

'Constructing/ Deconstructing AbEx Collage'

Hollis Taggart

In this show of collages by mid-20th-century heavyweights such as Robert Motherwell, Mary Abbott, and Jack Roth, canvases ranging from monumental to mini bore a distinctive quality of "made-ness," in which image (and meaning) was still hanging in the balance. Motherwell's *Dublin Collage* (1975), for instance, holds an actual box of McClinton's Barilla Soap, a cut-out green box, clawed by gnarls of black paint and splatters against a gray and blue background.

Bigger, mostly nonfigurative works dominated the main room. Conrad Marca-Relli, well represented here, overpowered the space with collages, using burlap, oil, and paper to create expansive yet knotty and tense canvases. His *Taos #2* (1961) refers to the southwest landscape in swathes of taupe-beige cloth but renders it rugged and unsettling with the surface's unfinished quality.

The latter part of the exhibition's title—"Deconstructing AbEx Collage"—had special significance, as the presentation overlapped with another of the gallery's shows, "From Surrealism to Pop: the Aesthetics of Collage." It was a juxtaposition that could confuse viewers at times but which was also illuminating. That grouping included a 1979 untitled collage by Robert Rauschenberg that centers on an

image of a heron mid-flight, pasted on yellowed paper and pulsing with drawn gray moons and radar circles. The bird appears to be flying away from a piece of checkered tablecloth, as if it were all part of a map in code. The Rauschenberg was a fitting choice, as it, like the artist, could be viewed as a bridge between the movements on view.

One could also trace Marca-Relli's trajectory through these two shows. In *The Sunday Caller* (1982), a collage of various stripes, burlap, and blue-and-gray paint create a scene in which two magazine-clipping women share a drink. One stares out at us, looking at once inviting and bored, as if to herald us into Pop. —**Ali Pechman**

Wendell Castle

Barry Friedman Ltd.
and Friedman Benda

Sliding into one of Wendell Castle's latest bowl-shaped chairs is a melt-worthy experience. The polished ash or walnut cradles your lower back and thighs, negating the "hard" in hardwood. These scooped-out chairs and settees, along with tables bearing bases that resemble



Wendell Castle, *Like an Echo*, 2012, stained walnut with oil finish, 26 1/4" x 43 1/2" x 38 1/2". Barry Friedman Ltd.

piled warheads, were the focus of "Volumes and Voids" at Barry Friedman. To make the works, Castle carves stacked-and-laminated boards into solid, biomorphic forms; the grain of the wood creates looping patterns across the surfaces.

Most pieces are stained black, but rather than having ominous overtones, they project a spirit of lightheartedness.

Castle expresses his quirky humor in the legs of his furniture. Seats like *More Is More* (2011) and *What We Know* (2012) rest on fat supports that resemble elephant limbs, and the equally stubby *Like an Echo* (2012) faces upward like a dog begging for a treat. Others look as though they're teetering on clown shoes. Castle avoids treading into cartoon territory by focusing on the balance between delicacy and weightiness in his rounded abstract structures.

Downstairs, the show at Friedman Benda centered on *A New Environment* (2012), an installation that was more art than design, although it was still perfectly functional. Suggesting a Space Age bachelor pad or an adult playhouse, the all-black installation is made up of three bowled chairs, a couple of end tables, a totem-pole-like column topped by pin-hole lights, and a spine-shaped staircase leading to a private, shag-carpet-lined pod with portholes. Everything rises from scratched wooden tiles that provide a textural counterpoint to the smooth, organic furnishings.

A New Environment is a kind of sequel to Castle's *Environment for Contemplation*, another sculpted domain from 1969, though the new one was set up for socializing rather than meditation. That's not to say this double exhibition was a nostalgic repetition of Castle's established forms. Instead, it showed the shape of things to come from this furniture-design lion.

—**Trent Morse**



Conrad Marca-Relli, *Summer Noon J-L-20-68*, 1968, oil, canvas, and burlap collage on canvas, 53" x 72". Hollis Taggart.