

Dealer Wins



In rural Normandy, Parisian gallerist François Laffanour turns a historic property into a showcase for modern art and design.

By William Middleton Photographs by Simon Watson



At François Laffanour's retreat in Normandy, France, a 17th-century stable has been converted into a design gallery. The gallerist oversaw the renovation of the property with architect Mikael Klatzkow and designer Jean de Piépape. Vintage desk and chair by Jean

Prouvé; floor lamp (right) by Serge Mouille; pendants by Isamu Noguchi; kinetic sculpture (far left) by Takis.

OPPOSITE: A new swimming pool blends into the landscape in front of the historic stable. Sculpture by Takis. For details, see Resources.

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ith its traditional beamed facade, the 17th-century manor house appears typical of the Pays d'Auge, a rural region in Normandy, France, filled with rolling hills, horse farms, and apple orchards. Step inside, however, and

one enters a different world, where owner François Laffanour has created a minimalist backdrop for the modern furniture and contemporary art he collects. Meanwhile, the property now also boasts a midcentury addition: a prefab house by the iconic French designer Jean Prouvé. "I feel strongly that historic architecture enhances contemporary art [and design]," Laffanour says. "For me, it harmonizes perfectly."

In the 1980s, Laffanour was a furniture dealer at the Paris flea market when he opened his Downtown Gallery on the Left Bank. Quickly, he became one of the leading forces behind the international ascension of French modernist designers, including Prouvé, Charlotte Perriand, Serge Mouille, and Pierre Jeanneret. In addition to an apartment he keeps in Paris, Laffanour spends much of his free time at his Normandy home, a two-story manor house set on 70 acres. He oversaw the renovation and interior design, with help from architect Mikael Klatzkow and designer Jean de Piépape.

Laffanour filled the rooms of his home with such prized pieces as a monumental dining table by architect Rudy Ricciotti, a bed by Garouste & Bonetti, and exuberant armchairs by Gaetano Pesce. There is also an eclectic mix of art: a 17th-century painting of the Virgin from Mexico; a textile wall piece by Gérard Deschamps; and roughly a dozen sculptures by Panayiotis Vassilakis, the Greek kinetic artist known as Takis.

A former stable has been converted into a gallery space, with concrete floors and soaring ceilings. Here, Laffanour is able to display pieces with heft, from a "president's" desk by Prouvé to a dining table by Perriand, a pair of daybeds by Donald Judd, and lighting by Isamu Noguchi. He will also be showing art for the first time in his career. "It is not gigantic," he says of the space, "but it is on a larger scale than what we have in Paris. The exhibitions will have very specific themes, giving clients a chance to take their time, and, because of the presence of nature and the indoor-outdoor element of the place, to see works differently."

One of Laffanour's clear passions is the work of Takis, whose humming sculptures appear throughout the property, from the rooms of his home to the grounds around the



In the dining room of the historic manor house, the table is by Rudy Ricciotti, and the floor lamp is by Andrea Branzi. Vintage Hans Wegner chairs; circa-1980 Italian pendant; 17th-century Mexican artwork of a Madonna.

pool. "For some years now, I have collected this artist in a pretty obsessive way," he says with a laugh. He met the sculptor through his friend Bob Calle, the collector and father of the artist Sophie Calle. "I was immediately drawn to his idea of sculpting forces that are unseen but shape our lives, like magnetism, electricity, and sound."

And, considering the importance of Prouvé in Laffanour's professional life, it is not surprising that he has installed a six-meter-by-six-meter edition of one of the designer's pioneering "dismountables"—structures

Prouvé created immediately after World War II to provide much-needed shelter. The dealer built the house up on concrete pylons, noting that Prouvé often did the same to offer parking under his structures. "Because the land here is sloping, I really played with the idea of height, as though [the prefab building] is dominating the historical architecture," Laffanour says. "I wanted to show how a simple kind of architecture, made with modest materials, could be in dialogue with old buildings and more than hold its own."

The interior of the modernist house, with its plywood

ceiling, wide-plank wood floors, and steel columns with the original peeling paint, contains a Prouvé bench and sideboard as well as a desk by Jeanneret. From this perch, the view encompasses the property's grounds, historic manoir, and the stable turned gallery space. There is no doubt that the Prouvé architecture, particularly in this context, is its own work of art. "It is like a control tower in the midst of the property," Laffanour says. "It has a great presence. And I hope to install others—they are like what architectural follies were in the 18th century." ■

RIGHT: A hallway in the manor house, where beamed ceilings and brick walls are original. Textile wall sculpture by Gérard Deschamps.

BELOW: François Laffanour on a circa-1955 Polar Bear sofa by Jean Royère in the gallery. Wall shelf prototype by Ron Arad; rug by Codimat.

BELOW RIGHT: Gaetano Pesce's thronelike Feltri chair brings a pop of color to a guest room. Vintage armchair by Pierre Jeanneret; drawing by Mark Brusse.



In the primary bedroom, the bed and armchair are by Carouste & Bonetti. Rug by Codimat.

The interior of a Jean Prouvé 1940s six-by-six-meter prefab "dismountable" house erected by Laffanour on the property. Circa-1955 settee and armchairs by Pierre Jeanneret.

OPPOSITE: In the demountable house, the stove, bench, dresser, double bed, and artwork are by Prouvé. Base building desk (back wall) by Jeanneret.



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