

# The New York Times

## INTERNATIONAL ARTS

### When Your Home Is a Museum: Bernar Venet's Labor of Love

By SARAH MOROZ JUNE 11, 2015



"Relief Bleu" from 1978, by Jean Tinguely, is on display at Bernar Venet's home-museum. 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris, via Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain de Nice

LE MUY, France — Southeastern France, with the beaches of Saint Tropez and vineyards of Bandol, is not known as a place to see contemporary American art. But the French collector and artist Bernar Venet may change that with his namesake Venet Foundation in the Var region, which opened to the public last summer.

The verdant four-hectare estate is in Le Muy, a village near the area where Mr. Venet, 74, grew up. He acquired the property in 1989 to store gargantuan sculptures — his own and other artists' — and oversize raw materials to create new work.

Today the venue is the culmination of more than 50 years of collecting, with about 100 works by minimalist and conceptual artists like Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Ellsworth Kelly, James Lee Byars and Robert Indiana. Mr. Venet often acquired pieces in exchange for his own works while living in New York in the late 1960s and early '70s, "when collectors were not beating down the door."

Artists like Judd and LeWitt, whose works now fetch hundreds of thousands of dollars at auction, were little known at the time, and were simply friends. "Our works had no commercial value," Mr. Venet said. "We produced more than we sold," he continued, adding that swapping one work for another was "reassuring." Over time, he was able to buy more important works, benefiting from favorable "friend" rates.

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The Frank Stella Chapel, built in June 2014 in the sculpture park of the Venet Foundation. Jérôme Cavalière/2015 Frank Stella, via Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, via Bernar Venet Archives, New York

Mr. Venet's collection, therefore, is very personal, with custom pieces doubling as memories of friendships between struggling artists. François Morellet created a neon work from the letters of Mr. Venet's name. The French artist César compressed Mr. Venet's old car into a sculpture. His countryman Arman created a personalized translucent trashcan filled with non-perishables (The Village Voice, letterhead from the nightclub Max's Kansas City, Seneca apple juice cans).

The foundation is only open from June through September — by appointment, twice a week, when visitors can view works in Mr. Venet's house and a temporary show in one of the two large exhibition spaces on the grounds. This summer's showcase is

**"Tinguely: The Final Collaboration With Yves Klein,"** a set of installations by Jean Tinguely, a founding member of new realism.

Mr. Venet did not initially intend to open the space to the public in his lifetime. "I live there, I don't want to be disturbed too much," he said. When he was first living in New York, one of his neighbors was Judd, who discussed his ambitions for Marfa, Texas — which he conceived as an outpost for his and his friends' works and a respite from the formalism of galleries and museums. Mr. Venet decided to give Le Muy a similar raison d'être: "I thought, This is what an artist should do, if I have the means to do it. Something a little bit exceptional."

Laurent Salomé, the exhibition director at the Grand Palais in Paris and a co-curator of its current "Icones Américaines" exhibition of art from the 1960s and '70s, said that minimalist and conceptual art is often overlooked in France, adding that the Venet Foundation is "still relatively confidential." But he noted that the minimalist movement is finding an audience at shows like "Icones Américaines." "Visitors come first for Pop Art and Warhol," he said, but "once in the exhibition they are surprised and seduced by LeWitt, Judd or Andre."

The Parisian gallery owner Kamel Mennour — whose current exhibition "Double Eye Poke" showcases minimalist and conceptual American artists at his two Left Bank spaces — said he admired Mr. Venet's prescience. "He collected very early," Mr. Mennour said. "I think he was a very rare witness." He said that Mr. Venet was a forerunner in valuing "minimalist art in Europe — and especially in France."



Many of Mr. Venet's collected works are housed in the reconverted 18th-century mill where he lives part-time, during the summer months. (He lives in New York the rest of the year). The trim green lawns and assortment of trees, on the river La Nartuby, provide a natural yet manicured context. Alexandre Devals, the director of the Venet Foundation, noted the symbiotic nature of art and setting, which was totally refurbished by Mr. Venet: "the artist shaped the place, but the place shaped the artist too."

Mr. Venet's collection mingles with his own work in his home-museum. In the foyer is a Carl Andre flat sculpture that one can (inadvertently) walk on. The living room, with vaulted wood-beamed ceilings, accommodates many works, including a spread of concentrically laid rocks by Richard Long, a Judd chair and a white neon-tubed piece by Flavin. The torch-cut steel furniture, here and throughout the house, was designed by Mr. Venet himself and produced in his factory in Hungary.

Mr. Venet's bedroom, off limits to the public, has typical accoutrements like a flatscreen TV and DVD player, but also features a six-piece blue anodized aluminum installation by Judd above his bed (which is also by Judd), and a fireplace flanked by a jumbled "portrait" by Arman, containing, amongst other items, a check signed by Sol LeWitt, cowboy boots, a bottle of Head and Shoulders shampoo, and a rotary phone. A yellow Robert Indiana painting with the words "skid row" hangs near the door.

Outside the house, the display of Mr. Venet's prolific collection continues. A sculpture park is home to pieces in colossal dimensions, including Mr. Venet's own "Indeterminate Lines" and "Leaning Arcs," plus sculptures by Arman and Gottfried Honegger. A chapel by Frank Stella is also al fresco, designed specifically for the site and completed in time for the 2014 opening. The hexagonal structure — crowned by a four-ton spiraled roof — is made of steel, fiberglass and boat sails. Six of Mr. Stella's multi-ton "Large Reliefs," from the early 2000s, hang on walls that do not meet, to let nature permeate. Mr. Stella is preparing a replica of the work for his retrospective at the Whitney Museum in New York in the fall.

A 2,000-meter exhibition space called the Factory, once an industrial hub that manufactured rails, is now covered in fragrant jasmine and is home to Mr. Venet's mammoth sculptures, like "Collapse" (Effondrement), a 200-ton swell of seven-meter-long steel arcs.

Finally, the 700-square-meter Gallery — by Berthier + Llamata Architects in mirror-finished stainless steel — hosts temporary shows. This year it is exploring Tinguely's artistic relationship and friendship with Yves Klein. The Swiss artist created purposeless machines that produce a mad-scientist array of shapes and sounds. The main sculpture featured here, "The Final Collaboration With Yves Klein," "gives the impression of cogs from Modern Times — machines that operate in a void," said Mr. Devals, who curated the spare *mise-en-scène*. The anarchic elements include scrap iron, wooden wheels, bulbs, engines — a massive piece to transport.

As ever, Mr. Venet is personally entangled with the art and artist. He and Tinguely ran in the same circles in New York; in 1966, Mr. Venet lived in Tinguely's former studio. For his 50th birthday, Tinguely made Mr. Venet a candelabra, now displayed in Mr. Venet's bedroom, ornamented with bright yellow candles.

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