

TALKING SHOP

Modern & Contemporary

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Two contemporary design exhibitions mine the best of modernism

This summer, two galleries—Galerie Maria Wettergren in Paris and R & Company in New York—have organized contemporary design exhibitions that respond to the legacy of modernism. Given that its critiques began percolating through the Western zeitgeist more than a half century ago, discussions of modernist design, whether for or against, haven't felt au courant for quite some time. The coincidence of these beautifully executed, modernist-themed projects is intriguing. Why now?



Modernism Crystallized: A Family Affair at Galerie Maria Wettergren.

Photo © Gregory Copitet



City Light Pendant by Boris Berlin & Daniel Berlin, 2020; Black Mirror Table by Boris Berlin & Germans Ermič, 2020. Photo © Galerie Maria Wettergren

Modernism Crystallized: A Family Affair at Galerie Maria Wettergren features a new body of work produced collaboratively by European designers Boris Berlin, Daniel Berlin, and Germans Ermič. Including seating, tables, and lighting, the collection is framed as a 21st-century interpretation of modernism's fixation on material reduction and innovation. At the same time, the designers undermine the modernist form-follows-function ethos by creating objects that seemingly dissolve away or self-replicate within their surroundings, playing with perceptions of light and space.

The idea to create this new collection by engaging modernist approaches began with Boris Berlin, who launched his studio in 1983—at the peak of postmodernism. “Modernism is the tree on which I grew up,” he explains. “There is a duality in reacting against anything. It is impossible to be rebellious against your parents if you do not have them. The rejection of heritage is the best proof of its presence. Ironically, unlike the great apostles of modernism, I feel myself to be a part of the continuously evolving historical narratives of all isms.”



Modernism Crystalized: A Family Affair at Galerie Maria Wettergren.

Photo © Gregory Copitet

Boris invited his son Daniel Berlin and his son's friend Germans Ermičs to collaborate on the project, bringing together multigenerational, nuanced views on modernism's legacy. "I think its influence is unavoidable, even if I don't think about it," Germans says. He adds: "The underlying principles are well alive in my practice, such as experimentation with shape and color and a great emphasis on material and manufacturing methods."

Daniel, in contrast, doesn't see much of an ongoing dialogue between his work and the principles that defined design for most of the last century: "I am not sure humanity has ever been modern. Any replicated pattern of practice becomes a style—and honestly style does not really interest me. I think architecture flourishes in the fecund perversion of rules and principles."



Sunburst Tall Glass Chair by Germans Ermičs, 2021. From Modernism Crystalized: A Family Affair at Galerie Maria Wettergren. Photo © Jussi Puikkonen

The varying perspectives of these three designers highlight the fact that, even with the benefit of a century of hindsight, the definition of what modernist design was and what it was meant to be remains elusive. Utopian ambitions certainly played a powerful role in the movement. Reducing designs to their most essential forms wasn't meant to be a mere aesthetic choice; it was meant to make design more suitable to mass production, which in turn would make life enhancing designs more affordable to more people, thereby raising standards of living for societies around the world. The vision, however, didn't turn out exactly as planned. Mass production led to rampant consumerism and, among other fallout, the consequent environmental catastrophe that we all face today.

Even so, Maria Wettergren and her designers aren't alone in thinking that multiple aspects of modernism remain relevant today, since many of its most fundamental expressions continue to define what it is to be a visionary designer. When asked about the positive side of the legacy, Maria says it's vital to forgo the movement's dogmatic and arrogant ideas of functionalism while keeping this compelling list of approaches intact: "the idea that the world has to be fundamentally rethought; rejecting stale norms and traditions; interdisciplinary processes and solutions; empirically driven experimentation; and striving for a better life through creative production."