

DOMAINE DU MUY

PARC DE SCULPTURES CONTEMPORAINES
CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURE PARK

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Domaine du Muy: art, naturally

Caroline Roux

Meet the man behind a new idyllic sculpture park in the south of France



Claude Lalanne, 'Pomme de New York' (2015)

A year ago at the Domaine du Muy, a freshly conceived sculpture park in Provence, signs of incompleteness were everywhere. Rutted pinky-brown mud had dried to a cement-like finish all around the house, which was in a semi-stable state: a side room unresolved; windows still to be put in place.

The Domaine's co-owner, Edward Mitterrand, a 48-year-old art adviser who usually runs his business from Geneva, was in deliberation with the designer India Mahdavi over the building's final touches. Pale paint colours — from a rosy cream to a pale grey — were being tested on the south facing façade in an attempt to balance the orange terracotta exterior of an edifice Mitterrand describes as “Romano-Provencalo”.

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What a difference a year has made. The house, now with a silver finish that looks blue in the sunlight, contains a long slender gallery on its ground floor. A grassy lawn leads to a pond where football-sized stainless steel balls click gently together in the greenish water — a work by the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, originally from 1966 but reprised in 2011. Beyond is a site of wild maquis, where scrubby bushes, cork oaks and native pines cover 10 gently undulating hectares, home to 42 artworks and installations.

A series of hexagons in acrylic, steel and mirrored glass glint in the sun: it is Tomás Saraceno's "Cloud Cities" from 2010-11. Like the Kusama balls, it absorbs its environment, reconfiguring the plants and sky in its shiny façades. "This version was commissioned by a client," explains Mitterrand. "But there's one double the size on consignment that can be produced to order."

While the Domaine is open to the public by appointment, and part of its mission is to create a

conversation between art and nature, nearly all the works here are for sale. "It is a subtle way to find new clients and talk to existing ones," says Mitterrand, who says that his ideal visitor numbers for 2016 would be in the lower regions — 500 to 800 people. "We don't even have our own dedicated road yet," he explains, somewhat anxiously. "It will happen in time."

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Jean-Gabriel and Edward Mitterrand with Tomás Saraceno's 'Cloud Cities'

His father is Jean-Gabriel Mitterrand, a seasoned dealer of postwar sculpture who set up his Paris gallery in 1988. For years, that operation was known as JGM Galerie — to avert attention from the distracting fact that Jean-Gabriel's uncle, François, was President of France from 1981 to 1995. In 2014, it was finally renamed Galerie Mitterrand, and that year Mitterrand and his father started work on the Domaine du Muy, having taken it on the previous year.

"Thaddaeus Ropac had opened a huge space in Pantin," Mitterrand says of the major French dealer's outpost in the Paris suburbs, "and Gagosian took on a big shed in Le Bourget [another suburb of Paris] for large-scale work. We needed to come up with our own response and unlock the gallery programme in a different way."

Compared to opening a new gallery space, expenditure has been kept in check at the Domaine. The estate cost €1.2m, and a further €1m has been spent on its development. Mitterrand helped with much of the heavy labour. "In June last year, there were 15 of us working here, in 40 degree heat, digging the paths and installing the work," he says. "We got through 60 litres of water a day. It was hard."

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Yayoi Kusama's 'Narcissus Garden' (1966-2011)

Now paths run from artwork to artwork, connecting a sinister Carsten Höller merry-go-round (the 2009 "Black Clown Carousel") with a Sol LeWitt white brick totem ("1-2-3 Tower" from 1993) on the top of a gentle hill, somewhere between a forgotten piece of rural water management and an ancient tribal stone. While the LeWitt seems happy communing with nature, the Höller has taken it less well, its black paint needing a little more care, exposed to winter's harshness and summer sun.

Elsewhere a 1991 Niki de Saint Phalle fountain lights up its surroundings, a group of brightly coloured pneumatic female forms spurting water from their nipples. It belongs to a collector, who would like to sell it for €700,000. "My father was very close to Niki, they worked together for years," says Mitterrand. "The same with Claude and François-Xavier Lalanne. My father is not a market player. He is good with artists and with a certain type of client. But now he's back in the market whether he likes it or not, because Niki and the Lalannes are relevant again."

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Claudia Comte's '128 squares and their demonstration'

Not all the work is vintage. A six-by-three-metre wall work by Claudia Comte, a young Swiss artist, was made on site last year — a highly controlled ocular extravaganza of black white and green squares. “I wanted to put something simple and geometric into the natural landscape, because nature looks wild but it’s really highly structured and organised,” as the artist explains.

A new Dan Graham curving glass piece will be installed soon. “I’m really happy to have that,” says Mitterrand. “I think we need make stronger links between nature and architecture here.”

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Subodh Gupta's 'A Giant Leap of Faith' (2006)

This part of the country is a thriving spot for both private foundations, which can be visited on request, and collectors' second (or third or fourth) homes. Nearby is the Foundation Venet, which belongs to the 75-year-old artist Bernar Venet and serves as an incomparable showcase for his work. Not far in the other direction is the fully public Château la Coste, an artfully manicured park belonging to businessman Paddy McKillen. Art, architecture, food and drink intermingle here, with a chic restaurant housed in a Tadao Ando building and a winery by Jean Nouvel, as well as a gallery completed last year by Jean-Michel Wilmotte. An exhibition of work by Lee Ufan runs there this summer.

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François-Xavier Lalanne's 'Poisson Paysage' (2007)

The Domaine du Muy has a way to go by comparison. “The vegetation still needs to grow back after all the work,” admits Mitterrand. “But we’ve repositioned some of the artworks successfully now, and we’ve found a way to keep out the wild boar.”

On the way back towards the house we pass a piece by Gianni Motti from 2014, two unassuming signs pointing right and left and marked “Failure” and “Success”. “The contemporary world is like that,” says Mitterrand frowning. “There’s no poetry.”

But he’s wrong. He’s busy creating some of his own at the Domaine du Muy.

domainedumuy.com; venetfoundation.org; ‘Lee Ufan’, Château la Coste, to September 24, chateau-la-coste.com

Photographs: JC Lett, courtesy Domaine du Muy; David Atlan