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## Goddess of Small Things

At her London gallery, Libby Sellers is bringing a curator's eye to design—and elevating everyday objects to fine art

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**IT WOULD BE EASY TO MISTAKE** Gallery Libby Sellers for one of London's leading contemporary art spaces. For starters, there's the sprawling whitewashed interior, parquet floor and conspicuous absence of cash registers. Then there's the location of the gallery itself, situated in the West End district of Fitzrovia, the latest fashionable destination for modern art in the city. And there are the works on display, meticulously set out on pedestals and plinths. Only you won't find art here. Instead, what visitors come to look at, admire and maybe even purchase are objects more typically found on department store shelves: vases, blankets, even chess sets.

**Photos: Libby Seller's Gallery Show**



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The Carpetalogue 4: Japan M/M Paris, 2012, Image by Gideon Hart, Courtesy Gallery Libby Sellers

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It's little wonder that Libby Sellers, the gallery's 40-year-old founder, has emerged as one of the leading voices in the design world. She's on the vanguard of curator-retailers who are giving design the same aesthetic attention as artwork, while also insisting that beautifully crafted objects can and should be used at home. "A typical retailer is really just getting stock in—not that there is anything wrong with that. But those 20 lemon squeezers are competing against each other for attention," she says on a rare sunny day in London, her blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. "Giving them space allows their story to be more easily heard."

Sellers, who moved into her gallery on Berners Street a little more than a year ago, hopes to present the work of cutting-edge designers in a forum that invites discussion and debate—thus, changing the way the medium has been traditionally viewed. "I've always been more drawn to things that enable me to challenge people's perceptions and expectations," she says. Her inaugural exhibition featured the Italian design duo Formafantasma, who presented a textile series called *Colony*, an assemblage of mohair and mixed-media blankets meant as a critique of Italian imperialism in Africa. The exhibition "Pyramids of Makkum," which Sellers put on earlier this year, showcased a whimsical collection of sculptural tulip pyramids—contemporary interpretations of 17th-century Delftware that were produced by the oldest ceramics firm in Holland.

"I like expanding people's vision of what design is," she says. "I'm trying to celebrate the breadth and the diversity of our built environment, not just through kettles and teapots but through floristry, new media, fashion and textiles."

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**1. Apple's Rising Mr. Fix-It**

Sellers has an academic's understanding of design history combined with years of museum experience. During her seven-year tenure as senior curator for London's Design Museum, she was responsible for staging some of that institution's most memorable shows, including the first British retrospectives of the influential industrial designer Marc Newson and the graphic designer Peter Saville, who created album covers for musical artists like Joy Division and New Order. Another of Sellers's shows championed Constance Spry, the social reformer, author and florist who educated millions of British people on the art of beautifying their homes in the mid-20th century. "That did cause a little chaos at the museum, for we hadn't done floristry before," she admits. "But I loved Spry's story, the fact that she made the British believe that they could feel like millionaires for just a couple of pence by simply plucking something from a hedgerow, shoving it into a soup terrine and creating a beautiful display."

While at the Design Museum, Sellers curated an ambitious series of small shows called "Design Mart," aimed at presenting the work of young designers to the public. She relished collaborating with "emerging practitioners and giving them a platform to express work that was outside of the mainstream," she says. "I suppose that gave me a taste for what I wanted to do next." Inspired by the success of events like Design Miami, the growing design scene in London and visionary places that blurred the line between retail store and gallery—including Galerie Kreo in Paris and Murray Moss's now-shuttered mecca in New York—Sellers left the security of the museum to start her own venture in 2007.

With limited capital and the recession looming, she began organizing riotous pop-up shows in semipermanent venues across London and the States, and also in Paris, where Sellers has a second home, an 18th-century apartment in the heart of the Marais that's been transformed into a contemporary haven by Ab Rogers, son of the architect Richard Rogers. "I had never worked as a commercial gallerist before, and I wasn't brave enough to just sign a lease, so this was my organic, slow way into things," she says. At her pop-ups, she would present the work of designers like Peter Marigold, Fabien Cappello and Julia Lohmann. For the most part these young talents were fresh from design school—where Sellers had often spotted them at their graduation shows—and, at the time, relatively unknown, but if anything, that spurred her on. The shows grew to be financially successful and hugely popular—so much so that Sellers compares them, not without fondness, to circuses.

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Sellers is revered for her eye for talent, but also for her willingness to stick with projects most curators would consider commercially unviable. She's also managed to introduce high-concept design to an entirely new demographic. Critics say that is the key to her success, though she prefers to chalk it up to simply working with such great talent. She jokingly refers to the designs she shows as her "children," but she could also be referring to the artists and craftspeople with whom she collaborates: Not only does she commission a great deal of original work for her exhibitions, she also supports her stable of talent from conceptualization to production and presentation. "It's much more than just giving these designers a gallery and saying, 'Here is a space, play with it.' It's about building a conversation," she explains. "We take on many more roles than just being the salespeople: We do their PR; we are advising and editing the pieces that they are producing; and we are helping make the right connections. If they can't find the right person to blow that piece of glass, we will point them in the direction of the right foundry." This fall, to mark the 20th anniversary of the graphic designers M/M (Paris) (Mathias Augustyniak and Michael Amzalag), Sellers commissioned an exhibition of elaborate, limited-edition hand-knotted wool carpets. They served as a condensed catalog—or "carpet-ologue," as she dubbed it—of the firm's work.

Like most curators, Sellers is tight-lipped about her client list. "We have the committed collector, the person who is excited about sofas and chairs," she says. "And then there's the person who just walks in off the street, having seen something in the window that's caught their eye." If her client list is eclectic, her price list seems tailored to match. Though certain designers and materials can fetch upwards of tens of thousands of pounds, there are more affordable objects on offer too. At a recent group exhibition of wildly inventive chess sets (Sellers's nod to the London Olympic Games), she sold a paper version of the classic game for next to nothing. "That's what I love about design," she says. "There are the Brad Pitts and Angelina Jolies, who are well-known collectors of design, and then you have a 12-year-old boy who sees a paper chess set and realizes that he can buy it and own something special, and that is wonderful."

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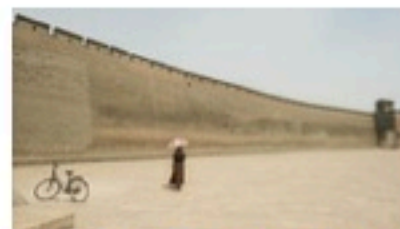
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