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The subversive power of uncomfortable furniture

“We all seem to seek comfort, but how much comfort is good?” asks the curator of a new exhibition

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Daniel Kukla, courtesy Friedman Benda

What the La-Z-Boy recliner lacks in looks, it certainly makes up for in comfort. It’s been designed so you slip into relaxation mode as soon as your butt hits that cushiony seat. The chair, and all the coziness it offers, [has become an aspirational symbol of the good life.](#)

Like the recliner, much of home furnishing today is dictated by comfort—either physically or emotionally—but at what cost? It’s a question the exhibition [Comfort](#), on view at the New York City gallery Friedman Benda through February 15, sets out to explore.

For the exhibition’s opening, curator Omar Sosa commissioned an edible La-Z-Boy recliner that the artists Sam Stewart and Laila Gohar baked from bread: a comfort food turned into a

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comfortable object, which then becomes uncomfortable because of the material and how you interact with it—consuming it versus curling up on top of it.

This interrogation of the notion of comfort set the tone for the exhibition and its mission: to get us thinking about our personal definition of comfort, and perhaps challenge the ways it has been defined for us.

“We all seem to seek comfort, but how much comfort is good?” asks curator Omar Sosa during a walkthrough of the show. “Is there a level of comfort that kind of numbs our senses? Like, just makes us sleepy and not want to do anything?”

Today, [comfort is king](#). There are [Snuggies](#) to swaddle adults, a [glut of foam mattress brands](#) that promise to cradle you into a deep slumber, the “[hygge](#)” [approach to cozy interiors](#), and [ads for sheets](#) that beckon you to bed. But this quest for comfort could risk making us too soft and impressionable.

For the exhibition, Sosa—a creative director and the founder of the gauzy [interiors and lifestyle magazine *Apartamento*](#)—has assembled over 25 works of art and design that speak to him, personally, about comfort either directly or abstractly. They’re more objet d’art than anything most people would ever put in their homes (both aesthetically and in terms of cost), but in their unusualness, they challenge us.

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For example, [a 1970s sofa by the artist John Chamberlain](#)—best known for his [twisted, mangled sculptures](#) made from automotive steel—consisting of a white, nylon parachute draped over foam blocks looks almost like a cloud you can sit inside. The [Golgotha chair](#) from Italian artist [Gaetano Pesce](#) features the imprint of a human body molded into **its** hard resin—a sensibility that simultaneously seems supple and hard (and kinda eerie since the chair is flesh-toned). A hammock made from pillows from the fashion studio Bless looks like it might be a cozy place for a nap. Richard Artschwager’s *Chair 4*—essentially a composition of laminate-covered wood boxes—is less inviting for lounging. These pieces look so unlike conventional seating, but are each unique in how they engage with the idea of what seating could be.

“There’s this almost comic situation where someone outside [the design world] walks into a gallery like this and says, ‘That chair. How much is that? Can I even sit there? Is it even comfortable?’ That to me was very interesting,” Sosa says. “That for some people the first perception of a chair, or anything you put into your house, is ‘How comfortable is that going to be?’”

Seeking comfort at home certainly isn’t unreasonable, but Sosa advocates balancing it with just enough discomfort so that you’re compelled to move your life forward.

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“I like to live with things that aren’t comfortable or easy,” he says. “I like to have things that are brave, that make you consider everything else.”

To spark those feelings, he included *Snarl*—a leather fetish mask by [Nancy Grossman](#)—and *Smiling Young Woman*—a sinister-looking portrait by George Condo—in the exhibition as foils to the furniture. The artworks evoke tension and put you on edge.

Sosa learned the value of “uncomfortable” design from a recently deceased friend, the design consultant and collector [Jim Walrod](#). “He was a collector of very difficult pieces,” Sosa says. “I didn’t understand what that was about in the beginning, but it was about living with everything that made him feel alive because he wasn’t totally comfortable with what he had. Everything was a little bit of a challenge, and I found it very refreshing. And I think it’s interesting for everyone to be a little bit on that edge.”

Pol Esteve Castelló, an architect and artist, asked similar questions about the role of comfort in a [2016 PIN-UP essay](#), which concluded that discomfort is a weapon we can all use against social and political conventions that limit personal expression and individuality. An uncomfortable space is an active space, consciously. Sosa invited him to revisit the topic for a pamphlet accompanying the show:

“The more comfortable the house and the city is, the more prescribed its inhabitants’ behavior,” Castelló writes. “Comfort is differentiated from well-being, happiness, and pleasure, as the latter may imply demanding and tiresome bodily activation. Comfort is translated into lessened sensual perception and imposes the equation: more ease = less feeling.”

There is a dark side to comfort. It’s a sensibility that can steer people into certain behaviors and actions because they’re easy and convenient even though potentially dangerous, like the ergonomic office chair that enables people to sit for hours on end, or subscription services that turn consumerism into a mindless act. An uncomfortable chair might cause you to activate certain muscles to stay balanced, or even make you get up and take a walk. Having to make a few extra clicks to purchase something might squash the impulse buys that lead people to accumulate stuff that they don’t really want.

Meanwhile, our notions of comfort aren’t universal. Sosa included a rocking chair made by the [Adaptive Design Association](#), a group that creates custom furniture for children with disabilities. Alongside the collectors’ items, this chair is a reminder that while much of the designed world is comfortable for people without disabilities, it lacks basic functionality—let alone comfort—for many.

Sosa hopes this exhibition makes people more critical about all the ways comfort dictates their lives. “I hope people can see comfort in a different perspective and challenge a little bit the way things should be,” he says.