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Above, a unique handblown glass "Biomorphic Bubble," designed in 2008 by Jeff Zimmerman. Opposite page: Brazilian designer Julia Krantz's eight foot long "Sofá Güell," a one-of-a-kind 2008 piece made of stack-laminated plywood.



## Room for the New

By showing emerging talent alongside icons of the last century, a Manhattan gallery joins a small and adventurous group of design dealers in doing what art galleries have done for years

BY JEN RENZI

Vintage-furniture dealers Zesty Meyers and Evan Snyderman are like truffle hunters, sniffing out undiscovered designers for their Tribeca gallery, R 20th Century. “We’ve never sold a piece of Prouvé or Nakashima,” says Snyderman. “That’s not our thing. Our niche is sourcing overlooked or underexposed talent for which we can build a new market.” Research missions have taken them as far afield as Sweden, birthplace of California modernist Greta Magnusson Grossman, and Brazil, home of mid-century masters such as Sergio Rodrigues and Joaquim Tenreiro.



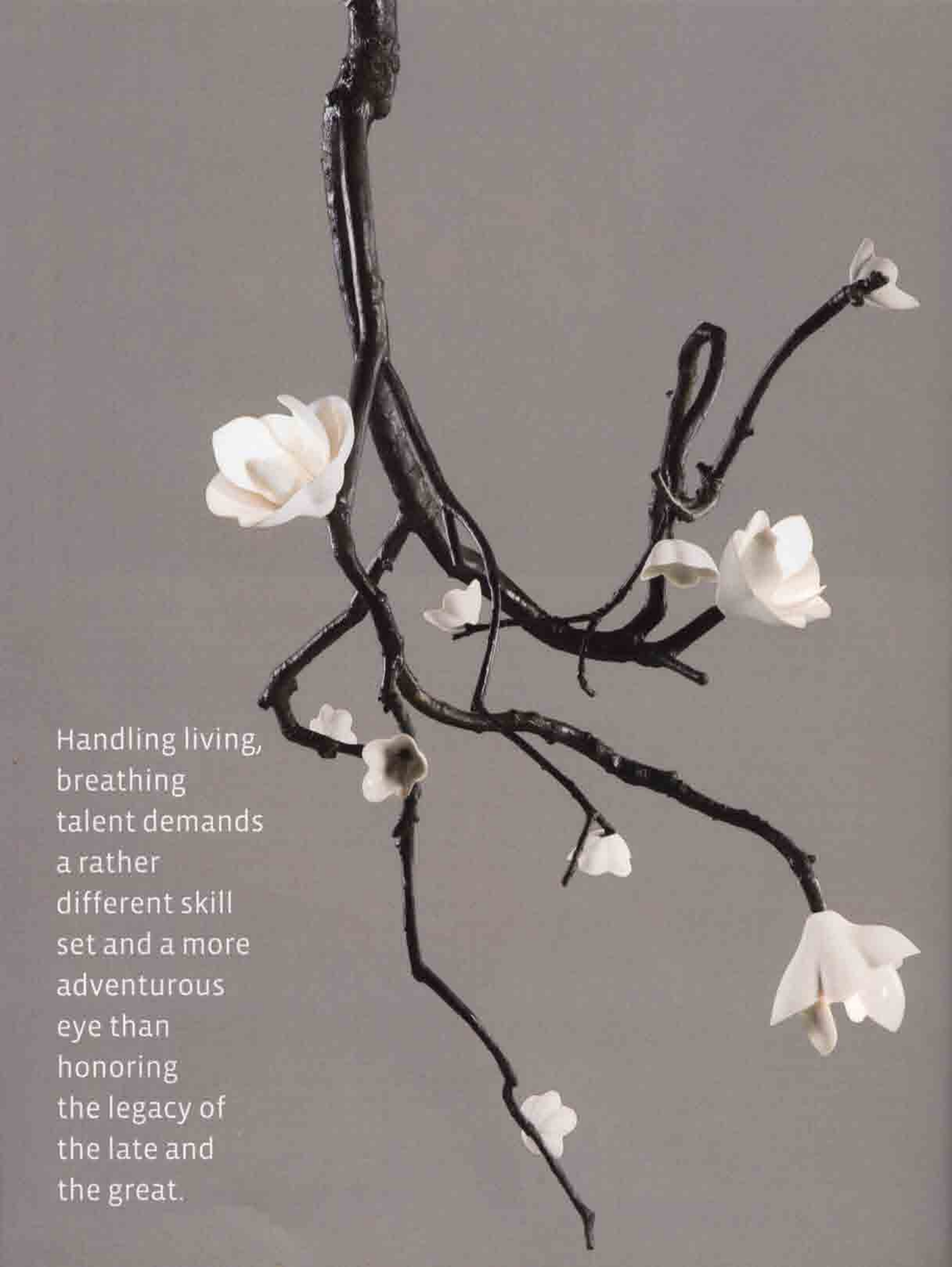
More recently, though, the hunt for the Next Great Thing has taken them to an entirely unexpected place: the twenty-first century. The gallery’s assemblage of twentieth-century pieces—Verner Panton lighting, Poul Kjaerholm lounges—is now joined by voluptuous laminated-wood sofas by emerging Brazilian star Julia Krantz and porcelain chandeliers by David Wiseman of California. “Five years ago, I never imagined we’d be selling contemporary design,” Snyderman says. “And now it accounts for 30 to 40 percent of our business.” The new move began as something of a fluke: In 2004, the duo’s friend artist Jeff Zimmerman brought over a series of his glass sculptures and asked if they’d consider exhibiting them. “Which we did out of friendship,” Meyers recalls. “But then we sold everything overnight. It was *insane*.”



Above, Jeff Zimmerman's eight-foot long 2006 design "Vine" is made of brass and opaline glass. Hugo França's "Mararé" coffee table, opposite page, top, is a 2007 design made of solid *gameleira* wood. Krantz's "Poltrona Maia" lounge chair, opposite page, bottom, was designed in 2008. It was made in an edition of ten, plus four artist's proofs.

R is not the only gallery to pair modernist masterworks with limited-edition furnishings by contemporary designers. Cristina Grajales shows Michele Oka Doner and Christophe Côme alongside Jean Royère and Carlo Mollino; Magen H Gallery commingles postwar French gems and kinetic Forrest Myers chairs; Johnson Trading Gallery nurtures the careers of Max Lamb and Aranda/Lasch while dealing Noguchis and Nakashimas. But the business model for this kind of gallery is only just emerging. It's far more common for a contemporary-art gallery to expand into cutting-edge design (see Gagosian, Sonnabend, Lehmann Maupin) than for vintage-design dealers to make that same transition. Handling living, breathing talent demands a rather different skill set and a more adventurous eye than honoring the legacy of the late and the great.

Meyers and Snyderman are particularly adept at artist relations—probably because they are artists themselves. Before launching the gallery in 1997, both were members of a performance-art group that crafted installations from molten glass. (Zimmerman was also a member.) They thus have an insider's understanding of exhibition logistics and the magic of the creative process—not to mention the fragility of the artist's ego. Many of the designers in the R stable sought the dealers out for these reasons, including Brazilian designer Hugo França, who sculpts monumental furnishings from giant hunks of salvaged *pequi* wood. "Hugo came to us because he wasn't happy with his previous representation," says Snyderman. "He had such a great story to tell about the intensive, primitive way his pieces are made, [and that story hadn't gotten out]."

A dark, gnarled branch with several white, delicate flowers against a grey background. The branch is the central focus, with several smaller branches extending from it. The flowers are small and have a delicate, papery texture. The background is a solid, light grey color.

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David Wiseman, who works in Los Angeles, designed the bronze- and-porcelain illuminated branch, opposite page, in 2008. França's pequi wood "Yuruá" armchair, above, is a 2005 design. His eight-foot-long "Mesa Joatinga" coffee table, below, was designed in 2005 and made of pequi

A creative visionary with a hearty respect for craftsmanship and design history, França fits into R's mold. "We have a unique take on the contemporary market," Meyers explains. "The designers we represent are directly connected to the making process." Even Wendell Castle, who has worked with a crew of assistants since the 1960s, still hand-carves the wood molds in which his fiberglass pieces are cast. The result is something unique and uniquely appealing to R's clientele, many of whom are art collectors. "This audience wants something they can have ownership of," Meyers says. "Commissioning a one-off gives them something tailored to their needs that's also incredibly personal." It's a win-win situation. R builds a closer relationship with its clients through the artists, and the resulting design is a true collaboration—and a true original.

Contemporary designs—whether one-offs or limited editions—offer something else to collectors weaned on contemporary art: the perception of a safer investment. With new designers, R can create and control the market. This is much harder to do in the vintage arena, where price differentials are common and confusing. "We have a lot to learn from the French, who understand the importance of dealers partnering to control pricing in a way that makes sense to the collector and builds their confidence," says Snyderman. "So if they find the same chair in two galleries, it'll be the same price. American dealers have been less willing to communicate until very recently, when shows like Art Basel and London Design brought us together and provided an opportunity for us to ask each other, 'How can we better our business?'"

Investing in emerging talent is not without risk. Meyers and Snyderman believe they are fostering the next generation of Greta Grossmans and Verner Pantons, so they have both a financial and an emotional stake in the artists' success; they have funded the production of new editions, sourced wood for some designers, and helped hire studio assistants for others. But how well Zimmerman or Wiseman withstand the test of time remains to be seen.

Working with contemporary designers is also a way for R to stave off the inevitable: as the market for vintage furniture expands, there will be less of it to sell. "We are going to run out of material one day," Meyers laments. "And did we work this hard to let it all go? We don't want to hoard pieces, but we can't replace a lot of what we sell. People still haven't realized that when we say, 'This the only one we've ever seen,' it's truly the only one we've ever seen! Once things are gone, they're gone forever."

*Jen Renzi is a New York writer who specializes in design.*

