

CHARLES RIVA COLLECTION

in conversation with Paulin, Paulin, Paulin

«ENTRE CHIEN ET LOUP»

April 27th – July 9th 2022

Francis **Bacon**
Alexander **Calder**
George **Condo**
Philip **Guston**
Paul **McCarthy**
Chris **Ofil**
Elizabeth **Peyton**
Rashid **Johnson**
Sterling **Ruby**
Ed **Ruscha**
Steven **Shearer**
Hajime **Sorayama**
and Pierre **Paulin**

Pierre Paulin in the Riva Collection: The Eternal Contemporary

Jérôme Neutres¹

Charles Riva is a bold and creative collector, which sets him apart in an ecosystem of art collectors that is increasingly made up of cautious and often overly conservative investors. Truly inspired and curious about everything, he knows how to breathe in the air of the times and go with trends underlying the evolution of art collections. Over the years, his exhibitions in the Riva Collection space in Brussels have caught the eye of a demanding public of art lovers through their ambitious projects and professional results. I am proud to have curated one of these exhibitions, *Sun Women* in 2019, which presented an anthology of female abstraction from Joan Mitchell to Jacqueline Humphries. Today's deliberately heterogeneous exhibition brings together works by some extraordinary distinguished artists such as Calder, Bacon, Guston, Condo, Ruscha, McCarthy or Sterling Ruby, and presents them on an equal level with a collection of furniture by Pierre Paulin, making a statement as important as it is poetic. Paulin's creations are works of art like the others, you immediately realise while walking through this beautiful exhibition, which shows pieces not often seen by the general public, thanks to a collaboration with the family business *Paulin, Paulin, Paulin*, who manage the estate and archives of the artist, who died in 2009. Such as the *Miami* table, a square table with integrated seats and floor, designed by Paulin in 1968, whose model is in the collections of the Centre Pompidou. This revolutionary modular table was not produced until 2014, when it was presented at Art Basel. The *Dune* sofa is also modular and can be put together in a variety of ways, assuming different shapes depending on how it has been assembled - like sand being shaped on the dunes... A Paulin sofa is poetry you can sit on. The furniture has meaning; the decor becomes a narrative. The exhibition also presents a set of furniture (desk, chair, table, lamp) designed for the Elysée Palace in 1984 during François Mitterrand's presidency. Let's sit down at the desk. This worktable has a blue lacquered metallic structure, and is finished with blue leather, blue lacquered wood and strips of pink aluminium. Blue is the colour of France: 'French blue' was first called 'Royal Blue' because

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it was the colour of the uniform of the French Guard regiments. Royal blue dominates this piece of furniture made for a monarch-president of a republic that has never ceased to mimic the old regime.

It was long considered the ultimate pitfall for a work of art to display a 'decorative' character. A horrible word, a contemptuous term frequently used by bloodthirsty critics to assassinate a young artist. Yet previously, notably during the Belle Époque, being 'decorative' was a quality of excellence that on the contrary was used to select the best in art. 'Art must be decorative' declared the painter Maurice Denis, the prince of the Nabi movement. For Charles Riva, Paulin's furniture is a visual work of the same importance as the paintings in his collection. And not just any paintings: Charles Riva's ambitious curating sets a very high standard in this exhibition by creating a platform of unprecedented dialogue with contemporary masters such as Calder and Bacon, and present day masters such as Ruby and Condo. The collector showcases a range of iconic works by artists whose stylistic identities are as strong as Paulin's. The 'classics' of the contemporary era, Calder, Ruscha, Bacon, as well as the stars of our time, George Condo, Sterling Ruby, Rashid Johnson, are all characterised by their immediately recognisable visual forms. It is striking to notice how Pierre Paulin converses equally well with them all. The Riva Collection juxtaposes artists who come from very different origins and generations and who have all created their works in special contexts. However this eclectic display reveals a dimension of universality in Paulin's artistic vocabulary, where the forms match and interact with Charles Riva's paintings. Paulin's furniture enters a dialogue with Calder's sober poetry just as easily as with McCarthy's provocative humour. From these encounters, Paulin emerges as an artist who resists all periods and styles, an eternal contemporary. In this respect Paulin joins with Calder's lasting contemporaneity, whose sublime mobile *Black Circle Black Triangle* 1961 floats majestically above Paulin's *Alpha* living room, which is installed for the occasion on the unforgettable *Diwan* rug, which, extending onto the wall, appears to envelope the room. *Diwan* is a rug made in Aubusson in 1992, reminding us that pictures on the ground used to be hung on walls and called tapestries. Airy and poetic, Calder and Paulin's masterpieces together make a composition suspended above time. On the edges of the same room, two little paintings bear an idiosyncratic light: a *Lamp* by Guston (1979) and a steak painted on a poster *Texas* (1962) by Ruscha appear like counterpoints in the room, which itself becomes an artistic installation, bringing face to face the many creative mediums and artists, each of

whom reinvented their art during their time. This is perhaps the DNA in all the artists shown in this exhibition: major figures in painting, sculpture and design, who each in their own way pushed the boundaries and limits of their disciplines, breaking the rules to create new forms – magnificently ‘undisciplined’ artists. Calder, like Bacon, was for a long time viewed with suspicion by the art academies and conformists; Condo and McCarthy likewise; not to mention Paulin, who had to wait for posterity before being shown in art galleries amidst other pioneering artists whose concern for inventing new forms and new images he shared. The other point in common for the prestigious ‘guests’ in Charles Riva’s exhibition is that each one embodies a chapter in the history of contemporary art. Charles Riva has convened a meeting of giants, transforming his house into a brief history of multitude forms of modernity. The contrasting elements are all the more powerful for their strong identities. These artists can often be explosive, creating a kind of visual fireworks of extraordinarily diverse colour and form. This variety of form itself illustrates the history of contemporary art, marked like no other time by the broad range of creative possibilities. Pierre Paulin’s creations, the central theme of the exhibition, the basis for the intersecting dialogues, prove this point with their astonishing creativity and the designer’s renewed ideas between one piece and the next.

Most of Paulin’s objects exhibited here were made for the exhibition by *Paulin, Paulin, Paulin*, who actively continue to produce editions by the artist, some of which were never produced during his lifetime, as they did not get beyond model or prototype stage. Designers have this advantage over painters, as do sculptors: it is possible to make posthumous reproductions of bronzes by Rodin and Brancusi, just as it is still possible to make a chair by Paulin – in very limited editions. The ability to be reproduced, intrinsic to object design, enables its perennial diffusion. A precious feature in an art world which has become globalised since the end of the 20th century, with more and more collectors – which is to be welcomed – who share a certain number of common references beyond national borders, those of the History of Art. François Mitterrand’s desk, which is now the desk in the Minister of Culture’s office, is exhibited today in the Riva Collection, before perhaps one day going to a collector’s home in New York or Beijing, or to a museum. Paulin’s poetry can be seen in two places simultaneously: designers naturally develop the gift of ubiquity which gives us access to a masterpiece like the desk of the French president without having to request an appointment. This was already the case with the

Alpha chair, which, before it became an iconic piece of 20th century furniture design, was commissioned in 1972 by President Georges Pompidou for his private apartments.

I was fortunate to meet Pierre Paulin personally, thanks to our mutual friend Michèle Pilhan, and organise an exhibition for his eightieth birthday in 2007 in New York, in the reception rooms of the French Embassy, in partnership with the MoMA. In fact this great museum of modern and contemporary American art took the first initiative (very early on) to include creations by Pierre Paulin in their collections, acknowledging the designer to be the great artist he is. Together with Barry Bergdoll, then Chief Curator of Architecture and Design, we planned a tribute to Pierre Paulin in the form of an exhibition of his iconic designs in the historic setting of the marble rooms in the Payne-Whitney Mansion on 5th Avenue, just opposite the MET, on Museum Mile in Manhattan. The opening of the exhibition, called *Happy Birthday Pierre Paulin*, became a celebration of the artist's eighty years with a birthday cake in the shape of a Paulin chair. The artist, deeply moved, had only one word to say, summing up his humour and simplicity "Today I'm the same age as Mickey". True artists are those who know how to keep their childlike spirit; great artists are those who have the humility of the wise. Pierre Paulin was truly a great artist.