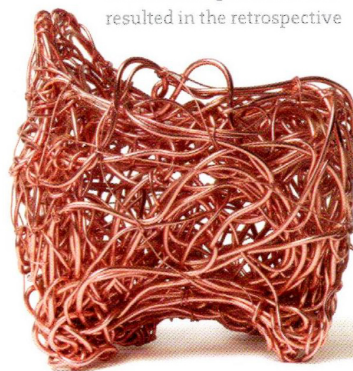




stop making sense

What the Talking Heads were to music, Art et Industrie was to furniture

A mixture of wonder and befuddlement was what Hugues Magen felt on first wandering into Art et Industrie, a gallery in New York, two decades ago. Magen likens the artist-produced postmodern furniture he saw there to an alien world with a language he did not understand—but wanted to learn. His first purchase, a squiggly pink chair called Champagne by sculptor Forrest Myers, soon led to friendships both with Myers and with the gallery's impresario and tastemaker, Rick Kaufmann. In the long term, those friendships led to the process of researching and collecting that has now resulted in the retrospective



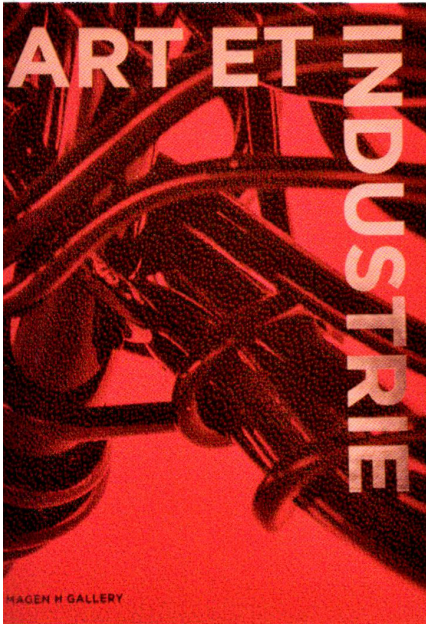
"Art et Industrie," on view at Magen H Gallery through December 5.

Though named after the French magazine of the early 20th century, Art et Industrie was strongly rooted in the artistic ferment and urban squalor of downtown Manhattan in the 1970's, the milieu of the Talking Heads, the Ramones, and Jean-Michel Basquiat. The loose collective of artists associated with the gallery, which went through several iterations in different SoHo locations, closing finally in 1999, included Michele Oka Doner,

Terence Main, and Howan Meister, many of whom worked in the neighborhood. And they did so with attitude, blurring the boundary between art and design. As Kaufmann recounts, he sought nothing less than "to change the way people thought about and looked at physical objects."

Which is to say that Art et Industrie was truly avant-garde, a hothouse for artistic expression in furniture design unburdened by commercial considerations or even functional ones. Kaufmann succeeded spectacularly at fostering a body of work that was original, uncompromising, and provocative while failing, equally spectacularly, at making an impact on the U.S. furniture market. Ironically, though not surprisingly, it was only six years after the gallery shuttered that the auction house Phillips De Pury & Luxembourg in New York and the Design.05 fair in Miami succeeded in putting designers on the map.

Describing Art et Industrie in a few words is almost impossible. Its output was as heterogeneous as the backgrounds of the artists involved. On any given day you would be likely to find a visual cacophony of form, texture, color, and pattern. Materials might run the gamut from anodized aluminum to cast bronze or concrete and carved, lacquered wood. Pieces were variously giddy and sober, frivolous and trenchant. Magen describes one as "ridiculous achieved." For chairs alone the riot of styles encompassed the loud and colorful opulence of Main's Golden Boy, the dangerous beauty of Doner's Terrible, and the expressive minimalism of Meister's elongated ladder-back Lesson, a precisely



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rendered riff on Charles Rennie Mackintosh.

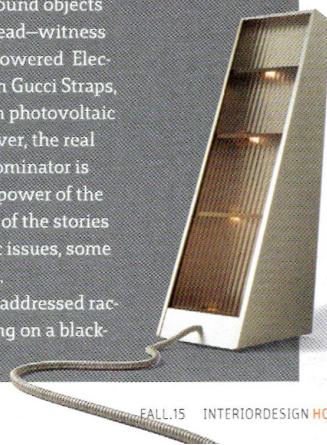
Still, certain threads ran throughout. Postmodern discourse, obviously. Historical references abound, though they are conspicuously transformed and subverted: ancient Egypt in James Hong's Karnak bookcase; 18th-century neoclassicism in Queen Anne, Queen Anne, a double chair by Main and his wife, Laura Drake; and Carlo Bugatti mixed with Eileen Gray in Laura Johnson's Soul Badge Tattoo chair. Ettore Sottsass and Alessandro Mendini were studied closely. Lamps by James Evanson resemble buildings by Michael Graves.

The use of found objects is another thread—witness Hong's Solar Powered Electric Chair With Gucci Straps, complete with photovoltaic panels. However, the real common denominator is the narrative power of the objects. Some of the stories involve public issues, some personal ones.

Paul Ludick addressed racism by focusing on a black-and-white

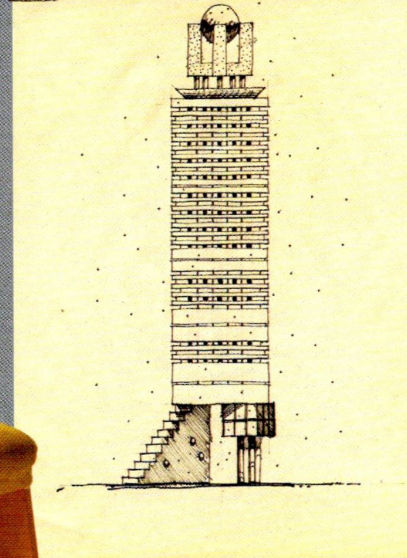
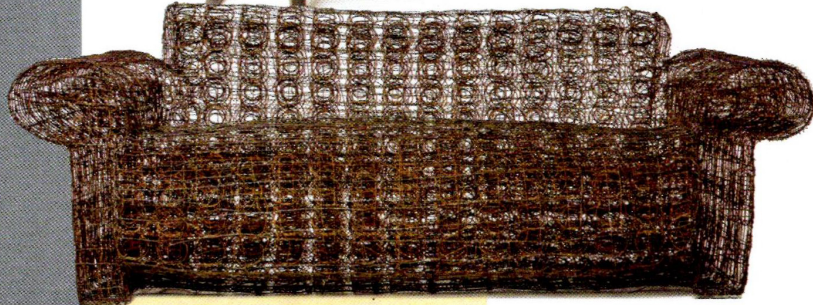
Opposite, from top: Presented by Magen H Gallery, Howard Meister's Lesson chair in painted steel, 1982. Ass Theater, a 1988 lacquered wooden stool with nails by Alex Locadia. Champagne, Forrest Myers's 1980 chair in anodized aluminum.

Clockwise from top left: Designed by Studio Philippe Apeloig, the cover of the 233-page catalog for the show. In 1977, the first Art et Industrie location. Paul Ludick's exhibition invitation, 1985. James Hong's Karnak bookcase, 1979, incorporating aluminum pipe. Art et Industrie artists with founder Rick Kaufmann in 1992. Queen Anne, Queen Anne, a 1982 chair in painted and enameled wood with mahoir by Terence Main and Laura Drake.



DESIGNinsider

Clockwise from top: Richard Snyder's lacquered Cabinet of the Ancient Squid, 1990. From the same year, the Untitled sofa, made by Myers from a rusted box spring. James Evanson's sketch, 1984, for the Torch lamp. Ludick's Arms chair, 1988, in wood and fabric with toy pistols. Golden Boy, Main's chair in carved and painted wood with mohair, 1989.



chair in "The World Theatre: Apartheid," and he followed up on that exhibition with his militantly ambiguous Arms chair bristling with toy pistols, pointing to the need for gun control and simultaneously proposing a refuge from rampant violence. On the other hand, Richard Snyder conceived the Collectibles & Curiosities series, which featured the Cabinet of the Ancient Squid, as a sultan's estate filled with fantastical and magical objects—a Shangri-la as imagined from gritty SoHo. Alex Locadio's polemical Ass Theater stool, with

its seat of nails, confronted the elephant in the room: artistic expression versus utility. If you sat down, you would get the point.

Presenting about 50 objects, accompanied by an extensive catalog, Magen H Gallery's show provides both a coda and an encore for the artists, many of whom attended the opening. Now that we have witnessed design-art take off in the marketplace, the concept is no longer shocking or transgressive—not when Fernando and Humberto Campana are international stars. But the strangeness of the Art et Industrie oeuvre persists, as well it should.

We are still not familiar with most of these pieces, made either as unique works or in very small editions. Seeing them together again reminds us how remarkable the gallery was and how necessary it is, from time to time, to inject a shot of adrenaline into the status quo. —Larry Weinberg