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# ROYALSTO RADICALS

Benoist F. Drut of Maison Gerard celebrates groundbreaking design from the past and present.

BY TIM MCKEOUGH PORTRAIT BY STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON PRODUCED BY MICHAEL REYNOLDS

**Benoist F. Drut, the owner of Maison Gerard** in Manhattan, is a design polymath, and the sort of dealer who mixes Louis XV *fauteuils à la reine* with contemporary cantilevered stools by Stacklab at his weekend house in upstate New York. For a time, there was even a 1971 *Isolation Sphere* by Maurice-Claude Vidili installed among the trees outside—an inhabitable plastic pod that could have easily been mistaken for an escape capsule from some orbiting disco spaceship.

“I love the dialogue between objects of different periods, from different times,” says Drut, ensconced in Maison Gerard’s Greenwich Village exhibition space, where more than a century’s worth of top-tier furniture—from Art Nouveau to Art Deco to contemporary design—is stacked floor-to-ceiling on metal shelving that wraps the walls. Drut’s focus on discovering and celebrating the best of the decorative arts goes back to advice that Gerard Widdershoven, founder of Maison Gerard, shared with him after they became partners in 1999: “Gerard would always say an average piece will always be average. But a good piece, a piece of importance, will always stand out.”

That dedication to quality, along with Drut’s interest in research and education, earned him the Iris Foundation Award for Outstanding Dealer from the Bard Graduate Center this month. But at the same time, Drut has dramatically expanded the gallery’s focus—where Maison Gerard was once known primarily as a specialist in French Art Deco, it is increasingly focused on the cutting edge of contemporary design, showcasing work by the likes of Achille Salvagni, Carol Egan, Ayala Serfaty, Peter Lane and Fernando Mastrangelo.

“Benoist is a design savant,” says Mastrangelo. “He stands out as the most eccentric, encyclopedic, kindhearted, gentle dealer.” When Drut invited Mastrangelo to exhibit a new collection of his cast sand, powdered glass and silica furniture at the gallery last year, “I was so excited,” says Mastrangelo, “because Maison Gerard is a mecca for the design community.”

Drut grew up in the small village of Omerville, France, where his favorite childhood activities included visiting neighborhood antiques shops, yard sales, and auctions. “When I was seven or eight, I was collecting almost anything—advertising plaques, Dinky Toys, carafes,” he says. That interest in material culture continued into his teenage years, when he grew enamored of French Royal furniture and would spend hours leafing through books about Versailles. A chance encounter with Thierry Millerand, one of the world’s leading authorities on French furniture at Sotheby’s, set him on the path to becoming a dealer. He moved to New York, found work with the legendary dealer Roger Prigent of Malmaison (thanks to an introduction from designer Robert Couturier), moved to Karl Kemp Antiques and eventually landed at Maison Gerard.

His expansion into contemporary design began on a whim after he befriended Hervé Van der Straeten in 2002 and decided to present a few of the designer’s pieces in the gallery. “At the time, that was a novel approach,” says Drut. “I do remember comments from other dealers that I was very young and didn’t know what I was doing.”

But the critics settled down when the Van der Straeten pieces generated enormous interest, and Maison Gerard began developing a larger roster of contemporary designers. For Drut, mixing styles and periods is perfectly natural. “To me, it makes sense to share the way I live with other people,” he says. “It’s a happy melting pot of culture.”



Drut with his dog, Maxine, surrounded by a mix of contemporary and period pieces: the *Whalebone* sofa by William T. Georgis for Maison Gerard Collection (2017), a one-of-a-kind *Starburst* wall mirror by Jacques Adnet (1954) and a late-1800s chinoiserie side table by Gabriel Viardot topped with Mario dal Fabbro's *Desert Vision* sculpture (1969).

