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Steven Learner, Collective Design Founder, Reveals What's in Store at the Fair's 2018 Edition

by Blouin Artinfo



Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi shocked the art world when he showed functional lanterns alongside carved-stone sculptures at his 1986 Venice Biennale exhibition called “What Is Sculpture?”

“Everything is sculpture,” he famously said. “Any material, any idea without hindrance born into space, I consider sculpture.” More than 30 years later—and just a week after many of Noguchi’s Akari were remounted in the Long Island City *Noguchi Museum*—it feels like the art world might have finally caught on to the great label defier’s point. As New York’s Armory Show—the most attended art fair in America, drawing nearly 65,000 out-of-town art enthusiasts to the west side of Manhattan—kicked off on Wednesday, a new collectible emerged clearly on the scene: design. Or, shall we say, functional sculpture?

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"I think that the lines are constantly blurring and have been for some time," says Nicole Berry, who took over as the fair's executive director last November and opened up the application process to design-focused galleries for the first time. "We're dipping our toe in with just two galleries to see how it works, and we'll move from there."

The two that made the cut—no surprise to in-the-know design scenesters—are Carpenters Workshop and R & Company, galleries that work with artists and designers that straddle the line between function and fine art. The former is showing esoteric lamps by Netherlands-based talent *Nacho Carbonell* while the latter brought work from a suite of its most boundary-pushing contemporary talents: Katie Stout, Dana Barnes, Jeff Zimmerman, and the Haas Brothers.

"Nacho's pieces are artworks that also happen to be functional design pieces," explains Berry. "That's how we were able to talk to the committee about these blurring lines."



To Berry, design's gradual move into the art sphere is not all that different from what happened with photography. "It was photography, not art for a long time—not a fine art like painting. Then that shift occurred," she explains. "Design is on that same trajectory. People are beginning to see it as art, and I think people will be more open to seeing it at our fair."

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Evan Snyderman, cofounder of R & Company, admits showing at the Armory has been a longtime goal of the gallery for its ability to elevate their artists into the collectible art world, and its access to a wider-ranging client base.

"We have a lot of clients that fly in for the Armory, but they may not make it down to Tribeca to see us while they're here," he explains. "This year we're going to be able to reconnect with a lot of buyers from out of town on our home turf, and that is a dream come true."

Following a similar logic, Collective Design fair, which has taken place for five consecutive years in May, New York's unofficial Design Month, also moved its dates to correspond with the Armory Show.

"Art collectors are design collectors," says Collective founder *Steven Learner* "There is a continuing trend toward inclusivity, a blurring of the boundaries between art, design, fashion, performance, and film that I fully support. We've encouraged new ways of presenting work, expanding our program to include galleries that present both vintage and contemporary work, both art and design."



Unlike with a traditional design fair, where blue-chip contemporary and vintage dealers present their best work, Learner tapped less-expected individuals to design booths,

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including art galleries that inch into design territory like Fort Gansevoort and Nina Johnson, as well as artists like Justin Morin and Alex Schweder.

Schweder, it's worth noting—known for what he calls performance architecture, much of which is made in collaboration with fellow artist Ward Shelley—showed work at both Collective and the Armory.

Davenport's Yawn, the piece at Collective which was originally conceived for the 2013 Lisbon Architecture Triennale, places pairs of visitors on two back-to-back sofas. As they sit, for a brief repose, a puddle of fabric around the sofas inflates, rotating their seats 90 degrees so that they are nose to nose. At the end of the cycle, the sofas slowly return to the original state.



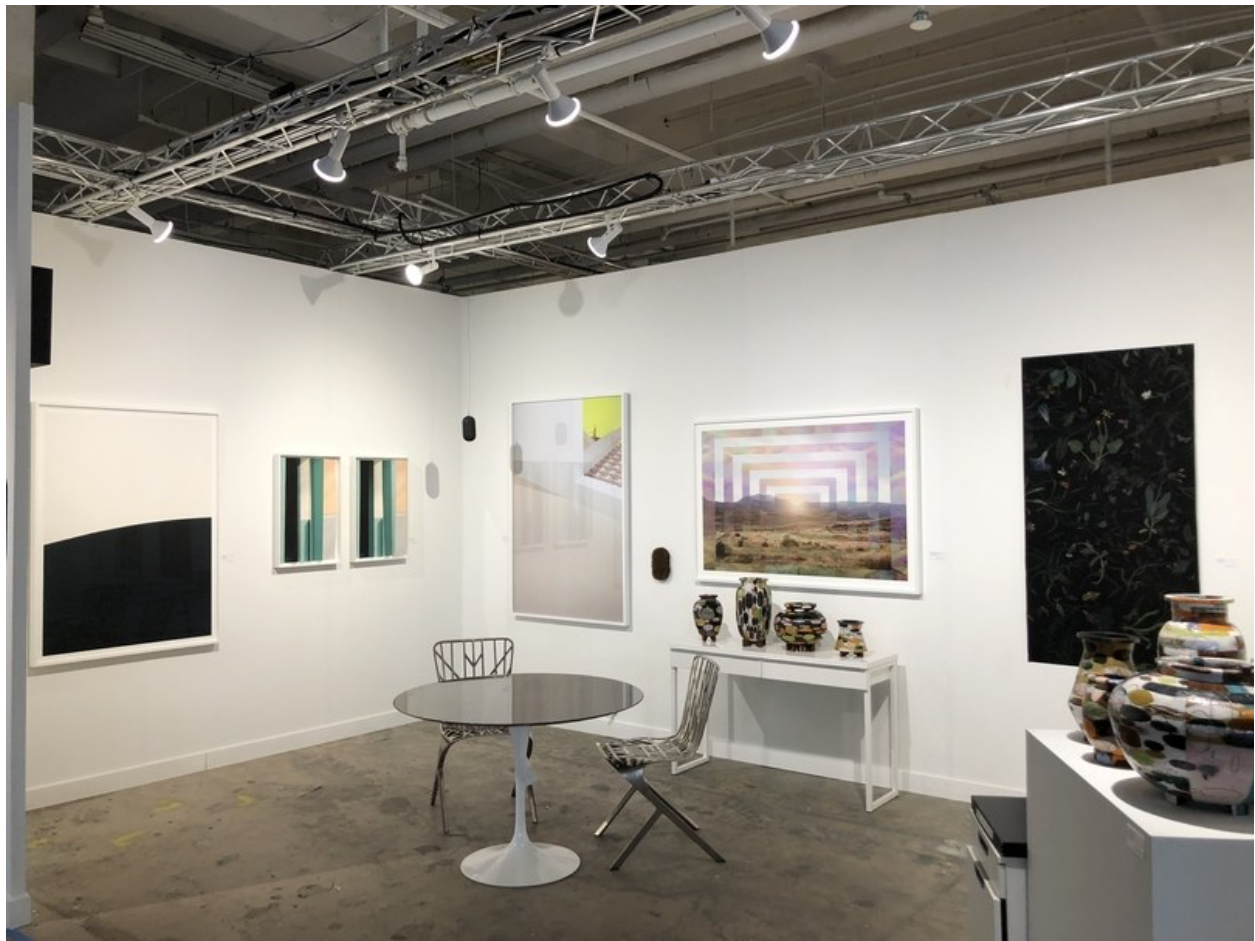
“I wanted to give people a half-hour nap,” he says.

At the Armory, he and Shelley will spend eight-hour shifts in a rather uncomfortable architecture of their own construction called My Turn, which forces one to stand while the other sits on either side of a wooden wall in a strange test of mental-spatial gymnastics.

Of the merging worlds of art, architecture, and design, Schweder says, “Someone can make a painting that looks like a thing and call it art. For them it is. It’s also possible to make a chair and call it art as well. I think we’ve gotten past the idea that the art lies in the thing; we’ve moved on to a world where the art is in the conversation around the thing.”

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It's not just that functional work is trickling into the fine art world, but also, to some *degree*, the other way around. Gallery owner Julie Saul has chosen to show her artists at Collective Design rather than a standard art fair. "We have traditionally worked a lot with architects, art advisers, and designers, and we thought this would be a great way to meet new people and develop new clients," she explains. Her photo-heavy roster does include one ceramicist whose work, she feels, strikes a chord with the design world. Two years in with Collective, she reports great results: "Often we do a fair, and we do our business with private collectors there, and never hear from the people again. But if you're working with a consultant or a designer or an architect, they come back to you time and again with different clients."



In the end though, isn't it all about the collectors? Did separating the functional from the painting and sculpture even benefit them in the first place? For many regulars on the fair circuit, it's convenience rather than concept that wins their approval.

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"It's like a hot fudge sundae—better to have butterscotch and chocolate syrup as opposed to only one," jokes collector and LIZWORKS founder Liz Swig, who has clocked serious time at fairs of every variety. "It's great that it's all happening at once. Plus, all pieces live together. Why not meet them all at the same time?"