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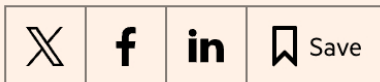
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Parisian sculptor whose work with resin puts her health at risk

Hélène de Saint Lager has suffered for her art — which involves poisonous liquids — but the results are often profound



Hélène de Saint Lager at her workspace in Paris, where she handles restoration, millinery, sculpture, casting and metalwork © Pierre Faure



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Polyester resin may not spring to mind as a likely material for an artisan to choose for shaping and adornment. But then the Parisian artist Hélène de Saint Lager, who moulds glitzy furniture from the stuff, is a maker of many talents and myriad materials.

As a child, Saint Lager spent summers in the Pyrenees at Château de Bielle, a forlorn-looking pile built in 1768 with a tall roof to protect it from Atlantic storms. In the darkness of that roof she found some dusty trunks, filled with old textiles. Young Hélène unfolded them and cut them into shapes for collages.

“I used to make things with my hands — anything,” she says. “My grandmother used to say ‘if you want to keep Hélène busy, give her some fabric and glue’.” Her small hands would make large pictures on boards to while away the hot days in the shade of the old house. She regards her formative creative period as 1962-73, between the ages of five and 16. At 12, she lived for a year in Algeria and under the spell of Islamic art: its colour, metals, pattern, fabric. “It remains important for how I work today,” she says.

Her greatest immersion came while studying for a degree in the history of art at the Ecole du Louvre, in the days before the glass Pyramid when it was “an old place, with real spirit. It still gave the impression of being a palace”. Though she confesses she “was not disciplined to work hard”, she would lose herself in the labyrinthine corridors studded with art and become transfixed on some detail of a painting or sculpture, gathering influences.

After forays in restoration and millinery, Saint Lager realised she was, in the end, a sculptor. Starting about a decade ago, her skill in making both lustrous

and profound sculptures in resin caught the eye of an interior designer called Jacques Garcia, known for his transformations of Paris hotels and restaurants. Through Garcia's commissioning came Saint Lager's best-known work, the Fleur table for the fashion house Schiaparelli. Its surface has gold circles over glazed deep red resin, and it is set on three gilded legs with staggered leafy shelves. Its dazzling surface and profound depth were the result of Saint Lager's experiments with the properties of polyester in her studio and at home.



A sculpture titled 'Quark' © Pierre Faure





Saint Lager preparing three barrels of liquid resins © Pierre Faure

Polyester resin is a material familiar to restorers: it is a tough, clear, mouldable alternative to glass. Combining polyester and styrene liquids, the polyester molecules are cross-linked by styrene during a slow setting and curing process, taking about a day to complete without accelerants. It was pioneered in 1894 as a glycol maleate, developed in the 1930s and patented in Britain in 1932. A little later, American engineers realised its value in laminating glass fibre for light and strong radar equipment, all of which prepared it for postwar consumer demand in the age of coloured plastics.

Resin's clarity and colour have a dark side. In its hard-set state, it is inert but the uncured liquids have long been known to be poisonous, as described in a 1963 article, "Polyester Resin Hazards" by Bourne and Milner, which explained that "the handling of polyester resin system materials may give rise to skin irritations, allergic reactions and burns . . . probably due to styrene and organic peroxides. Atmospheric pollution from styrene and explosion and fire risks from organic peroxides must be prevented".





Geode table lamp in resin and silver foil © Pierre Faure





Saint Lager applying the finishing touches using abrasion © Pierre Faure

Saint Lager's lungs have yielded to those effects. Animated and passionate as she is, during our interview her son Guillaume speaks with concern about his mother's respiratory health. But this is her lifetime's work and her chosen medium.

A Saint Lager table is typically made over the course of a week, using a hollowed-out bed of sand. She forms that hollow to represent the mass of the table when it is filled. A canvas sheet lines the void before Saint Lager pours a layer of resin a couple of inches deep on to it. Her task now is to decide how industrial dyes lend effects of opacity or transparency, depth or brilliance. Metallic strips or iridescent drops or streaks might be added as the material is

built up in each stage, with 24 hours needed for each layer to cure.



A mold and various flower resins © Pierre Faure



A small tripod table in orange resin © Pierre Faure

Sometimes mother-of-pearl or broken ceramics are added. One table made for Garcia entombed a much-loved antique teapot his client had dropped and smashed. Its fragmentation is suspended for eternity, a disaster turned to virtue. And Saint Lager encourages personal effects to be entombed in her work: wine labels and vine leaves have become an unreachable and incorruptible tableau in the anaerobic depths of her resin.

The results combine depth and mystery with warmth and luminosity. The prismatic, glowing effect is gained by the peeled-off canvas sheet having left the impression of folds and bulges that animate the edge and underside, which will probably be finished in silver or gold leaf so that each crease reflects the light penetrating the glacial mass. The Améthyste table is uncoated so that the violet resin and shimmering strips suggest layers of ancient quartz. You could be looking at a piece a million years in the making.



Some of the constituents of her creations © Pierre Faure

Even when it comes to table legs, Saint Lager takes a contrarian approach. They are typically made from common materials such as concrete

reinforcement bars and then gilded or silvered, if not coated in glass fibre and resin. The often diagonally set legs seem spindly, like the landing gear of a flying saucer. That adds some levity but the effect is to make the heavy resin seem to float.

Colours and themes are not always of Saint Lager's choosing; 80 per cent of her orders come through designers for specific projects, or from clients with specific ideas. When she works with Garcia or Peter Marino, New York's architect of choice for fashion houses, colour schemes are stipulated. One Russian client wanted a vivid pink interior. The remaining 20 per cent of her work, however, draws on her own ideas. It may include a pool of eyes inspired by the Egyptian ceramics she wondered at long ago as a student in Paris, or forms created by splashing molten aluminium into pools of water.

Constantly adding more methods and materials to her repertoire, Saint Lager is far from set in her ways.

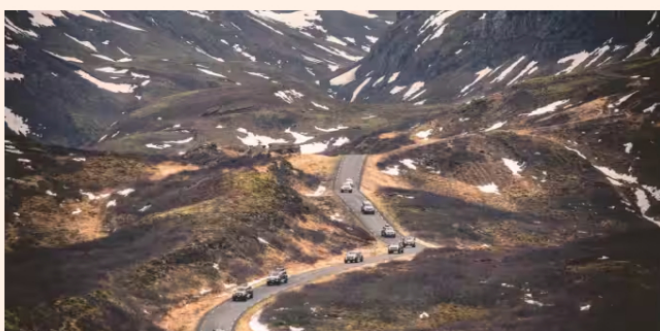
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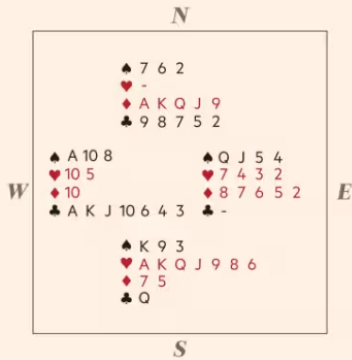




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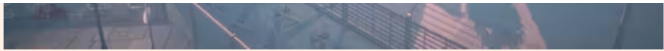
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