

Financial Review Magazine Life & Luxury Design

New Australian design fair aims to capture cashed-up global collectors

Collectable and covetable pieces will be on show at a new fair in Melbourne, further entrenching that city's status as a global hub for design.

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Design editor
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When the inaugural Melbourne Design Fair opens its doors this month, it will align the city with global design capitals where similar collector fiestas flourish, notably London, Paris, Basel and Miami.

A collaboration between the Melbourne Art Foundation and the National Gallery of Victoria, the fair brings together 10 leading galleries, organisations and agencies – including Sullivan+Strumpf (Sydney), JamFactory (Adelaide) and Melbourne's Broached Commissions – to show one-off and limited-edition pieces that teeter along the increasingly fine line between art and design.



The walnut desk designed by Don Cameron.

"It's about cultural production anchored to function, embracing ideas and content," says Simone LeAmon, NGV curator of contemporary design and architecture. While each gallery has its distinct exhibition space within the former warehouse in an inglorious Abbotsford side street, LeAmon has also curated a section called Select, featuring 35 artist/designer/makers independent of gallery connections.

Like algorithmic architect Roland Snooks, who has scaled down one of his swoopy structural forms to create an edition of seven domestic pieces. Or Adam Goodrum, who will show his prototype Conversation chair, originally designed to showcase fabrics for Danish textile giant Kvadrat.

Su san Cohn, whose sculpture and jewellery is dealt through Anna Schwartz Gallery, will be putting the prototype of her Cohncave bowl, designed for Alessi in the early '90s, up for sale.



Adam Goodrum's Conversation seating.

The NGV established its Department of Contemporary Design and Architecture seven years ago. Since then, there's been greater visibility of contemporary collectable designers, says LeAmon.

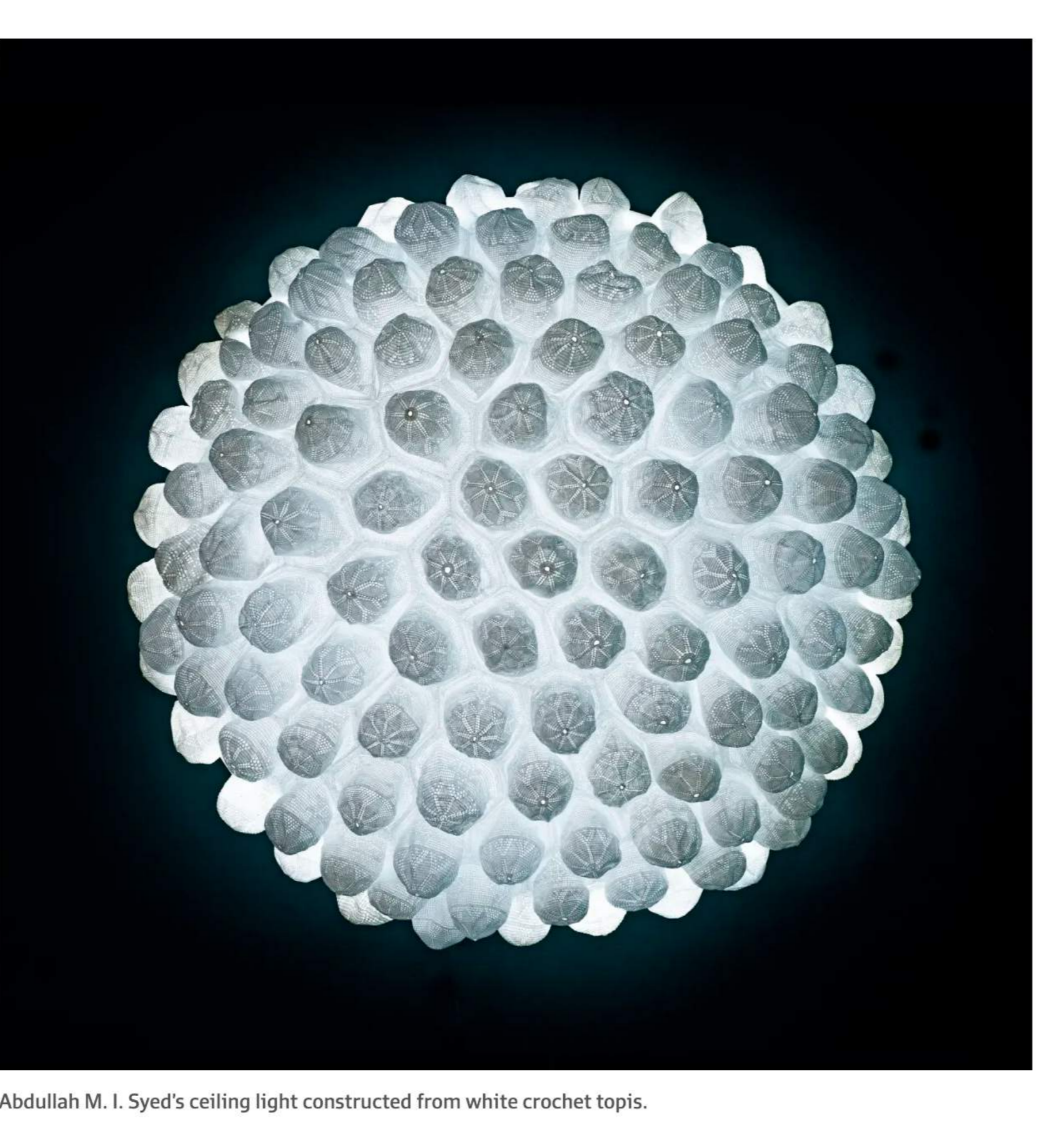
"We've been actively acquiring, but there's only so much the NGV can acquire. The Melbourne Design Fair is a platform to encourage active collecting."

While the NGV brings its curatorial vision, the Melbourne Art Foundation, established in 1988, brings its commercial expertise, says Maree di Pasquale, chief executive of the MDF. "We really understand the business of delivering a fair like this and making it commercially successful."



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The Melbourne Design Fair will run for five days, consecutive with Melbourne Design Week which has been held under the auspices of the NGV since 2017. The effect is that of critical mass: by stimulating the collectable design sector, the NGV is encouraging practitioners in adjacent creative practices to enter the field.



Abdullah M. I. Syed's ceiling light constructed from white crochet tops.

For instance, Don Cameron – renowned as an importer of rare mid-century European design and as an interior consultant for a discerning clientele – will unveil a solid walnut desk of his own design.

An extrapolation of a 20-year photographic project exploring the beauty of brutalist architecture, the sensuously rounded, robustly blunt form echoes the shape of concrete bunkers found along the English Channel since World War II.

Artist Abdullah M. I. Syed – who was in residence at Sydney's Art Space in 2019-20 – will show a ceiling light constructed from white crochet tops (skull caps) that, he says, "encapsulates the concepts of unity, beauty and infinite presence of Divine in Islam and its relation in particular, to light".

Both Cameron and Syed are now represented by Sally Dan-Cuthbert, who in late 2019 founded her eponymous gallery, the first in this country to specialise in what she calls "functional art".

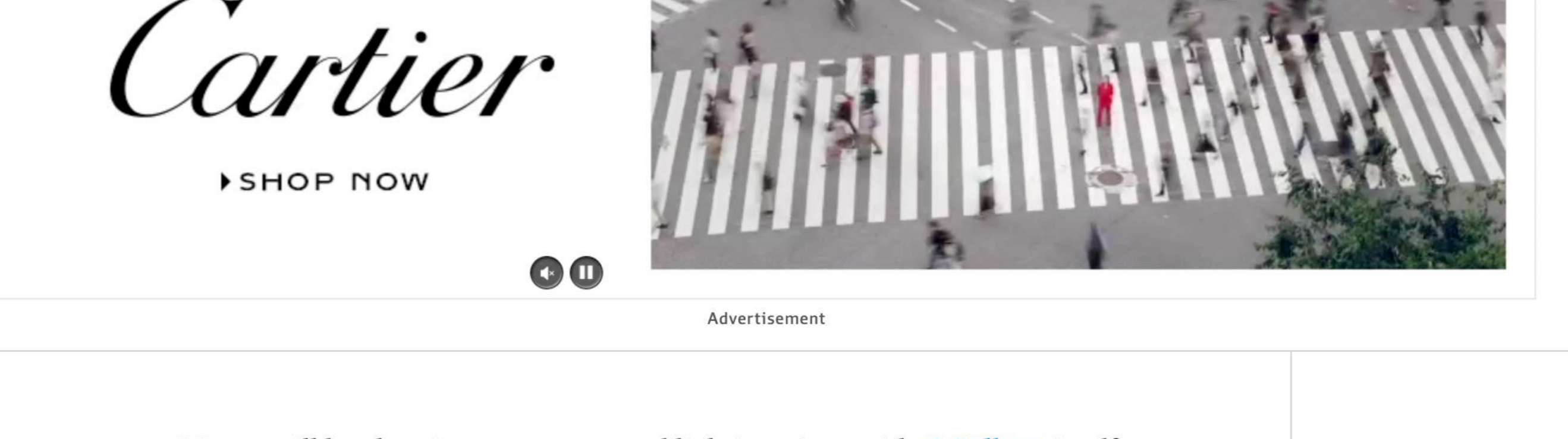
"I think this flourishing of interest shows that our instincts were right," she says. "Australian collectors are now appreciating not just the visual art, but the functional arts and collectable design."



A Ben Mazzy ceramic wall-mounted candleholder.

Ben Mazzy, who was Paris-based for seven years, where he designed for LVMH-owned fashion brand Kenzo, has recently settled in Melbourne where he has taken up ceramic design. Ostensibly, he hand-builds prototypical (almost cartoonish) shapes – a lamp, say, or a candleholder – from slabs of clay, but along the way imbues them with an off-kilter poetry.

Leaning into the imperfections inherent in the medium and technique ("you're basically building something with your hands out of dirt") he seals the flaws within sumptuous, unctuous glazes; hard eye-candy.



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Mazzy will be showing a monumental lighting piece with C-Gallery, itself a new functional art gallery opened mid-last year as an adjunct to upmarket furniture importer Criteria.

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Established fairs such as Design Miami and its progenitor, Design Miami/Basel, were launched to capture the well-heeled collector as they recreated in Florida in the northern winter and the Swiss Alps at the height of ski season.

In a similar vein, newish fair Nomad Circle bounces between St Moritz, Monaco, Venice and Cannes. If Melbourne is going to attract a similar international collector, it will have to rely on its more nuanced charms.

"But COVID has meant that local collectors haven't been able to travel and that has in many ways stimulated the market," says Dan-Cuthbert. "This seems like a moment we can capture."

The March Innovation issue of AFR Magazine – plus Machine – is out on Friday, February 25 inside The Australian Financial Review. Follow AFR Mag on Twitter and Instagram.

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