

Yves Klein (1928-1962) was a French conceptual artist best known for monochromatic paintings in International Klein Blue (a deep blue he created), pink and gold. Think jaw-droppingly gorgeous canvases made with a colourist's perfection. Jean Tinguely (1925-1991) was a Swiss artist that made large sculptural machines and kinetic art with the passion of an inventor. Yet these two different artists shared a mutual fascination for perception and a desire for collaboration.

Klein and Tinguely first met in France in 1955 when they discussed the phenomenon of virtual volumes. Three years later, they submitted a monochromatic artwork, "Meta-morphe", to the art fair Salon des Réalités Nouvelles but it was rejected by the selection committee. In protest, the two artists decided to "occupy" the exhibition venue in July 1958 by shining blue light onto all the walls, an impromptu artwork that they called "Colonisation par le bleu" (Colonisation by the blue). That November they teamed up again for a joint exhibition, "Vitesse pure et stabilité monochrome" (Pure Speed and Monochrome Stability), at Galerie Iris Clert in Paris. The following year, Klein compared Tinguely's drawing machines to the invention of photography and expressed his belief that they would revolutionize art in a lecture at the Sorbonne, a Paris university for literature and the arts.

The relationship between the two was further cemented in 1960 with the founding of the Nouveau Réalisme movement that evolved from a group exhibition, "Les nouveaux Réalistes", at Galerie Apollinaire in Milan. The art critic Pierre Restany wrote the manifesto, "Nouveau Réalisme—new ways of perceiving the real", and a joint declaration was signed by Klein, Restany, Tinguely and the artists Arman, Martial Raysse, Daniel Spoerri, François Dufrêne, Raymond Hains and Jacques Villeglé.

Three years after Klein had died of a heart attack in his Paris apartment, Tinguely wrote highly about Klein in a hand-written text in 1965. "His activity was dramatic, obsessed by space, emptiness, the infinite, the immaterial, he precipitated ahead of time," wrote Tinguely. "He is a messenger. He expressed the adventure (and worry in front of the adventure) about the conquest of space."

Tinguely's admiration of Klein was enduring. In 1988, when Tinguely was invited to have a major retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, he created a large-scale work that was a homage to Klein. Its title, "Last Collaboration with Yves Klein (died in 1962) in absence of an (astral) agreement from his behalf but with the amiable kindness and protection of Rose Selavie", referenced the avant-garde artist Marcel Duchamp, father of the readymade, who used Rose Selavie as a pseudonym. The sculptural installation is an intriguing assemblage of wooden wheels, scrap iron, synthetic materials, foam, mirrors, bulbs and electric engines. When switched on, it revs into life for a few seconds like a theatrical scene. It's an example of Tinguely's talent for creating machine-based, performative art through his sculptural endeavours. The Klein-esque influence is the rhythmic attention to colour, notably how one of the wheels is blue. "I see colours essentially as a movement," Tinguely wrote. "Colours are a component of the object, they belong to it, they are therefore movement. The unique stable thing is movement, everywhere and always."

This major piece belongs to the permanent collection of Museum Tinguely in Basel, Switzerland. This summer, however, it is on loan to the Venet Foundation, owned by French artist Bernar Venet, in the Var countryside in the south of France. Alexandre Devals, the foundation's director, travelled to Museum Tinguely, followed by Venet on a second trip, to request permission to borrow it. Two employees from the museum spent two weeks at the foundation installing it, carefully putting all the components in place. Smaller pieces by Tinguely are also on display.

Venet's decision to dedicate his foundation's summer exhibition to Tinguely contrasts with his predilection for minimal and conceptual art. But Venet, who makes challenging conceptual sculpture, explains that he wanted to do something different from last summer's inaugural show.

"Last year, my foundation officially opened with an exhibition on American minimal art, including works by Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Frank Stella and Robert Morris," says Venet. "This year, I wanted to do an exhibition with European artists. Tinguely is important from Nouveau Réalisme and Yves Klein comes from Nice in the south of France, so there was the flavour of the Côte d'Azur, and there haven't been many exhibitions on Tinguely in this region."

The fact that Tinguely's machine-sculptures are a world apart from Venet's own aesthetic does not stop him from appreciating them. "Tinguely's work is very far from my own aesthetic because my taste is very sombre and minimalist," concedes Venet. "But I recognise Tinguely as somebody who is important in art in movement and I have a Tinguely in my bedroom [Le lion de Belfort, 1959] - a lion in motion, powered by a machine, with a neon and an animal skin."

Venet's estate covers a vast, verdant site of four hectares through which flows the Nartuby River. The gallery is only a small part of it. Venet, who comes from the south of France but spends much of the year in New York, bought the land 26 years ago. His initial aim was to develop it so that he could make and keep his monumental artworks here and have somewhere to spend the summer months with his wife Diane. His idea for the estate was inspired by Judd's foundation in Marfa, Texas, where the American artist placed his works in harmony with the environment that he was going to shape.

A sawmill, next to the river and overlooking two waterfalls, was converted into Venet's house. It is filled with works by artists that Venet has been friends with over the decades, including François Morellet, Arman, César, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Jasper Johns, Morris, Stella, LeWitt, Judd, Robert Motherwell and Janis Kounellis. In the living room there's a circular arrangement of stones by Richard Long. Upstairs there are two "Homages to Tatlin" (1981) by Flavin. In a

basement dining room, wall paintings by LeWitt and Robert Barry flank a dining table sporting a mural by LeWitt that is a burst of primary colours. There's also an ensemble of postcards sent from On Kawara in December 1969. It's an impressive, personable collection forged through friendships with artists that pioneered conceptual and minimal art and is based on peer-to-peer conversations and exchanges. Clearly, Venet's lifelong passion for making art is matched by his passion for collecting it. "My dream would be to have a bed in a museum and move from one room to another," he says. "So I did something like that here."

His aim to turn the site into a foundation occurred only a few years ago, however. "At the beginning, I never thought of a foundation," he says. "But I wouldn't want our children to lose this place. It's a legacy, it's my taste, my works, my collection."

The site includes an exhibition space, called the Factory, on Venet's work from the 1960s (when he begun his career making work based on mathematical formulas), up until today. In the gardens are his russet Corten steel sculptures that swoop and rise into the air. With titles such as "Leaning Arcs" and "Indeterminate Lines", Venet's arches and lines punctuate the manicured lawns.

One of the treasures is the Stella Chapel, which lies the other side of the "pont-tube", a white, enclosed tube-like bridge, designed by Venet, that is dotted with pixellated viewing holes. Open to the elements, the Stella Chapel is a hexagonal structure with a wavy fibreglass and carbon roof that is to the right of the bridge. Its breathtaking presence catches you by surprise. Inside are six grey relief paintings that the American artist made in 2001. Made from aluminum, rusted steel, tubing and paint, they are dynamic and powerful as if they have all the elements gathered inside.

"One day I was visiting Frank Stella's studio and I saw these six, homogenous paintings on an enormous wall and I immediately thought of doing a chapel like the Rothko chapel [in Houston, Texas]," recounts Venet. "I proposed a figure to him and he added on 40 percent, saying I could pay him whenever I wanted. I offered him one of my works, priced at €200,000, and this lowered the price. When I got back here, I invited the architect Rudy Ricciotti over for lunch to reflect on a design for the chapel. But then I got a call from Frank Stella who had imagined a concept with a female assistant of his who was talented at architecture. They conceived of the idea of a hexagonal roof that would have an interlacing of curved lines, recalling the play of curves in the works hanging on the walls. She sent us the plans, then I found an engineer with construction experience."

The chapel was built in time for the foundation's inauguration last year. "Frank was absolutely thrilled and had a marvellous smile on his face when he came over and saw the chapel," Venet reminisces. "It's the only architectural project that he has ever done."

Looking ahead, Venet is keen to commission other artists to make projects for his foundation. "We're thinking of making a James Turrell piece as an extension of the factory and of having an open Skyspace [where visitors can watch sky sequences through an aperture] by Turrell on the other side," says Venet. "And Larry Bell is coming here in three weeks to see what ideas he could have for doing something on the land here."

As for Venet, he is still seeking new sculptural forms. During the Venice Biennale, he installed a sculpture of leaning, triangular lines in a palazzo garden near the Accademia bridge. "It was the first time that I showed a work with angles," he enthuses. "Today, this is the most adventurous thing for me. I always try to create other formulas and solutions and enlarge them."

For monumental sculpture such as Venet's, the ideal, interior space would be the Grand Palais in Paris. No ambition is too small. "My main issue is, what am I going to do with art?" Venet ponders. "To make a different proposal, see where we can go with a degree of lucidity, and create things that have never been created before."

No doubt Klein and Tinguely would have agreed with his words.

BV = Bernar Venet

MW = Modern Weekly

MW: How did you start collecting?

BV: At the beginning, I made exchanges with Sol LeWitt because he's a friend and with Donald Judd. I started earning money early on, so in 1971 I started buying work by other artists. To have major pieces, you have to buy them. If there's a dealer who owes me money [for a piece of mine that he has sold], I take an artwork instead of waiting for him to pay me. There are all sorts of possibilities.

MW: It stands out that you have many works by Frank Stella.

BV: Frank Stella is one of the living artists that I admire the most. I have very good pieces by a very good artist for reasonable prices. I have about 20 works by him. Since I don't buy artworks by upcoming artists for investment, I'd prefer to have pieces by him. I first met Frank in 1966 in New York when Arman introduced me to him and we became friends around 10 or 12 years ago.

MW: What was your experience of moving to New York in the late 1960s and feeling an affinity with minimal art?

BV: When I went to New York, everybody was doing Pop Art or New Realism. I was one of the few artists not doing that. My aesthetic was minimal and I immediately felt a link with minimal art. When I went to the Whitney Museum of

American Art and saw the exhibition on minimal art, I had a shock because I recognised myself within it. When I enter a gallery and see something by a young artist that's referencing minimalism, it's a language I understand.

MW: Why is it that your collection is almost colourless?

BV: I don't have a taste for colour which is why I don't collect painting – there's too much spectacle in painting. Artworks need to talk to my intellect. I like sober, intellectual artworks.

MW: What artworks would you love to acquire?

BV: My dream is to have a completely black painting by Ad Reinhardt and I'd love to have a black Stella. I'd prefer to have a big piece than a small piece. I once swapped a small painting by Reinhardt for a big Judd and was delighted with the exchange.

"Tinguely – The final collaborations with Yves Klein" is at the Venet Foundation until 30 September 2015. The foundation is open on Thursday afternoon and all day on Friday. www.venetfoundation.org