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Bernar Venet's new foundation in France

By Gareth Harris

The conceptual artist has launched a foundation in France, featuring work from a 100-strong collection, along with his own pieces



A room at the Venet Foundation with works by Jean Tinguely, Sol LeWitt and César

©Serge Demailly



Bernar Venet has not just made challenging conceptual art over a 50-year career, but has also forged friendships with some of the most influential of his peers during that period, from Donald Judd to Sol LeWitt and Frank Stella. The 73-year-old French artist, who made his presence felt in the 1960s with radical work based on mathematical formulas, has cemented his reputation with the launch last month of a new foundation. Its headquarters, a verdant four-hectare estate known as Le Muy, located 65km west of Nice, is one of the art world's best-kept secrets.

Dubbed a “total work of art” by its publicists, the site mirrors Venet’s life and career: work from his 100-strong collection of mainly minimalist art – by the likes of Judd, LeWitt, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin and others – is dotted around the complex, dovetailing with Venet’s own pieces, which fill the pristine, manicured grounds. These swooping, russet sculptures made of Corten steel include his “Indeterminate Lines” and “Arcs” creations, which twist, coil and spring in the air.

This part of France is dear to Venet. “I’m from this region, from the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, to be precise,” he says with animation. “I spent my childhood here.”

The search for a property that could house his large-scale work and growing collection began in the late 1980s; tasked with finding one, his brother Francis visited more than 20 properties between the Côte d’Azur and the foothills of the Alps and awarded Le Muy “nine out of 10” as it was a “little pricey”.

Overlooking the Nartuby river that threads through the estate, Venet’s sanctuary is an idyllic spot, albeit one with an industrial heritage. A former sawmill, built in 1737, houses most of Venet’s holdings; a Roman bridge running alongside the pretty Provençal building, and a mill pond with black swans complete the vision.

The hub of Le Muy, meanwhile, is a 2,000 sq metre hangar-like venue that once churned out switching regulator systems for railway tracks, and was the backbone of a flourishing manufacturing empire in the 1960s.

After securing the purchase in June 1989, Venet and his wife Diane embarked on major conversion work, removing piping systems and a chicken coop from the old factory. Venet created a bespoke set of steel furniture for the cavernous industrial relic, which within two years had become living quarters and an exhibition space.



The French artist in front of one of his 'Indeterminate Lines' creations.

The thought of turning the sawmill into both a large-scale vitrine for the collection and another home slowly dawned on Venet during the initial renovations. The sitting room's high ceiling and never-ending walls seemed perfect for a homemade *Kunsthalle*, or art gallery. Venet and his wife now spend summer in the factory and winter in the mill.

Many collectors struggle with how and where to parade their acquisitions; they have to pick and choose which ones to display, stresses Venet, with pieces often banished to storage.

But Venet has room to display everything. "The mill has forced me to make . . . other choices that are more coherent and involved," he says.

His strategy appears to be paying off; the art on show there – by the likes of Robert Morris, Robert Motherwell, and the French artists Arman and César – makes quite an impact.

A startling wall painting and table design by Sol LeWitt ("Star", 1991) in a basement room – a blaze of orange, red and azure – would make any modern art curator salivate, especially at Paris's Centre Pompidou.

And surely no other bedroom in the world houses a kinetic sculpture by Jean Tinguely, comprising a lion in motion powered by a motor ("Le lion de Belfort", around 1989).

But there is another attraction at Le Muy. The US artist Frank Stella has designed a "chapel" fitted with six of his own large composite reliefs (2001). "[They are] very brutal, made of aluminium and rusted steel – powerful – the kind of artwork that makes you feel small," Venet says.

The hexagonal construction, open to the elements, is in the tradition of other famous contemplative environments such as the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas.

Stella's intervention is the latest addition to the sculpture park, complementing an imposing bridge in Corten steel designed by Venet. "Le pont-tube", an enclosed structure dotted with tiny viewing holes, straddles the Nartuby. A nearby gallery rendered in stainless steel, which opened in 2005, houses works by LeWitt, Andre, Daniel Buren and François Morellet.

A beautiful, subtle aluminium wall relief by Judd ("Untitled", 1971) hovers in this space. The story of its acquisition shines a light on Venet's network of friends and contacts.

In 1971, Venet attended an auction in a New York loft, bidding on another piece by Judd from 1965 comprising four cubes. He bagged the work for \$3,000, but faced a dilemma.

I went to Marfa a few years after Donald Judd died and it had a huge impact on Le Muy's development fabricated."

"My problem was that I did not have the money to pay immediately. I called Judd and explained that I was trying to sell a very small Ad Reinhardt [painting] in order to pay for the 'Four Cubes' piece.

"His reaction was immediate. He said: 'I am coming. Show me the Reinhardt piece.' A few minutes later he was in my loft and instead proposed exchanging the Reinhardt for a new work of his, a 12ft-long 'Progression' piece. We went together several times to his factory in Brooklyn to make sure it was properly



The Nartuby river that flows through Le Muy, with Venet's steel 'Le pont-tube' straddling it



Frank Stella's 'Djinet' (2007)

Other acquisitions were equally informal. “I used to exchange work with artist friends in Nice back in the 1960s,” elaborates Venet, adding that he did his first big swap with conceptual art trailblazer LeWitt in 1970.

Venet’s vision of Le Muy is indebted to Judd, who died in 1994. Their relationship stretches back to the 1960s when Venet moved to New York; both designed their own furniture, collected work by their peers and had a “taste for a sober minimal abstraction”. Indeed, Judd’s Marfa hub, in the Texan desert – a fabled complex of living and working spaces established in the 1970s – is the blueprint for Le Muy.

Judd showed Venet slides of Marfa in progress. “It is sad that he died so young. I went to Marfa a few years after he passed away and that experience had a huge impact on my decision to develop Le Muy in such a way that my own work, as well as my friends’ art, is presented in the best possible environment.”



The foundation building

Le Muy certainly allows Venet to think big; his latest work, “Collapse” (“Effondrement”, 2014), a 150-tonne swarm of seven metre-long steel sculptural arcs, dominates the old factory, along with his “Gribs” series (2013), abstract “living drawings” crafted in steel.

He broaches the issue of funding with characteristic candour. Preserving the site, which can be viewed only by appointment, is a key objective, but the artist admits that Le Muy, with 33 staff, costs “a fortune”.

Venet points out that the enterprise is entirely self-funded, and sells his work through a string of international dealers to boost the coffers. Yet he is also damning of the booming art market, which has now put works by artists such as Reinhardt out of his reach.

“Some people think that it is generous of me to give away all this art. I think that it is more generous of my wife and my children, who will not inherit [his work and collection]. They will enjoy the art for longer at the foundation, instead of having to sell it to pay taxes. All this art does not belong to us, it should ultimately belong to everybody,” he says magnanimously, turning towards his sculptures that arch and curve against the contours of the foliage.

venetfoundation.org

Photographs: Jérôme Cavaliere; François Baille; Serge Demailly; Antoine Baralhe

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