



A CRITICAL EYE Ellen Lupton, a curator at the Cooper-Hewitt, evaluates, clockwise from top, the lighting of Lindsey Adelman; accessories from Thelermont Hupton; ergoErgo, a belly-strengthening stool, and Aboubakar Fofana's textiles.



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Kicking the Tires

A Champion of Common-Sense Design Takes On the International Contemporary Furniture Fair

By PENELOPE GREEN
THE relationship between you and your furniture is not a one-night stand, says Ellen Lupton, curator of contemporary design at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum: Sometimes it lasts a lifetime. That said, home life is rarely just sunshine and freshly made heirloom beds. It can be dark and complicated. "People kill each other," Ms. Lupton said recently. "They have affairs. They steal each other's money. Domestic life is hard. It's important to show its dark side. I like to see things that suggest that complexity." Early last Saturday morning, at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair at the Jacob

A roundup of new design from the show, by Marianne Rohrlich. Page 4



K. Javits Convention Center, Ms. Lupton, clutching a sketchbook, was hunting for that complexity — a challenge in a hall where so much floor space was devoted to the white leather offerings of large Italian furniture companies. She had to wander for a while before spotting her quarry, pulling up short at the booth of an English design firm, Thelermont Hupton Ltd. In it, there were bright red kitchen knives sunk deep in a wall (and meant to be used as coat hooks, \$32), surveillance cameras in primary colors with mirrors instead of lenses (\$160), and plain white teacups that were tipped over and strewn along a shelf, like the detritus from a long day in bankruptcy court (\$50 for three). Ms. Lupton grinned broadly and rocked a bit on her orange rubber sandals.

"Really good design is an object that makes you think about how we behave and our social conventions but still really works," she said, hanging her shoulder bag on one of the knives and noting that each teacup was designed to sit upright, too, and actually hold tea. "And these work really well." Thelermont Hupton was one of 552 exhibitors — 212 of them first-timers — that came from as far away as Australia and Vietnam, as nearby as Seattle and Brooklyn, to show at the 21st annual I.C.F.F. "It's not a museum, it's a marketplace," Ms. Lupton said of the fair. "I go to see what's happening in the world of commercial progressive design. I like cruising along the edges, seeing the people with just one product. I just find it very democratic." *Continued on Page 4*

INSIDE



6 SHOPPING
Flexible furnishings for outdoor spaces.
By Rima Suqi

ATHOME WITH

AMY STEWART

Warning: Paralysis May Result

By JOYCE WADLER

HERE we are, squatting in the chocolate-scented mulch of Amy Stewart's poison garden. The smell comes from the cocoa hulls. Good thing you're not a dog; according to Ms. Stewart, the theorist of "Wicked Plants: The Weed That Killed Lincoln's Mother & Other Botanical Atrocities" (Algonquin), a new book that inspired the coming "Wicked Plants" exhibition at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, has plenty of plants on hand to deal



JOY WADLER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

NOT ALL BAD
Amy Stewart grows poisonous plants but also has a soft spot for benign ones, like those at left.

with any human who annoys her. And you know how sensitive authors on the cusp of publication can be. Foxglove, opium poppies and castor beans, among a total of about 40 varieties of toxic plants, are thriving outside her house in Northern California. There are singular garden ornaments, too: a miniature tombstone for Socrates next to the hemlock; one reading "Death By Asphyxiation" beside the monkshood; another that says "Kidney Failure" (that would be for cats) beside the lilies. And don't get her started on the "Madness" stone. "All of my favorite little hallucinogens are here," says Ms. Stewart, who is 39 and whose distinctive markings include a head of curly strawberry hair, Birkenstocks and a sunny disposition. She zooms in on a stumpy plant starting to bloom. "This is datura," she says. "In August, this will have white trumpet-shaped flowers. They also

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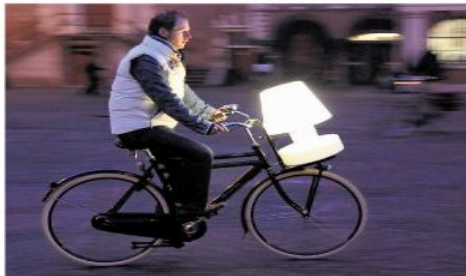
Furniture Comes Out to Play

By MARIANNE ROHRLICH

THE recession might have cast a pall over the retail market this past winter, but there seemed to be hope for home design — at least on the part of those who sell it — in the halls of the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center this week. There were 552 exhibitors at this year's International Contemporary Furniture Fair — about 50 fewer than last year — but those who came brought plenty of newly designed products, many of them made in places like Brooklyn and Los Angeles. And after the ascendancy of dark woods and vintage references in recent seasons, this show was notable for bright colors, simple forms and a preponderance of environmentally friendly and unstained reclaimed woods.



Cortica, a recycled-cork lounge chair by Daniel Michalik; \$4,800 from DMFD, (347) 556-1906, danielmichalik.com.



Portable lamp with rechargeable battery by Bloom; \$500 or \$525, depending on size, at M2L, (800) 319-8222, m2lcollection.com.

Agatha, a hanging light made of wood strips, by LZP; \$1,998, from (914) 591-4095, globallighting.com for dealers.



Coat Tree wall sticker (hooks not included); \$125 from Ferm Living, (415) 318-6412, fermilivingshop.com.



Submarine Activity Station, a child's desk, by Skyline Design; \$3,950, at (888) 278-4660, skydesign.com.



Customizable cabinets: 81-inch-wide frame, \$526; doors, \$85 each; drawers, \$380 to \$460, at Load-bearing, (646) 336-8302, loadbearing.com.



Polyester-filled cotton poufs with knitted wool covers; Henry (small), \$349; Ernest (medium), \$499; Frank (large), \$625, at the Future Perfect, (877) 388-7373, thefutureperfect.com.



Drake indoor-outdoor stacking chair; \$365, from Council Design, (415) 550-1750, councildesign.com.



Iron-shape rubber bookends by Maarten De Ceulaer; \$250 a pair, at 011-32-494-894-730, maartendeceulaer.com.

Kicking the Tires: Taking On the Inter

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in that way." Ms. Lupton is an advocate for the designer in us all, not just the trained professional. Design, she'll tell you, describes more than the function and aesthetics of an object: It's critical thinking married to action, a discipline that can inform how you arrange your furniture, manage your time or prepare a PowerPoint presentation. "Design is everywhere," she said. "It's not just shopping." This is the philosophy behind her new book, "Design your Life: The Pleasures and Perils of Everyday Things," written with her twin, Julia Lupton, an English professor at the University of California, Irvine. In it, Ellen Lupton questions the necessity of toasters; ponders the decorating challenge posed by the wedge, a foam prop used as a sex aid; and suggests that working mothers endeavor to spend less time with their children by embracing the television set. Both sisters contributed essays to the book, but Ellen Lupton's observations are not confined to the printed word. Her impish paintings — Wayne Thiebaud by way of Maira Kalman — propose the existential dilemma of an unmade bed, explore the difficulties of hanging clown art properly and imagine the cover of a magazine for working fathers (sample cover line: "Want to breast-feed? Well, you can't"). They are as much commentary on design as illustration of it. She likes objects embedded with ideas and stories, and furniture that is multifunctional (a built-in joke can be seen as an added function, she suggested, unless the joke destroys the utility of the object). At the fair, she was drawn to an English wallpaper — a cartoonish midcentury pattern of birds in a forest from Chato & Company — that recalled the opening credits for a Rock Hudson-

Doris Day vehicle but that Ms. Lupton saw in a more contemporary light, as an echo of the Twitter home page graphics. She is also a fan of the kind of alchemy involved "when people take a generic and familiar object and make it new," she said, running her hands over the forest of dowel sticks that held up a \$2,600 bamboo bookshelf designed by Michael Iannone for his own firm in Philadelphia. At a booth of three Brooklyn furniture designers, she found another example, a clean-lined sofa by Doug Fanning that was made with a shelf for storage under its legs, priced at \$8,700. "It's taking a classic form and adding functionality," she said. And at the Ikea booth — actually three rooms of new objects infused with a Swedish country vibe — there were four-poster beds that looked like elegant cages (\$499): "I do think people like to be enclosed," Ms. Lupton said, trying one out. She also admired an appealingly goofy grandfather clock lined with shelves that were filled with Swedish paperbacks with the covers torn off (the PS Pendel clock, \$189). "Grandpa grew up and got a job," she said with approval. Ms. Lupton shuddered at a booth in which a chandelier sported lingerie instead of crystals, and then sank gratefully onto a foam pouf designed by Alissa Melka-Techroew and Ilona Huvemaars and shaped to look like a tree stump (\$140) at the booth of Kikkerland, a Dutch design collective based in New York. Stump seating was well represented at the fair, at least the conventional kind made from petrified wood, dotting the place like so many nicotine-stained molars and generally failing to tempt Ms. Lupton. "Tree stumps are an ancient form of furniture," she said, "but they're really hard to move around." She also seemed unimpressed by the ergoErgo, an orange plastic stump like a spring that had its

What She Saw

Ellen Lupton, the curator of contemporary design at the Cooper-Hewitt, roamed the International Contemporary Furniture Fair, sketchbook in hand, searching for objects that told a story — and sometimes came with a built-in joke. Here are some of the resulting notes and paintings.



SCATTERED TEA SET FROM THELERMONT HUPTON

"These teacups look like they've been knocked over. They suggest a new way to set your table that acknowledges social conflict and personal dysfunction. But when it's time to pass around the teapot, each cup can stand up and be useful."

WOODEN TORCH BY JONAS DAMON AT AREAWARE

Designer Jonas Damon reinvented the iconic flashlight by switching out the materials and technology: wood trumps plastic, and eco-friendly LED replaces the incandescent bulb. A soft rubber button accents sensuality."



GRANDFATHER CLOCK FROM IKEA "Grandpa grew up and got a job. This new clock from Ikea updates the classic pendulum clock case housing a big, bold timepiece in side a handy bookshelf."





Lace, a hand-screened custom-made wallpaper panel (22 by 84 inches) by Tracy Kendall; \$190, at Ted Boerner, (212) 675-5665.



Legs 11, 10-foot-square inflatable changing room; \$1,900, from Inflate USA, (212) 537-9309, inflate.us.



Birch cabinet, inspired by a Josef Frank design; \$249, at Ikea (in August), (800) 434-4532, ikea.com for locations.



PS Collection 9-foot-square cotton rug; \$299, at Ikea (available in August), (800) 434-4532, ikea.com for locations.



Cabinet made of recycled wood on metal legs; \$355 (a second cabinet, \$280, may be stacked on top), from Mio, (215) 925-9359, mioculture.com.



Console desk made of reclaimed ash; \$1,375, at Moe, (917) 569-7674, studiomo.com.



Eileen, a metal lamp that leans against a wall or in a corner; \$775, from Misewell, (262) 994-8613, misewell.com.



Big Block, a wool rug (4 by 6 feet); \$960 (other sizes available) from Balanced Design, (401) 486-3589, balanced-design.com.



PS Collection birch-frame daybed; \$499 at Ikea (available in August), (800) 434-4532, ikea.com for locations.



Fiberglass side table with auto-body paint finish (can be turned over and used as planter), by Reza Feiz; \$660, at Phase Design, (323) 654-0299, phasedesignonline.com.

Noteworthy, But Not in Stores



COMING SOON Lamp No. 1, made of glass with fabric shade and adjustable cord, by Nicolò Taliani; about \$360 to \$940; information: nicolotaliani.com.



LIMITED EDITION Pile of Suitcases, handmade of leather by Maarten De Ceulaer; about \$34,000 at 011-39-02-780-193, nitufar.com. (Valises, machine-made of recycled leather, is about \$16,300 at 011-39-0423-6753, casamania.it.)



PROTOTYPE The Unified dining table, a lacquered plastic cart with a dinner service on a tray, by Min Hoo Park (the tray can be flipped to create a flat surface); about \$1,000; information: minhoopark@gmail.com.

national Contemporary Furniture Fair



BROKEN TABLE FROM UMBRA
"This slab of glass is sitting on a wooden table that's been cracked in half. The result is more than an image of today's broken home — it's a functional piece that gives you a place to stash your magazines (and maybe your divorce papers)."



STUMP TABLE FROM KIKKERLAND
"These foam stumps from Kikkerland feel like marshmallows and come dressed in Easter colors: chocolate, vanilla and baby blue."

own booth and promised its sitter an ongoing core workout (\$99.95). Ms. Lupton sat down irritatedly on one. "I don't want to exercise while I'm sitting," she said, and sketched a suited gentleman perched on another into a rude cartoon.

At Umbra, she fell upon Splice, a wooden coffee table cracked in half, like the aftermath of a nasty domestic dispute (\$725). "You could store your magazines in the cracked part," she said. "Or your divorce papers." Matt Carr, Umbra's design director, explained that the piece was made by Menomonites in Canada, which is noteworthy given that Mennonites, like Quakers, are renowned for their commitment to nonviolence. "Having come from a more or less happily broken home," Ms. Lupton said, "I enjoy those kinds of contradictions. Domestic life is full of uncertainty."

Ms. Lupton said her parents — her mother taught literature, her father dropped out of academe to become a contractor — divorced when she was 10 and shared custody of their two daughters, for a while living side by side in row houses in Baltimore. The sisters hopped the fences to visit their parents, she said.

Several booths away, Ms. Lupton found domestic resolution in a "stitched table" at Uhuru, part of the Brooklyn Designs collective, which had set up a booth toward the back of the exhibition floor, near where the design colleges were presenting their student work. The coffee table is made from two slabs of walnut "stitched together" with plastic X's (\$4,800). Ms. Lupton liked its natural-industrial yin-yang, and the story that accompanied it. Those X's are sliced from sheets of recycled plastic (shredded detergent bottles that have been pressure molded, in fact). And that walnut died a natural death, according to Uhuru's Web site, which proclaims that the wood was harvested from trees that had "come to the end of their natural lifespan

disease," like an old horse.

Ms. Lupton skirted the Italian section, acres of tundra-like exhibition space flecked with those glacier-white sofas. What did it all mean? "Freedom from want?" Ms. Lupton suggested. "When you have everything you need you get white leather?"

At the very back of the floor, young designers were selling small items, "just like a bake sale," Ms. Lupton said delightedly. She bought a Tyvek wallet, \$10, from Dynamighty Design, that looked like a page torn from a ring binder and folded origami-style (written inside was the present tense

'I like things that have a sense of humor. They just seem more true to life.'

conjugation of the French word for "to buy").

Around a corner, there was a little knot of people around the ModKat, a \$180 kitty litter box in glossy plastic. Pez-shaped and high-sided, it looked like a piece of office equipment, a stylish paper shredder perhaps, destined for a cubicle in the Scarlett-Lehigh Building. Ms. Lupton approved of the design process of its makers. "They've studied kitty behavior and worked from there," she said, referring to the feline propensity for jumping into and out of enclosed spaces. "And it looks like the iPod of litter boxes." (In her book, Ms. Lupton shows how design can influence behavior by depicting how most toilet paper holders discourage family members from copious toilet paper use. Can

sider a simple horizontal bar open on one end, she advises; the double-dowel numbers are seemingly too complicated for the average teenager or spouse.)

At a booth showing the work of Pratt students who'd been challenged to make pieces for under a dollar, David Steinvurzel was also thinking about waste when he designed sweetly simple votive holders from orange peels. A concrete side table made by his classmate Daniel Jeffries by pouring wet concrete into a garbage bag looked like a mushroom cloud, a mini-apocalypse for your living room. A Cranbrook student, Isaac Yu Chen, had made a magazine rack out of a slice of wood from which hung cables ending in spheres the size of table-tennis balls. It was elegant, perhaps even brilliant, and a Cranbrook professor worried aloud that you'd see it in the Ikea catalog by next season.

Before leaving, Ms. Lupton refreshed herself with eggplant parmesan in the Javits Center food court, where a television with the sound turned off was tuned to a call-in show about finances. "Dealing with the Repo Man," read a graphic running along the bottom of the screen.

"Good design is always about the truth," she said. It can be a weighty truth, like the world is out of whack, or a little one, like no one in my family will replace the toilet paper. And the biggest truth, she suggested, is that real life is just funny. "I think our things should reflect that. There is a lot of illusion in design, a lot of surface and playing with reality. That's why I like things that have a sense of humor. They just seem more true to life."

Getting up to leave, she tipped her leftovers into the garbage can, then glanced back at the swinging flap of the bin that was stamped with the words "Thank You." "You know," she said, "if you were from another country, you'd think 'thank you' was the word for garbage."