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by Christopher Bollen | Portrait by Reynard Li

Barry Friedman was an art dealer for a decade before Marc Benda was born. But since they teamed up five years ago to develop groundbreaking design shows like Droog's recent "Smart Deco," Friedman, 64, and Benda, 30, have helped turn a nonexistent American collecting market into one that's increasingly on the level with fine art—a feat culminating in the opening this September of the 18,000-square-foot Friedman Benda gallery in New York's Chelsea district.

When the Swiss-born Benda moved to New York in 2002, Friedman's Upper East Side gallery was trading in everything from Pre-Raphaelite paintings to Art Deco furniture but had begun showing contemporary design. Now the pair represent Ettore Sottsass, Marcel Wanders, and Ron Arad, whose limited-edition pieces can fetch up to half a million dollars. They've also begun to back younger designers, such as the Swedish quartet Front, whose 3-D-scanned air drawings they turned into \$10,000 chairs for Design Miami 2005. I.D. spoke to Friedman and Benda about how they found the pulse of design collectors, and what the new gallery means for the future of their business.

Marc, why did you come to New York?

MB I came to have access to America. There was a perception then that no one was driving the market here. It was mostly a secondary market, and supplies had completely dried out. Barry and I were in a position to change that. The U.S. has very strong art collectors, and we wanted to introduce a contemporary sensibility that looked at design objects and sculpture in a similar way.

Barry, how did Marc's perspective help you transition into the new business?

BF There are a lot of young clients in Chelsea. Not that these people wouldn't buy from me, but I think it helps to have a young partner. Mostly it will be a continuation of the current business, and Marc brings in fresh ideas.

Do you follow the art gallery business model, directing design pieces into specific collections?

MB We try not to be elitists. Of course there are a lot of things people want that are not available—most of our stock is made in limited editions, which is pretty much standard now—but we try not to play the waiting-list game.

Your clients are both American and European. Do the two collect differently?

MB U.S. collectors are looking to live with these pieces, which is great. That's where design started. But in Europe, there's a tendency to see them as aesthetic objects. The schools there encourage design much more than American art schools, which tend to skew toward sculpture. So our American designers are much more craft-oriented. We work with only two designers who are U.S.-based [Forrest Meyers and Wendell Castle], as opposed to 10 to 15 Europeans, but our stable appeals to both markets.

Has the recent popularity of art and design fairs helped bring design into the marketplace?

MB Certainly they raise awareness, but they also tend to put you into little groups. Here's design, here's art. And even within design, there's the mass-production world, and then a Marc Newson lounge chair that's not intended to be sat upon. It's hard to find the boundaries.

BF So many so-called design fairs have about two out of 50 galleries that are really selling cutting-edge design over, say, carpets.

From a financial aspect, are there different strategies for dealing art versus design?

MB For designers, to work at the same level as an artist requires a much more significant financial

investment. You can't just produce a chair in your studio. So the prices and commissions are very different for us than for a painting show. In design, prices depend on the cost of making a piece. In art, the price of a painting has very little to do with the paints used.

How do you feel about art galleries like Gagosian getting into the game of showing star designers like Newson?

BF It's good for the market to have Gagosian there. We originally had Newson in our gallery, but that was on a secondary-market basis. Most of our relationships with designers now involve unique new works. That's what we're interested in pursuing in Chelsea.

MB We'll be showing contemporary art as well.

Are you afraid of being isolated from collectors who have been coming to you for more traditional pieces?

BF A lot of longtime collectors are showing interest in the new works. Ninety-five percent of the gallery will be contemporary.

So the old guard will make the trek from the Upper East Side down to Chelsea?

MB Many collectors, museums, and dealers don't even go uptown anymore. They get off the plane and their first and last stop is Chelsea. Having all of this new space, and a new venue, adds to the business as well as enabling us to show more and larger pieces.

Christopher Bollen is editor at V magazine.



Mark Benda and Barry Friedman at
Friedman's Upper East Side gallery
in New York City, March 27, 2007