

## The ultimate in immersive art



Picasso, Braque, Hockney . . . the swimming pool as artwork has quite a history. Now contemporary artists are dipping in too. By Caroline Roux

With its sleek black interior and huge, steel, shimmering letters spelling out "BE AMAZING", the swimming pool in the beautifully appointed grounds of Villa Emsleib, near Salzburg, is certainly not your standard blue-and-white tiled affair. While fully functioning as a recreational space, the 16x8 metre pool is also an artwork by the Swiss artist Sylvie Fleury.

"It was pragmatic, really," says its owner, the contemporary art dealer Thaddeus Ropac, of the choice of Fleury to embellish his pool. "Villa Emsleib is a 17th-century property, where everything is subject to historical codes. To get permission to install something as banal as a swimming pool would have been very difficult, so instead we chose to create something that was a sculpture in its own right."

The pool is watched over by a large-scale fountain by the American artist Tom Sachs in the form of the children's book character Milly. "It's," says Ropac, "always a joy to take art out of the gallery or the home, to find a new context." Fleury, who likes to fish ideas from consumer culture, lined the pool in black granite, then embedded its surround with the words she found in a skincare advertisement: "hydrate, shield, hydrate, exfoliate". By day, silvery light glitters off its surface. But by night, the steel letters in its depths can



A silvery light glitters off its surface but the soundtrack can only be heard when you are underwater

beam out brightly if they are picked up in the lights of a passing plane. "You can sometimes see them when you come into land at Salzburg," says Ropac. A specially composed soundtrack, on the other hand, can only be heard when you are underwater.

"It surprises me that there are so few similar examples," says Ropac, who has galleries in London, Paris and Salzburg. In his own business, he says, "we often have a request for a sculpture next to a pool. But to me, this integration of pool and art makes even more sense for a serious collector. The upkeep is no more complicated than a normal swimming pool. We drain it in the winter and clean it, just like any pool." Installed more than 10 years ago, Fleury's black lining has turned out to have more than an aesthetic effect. "It naturally heats the water," says Ropac, "so it's unintentionally ecological too."

As contemporary art collectors buy more large outdoor works, pools will surely become a point of interest. When the art dealers and advisers Edward Mitterrand and his father Jean-Gabriel were planning their sculpture park at Le Muy in the south of France, an early move was to get rid of an "existing ugly pool" in front of the uncompleted house that also came with the property, according to Edward. Working with architect India Mahdavi and landscape

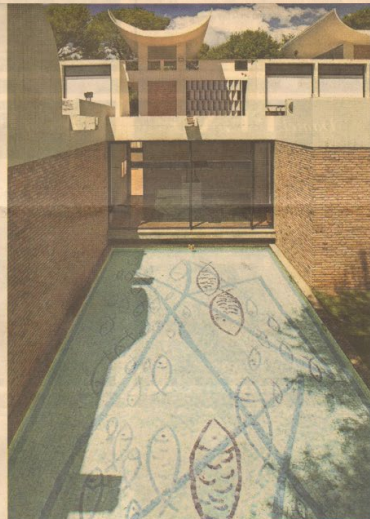
designer Louis Benech, he marked out a more discreet spot for the pool and enlisted the Austrian artist Peter Kogler to come up with a work of art that would sit comfortably in the natural landscape. Kogler, known for creating immersive environments by lining interiors with pulsating, computer-generated patterns, here perched his thoughts to the outdoors.

The pool, completed last year, has become a canvas for Kogler's geometric designs, which he describes as "evocative of the world of pixelation and the structure of the Internet." "But then the light, the water and the consequent distortions bring so much complexity. And there's an unpredictability brought on by the weather," he says. Though the design is black and white, it appears blue or grey as it reflects the colour of the sky.

Edward Mitterrand says it is thrilling to swim through this pixelated underwater universe: "Once you've seen a pool as an artwork, it's difficult to look at a standard pool and think it looks nice."

When the Mitterrands (the former French president François Mitterrand was Edward's great-uncle) opened the sculpture park at Le Muy in 2015, part of the intention was to encourage collectors to embrace outdoor works, as well as honing their own expertise in placing works in nature. "Now I can explain to collectors how this pool was put together over two years," says Edward.

"First we made the concrete base, then we had to install Peter's composi-



(Clockwise from top) Peter Kogler's design evoking pixelation in Le Muy sculpture park, France; video installation for a pool in Gstaad by Pipilotti Rist; Picasso's design and signature in a pool in Spain's Costa del Sol; Georges Braque's fish mosaics pool by Sylvie Fleury, Villa Emsleib, Austria

tion, it's hundreds of mosaic pieces, each one numbered. In construction terms, the budget might be very slightly higher than a normal pool, but I think any collector would feel it was worthwhile investment, for something so special and permanent." The Kogler pool is an editioned work, meaning that it could be reproduced elsewhere.

In fact, the history of the pool as art goes back decades. In 1961, Pablo Picasso created one unintentionally higher than a normal pool, but I think any collector would feel it was worthwhile investment, for something so special and permanent." The Kogler pool is an editioned work, meaning that it could be reproduced elsewhere.

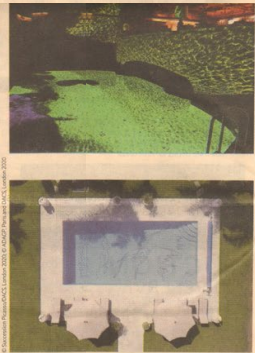
In 1962, the painter Georges Braque made a pool for the Maeght family at their new foundation for contemporary art near Nice. It is more water feature than pool, with fish appearing to swim

languorously in the sunshine. "The mosaics were done by Lino Melano, and it's lasted beautifully," says Isabelle Maeght, granddaughter of the founders.

Since then, there has been a trickle rather than a flood. But what a trickle. There's the pool at the Hollywood Roosevelt hotel; the markings appear like waves when the water moves

A year later, the American Pop artist Ed Ruscha decorated a pool for his brother Paul at his house in Studio City, with a supersized luggage label on a black tiled background are the words Name, Address and Phone Number, complete with dotted lines.

James Turrell, an artist who plays with light, devised an indoor pool in Connecticut for collectors Lisa and



(Below) David Hockney created a multimillion-dollar mural in the pool of LA's Hollywood Roosevelt hotel; the markings appear like waves when the water moves

Richard Baker, completed in 2008, which creates the sensation of swimming in a mirrored light box. In 2001, the same artist had made a "sky room" and pool for Nora and Norman Stone in Napa Valley; visitors swim through a tunnel into the pool, where an aperture in the roof displays a perfect slice of sky.

For the Paris-based architect Luis Laplace, the pool at a new chalet in the French Alps became the ideal place for a work by the Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist. Surreal, abstract and disconcertingly intimate, Rist's moving-image work often features parts of her own body intermingled with nature and accompanied by a dreamlike soundtrack. "We took this early artwork by Pipi that was in my client's collection," says Laplace, of the project completed in 2015, "and then designed the pool around it. The imagery is mostly of sky and her face, and you quite literally swim inside the artwork. At times, it's like you're swimming to her mouth."

Logistically, the project was less fanciful, the length and shape of the pool requiring the use of two carefully positioned projectors, while experiments to determine the ideal lining to maximise the quality of the image were laborious.

"We got there," says Laplace.

The situation was reversed for a project in Gstaad, where Rist was commissioned in 2016 to make a new work for an existing pool. The *Veux Chalet* was once the home of Gunter Sachs — the German automotive heir and one-time husband of Brigitte Bardot — who in the 1960s installed an organically shaped pool that is entered by a tunnel, with a waterfall that can be switched on to create a private space. Rist's addition is a vivid, abstract, moving image work of leaves and branches that appear to swirl and unfurl in the water.

"Pipilotti offers us the purpose of her work is to make us feel collectively consoled and rinsed," says her gallerist twin Wirth, who uses the chalet for Hauser & Wirth exhibitions. "To confront her work in water is to be absolutely enveloped in her universe. To swim in it's probably the most immersive experience you can have with a video work." Pools, concedes Wirth, are an unconventional setting. "But then, there are plenty of unconventional artists."

