

Quest for Furniture With Nothing to Hide

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again, not with a disgraced pop star this time but with my wife. We were at a strip mall on a bleak stretch of Biscayne Boulevard that houses a dozen vintage furniture shops, all loaded with Lucite. Coffee tables, chairs, desks, étagères, vanities, lamps, clocks. It all looked good.

We had gone off meat-and-potatoes modernism and craved a lighter, cleaner flavor. I wanted gloss, she wanted glam: design out of reach. Miami's mother lode of Lucite was looking like ours to strip mine, until we ran into an architect who lives in my building, and then into Simon Doonan and Jonathan Adler, the Batman and Robin of the Gotham design scene. (Mr. Adler's furnishings line is heavy on high-end plastics, so this should have come as no surprise.)

Sensing it was every carpetbagger for himself, we quickly closed deals at Gustavo Olivieri Antiques. A white sectional sofa with a Lucite base for \$2,200 and a Lucite folding card table (for a few hundred dollars) to show off the colored Lucite chess set my wife had given me, which had started the whole ball rolling.

A few weeks ago we returned to this all-vintage strip mall on Biscayne, a Coen brothers movie location waiting to happen. (Landlords apparently do not want an antique shop in their malls, so the shop owners have banded together in this one.) We bought a coffee table for under \$1,000 that looks a bit like a Lucite version of the famous Noguchi one, again from Mr. Olivieri, a jovial Argentine who opened a store for the summer this week in Watermill, N.Y.

A keen trader in Lucite, Mr. Olivieri cautioned against the milky-white kind. Always look for clear, he counseled, with the fewest scratches, because they are almost impossible to remove. And thick: three-quarters of an inch or more.

"Thickness is impossible to find anymore," he said, because it's expensive to make. "You don't see chunky pieces. Once you see a chunky piece, grab it!"

The tubular base on our coffee table is about three inches thick. We grabbed it. He also had an amazing-looking park bench designed by Carl

SEE-THROUGH

Transparent

trappings barely seen here include

a chair from

Plexi-Craft in

Chelsea, right; the

Louis Ghost chair,

inset, by Philippe

Starck for Kartell;

and artwork by

Sasha Sykes, who

packages nature

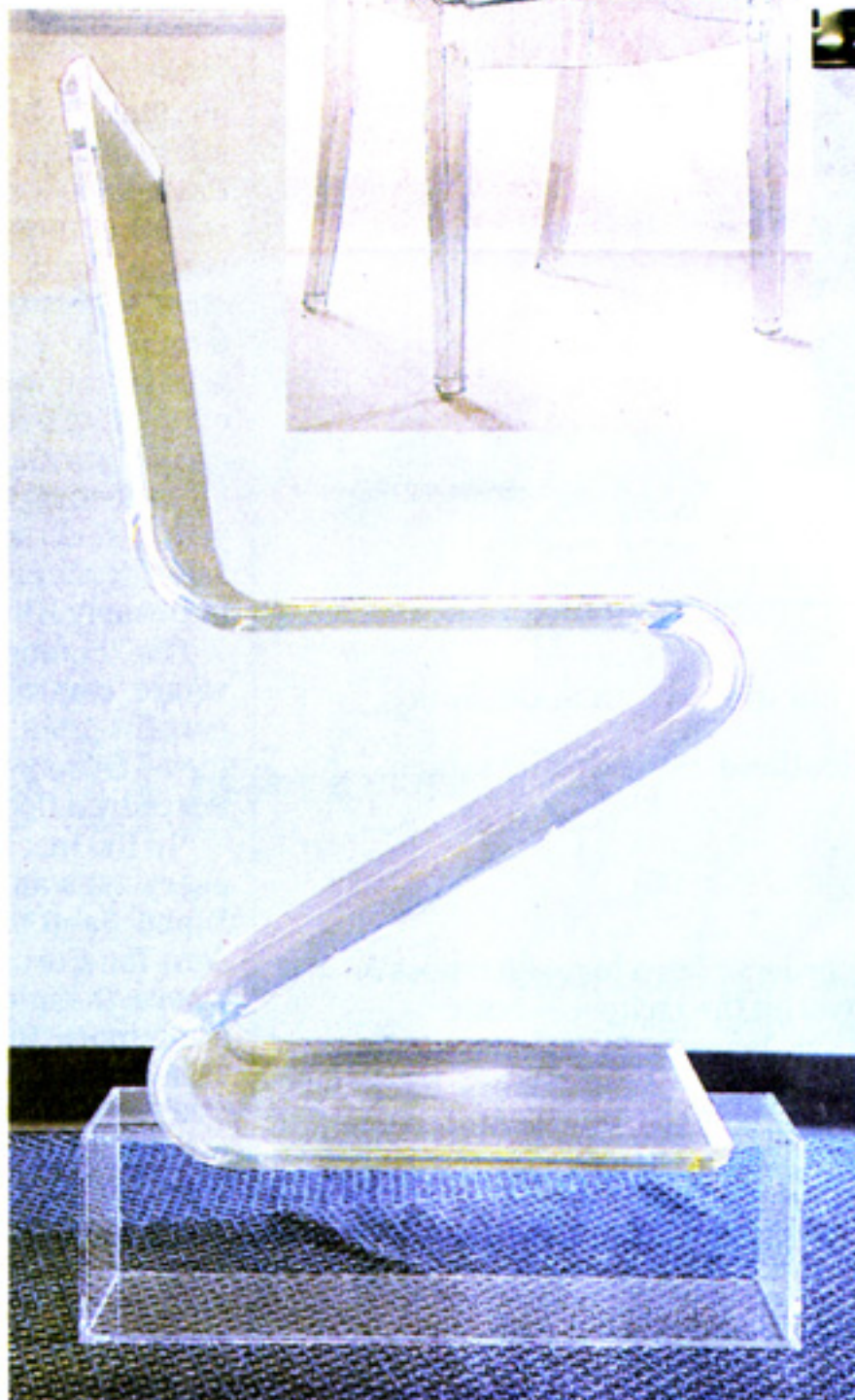
in clear cubes, far

right. Collectors

say plastic is

clearer than glass

(but watch out for scratches).



Phil Mansfield for The New York Times

Springer, a big Lucite guy in the 70's. (Pierre Cardin also did a line.) It was three grand. We didn't grab it.

The reason Lucite took off in Miami, Mr. Olivieri said, is "it doesn't block the view; you can still see the ocean through it, and the beach."

Acrylic can be up to eight times clearer than glass, and it doesn't have that cheap-looking green edge. That lightness and translucency are as valuable in a Manhattan apartment as in a beachfront condo, said George Frechter, the owner of Plexi-Craft, an acrylic retailer on West 24th Street that has been supplying New Yorkers with their clear nesting tables for several decades.

"In a small room, six or seven pieces of acrylic disappear," Mr. Frechter said.

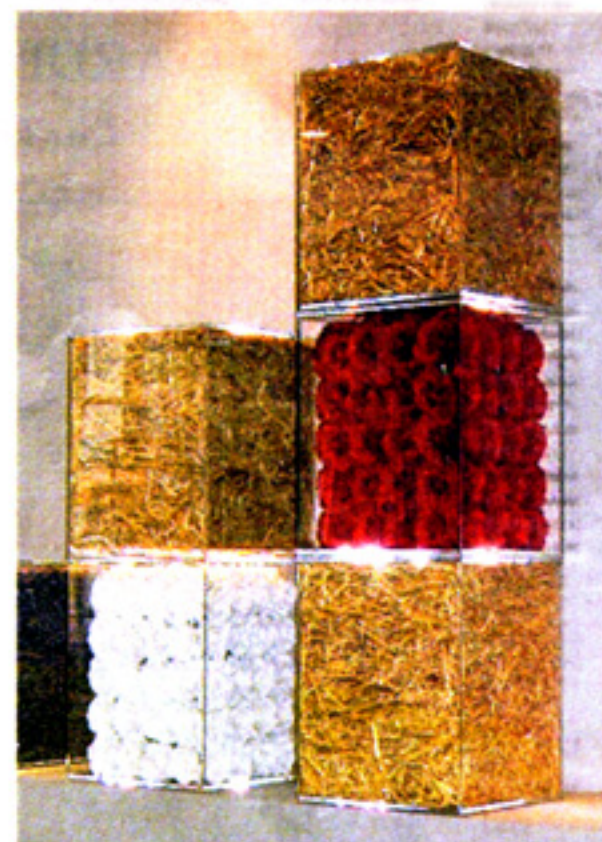
If you can afford six or seven pieces. The price of Lucite has gone up. A 16-inch cube that cost \$64 at Plexi-Craft five years ago is now \$109. In Vivre, a catalog of fashion

and home furnishing accessories, 8-by-11-inch Lucite frames by Amanda Nisbet with frosted edges are \$150 each, and the Alessandro Albrizzi backgammon board in "hand-cut" acrylic, a late-60's jet-set design, is \$625.

The founder and chief executive of the Vivre catalog, Eva Jeanbart-Lorenzotti, said that when Lucite was used in the 70's, it was all look, meaning "everything was mirrored and everything was Lucite." Used more sparingly, it can be modern and sophisticated. "The question is whether or not it is well designed," she said.

Lest people doubt Lucite's current street cred, they need look no further than the work of the artist and designer Sasha Sykes, who fills two-foot clear cubes with organic material like straw, lichen and lavender and sells them through the Voltz Clarke gallery.

She got the idea for clear cubes four years ago when she wanted to



Voltz Clarke

give her father, a farmer in County Carlow, Ireland, a glass one filled with straw for his 60th birthday. But glass "didn't have the invisibility I was looking for," Ms. Sykes said. "It's about the invisibility, being able to reveal incredibly fragile organic material and give it this unseen strength through the casing."

Not all her materials are organic. One cube, titled "Signs of a Misspent Youth," is filled with old pool chucks. She filled another with Lego astronauts for a child's room.

Over our baby's changing table hangs a 1960's mobile made of clear plastic with little colored eyes. It looks great, except I'm not sure he can see it.

How much is too much? After the chess set, we started collecting Lucite game boards: checkers, cribbage. We have a cheese board signed by somebody, or to somebody. (Furniture by George Nakashima was often inscribed with the names of the families who bought it.)

The collection gets a little junky with the cake platters, the jewelry boxes and the lipstick holders. This is the danger of theme-ing out. Before you know it, you're back into bar mitzvah gifts.

But we're too invested to back out now. The big design statement in our renovation is a series of large divider panels in the middle of the apartment. Sandwiched between the two sides of the curved white wood panels are overlapping sheets of colored acrylic, visible through cutouts. The face of the acrylic sheets is almost clear, only very lightly tinted, but the edges are bright, creating a stripe effect behind the cutouts. It's hard to explain, but it looks very Vanilla-esque.

Now all we need is a mongoose — in Lucite, of course.