

HOUSES

At home in Provence with the conceptual artist Bernar Venet

It is fitting that Bernar Venet's home-cum-gallery in Provence is accommodated in a former mill and factory, with their industrial past forming a direct link with his monumental steel sculptures

By Fiona McKenzie Johnston

1 November 2023

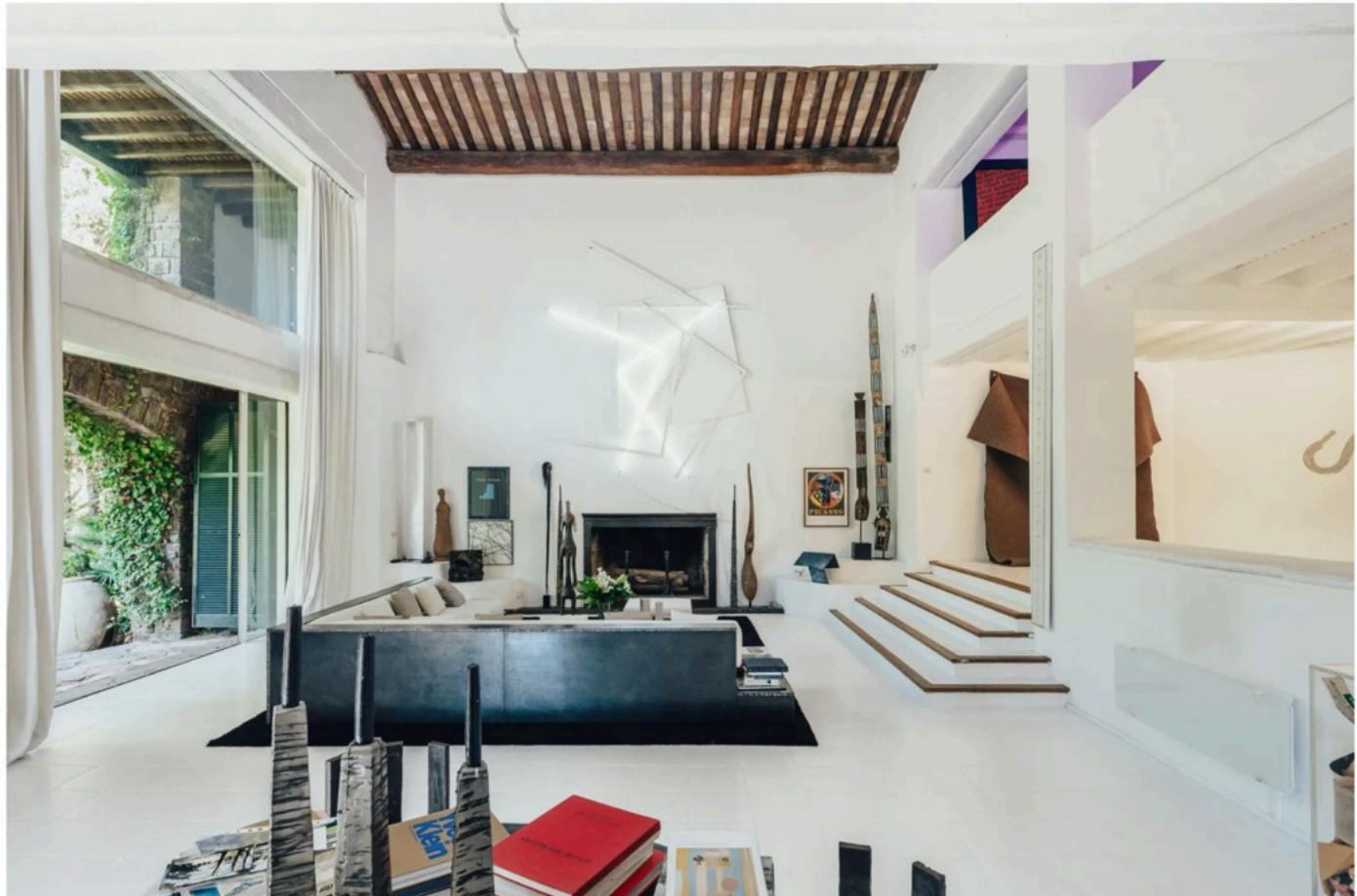


SAVE THIS STORY



Le Moulin des Serres, Bernar and Diane Venet's mill house, where they live during the winter months. It is in a tranquil spot on the banks of the

An area has to stay alive and a narrative has to continue,' says French conceptual artist Bernar Venet of art history – and of the foundation and collection that he showcases in Le Muy, [Provence](#). Open to the public during the summer, it comprises gallery spaces and a sculpture park, which holds – among other works – the only Frank Stella chapel in existence, a *Skyspace* installation by James Turrell and a slew of Bernar's own monumental structures in Corten steel, their curves and angles juxtaposed against breathtaking views across the plains of Argens to the majestic Rocher de Roquebrune mountain.



The sitting room at Le Moulin has a sofa, table and candlesticks designed by Bernar, and artwork collected by him and Diane over the years. TARAN WILKHU

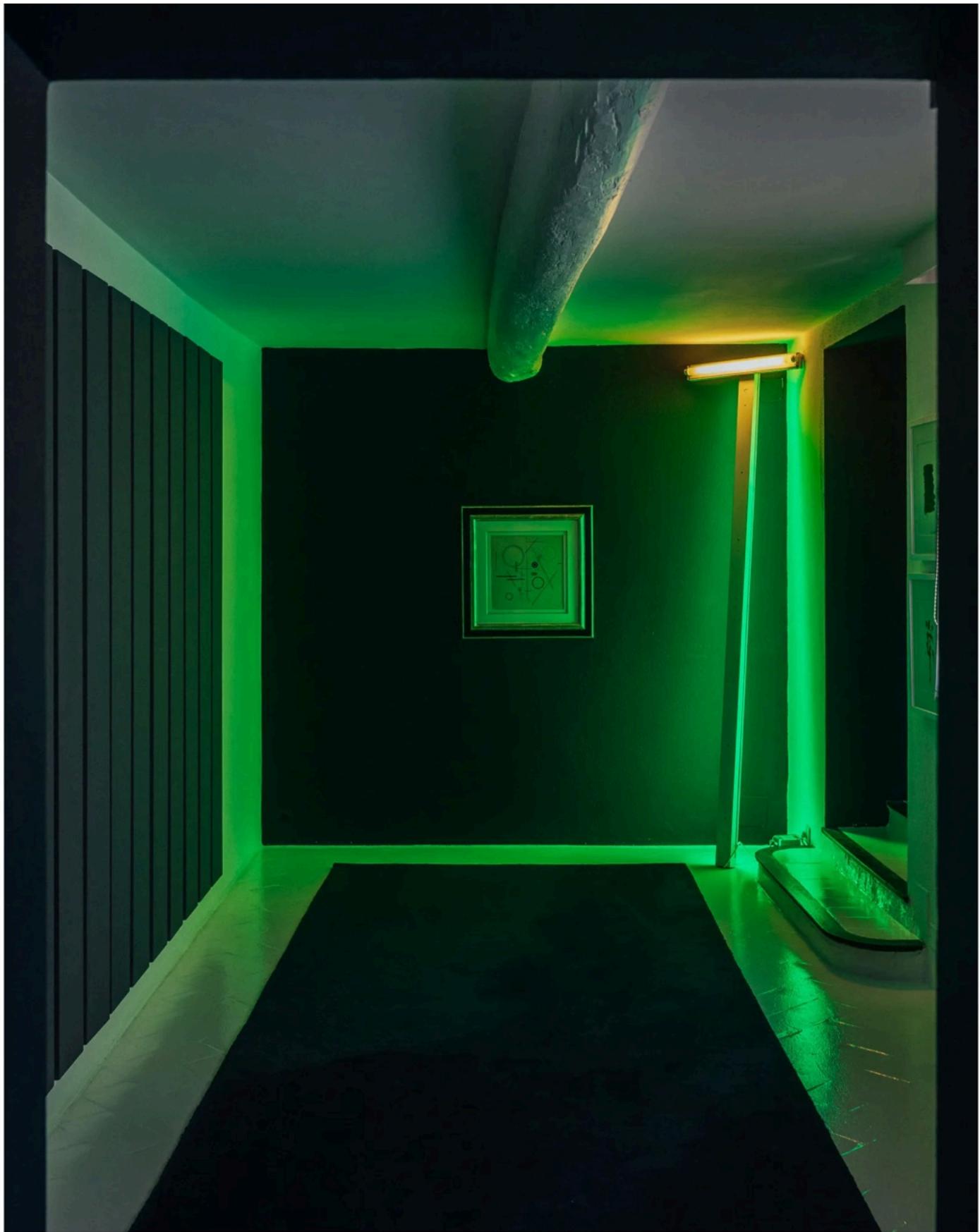
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Not on the foundation's public tour – at least not yet – is the mill house (Le Moulin des Serres). The winter home of Bernar and his wife Diane, it offers equally extraordinary encounters. In the [dining room](#) is a wall painting by Sol LeWitt, while a table designed by Bernar has been coloured to Sol's specifications: 'Be sure they use many coats of varnish.' The corridor to the main [bedroom](#) is lit by a Dan Flavin light sculpture and the couple's bed is by Donald Judd. In front of a huge canvas by Robert Motherwell in the sitting room

is a Plexiglass-encased personalised *Poubelle (Garbage)* by the late American-French artist Arman, with whom Bernar once shared a studio in [New York](#). 'I'm interested in art that raises questions about the nature of art,' explains Bernar.



A Richard Long installation on the mezzanine of *Le Moulin*. TARAN WILKHU



TARAN WILKHU

Born in 1941 and raised in Provence, he has effectively picked up the thread from the nearby Fondation Maeght in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, which includes works by many of the well-known artists of the first half of the 20th century. But the Venet Foundation has its own story. It provides an extraordinary record of an often unsung moment in time – specifically the salad days of the French Nouveau Realistes and the American Minimalists. Both movements reacted against abstraction and the idea of subjectivity, concentrating on

material clarity and the understanding that a black square is, simply, a black square. Bernar's career has bridged working relationships and enduring friendships with the artists associated with each of these movements. Above all, says Diane, the Venet Foundation is the culmination of 'a very long love story with art'.

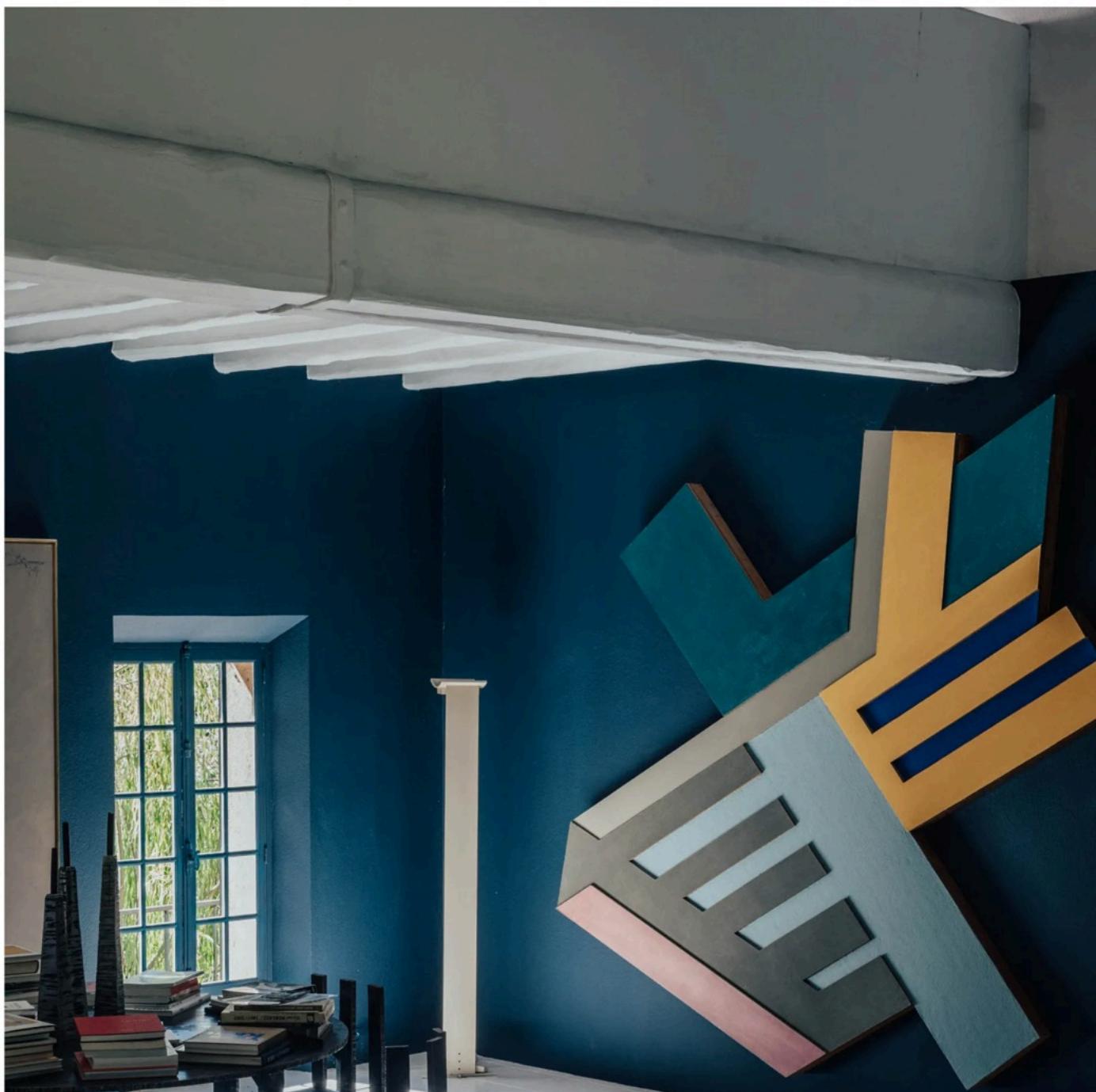
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TARAN WILKHU

Bernar says his driving aim has always been 'to push at the boundaries of what art can be'. Marcel Duchamp once said of him, 'La vente du vent est l'évent du Venet' (the sale of wind is the event of Venet), after the young Bernar confidently told the inventor of the term 'readymade' that he thought his own work was the more radical.





TARAN WILKHU

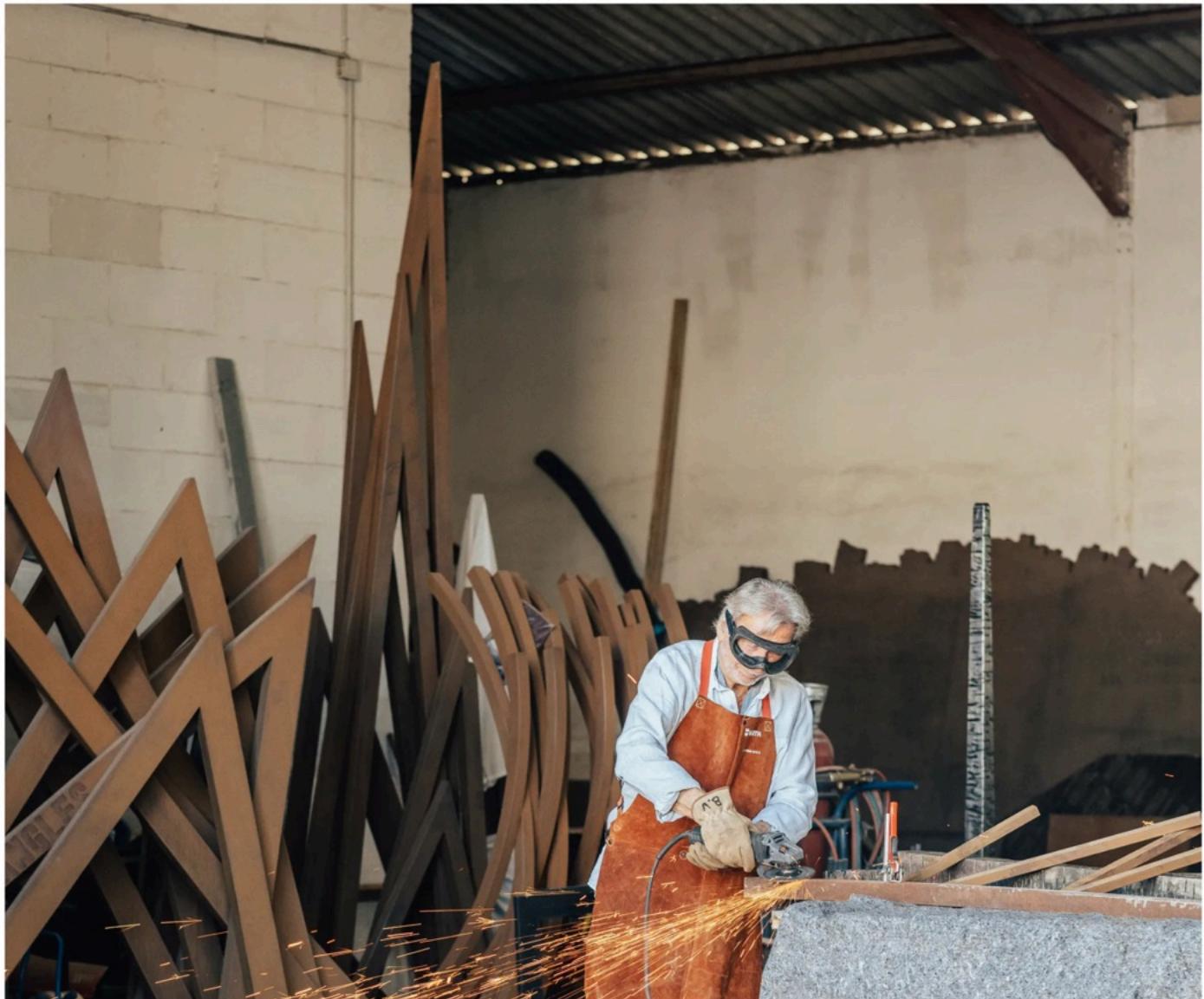




A light sculpture by Dan Flavin, a wall painting by Sol LeWitt and a Carl Andre sculpture create a striking display. TARAN WILKU

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Arguably, he had a point. Bernar is the artist who, in 1963, aged 22 and based in Nice, created the first artwork that did not have a specific shape – namely, the *Tas de Charbon (Pile of Coal)*. ‘I didn’t make art with coal: the coal is the art,’ he explains. His move to New York in 1966 kick-started his interest in geometry and logic – he frequented the maths and physics departments of Columbia University – before he segued, in the early 1980s, into working with steel. Bringing milling, flame-cutting and torch-welding into the studio, and turning what had previously been an industrial process into art, was, at the time, revolutionary.





Bernar in his studio. TARAN WILKU

That shift coincided with Bernar meeting Diane at a dinner in Nice. The couple went on to divide their time between New York and [Paris](#). In 1985, as Diane recalls, 'he wrapped a piece of silver around my finger', which prompted her to begin her now well-known collection of artist-made jewellery. Together, they started looking for a solution to a specific problem: Bernar was exhibiting widely in Europe and America, and, as he points out, 'the storage and conservation of vast steel structures is not straightforward'. He also wanted somewhere he could look at his work and visualise it in different contexts. Though they had no plans to move permanently from New York, his immediate thought was simply, 'Provence is my home.'





Bernar and Diane in the sculpture garden next to the swimming pool and his work *221° Arc x 5*, 2003. TARAN WILKHU

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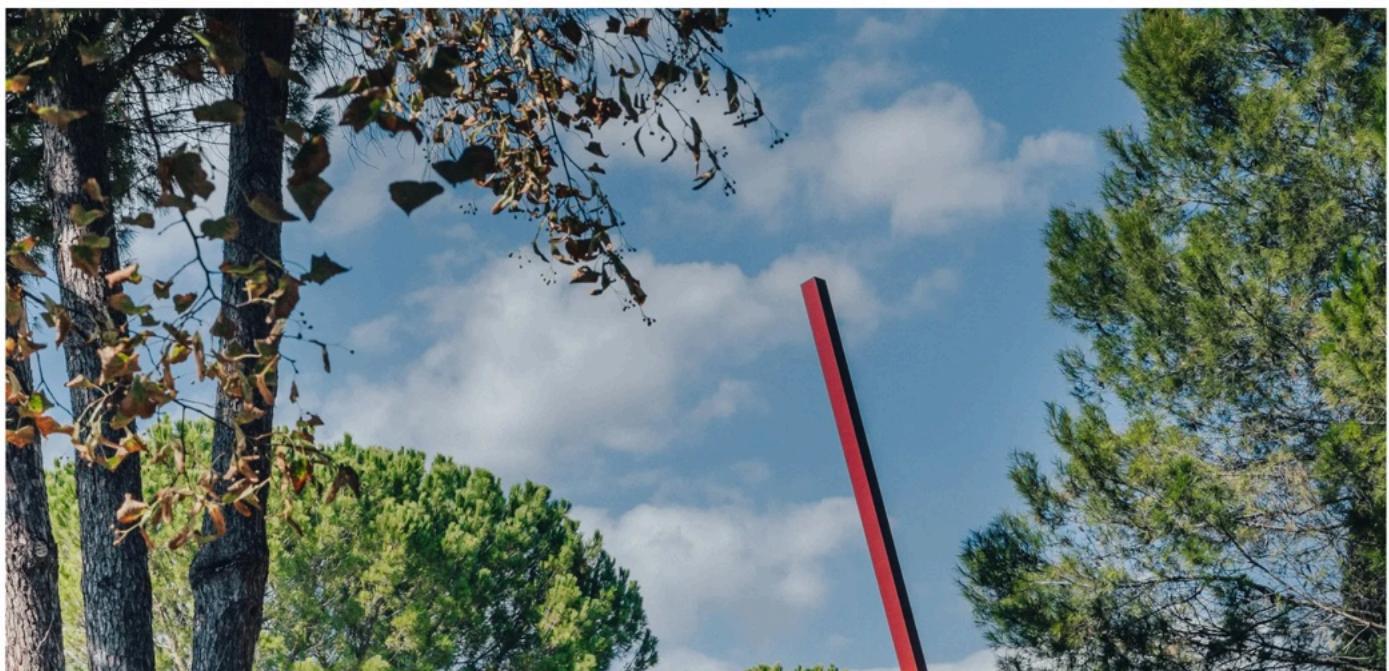
Le Muy is ideally situated, says Bernar, 'It's 45 minutes to Nice airport and St Tropez's beaches.' As well as the mill house, there was a factory, in which railroad switches had been made, and 12 acres. Bernar bought the site in 1989, prioritising the conversion of the Usine (factory) and employing architect Didier Guichard (responsible for the design of Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain in the Auvergne city of Saint-Étienne) to carry out structural work and create divisions for storage, work and living. It took one bone-chilling [Christmas](#) with Bernar's two sons and Diane's two daughters for them to realise that heating such an edifice was impossible and renovating Le Moulin was essential, so that they could live there in the winter.





James Turrell's *Elliptic Ecliptic* from his *Skyspace* series TARAN WILKU

As Le Moulin took shape, the couple saw that, beyond being somewhere to place the furniture Bernar had started designing out of dissatisfaction at what was commercially available, it could also be a showcase for works by other artists. Important to note is that there is strict demarcation between furniture and art, which extends both to gallery representation and use. Furniture by Bernar and Donald Judd is treated as such, but the Richard Long installation on the mezzanine above Le Moulin's sitting room – despite its ideal perching height – is definitely, Diane declares, 'art'.





Bernar's works are seen in front of the gallery. TARAN WILKU

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From the start of his career, Bernar has been 'making exchanges'. He explains, 'I like art and I like to be surrounded by pieces that mean something to me. It became more serious when I moved to New York. I always preferred a Sol LeWitt on my wall to money in the bank. Our works weren't worth so much then anyway and we produced more than we sold. So I was making swaps with Donald, with Dennis Oppenheim, with Frank Stella. What was ambitious was that I wanted significant pieces, not just little drawings.' Over time, he has bought more, but often informally: 'Maybe we'll have lunch with Frank and see a nice piece, and he'll give us a nice price.' Neither Bernar nor Diane approve of storage, so once Le Moulin was full, they turned their attention to the sculpture park. A huge, cavernous work by Anish Kapoor is the latest addition.





Bernar's work in front of the dramatic Rocher de Roquebrune. TARAN WILKU

The foundation was formalised in 2014, inspired by conversations with Donald and a visit to Texas to see his Judd Foundation, after his death. 'Diane and I were silent on the plane home, knowing what we had to do,' recalls Bernar. 'I was born with nothing and managed to do well, to travel, to meet the right people. I owe it to society to give back.' He mentions his realisation, aged 11, that art

could be an escape from the monotony of poverty and is delighted by the crocodiles of schoolchildren visiting the grounds.

Pieces are lent to institutions, sculptures are repositioned and the landscaping continues. 'It's been suggested that I'm creating my own Giverny,' says Bernar with a laugh, referring to Claude Monet's house and garden. Change keeps things fresh, as do the exhibitions that happen each summer in the purpose-built gallery space.



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Bernar and Diane travel frequently for exhibitions (of Diane's jewellery as well as Bernar's art). However, they sold their New York apartment in 2020 and, while they retain a flat in Paris, Le Muy is their main home and the location of Bernar's studio. Here, they are surrounded by the pleasures of Provence – the beaches, restaurants, markets – and many friends, some of whom, including Philippe Austruy at Peyrassol vineyard, have been persuaded to be part of 'bringing the next chapter of art to Provence' by setting up their own art foundation. As Bernar emphasises, 'It matters. When the Fondation Maeght opened, it was new and exciting. In the future, someone else will be new and exciting. Right now, it's us.'

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Bernar in his study in the Usine, where he and Diane live during the summer. On the wall is his *Copper Round Painting "to Gödel"*, 2012





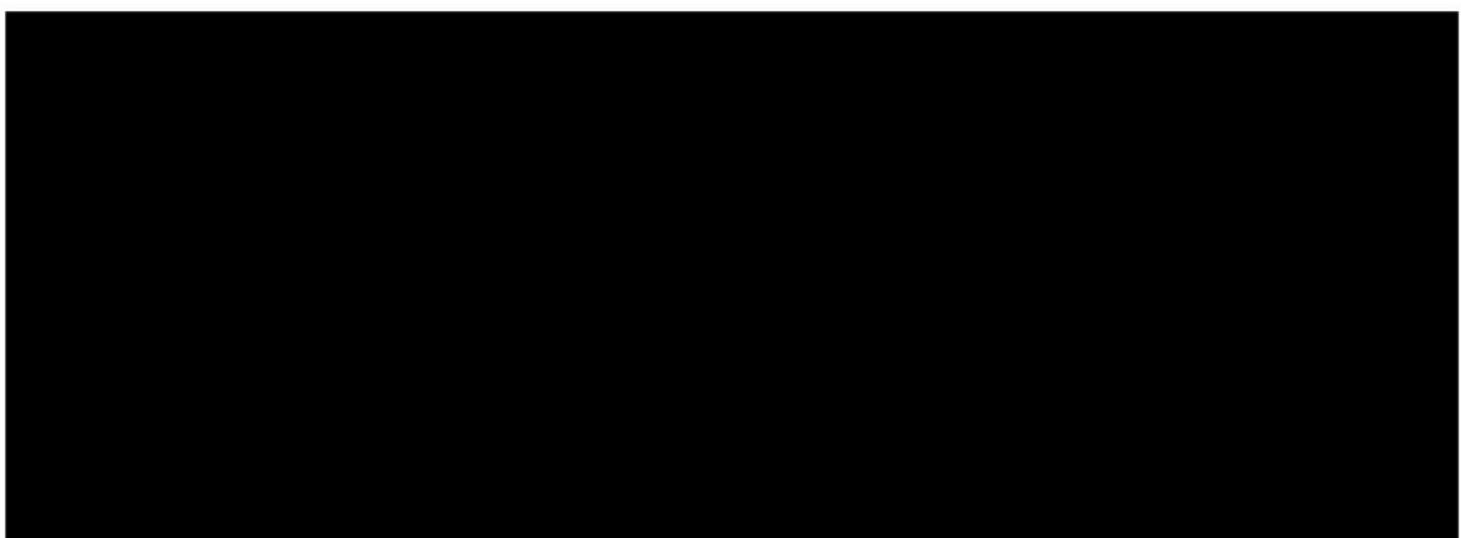
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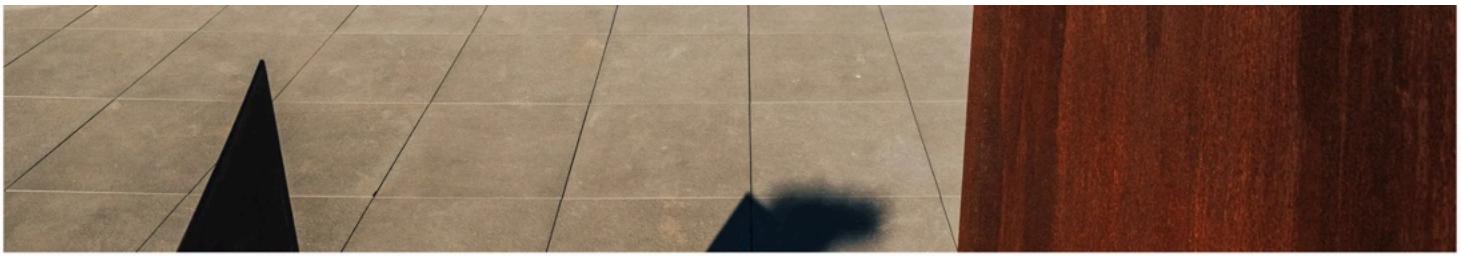
At Peyrassol with Mathilde Marchand, who is the head of its art collection.

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Bernar's 2016 work *Two Angles of 15.5° and 16.5°* displayed on the roof of the exhibition space at Peyrassol vineyard.





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Diane wearing a necklace made by Bernar.

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