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The Plaster-Filled Eggshell Gambit

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IN the summer of 1944, Max Ernst shared a summer house on Long Island with the art dealer Julien Levy. Ernst was the first to arrive, with Dorothea Tanning, the painter who would become his fourth wife, and he sent a postcard to Levy back in New York: "No chess set available at the village store."

If Ernst had found one in town, it probably would have been a Staunton set, the style that was endorsed in 1849 by the British chess champion Howard Staunton and that has become standard for elementary school lessons and international tournaments alike. But throughout the history of chess, its pieces have taken every shape, from intricate Gothic figurines to abstract Islamic forms to prisoners' bread crusts. So Ernst and Levy decided to make their own.

After studying the shapes of everyday household objects - funnels, bottles, wooden spoons - Ernst fashioned an exquisite wooden set as well as a sculpture, "The King Playing With the Queen," that he later cast in bronze. Meanwhile, Levy tinkered by pouring plaster into eggshells left over from breakfast. The round bottoms of his pieces nestled in the sand on the beach, where the players would trace a board.

Levy, whose eponymous gallery first showed Surrealism to New Yorkers, soon conceived of a group show of chess sets by artists, along with other chess-themed art; "The Imagery of Chess" opened at his gallery that December. He invited Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray and other artists in exile for whom this game of war was both a refuge from and a symbolic meditation on the war in Europe. More local talents like Isamu Noguchi, Robert Motherwell and John and Xenia Cage were also asked to take part.

"In a weird way, this show was like the Manhattan Project," said Larry List, the curator of "The Imagery of Chess Revisited," a reconstruction of Levy's 1944 show that opens on Friday at the Noguchi Museum in Long Island City, Queens. "It brought together all these people and gave them a short time period and a big problem to solve. There was this critical

mass that established a beachhead for modernist design in chess sets and modernist design in general."

This month, a new critical mass will be reached in "The Art of Chess," a showcase of 10 chess sets by contemporary artists opening on Oct. 28 at the Luhring Augustine Gallery in Chelsea. These new projects, produced in limited editions of seven with the London firm RS&A, include Rachel Whiteread's array of dollhouse furniture on linoleum and carpet squares as well as a mouthful of oversize human teeth from the Brazilian artist Tunga.

Levy's 1944 "Imagery of Chess" show reflected the eclipse of the European avant-garde, which by then had become a grandmaster in decline, challenged by the upstart that was American abstraction.

The participants in the Luhring Augustine show, meanwhile, are among the stars of the current art world, which raises the issue of what, in 2005, they are exploring through the centuries-old world of chess. Clearly, they are playing by different rules.

The 1944 show took shape around a core of artists for whom playing chess was fundamental to their intellectual and social interactions. The game offered them a provocative design challenge and rich metaphors to mine; but for many of them, chess play was in itself also an avenue of creative expression, like the visual arts or music: one evening at the Levy Gallery, six of the exhibitors and Alfred Barr Jr., founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, played simultaneous matches against the blindfolded master George Koltanowski.

For the contemporary artists in "The Art of Chess" in Chelsea, however, the game is first and foremost a point of departure for sculpture. Some artists have executed sets in their signature styles, and these seem like little more than brand extensions, comparable to the handbags that Takashi Murakami recently painted for Louis Vuitton. And paradoxically, the contributors who actually play chess have produced the works that may be hardest to play chess on.

"If you care about really playing chess, then it's stupid to have the pawns a different color," said F. Lanier Graham, an art historian and the author of a 1968 monograph, "Chess Sets." "If you're just doing a piece of sculpture, then it's O.K. But apply the term chess set judiciously." Mr. Graham was a frequent chess partner of Duchamp (they favored Ernst's set).

Duchamp looms intellectually over both shows. He sowed the seeds for the 1944 show when he taught Levy how to play, during a trans-Atlantic crossing in the winter of 1926-27. In the Chelsea show, Duchamp's fondness for found objects is echoed in the set of pieces Paul McCarthy pulled from his kitchen (a lime, a lint roller, Mrs. Butterworth syrup), all on a chessboard made of bits of his kitchen floor. But a deeper influence lies in the way Duchamp straddled the self-contained subcultures of avant-garde art and competitive chess.

Duchamp spent a decade trying to make his way as a chess professional. And the simultaneous blindfolded matches at "The Imagery of Chess," which Duchamp orchestrated and for which he announced all the moves, can also be seen as a work of art that engages the mind and not the eye. When it came to chess sets, he was innovative but bound to the game. In the invitation to the 1944 exhibition, he called for new sets "without a too radical departure from traditional figures, at once more agreeable to the touch and the sight." Ernst's curvaceous abstractions, which were the hit of the show, were somehow immediately recognizable as chess pieces, even though his buxom queen towered over the king. Noguchi's

acrylic pieces, which represented early steps toward his planar biomorphic sculptures, were red and green, in the classical Indian style. Even André Breton, who disdained chess, assembled a functional chess set - with Nicolas Calas - of assorted glasses filled with red or white wine; when you captured a piece, you drank it. (Neither the Noguchi nor the Breton-Calas set survived, so Mr. List, guest curator of the Noguchi Museum show, who is also an architectural model maker, recreated both. The Noguchi set took a painstaking nine months; the Breton-Calas was quickly assembled after a trip to Macy's.)

The Luhring Augustine show presents a different kind of bacchanal. The impish American sculptor Matthew Ronay describes his painted bronze set as "kind of like a gay orgy picnic." The pawns are slices of pizza (one side is pepperoni, the other plain); the rooks are penises (one side is circumcised, the other plain); and the kings look like marijuana cigarettes. Mr. Ronay said he had Monet's "Déjeuner sur l'Herbe" in mind, only this repast is "less about intellectual prowess, and more about conquering your mate in an emotional or sexual way," he said.

Some entries in the Chelsea show are capable of both inspiring and confusing, especially if you are a chess player. With Yayoi Kusama's polka-dotted porcelain pumpkins, which are mesmerizing but hard to identify, this may or may not be intentional. But Tom Friedman said he meant to make something "semi-dysfunctional." His self-referential set - a sharpened pencil, a toothpaste box, a toppled plastic Staunton king as a pawn- is a tabletop retrospective of his own philosophically playful oeuvre, and no two pieces are alike.

"Most of the chessboards that I've seen have been thematic - good versus evil, an aesthetic consistency," Mr. Friedman said. "I wanted to completely break that apart."

Mr. Friedman weaned himself from a four-year-long obsession with online chess. Mr. McCarthy is also a chess player, though he is said to favor a variant in which his granddaughter, who does not understand the game, makes every third move.

A devoted player like Duchamp might have been enervated by this random element. But at least one fellow artist would have appreciated it.

In a statement that was part of the 1944 show, Breton proclaimed, "What must be changed is the game itself, not the pieces."