

DESIGN NOTEBOOK

At Furniture Fair, Vanity Takes A Back Seat

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otions, will anyone ever feel nostalgic about them? If the house caught fire, would you grab Glide, or your childhood blanket?

There's a lot fogging design's pristine mirror right now — an iffy economy, unease about security, in the world of design, where looks can be everything, vanity seems uncomfortably self-conscious this year. Though there were more exhibitors than last year, including an increase in newcomers, the fair was perceived by participants as a modest statement, with an apprehensive emphasis on biz, not buzz.

Jerry Epperson, an industry analyst with Mann, Armistead & Epperson in Richmond, Va., said that the businesses at the fair, generally smaller manufacturers, represented 10 percent of the furniture industry in the United States. The wider "contemporary" market is defined by anything that is not historically derivative (including recliners and home theater seating) and is strong in sales — roughly 50 percent of the upholstered furniture sold.

But Mr. Epperson added that "nostalgia is the hottest category in the business right now." He characterized it as "your grandmother's furniture."

On a sleek island of black at the convention center, Bernhardt Design (www.bernhardtdesign.com) showed a vampirish collection of steel and white-leather furniture designed by Fabien Baron, the graphic designer best known for his makeover in 1992 of Harper's Bazaar magazine.

The minimal-as-a-knife-edge design and dressed-to-kill attitude in the Bernhardt group were reminiscent of another Christian Bale movie, "American Psycho," based on Bret Easton Ellis's novel of 1991. Patrick Bateman, the protagonist, also believed in life as a perfect surface.

But many exhibitors were trying to make concessions to the comfort of the consumer — if not physically, then emotionally or financially. That, and not form, function or finish, seemed to be what was newest and most hopeful. And meaning, a favorite conceit for designers, especially young ones, took a secondary role to the kind of friendly, easier allusions that make one feel lucky to have a home to furnish.

Pulse Requisite, an Oakland, Calif., outfit (www.pulserequisite.com), presented Juice, a wooden breakfast table with a scalloped-edge top that makes it look as if it has a

Offering comfort to the consumer in stressful times.

lath on it. The "cloth" edge has a daisy-cutter cutout in it too. The table, \$1,350, looks like the product of a happy childhood, not a design degree or a jigsaw.

Denyse Schmidt (www.dsquilts.com), a well-known contemporary quilt maker who has exhibited hand-sewn quilts for eight years, showed Denyse Schmidt Works, machine-sewn quilts that cut the price to \$800 — roughly a quarter of the cost of her hand-sewn quilts. She is also in licensing negotiations with Terence Conran Shops and Design Within Reach, which is developing a line of bedding.

Snowlab (www.snowlabdesign.com), a Canadian company that exhibited for the first time last year, returned with a much cheaper version of its well-received, flat-panel wall lighting and introduced blown-glass hanging lamps that were antithetical to its futuristic first collection. Snowlab did \$27,000 worth of business at last year's fair, enough to bring them back. But the writing was on the wall as to what would sell — and it wasn't phosphorous ideas alone.

Even at the "off-site" or "alternative" events staged in galleries and showrooms throughout New York City during the fair, which are typically more radical in concept, there were indications that design's unbreachable barriers — the "you're either into it or out of it" thinking — were being cracked by anxiety.

At Core77's "Canary in a Coalmine" presentation at Gallery 91, Todd Falkowsky, a Toronto-based designer (www.coroflot.com/tfalkowsky), showed his Toy chair, upholstered with stuffed animals. As comfort, it's proactive — a chair that wants to give you a

And at the convention center, student work, represented in booths set up by schools like Pratt Institute with large design programs, and a preview of problems to be solved by the next class of professional designers, was an uncharacteristically pacific mixture of acknowledging the present and appeasing the past.

Day Off by Kanjana Chaiwatanachai (at Pukan_07@hotmail.com) is a futuristic cushion with flexible extensions that relieve the stresses of a workweek by accommodating anything you might care to do on your day off — read, eat, watch television. Past Lite by Geoffrey Young is a translucent resin table illuminated by neon ([gyoungdesign@aol.com](http://www.gyoungdesign@aol.com)). An ornamental cast in the resin appears when the mantel-like table is lit — classical inspiration as a kind of night vision, like dreams.

The fair's 2003 Editors Awards were tel-



Photographs by Michael Noggle for The New York Times; Jason Mandella, bottom left



HUGS Above, Todd Falkowsky's Toy chair is a play on playful design — plush toys with rings sewn into the backs were strung onto a sidechair frame.

ing too. Blu Dot, the seven-year-old Minnesota company (www.bludot.com) that staked its success on practicalities like utility, attractive pricing and dependable shipping dates, not daring design, took the prize in the furniture category. Its new shelving, which sells for \$279 for a 36-inch-wide unit, is raw particle board — design has literally dropped its veneer. Anne Kyro Quinn (www.annekyroquinn.com), based in London, was named best new designer. Ms. Quinn creates pillows and throws.

"I'm much more cautious about my buying this year," said Douglas Burton, an owner of Apartment Zero, a design store in Washington, who was walking the fair.

As an independent retailer, Mr. Burton has recently felt the pressure of staying in business. Several exhibitors, including Blu

Dot, reported losing accounts from design stores, once a measure of metropolitan sophistication and a staple of cities big and small, which are closing — in part because of competition from design "chains" like Design Within Reach, a catalog and Internet company now also opening showrooms.

"I'm not writing as many orders," Mr. Burton said. "I'm getting all the materials, going back to the store and talking with my employees about what customers really want. There might be an amazing piece, but it might be a \$6,000 chair. People aren't spending money on those pieces now. We need that great chair that's \$500." Mr. Burton concluded, "They're coming to us for great design, but they're coming to us for pricing now, too."

Not inappropriately, the moment seems

grounded in serviceable home furnishings. At the fair, there were pieces to admire with ambitions no greater than to be chests of drawers, like e15's mahogany model (www.e15.com), or stylish side chairs, like Huss's ST6 (www.husslat.com), which is available in a variety of colored lacquers. Pure Design (www.puredesignonline.com) showed a bar stool (\$305) that was as long as a love seat, for those who don't like to drink alone.

Cocktails were on people's minds, as were children, some indication that many young designers at the fair, like Mr. Deam, are now older and beginning to act, if not like



DOMESTIC STAY

mahogany chest of drawers, left, Kanjana Chaiwatanachai; Day Off futon; above, bar stool by Pure Design; center, a child's chair by Anne Kyro Quinn; Truck; above, brass chair by Jeffrey Young; Schultz (info@floridainfo.com)



ON THE HORIZON

Pulse Requisite; left, lighting by Afrodit; (www.afrodit.com); lacquered chair from



THE GHOST OF D

Lite, above, a resin table by neon, by Geoffrey Young; Parsons School of Design; ornamental cast in resin, by Jeffrey Young; appears when the t

their parents, well, Mr. Deam, 41, had twins contemporary children at Truck (www.the-truck.com), the Carpenter, one of the firm's and its manager. David Deam, a designer in New York City, including a crib. Down the aisle is a changing table, Borning marlin — the has served cocktail day, the impromptu Generation X, it a the business lunch.