on intuition and spontaneity. Because of this, each piece was meticulously selected and reviewed, as was its placement. "Everything is there for a reason," she concludes. "One thing we can take away from this crisis is that we need to slow down and look at things more closely."

Split Personality is now on view through February 6, 2021, at 515 W 26th Street, New York, New York.



Alice Stori Liechtenstein

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