

REVIEWS APR. 06, 2015

Memphis Group

NEW YORK,
at Koenig & Clinton and Joe Sheffel

by Becky Brown

Faces break into smiles encountering the far-out furniture of the Memphis Group, the Italian design collective officially active between 1981 and 1986. The majority of pieces on display are by Ettore Sottsass (1917-2007), who founded Memphis at age 64 with a group of younger designers, including Andrea Branzi, Michele de Lucchi, Shiro Kuramata and George Sowden. As legend has it, they took their name from the Bob Dylan song “Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again,” because the record got stuck on the title’s last three words during one of their early meetings. This origin story is textbook postmodernism, as Fredric Jameson defined it in 1982 (the year after Memphis debuted its first collection in Milan): a reference to a place that does not refer to the place itself but to an earlier work (a song, in this case). The Memphis Group came to embody postmodern design; 30 years later, as the clean white surfaces of proliferating Apple products point back to High Modernism (Adolf Loos would have been proud), these 51 pieces across two venues felt freshly outrageous.

At both galleries, viewers were met with an onslaught of color and shape that defied harmony, rationalism, and material honesty in favor of integrating (and flattening) stylistic nods to Art Deco, Aztec designs, science fiction, Pop art, and Tantric art, along with a heavy dose of kitsch. The dissonance of single pieces was amplified through ensemble: vases on pedestals, lamps on cabinets, clocks on

View of the Memphis Group’s exhibition, 2015, at Koenig & Clinton, showing (center) Ettore Sottsass’s Beverly, 1981, sideboard in wood covered with plastic laminate and natural briar, 89¼ by 69 by 19 inches. Courtesy Memphis Milano Collection, Milan, and Koenig & Clinton, New York. Photo Jeffrey Sturges.





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tables. This sounds natural enough, since furniture is meant to keep things off the floor. Yet in the context of a fine-art gallery, the objects became sculptures and installations. At Koenig & Clinton, stagelike platforms brought the display closer to theater: most ambitious was an approximately 20-foot section of wall and platform painted in black and white stripes, on which 11 pieces were arranged in four adjacent groupings. It was the second incarnation of a display concept that the galleries premiered at Design Miami in December.

Included was the Beverly sideboard (Sottsass, 1981), a two-door cabinet with a green-and-yellow snakeskin pattern in light pink casing; teal, red and navy blue mini-shelves protruding asymmetrically from both sides; a wooden shelf with exposed natural grain extending upward at an acute angle; and a steel tube, like a bent subway pole, supporting a green light bulb. And yes, this is a single piece. Its design uses a logic of contrast in which the distinction between “natural” and “synthetic” materials becomes increasingly fuzzy and no longer seems to matter. The Colonia table (Sottsass, 1981) at Joe Sheftel has a surface of rare pink marble that looks more surreal than real, as nature can.

Gallerygoers in Chelsea and the Lower East Side are accustomed to seeing objects with no use value. Functionlessness is a defining feature of fine art, yet artists have been riffing on function forever: think of Jasper Johns’s *Drawer* (1957), Robert Gober’s cribs, Mona Hatoum’s *Grater Divide* (2002) and Liam Gillick’s various exegeses on shelving. This tradition is reversed by the Memphis Group: furniture and appliances riff on art. Remember, the Beverly is a sideboard, which the store Crate and Barrel describes as an item to “make organizing your space simple.” The Beverly, in fact, complicates organizing one’s space, suggesting (or demanding) new methods. Along with the Carlton (a shelf), the Brazil (a side table), the Antibes (a cabinet) and most Memphis pieces, it might converse easily with, say, the paintings of Elizabeth Murray, Rebecca Morris and Thomas Nozkowski; the sculpture of Ken Price; the installations of Jessica Stockholder. But Memphis’s objects are built for direct contact with our bodies and belongings, implying an intimacy that is hard to conceive in the hands-off fine arts. And like most forms of intimacy, it requires some compromises.

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