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'Midtown': That Chair's Charming, but Can I Sit in It?

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If you skipped New York's grittier art fairs this season and now regret it, compensation awaits in a scruffy food fight of an exhibition at a relatively swank address: Lever House, the first glass-curtain-wall skyscraper on Park Avenue.

The show is "Midtown," a contentious mix of art, design, craft and various hybrids by more than 60 artists from around the world. A pop-up affair, it has been organized by the New York art dealers Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Michele Maccarone, and the contemporary design dealer Paul Johnson, with help from the independent curator Ali Subotnick. It sprawls throughout the denuded second floor of Lever House, the ever-elegant International Style gem designed by Gordon Bunshaft and Natalie de Blois (for Skidmore, Owings and Merrill) and completed in 1952.

Lever House arrived when glass-box skyscrapers were new, city planners were wary of them (can you imagine?), and setbacks were the law. Consequently its relatively slim 21-story tower sits on a broad, wonderfully porous two-story pedestal. The ground level is ingeniously generous and unlike anything else in the city: It's mostly outdoor public space, enhanced by a light-giving atrium that cuts through the second floor, where, up one flight of a fire stair, "Midtown" can be found.



Ruby Neri's "Untitled (women around a pot)," far left, and Josep Grau-Garriga's "Drap i més," foreground. Michael Nagle for The New York Times.

The floor is bathed in light from wraparound windows and the atrium. And, by being stripped down to its concrete bones, it has become the perfect setting for the brawling art. The combined result is like the neglected tail end of a large biennial, where the art arrived but the curators didn't spend much time arranging it.

It's worth visiting this show just to experience the space of Lever House, which became a landmark in 1982; even under these stark conditions, you can sense the intimacy and human scale that informed early skyscraper design. But the show itself is provocative, throwing out questions on all sides, even if it answers few



of them. Mainly it exposes the growing, often dubious, gray area of pricey, often one-off objects that are more interesting to look at than to use but may not be visually adamant enough to be art. You decide.

Anton Alvarez's great-looking chairs, benches and stools, for example, are made by tightly wrapping together planks and scraps of wood using bright polyester thread and a machine of this Stockholm artist's own invention. They have a cheap, thrown-together — yet sturdy — flamboyance, like big toys; the bench and stools could be used, but the chairs seem too angular for comfort, more like sculpture (and not bad as such).

The celebrated British designer Max Lamb doesn't come off as well. He is represented by a mini-retrospective at the center of the show, an assortment of quasi-furniture and not-quite-art. There are a couple of great moments: a cartoonishly thick, bumpy chair that seems to be cast copper but is actually something called nanocrystalline. From 2015, it promises to become a classic, a Flintstones-like one that might also have escaped from a Philip Guston painting or an R. Crumb comic. Mr. Lamb's other efforts are briefly intriguing, especially if his innovative materials and sometimes simple processes are explained. But besides the chair, the only things I lusted for were two luxuriously thick wool rugs whose contrasting patterns are nicely collaborative: They were devised by their weavers from spools of yarn provided by Mr. Lamb.

In one corner-office area, you'll find objects that justify themselves by sheer extravagance: an example of the artist Nick Cave's ornate costume-sculpture-assemblages, this one involving textiles sewn with china plates; Takuro Kuwata's five-foot-tall conical sculpture in black porcelain and covered with five-inch-thick chunks of pink glaze (think monumental craquelure), and a big colorful see-through abstraction on pigmented urethane by Alex Hubbard.

Several of the artists have shown their work at Ms. Rohatyn Greenberg's Salon 94, Maccarone or Mr. Johnson's gallery. But several unfamiliar names stand out. The Arkansas basket maker Leon Niehues is represented by 13 vessels and exquisite sculptures involving thorns that have a delicate, scorpion menace.

The works by the South African ceramic sculptor Andile Dyalvane are notable for their combination of topographical ruggedness and refinement, even though they can sometimes verge on fussiness. Aneta Regel, a Polish sculptor who makes simplified animal forms encrusted with bright colored glazes that seem descended from African Baule, is another talent worth watching. And Kenzi Shiokava, a professional gardener from Los Angeles, and a breakout star of the Hammer Museum's 2016 biennial, is an older newcomer represented here by five delicate and totemic forms dating to the 1980s and made in carefully carved and burned wood. They are both indebted to Isamu Noguchi and Louise Nevelson — and free of them.

The show features work by forerunners who mined the gap between sculpture and design, starting in the 1970s and '80s. Scott Burton (1939-1989), whose gifted life was cut short by AIDS, was one of the first Americans to exploit this in-between space, as evidenced here by a table made of two massive pieces of interlocking granite. Here, it serves as a base for a curving black vessel from 2016 by Christine Nofchissey McHorse that is accurately titled "Robster Claw" and extends the tradition of Navajo micaceous pottery.

(Seeing Mr. Burton's table used this way may remind some visitors of the furor he caused in 1989 when he initiated the Museum of Modern Art's "Artist's Choice" series by exhibiting Brancusi's dynamic pedestals without their historic objects, as sculptures in their own right.)



R. M. Fischer's signature lamp sculptures still impress with their sophisticated use of industrial materials more than 30 years on. The inventive designer Gaetano Pesce, 77, contributes a colorful sculpture, nominally a bookshelf, from 2007; made of polyurethane resin, it stands near a window and glows like latter-day stained glass. A 1991 Pesce, "Sandbag Chair," also called "January 16th Sofa," is named for the starting date of the first Iraq war. Oozing bloodlike latex, it remains pertinent in an angry, heavy-handed way and also might be nice to sink into. Vito Acconci's "Stretched Facade" of 1984, is a giant mask that manages to combine comedy and tragedy, with a big red mouth that is also a love seat. Mr. Acconci, a trailblazing artist, died last month.

Josep Grau-Garriga (1929-2011), a Catalan textile artist is both a forerunner and a relative unknown, at least in New York, although his solo debut at Salon 94 should change that. He is represented here by two equally powerful but quite different fiber pieces from 1973 and 2011, the first suggesting a giant cocoon, the second a deliciously fringed wall hanging. His work helps clarify the tapestry-like nature of its neighbor, a taut new painting by Rosy Keyser.

Several artists included works that announce aesthetic shifts. Jon Kessler, usually Mr. Mechanical, has three new pieces that are essentially airy stabiles dangling sweet found objects, as if they were collaborations by Calder and Dalí. Nate Lowman has dropped his facade of hyper-cool to cover a wall with big playful paintings shaped like leaves or flowers; it's quite startling, in a good way. And Betty Woodman has transformed her glazed ceramic cutouts into beautiful women, whose garments include actual textiles. These are among the best work of her long career.

Joe Zucker's striking paintings achieve an unusual balance among art, craft and design, as well as materials. Their pale fluctuating grids are made from incised wallboard whose tiny squares have been stained different shades of gray. They resemble weavings and might be tributes to Anni Albers. Urs Fischer goes site-specific with a beautiful expanse of trompe l'oeil wallpaper that replicates drywall patterned with splotches of glue and interrupted by exposed beams and electrical conduit.

Amid the clash of sensibilities and amusing sights this show fruitfully unleashes, I realized, once more, my preference for design that is functional, affordable and capable of mass production. Sadly, there seems to be only one candidate here: a metal tubing armchair by Mr. Fischer that looks back to modernist masters like Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, but adds extra curves. It's a bit of a Surrealist joke, a bit of an abstract sculpture and comfortable to sit in. Perhaps there will be many more like it, reasonably priced.