Design Reimagined at Milan Fair

By AILEEN KWUN

It's not a stretch to call Milan Design Week the design world's largest annual global event. The commercial anchor of the yearly fair is Salone Internazionale del Mobile — the trade show wrapping up this Sunday at the Rho fairgrounds — where design lovers, curators and the industry's key players convened to discover and unveil the latest product and furniture releases from around the world.

Within the city, a sprawling network of related events, together known as Fuorisalone, resulted in a citywide takeover teeming with gallery and showroom exhibitions, pop-up installations, independent satellite fairs and Instagram-worthy brand activations.

After a canceled 2020 edition and a somewhat lackluster 2021 "Supersalone" event last fall that was thrice postponed, this year the fair, which is usually held in April, was Salone's 60th edition, and a major return after Covid-19 roiled the industry's calendar of fairs — not to mention the supply chain issues that soon followed.

"This year is a restart with a lot of positivity and energy, and the joy of being together to experiment through design," said Marva Griffin Wilshire, the founder and curator of Salone-Satellite, the fair's capsule program for new and emerging talent.

"This has felt a bit like a transitional year, though it hasn't yet felt clear what direction that transition will lead to," said Aric Chen, the artistic director of Rotterdam's Het Nieuwe Instituut and former director of Design Miami. "It hasn't felt like there's been as much focus on 'the new,' in part because everyone's been so focused on surviving." He noted that this year's Milan Design Week felt more grounded in critical discussion.

"There is a palpable sense of sustainability and responsibility as normalcy," said Paola Antonelli, the senior curator of architecture and design at New York's Museum of Modern Art, especially among young and emerging studios. "There's much more discussion and also display alongside these objects — chairs, carpets and furniture — concerning their life cycle, which makes a gigantic difference. There are also installations and discussions about the role of design in society at large, without focusing on objects unnecessarily. But objects are now the Trojan horse for those topics, in a way they were not necessarily as much before."

"Sustainability has been a consistent theme here," said the interior designer Kelly Wearstler, with many established studios and brands such as Hermès, Martino Gamper and Dimorestudio "reimagining vintage works" or making use of reusable materials.

Though the only certainty of Milan Design Week is that one can't possibly see it all within the week, many more people turned out this year than last year, showing how much the fair had been missed. And as always, the key design takeaways made the effort worth it.

ABOVE, ALESSANDRO SALETTA/DSL STUDIO — VIA ATELIER BIAGETTI; BELOW LEFT, REBECCA REID

Top, an installation view of "Pet Therapy" by Atelier Biagetti.

Creature Comforts

Partners in work and life, Alberto Biagetti and Laura Baldessari of Atelier Biagetti, have produced ironic, tongue-in-cheek installations that explore design as a storytelling device and "create a sense of theater that speaks to the emotions," Mr. Biagetti said. Previously, they have tackled taboo conversations related to wealth, fitness and sexuality. This year, they responded to a request from their young daughter to create, rather than a piece of furniture, "a giant cat you can hug," sized at surreal, Fellinesque proportions.

A series of new seating pieces inspired by slumber was showcased by the Los Angeles upstart Otherside Objects, founded by Sam Klemick, a fashion designer who transitioned into woodworking and furniture. "I'm really obsessed with sleeping and dreams, and the fact that we spend so much of our lives dreaming without even understanding or being able to make sense of it," she said.

The New York designer Eny Lee Parker debuted the Cloud chair in a group exhibition presented by artist Daniel Arsham and StockX, an online marketplace, alongside the fashion label Wales Bonner the Swiss furniture company USM and others. Other works that cradle and comfort the body, including Bohinc Studio's Peaches seating collection — made from curvaceous, voluptuous contours celebrating the female form — spoke to a desire for tactile connection, comfort and solace.