

Way of Women

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DESIGN AS A CULTURAL CONDUIT: LIBBY SELLERS

Design Historian / Gallery Director — *London (UK)*



Exterior of Gallery Libby Sellers, 2011. Photography by Ed Reeve

Libby Sellers is a Design historian/curator and Gallery Director. She moved to London from Australia 24 years ago. Five years ago Libby started her own gallery with the remit to support critical and progressive designs. Since then she has established her eponymous gallery as a serious contributor to the design world and the careers of the designers in her stable. The gallery is working towards an exciting collaboration with Royal Tichelaar Makkum, a presentation for Design Miami/Basel in June and a very special exhibition and series of events that takes a wry interpretation on the notion of Games to coincide with the Olympics. The last project also involves a special musical commission from rising composer Hannah Kendall in collaboration with the Richard Thomas Music Foundation, which will compliment the exhibition and debut in the gallery in the summer.



(Left) Installation view of Grandmateria II, 2011. Photography by Gideon Hart (Right) Installation view of "Tail Light" by Stuart Haygarth from Grandmateria II, 2011. Photography by Gideon Hart

Could you please tell us something about your background and career?

I am a graduate of the design history Master's degree at the Royal College of Art, run jointly with the Victoria and Albert Museum, and went on to co-found Restructure Ltd in 1999, a boutique curatorial company that provided design and architecture-related content for a variety of clients and institutions including the RIBA, Habitat, L'Oreal, Wordsearch and the Design Council (the last for which I curated the award-winning touring exhibition, Great Expectations). From 2001 to 2007 I was senior curator at the Design Museum, London. Exhibitions during this period included the first UK retrospectives of Marc Newson, Peter Saville and a celebration of the life and work of both Eileen Grey and Constance Spry. I also oversaw the frequently changing Tank exhibition program (a public arts initiative) and the annual Designer of the Year and Design Mart exhibitions. A frequent public speaker and commentator on design and contemporary culture, I am also a regular juror on design awards and an external examiner on design degree courses. I recently authored two publications for HSBC Private Bank, one on the cultures of collecting design, which launched during Design Miami/Basel 2010. In 2008 I was nominated for the Paul Hamlyn Breakthrough Fund for cultural entrepreneurs and in 2009 for the Wallpaper* Courvoisier Design Awards.

When and why did you decide to start Gallery Libby Sellers?

I had been working on a series of Design Museum exhibitions called Design Mart that offered emerging designers a platform to show their work in a curated environment with all the machinations of the museum's support at their disposal. At the time, there were few other opportunities to present critical and progressive and I was eager to develop this. The first show was in 2007, but I was operating the gallery as a 'pop-up' or 'guerilla gallery' (i.e. with no permanent home and temporary spaces for each and every exhibition). I took on the permanent gallery in September 2011.



Installation view of Formafantasma, Gallery Libby Sellers at Design Miami/Basel 2011. Photography by James Harris

Is your work about creating new ways of living? Why?

The gallery's agenda is really to offer a foundation for new modes of design production, promotion and thinking. We are encouraging an interpretation of design as a cultural conduit. Through this we hope to attract the patronage of consumers and collectors who want more from the objects they choose to surround themselves with than the homogenous and ubiquitous choices available on every high street from Shanghai, Sydney and Sao Paolo and instead to embrace designs that are more autonomous, individual and evocative of a creative spirit.

What kind of features does a design item need to catch your attention?

The objects that I'm drawn to are often very honest in their production and appeal on a conceptual or intellectual level. They always have an inherent function, however their real allure lies in their narrative or story behind their purpose.



(Left) "Brick Glass" by Fabien Cappello from Grandmaterica II, 2011. Photography by Gideon Hart (Right) Found animal bone, India ink and sterling silver vessel by Julia Lohmann and Gero Grundmann from Tidal Ossuary, 2009. Photography by Gideon Ha

What are the differences between your former job as senior curator of the London Design Museum and your present one? Is there anything you miss?

While at the Design Museum I was fortunate to have overseen a wide range of exhibitions, from the first UK surveys of both Marc Newson and Peter Saville, a retrospective of architect/designer Eileen Gray, a beautiful homage to the social reformer and florist Constance Spry, as well as the annual Designer of the Year awards exhibition. No two days were ever the same, so difference and variety have always been at the heart of my career. While there are obvious practical differences between being an employee and now an employer, with that added responsibility also comes the freedom to establish my own agenda; one that responds to the issues, topics, designers and materials that I feel are important.

In your opinion is there something about Gallery Libby Sellers that could be improved? Why?

I'd like to have our own front door, with direct access from the street.

What young designers should be aware of when approaching contemporary design market?

I'm surprised by how little design historical knowledge some emerging designers have, and I am often a little stunned when presented with an idea that actually had been realized decades beforehand by one of the godfathers of contemporary design such as Castiglioni, Mari or Kuramata. Consequently an awareness of where design has come from in order to understand where it can go to is a real asset to both obtain and hold onto.



Portrait of Libby Sellers. Photography by Joakim Blockström

Which new designers do strike you? Why?

Of course I have to say the designers I work with as otherwise I wouldn't work with them: Julia Lohmann, Fabien Cappello, Simon Hasan, Formafantasma, Nicolas Le Moigne, Peter Marigold, etc. However at the time of writing this, I am preparing to go to Milan for Salone del Mobile and I hope to learn about some new designers while there.

Who is the woman you'd like to see featured/ interviewed here?

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