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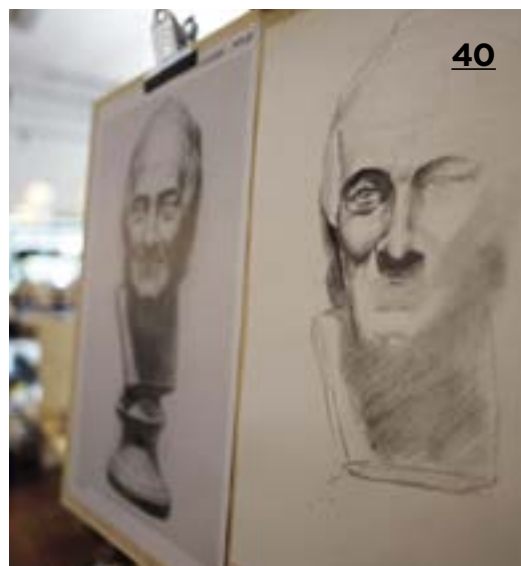
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31 **Bernar Venet**

Meet the creator of world's tallest public art.



DESIGN

IDEAS AND INSPIRATION FROM THOSE IN THE KNOW

THE LAW OF GRAVITY

When something doesn't change the history of art, is it even art? Bernar Venet, 80, says no. One of France's greatest living artists and creator of the tallest public artwork in the world, Bernar talks to Y-JEAN MUN-DELSALLE about his latest exhibition at the Louvre-Lens Museum and his obsession with gravity, disorder and unpredictability. ►

photo JEROME CAVALIERE

Bernar Venet has always proclaimed, “It’s not art if it doesn’t change the history. From his foundation – a constant work-in-progress and representation of his ties with famous artists, such as Arman, Cesar, Man Ray and Christo – and a 6ha sculpture park to his Chateau de Versailles exhibition in 2011 and *Arc Majeur*, the world’s tallest public artwork (60m), every project he has created in his 60-year career has been an adventure and an accomplishment.

At 80, he is defying the effects of time, as neither physical nor mental ageing has affected him. It is still in his character to remain persistent and perfect, which means he’s always moving forward and innovating.

Size Matters

From one gargantuan work to another, Bernar’s visually-recognisable bars of Corten steel will be on display at the Louvre Museum until January next year. He describes this ultimate recognition: “More than any other museum in the world, the Louvre embodies the idealised image of this paradise, where all the greatest artists in history meet forever. It is the image of a dream, and to enter it is the fulfilment of that dream.”

Weighing a tonne each, 110 beams – composed of signature *Arcs*, *Straight Lines* and *Angles* made in a Hungarian foundry – are strewn on the ground in the museum’s 1,000 sqm Glass Pavilion, as if they’d collapsed one on top of the other.

But far from having fallen randomly, they are arranged in an intentionally disorganised manner. Based on a scale model conceived in 1994, Bernar has displayed smaller versions of these *Collapses* in various venues over the years, plus 200 tonnes of *Arcs* in Le Muy, his most voluminous installation.

“NORMALLY WHEN A SCULPTURE IS HERE, IT ISN’T ELSEWHERE, BUT I CAN EXHIBIT PILE OF COAL HERE AS WELL AS IN TOKYO, NEW YORK, NICE, OR ANYWHERE ELSE. WE’RE IN A CONCEPT, IN SOMETHING THAT IS TEMPORARY.”

1. *10 Acute Unequal Angles*, a 2021 Corten steel installation.

2. & 3. Installations at The Hypothesis of Gravity Exhibition at Louvre-Lens.

Among Giants

But this is the first time it’s “large enough that you can’t comprehend it with a single glance, and it becomes possible to move around inside,” he notes.

The Hypothesis of Gravity continues Bernar’s explorations of the disorder, entropy, gravity, instability and uncertainty central to his oeuvre.

“My Louvre-Lens installation is the most characteristic demonstration of the works I have created in recent years. By scattering a pile of steel bars in an uncontrolled and irreversible disorder, I am creating a work that demonstrates the non-proportional, the unconstructed and the non-pre-established.”

In contrast to his towering sculptures that stretch vertically into the sky, *The Hypothesis of Gravity* is an exercise in horizontality that is in harmony with the long, flat lines of the museum built by Pritzker Prize-winning Japanese architectural agency, SANAA.

It echoes his first performance, where he lay down in trash with his *Pile of Coal*, inspired by a heap of gravel mixed with tar, from 1963 that was presented at the *Soleils Noirs* exhibition at the Louvre-Lens in 2020. A sculpture with no base and no specific form was one of the first instances of non-composition in his oeuvre. ▶



photo JEROME CAVALIERE ©BERNAR VENET STUDIO



photo FREDERIC IOVINO



photo FREDERIC IOVINO

Down to Earth

“I already accepted gravity,” he recalls. “With Pile of Coal, I realised that I could push the sculpture in front of me or make it a little more compact; there are many possibilities. I can call the local coal merchant and tell him to lend me 10 tonnes of coal and collect it afterwards. “

Another interesting parameter is that normally when a sculpture is here, it isn’t elsewhere. Still, I can exhibit *Pile of Coal* here and in Tokyo, New York, Nice or anywhere else. All I have to do is order some coal – whose volume will obey the space to which it is assigned – and then each pile is a Bernar Venet pile wherever it is and then disappear afterwards. We’re in a concept, in something temporary.”

A logistical feat, eight lorries drove the precious cargo of The Hypothesis of Gravity exhibit from the south to the north of France. Then a ballet of cranes and telescopic handlers took over, and four long days were required for the installation because each beam had to be transported inside out at a time via a small door.

To protect the floor from shocks in case precariously placed bars should tumble, 140 enormous stainless steel plates were laid over it. “This is physically demanding work which requires great concentration to avoid accidents,” Bernar relates.

During such an installation, it is impossible to visualise how it will look at the end. “I give instructions on the positioning of each element, and the randomness is far from absolute. Still, I let these elements fit together



according to the possibilities offered in a configuration always in the making. This final pile, this extreme and irreversible disorder, obeys more the laws of gravity than my limited, uncertain orientations.”

It is connected spatially, visually and conceptually to the museum’s Gallery of Time and its works that encompass 5,000 years of art history, and to Bernar’s other installation just outside in the garden.

Built over a mining site that closed in the 1960s, *Disorder* comprises 10 groups of leaning *Arcs*, each with a unique composition and weighing 9,000kg.

Man of Steel

Born in 1941 in Provence to a family of little means, Bernar is revered for his sculptures of *Arcs*, *Angles*, *Straight Lines* and *Indeterminate Lines*, all early experimentations with tar and coal and the radical incorporation of sciences and mathematics into his works.

These featured equations as his subjects separated themselves from artistic



tradition. Whereas all art before him was either figurative or abstract, a mathematical diagram was neither.

Moving to New York in 1966, he became a pioneer of conceptual art and stayed at the famous Chelsea Hotel – home to the city’s entire artistic scene at the time – and the studio of his friend and fellow artist, Arman. Despite his youth, he was quickly accepted by the circle

of artists already anchored in art history. Gaining rapid success, he lived in the Big Apple for the next 50 years before only recently returning to his homeland.

Bold Moves

Nowadays, the factory building he rehabilitated in Le Muy is an experimental laboratory. In a further development of his *Accidents* initiated in 1996, he recently created *Domino Collapse* when he knocked down steel bars leaning against a wall.

For years, he had dreamt of carrying out the project at a sufficiently sound venue capable of accommodating heavy, voluminous sculptures. Still, he couldn’t find a museum prepared to take the risk for security reasons, so he decided to do it at his foundation.

In a daring artistic performance he refers to as a “gesture”, he used a steel bar attached to a forklift to topple 30 Corten steel *Arcs*, each 5m tall, lined up in a row, that collapsed in domino fashion. A single-action generated a 30-tonne sculpture in seconds.

It caused violent, brutal shock, like a mini earthquake, and even the building trembled as the *Arcs* came down with a loud noise, leaving behind a red cloud of dust. The laws of physics and chance were at the heart of this mode of creation, as nothing was predictable.

“The resulting intertwined *Arcs* lying on top of each other in a very disorderly fashion, corresponded with what I expected: the sudden disintegration of an aligned set perceived as a constitutive, organisational passage to a new form and new state of stability,” he says.

Across Borders

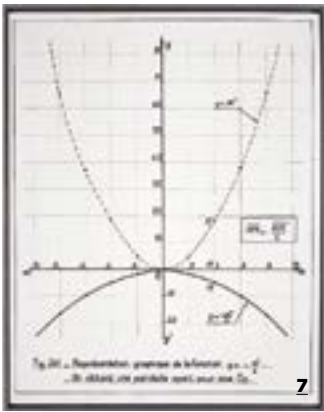
Following the exhibition of his new distorted *Anamorphosis* paintings with no specific shape at Guy Pieters Gallery in Belgium last August that sold out before it even opened, Bernar was commissioned to work on a monumental project for a collector in Hawaii.

He has just opened a solo exhibition of approximately 30 paintings dating from 1966 onwards at the Tadao Ando-designed He Art Museum in Guangdong, which will run through to December. Next year, he is preparing to install his Vertical Angles sculpture at San Giorgio Maggiore Church in Venice.

Additionally, a retrospective at the museum is also on the schedule for 2023.

Unconcerned about the short-lived nature of his works, the permanently dissatisfied artist, who questions everything he knows, continues on his quest to offer a new definition of sculptures.

He concludes, “There is the permanent, and then there is the temporary. After me, we will recreate my works in the future because we are in randomness. So if we follow my rules, if we make an uncontrolled *Collapse* like that, we will have a work of mine. It’s not always easy, but in the end, everything will remain.” ■



4. The *Anamorphosis* Exhibition at Guy Pieters Gallery in Belgium

5. *89.5° Arc x 14*, a 2016 installation made with Corten steel bars (17m tall) in Bonn, Germany.

6. Paintings from the *Equation* series (2000-2001) at the Retrospective exhibition in Lyon, France.

7. *Representation graphique de la fonction y = -x²/4*, a 1966 artwork.

8. *Arc Majeur*, 2019 Corten steel installation on the E411 Highway, Belgium.