

# GRAND TOUR

## The Vervoordt saga

Text & interview by  
Yamina Benai



Axel Vervoordt (right)  
with his son Boris.

His family's name is associated with an impressive list of activities: antiques dealer, art dealer, interior designer, collector, gallerist, real estate promoter and curator of some notable and noted exhibitions... Axel Vervoordt will try his hand at any number

of activities, while always bearing in mind his love of art, whatever form it takes. We spoke to this man of many talents in his château near Antwerp just before "Proportio", the exhibition that will be inaugurated on May 9 at the Palazzo Fortuny in Venice.



**"When I begin to dream of a project, I do my utmost to make it come true, carefully choosing the people I work with, so that I'm sure to be in charge of things. I follow my intuition and after, I think. So far I've never been mistaken." AV**

Hardly have you come out of the train station in Antwerp than figures dressed in black, with long overcoats and wide-brimmed hats, remind you that this town is the capital of the diamond business. Little by little the hectic inner city gives way to a quiet country road, dotted here and there by staid, silent mansions. As you walk past these façades, you cannot but feel an atmosphere of sophisticated calm.

Then, when you turn into a narrow track you enter another dimension. Straight in front of you: the Kasteel van's Gravenwezel. You need to have a full view of it to appreciate what seems to be a mirage. A squat building with slender towers, surrounded by a moat. Impregnable, at first sight. A citadel far removed from the hustle and bustle of modern life. Yet so filled with anima. A life infused by Axel Vervoordt and his wife May, who in 1984 acquired this ramshackle mansion and made it their home, and their retreat. Also the home of their art collection.

Then, you go on across the bridge over the dark waters of the moat, ink black in places contrasting with the vivid green of the rampant creepers. There is a chill in the air but the rays of the sun begin to tickle the stone façade. Out of time.

In the living room, whilst waiting for Axel Vervoordt, your gaze travels from an 18th century table to an antique Chinese writing set, lingers on a delicate engraving and then swoons in front of a canvas by a master of Gutai, a Japanese avant-garde movement. The artist will turn out to be Kazuo Shiraga. Always one to travel through time and styles, Vervoordt was the man behind the recent revival of Gutai with a major exhibition in 2013 at the Guggenheim, New York: "Gutai: Splendid Playground". In 2007 he had already put that movement back on the map by featuring some works by Shiraga in the "Artempo" exhibition at Palazzo Fortuny during the Venice Biennale. Last December a canvas by Shiraga went under the hammer for €3.25 million.

Accompanied by a leaping barking Labrador retriever with an ivory coat, Axel Vervoordt welcomes the visitor with that relaxed restrained warmth of a man who no longer has anything to prove. He starts the morning with a horse ride, then he has little respite for the rest of the day. He is an accomplished horseman - a legacy

inherited from his father, a horse breeder - Vervoordt only foregoes this ritual when duty calls him abroad.

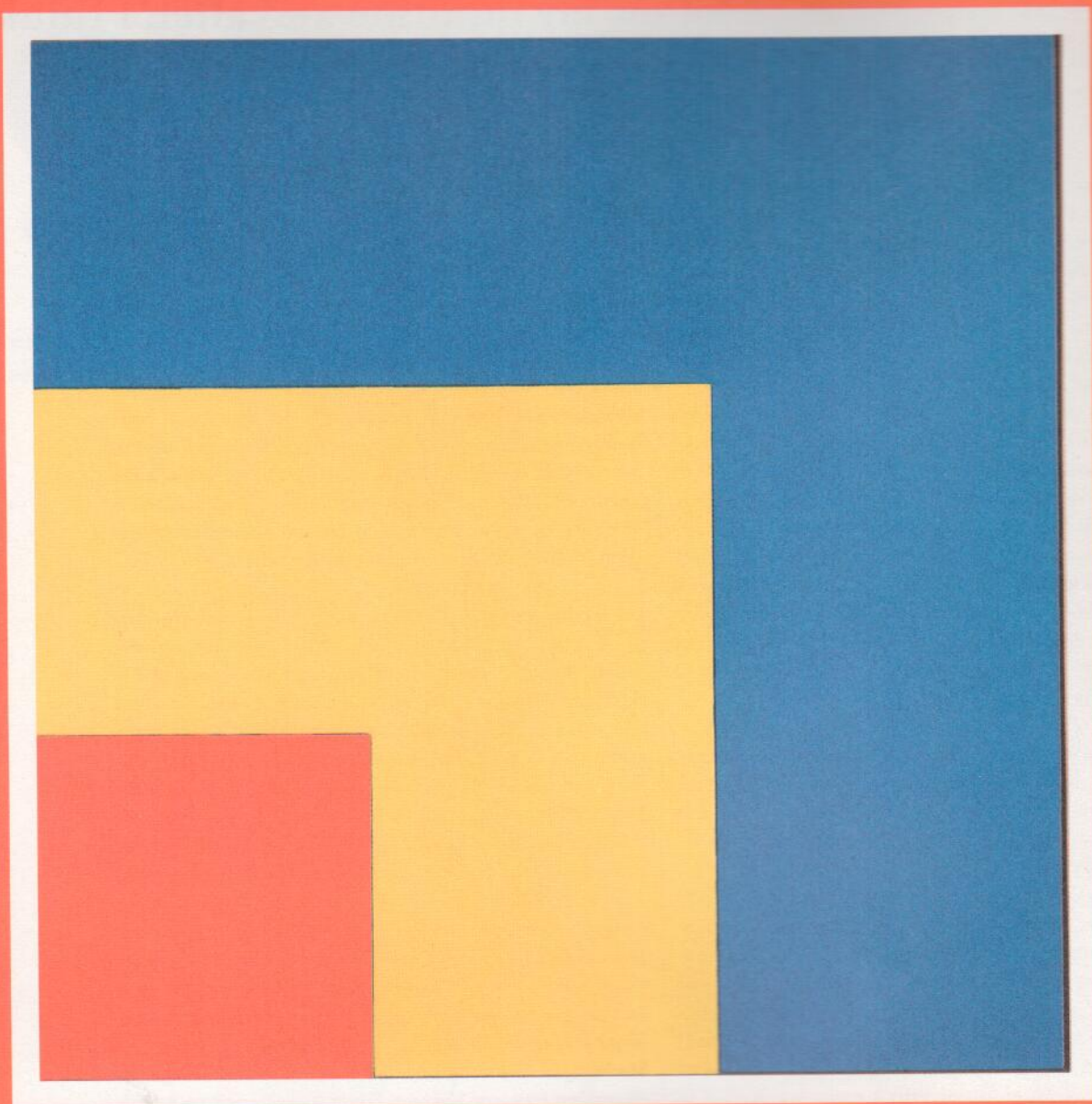
In the library tightly packed shelves of leather-bound books which cover the vast history of literature. Above the fireplace a splendid Concetto Spaziale by Lucio Fontana holds the eye. He is the first artist whose works Vervoordt acquired. That was in 1969, he was just 21 years old. *"This third dimension, his way of filling the void fascinated me. It caused me to develop a pronounced taste for contemporary art, the spirit of the message of his works. Great artists are several decades ahead of society. Just like an ancient Greek sculpture or a 16th century masterpiece, they are a source of inspiration to make you a builder of the future."*

Born into the Antwerp upper-class, Vervoordt grew up in a comforting world of luxury, and delight. He was stimulated by the creative influence and sobriety of his mother. *"She was both classical and eccentric. So when she was offered magnificent baccara roses which were supposed to be put on show with their long stalks, she would cut back their stalks and arrange them in little bowls. She taught me how to look at things and appreciate them simply for what they are."* Vervoordt has definitely put this credo into practice. A striking example of this minimalism is an old farmhouse table with its rough, knotted surface. *"I like the marks of time. I never restore the furniture around me more than is necessary. A piece of antique furniture is for me similar to a contemporary work of art, as long as you leave it in its original state."*

Standing on the console is a full-size work *Le Village de mon père* by Laziz Hamani. *"I am very sensitive to the atmosphere which he manages to recreate in his photographs. Laziz takes the photos of the interiors which I design. As a sign of friendship he offered me this book of black and white photos of his father's village in Kabylia."*

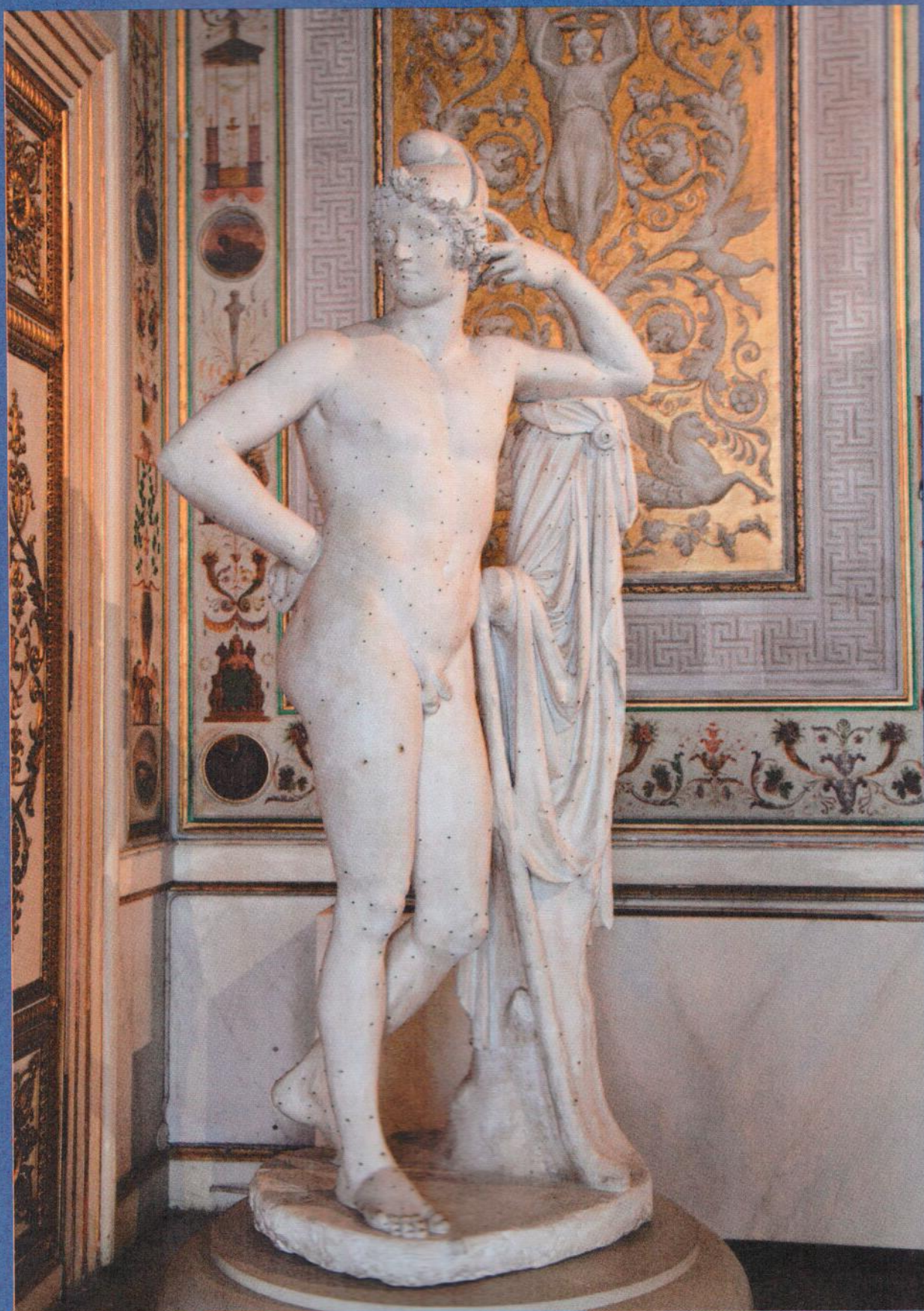
A flight of stairs gives access to a maze of corridors and antechambers which lead to a room symbolic of Vervoordt's idea of aesthetics: a wabi-sabi type interior, sparsely yet harmoniously decorated with roughly-hewn elements out of wood and stone. On the wall of yet another room, reaching down to the floor, there is a giant canvas by Antoni Tapies. On a low table lies the ...





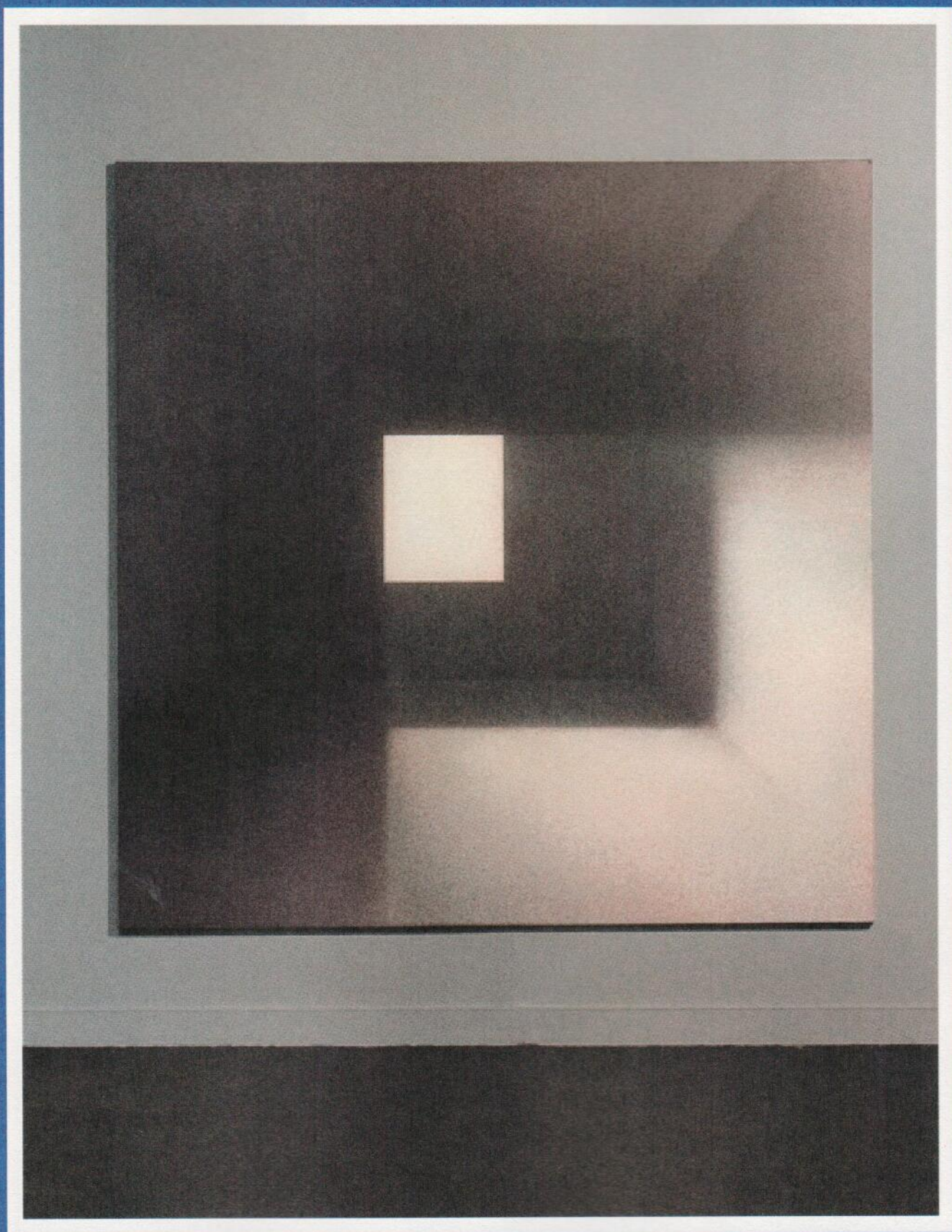
ELLSWORTH KELLY, *RED, YELLOW, BLUE*, 1963, OIL ON CANVAS, 231 X 231 CM, FONDATION MARGUERITE AND AIMÉ MAEGHT, SAINT PAUL DE VENCE.





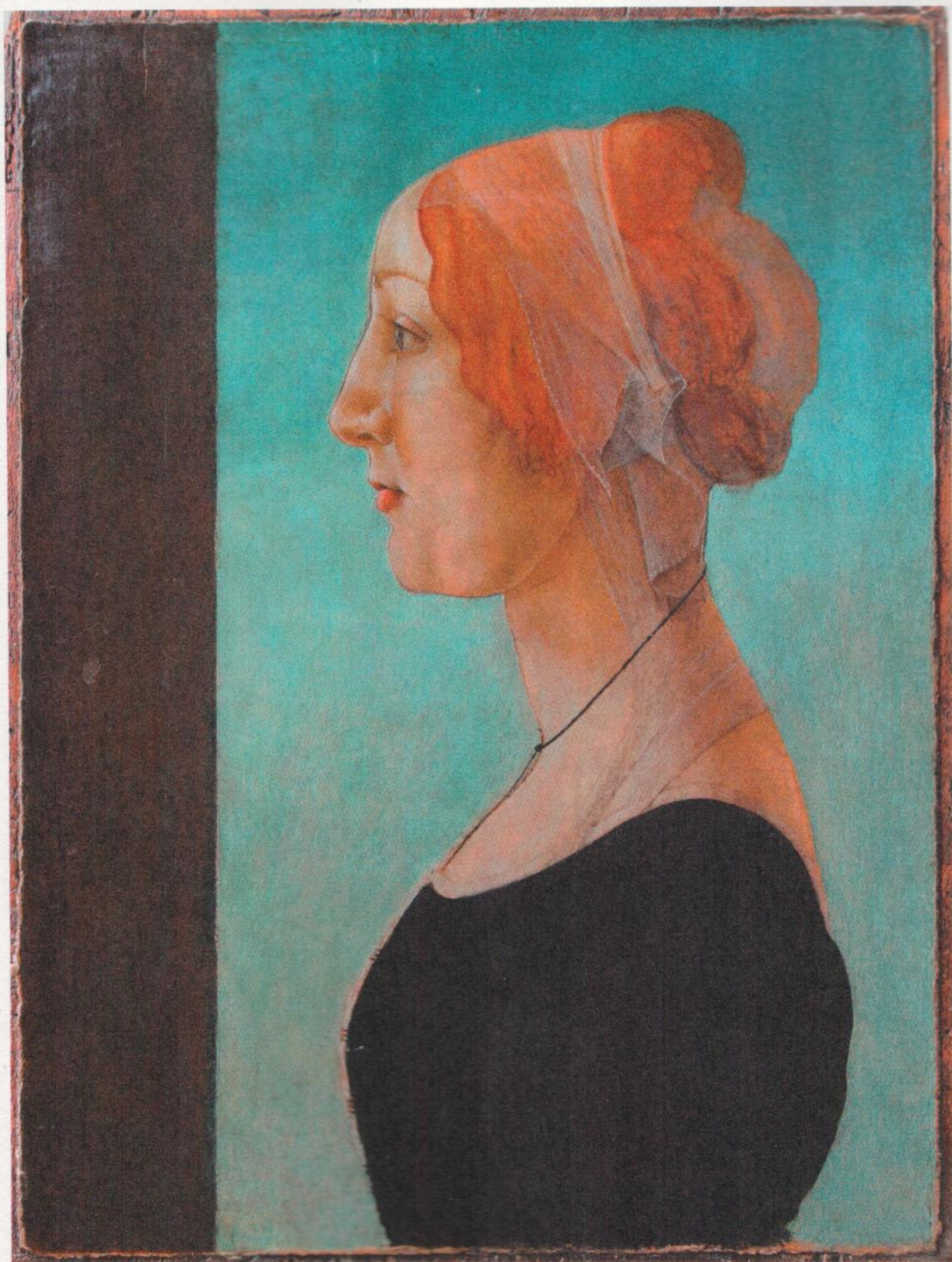
ANTONIO CANOVA, PARIDE, 1807, PLASTER,  
201 X 105 CM. FONDAZIONE MUSEI CIVICI DI VENEZIA.





MARCO TIRELLI, *UNTITLED*, 2012, MIXED MEDIA  
ON CANVAS, 300 X 300 CM.





SANDRO BOTTICELLI, PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN  
1485, TEMPERA ON WOOD, 61,3 X 40,5 CM.



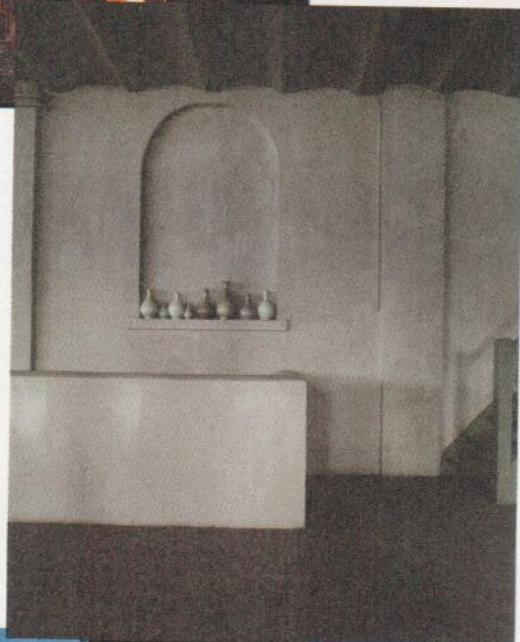
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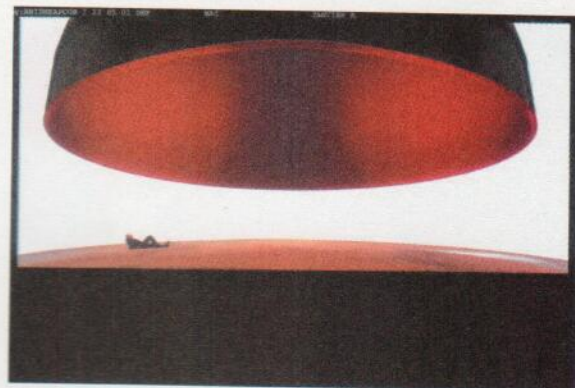
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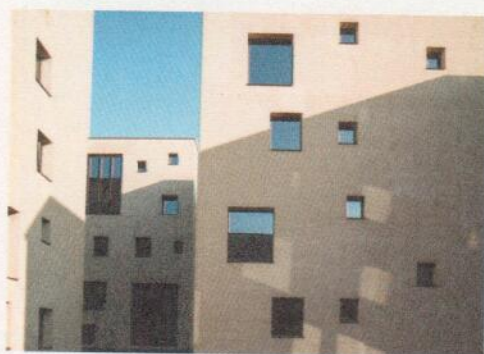
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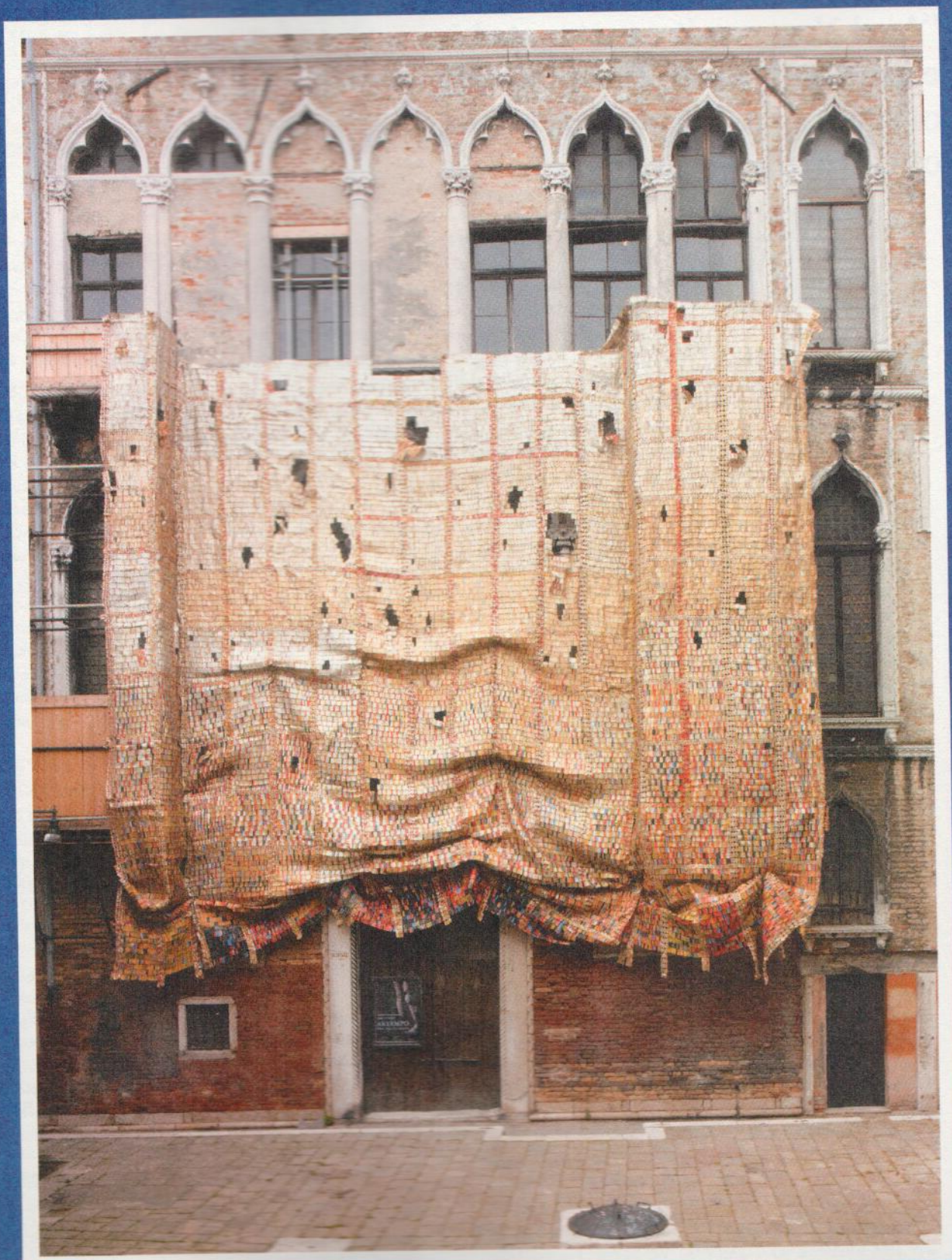


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1. Work by Lucio Fontana at Kasteel van's-Gravenwezel. 2. From left to right : Axel, May, Boris and Dick Vervoordt. 3. Inside Kanaal. 4. Salon wabi-sabi at Kasteel van's-Gravenwezel. 5. and 7. Exterior of Kanaal. 6. Installation of Anish Kapoor commissioned in 2000 for Kanaal. 8. Paintings by Kazuo Shiraga displayed in the gallery of Axel Vervoordt in Hong Kong.





WORK BY EL ANATSUI ON THE OUTSIDE  
(INTERIOR OF THE PALAZZO FORTUNY)  
2008 "AUTUMN" 2007



## **"Axel Vervoordt constructs his exhibitions around the association of ideas and not periods of time, of culture or artistic style."**

...*Traité du vide parfait* by Lie Tseu: "One of the great thinkers of Taoism, in vogue during the 5th century BC". A sign of his interest for oriental philosophies.

The French windows are wide open. In the foreground a pond full of water lilies, a stretch of lush grass as far as the eye can see. This is only a small part of the 170 acres which the domain comprises, along with farms and stables. On the wrought ironwork, a perfectly formed spider's web. Vervoordt admires its beauty, bright in the midday sun. Although he is hyperactive, he nonetheless indulges in daily meditation, a habit he has passed on to his two sons, along with a taste for beauty and creativity. Boris, the elder, runs Axel Vervoordt's art galleries. One in the heart of the Vlaeykensgang district in Antwerp, saved from demolition in 1967 by Vervoordt's mother. The other was inaugurated in May 2014 in Hong Kong for the second edition of Art Basel. This 40 square-meter space which opened with an exhibition by El Anatsui. "The aim was to clarify the message by differentiating the activity of the Vervoordt business of interior design, antiques and art dealing from the gallery side, and to get that activity better known to an Asian market." A year later, the results are looking very positive: "this second gallery has improved the turnover of the group" he adds. All the same it's just one step in the development and is planned to last for several years, then perhaps we will head towards other international destinations."

The younger son, Dick, is in charge of the real estate business launched by his father. The Kanaal complex - another of the numerous activities of the indefatigable Axel Vervoordt - has set up shop on the banks of the Meuse in a former malt factory, keeping three silos and the surrounding land. The project will comprise about 100 apartments - from 130 to 400 square meters - the first of which were delivered to the owners in December 2014, and shops, restaurants, a kindergarden, a town in its own right. "We wanted to have a very pure contemporary architecture in harmony with what already existed". Kanaal will also host the Axel and May Vervoordt Foundation, whose opening in 2016 will afford a privileged showplace for the thousands of artworks acquired over 40 years. It will be a storage space for works of art but also a new mu-

seum which will host temporary exhibitions.

For the time being, the family is focused on "Proportio" whose aim is to reflect on the omnipresence of universal proportions in art, science, music and architecture (see following pages interview with Daniela Ferretti). True to his own style and flying in the face of customary museum procedure, Axel Vervoordt constructs his exhibitions around the association of ideas and not periods of time, of culture or artistic style. He calls upon experts in various fields - scientist, musicians, historians, architects - to take part in workshops where the concept is worked out and then communicated to artists. These commissioned works are then exhibited alongside archaeological remains either on loan or from his personal collection. These crossed dialogues are the widely acclaimed strong point of the exhibitions at Palazzo Fortuny, moments long-awaited by critics and the public.

Hard work, insatiable curiosity, along with a touch of madness à la belge, could help to sum up Axel Vervoordt. "When I begin to dream of a project, I do my utmost to make it come true, carefully choosing the people I work with, so that I'm sure to be in charge of things. I follow my intuition and after, I think. So far I've never been mistaken."

### **MUST-SEE**

**"Proportio",**  
9 Mai-22 November,  
Palazzo Fortuny, San Marco  
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# Daniela Ferretti / Director of Palazzo Fortuny, Co-curator of "Proportio"

**L'OFFICIEL ART / 'Proportio' aims at exploring the omnipresence of universal proportions in the arts and sciences. What is the reason for the choice of this particular subject, which follows on from the trilogy 'Artempo. Where Time becomes Art' (2007), 'Infinitum' (2009), 'Tra. Edge of Becoming' (2011), exhibitions which were held in this very same Palazzo Fortuny?**

**DANIELA FERRETTI /** The irrational number 1.6180 represented by the letter phi in the Greek alphabet is the symbol of the harmony of the universe. Nature, art and science are closely connected. The many ways phi appears highlights the tight link between the physical world, artistic and intellectual creation, as well as the beauty of numbers. This premise and an idea of Axel Vervoordt's were the genesis of 'Proportio', which rounds off the cycle begun 8 years ago. This exhibition cuts across the centuries, involving different branches of learning to tell the story of that universal value since the beginning of time, 'the divine proportion', that's to say the unit of measurement capable of giving to each and every thing its harmonious dimension.

**Did you seek any expert opinions to help you limit such a vast field?**

An international committee of scientists, philosophers, musicians, architects and historians helped us in our arduous task of fixing the main themes of our exhibition. During our numerous meetings we discussed the extraordinary range of our subject, we analysed it from different points of view. Despite the obvious differences of opinion, all those involved played an active part in the discussion, fully aware of the challenge before us. To a certain extent, this fruitful exchange of ideas followed on from the extraordinary conference on the 'Divina Proporzione' in Milan in 1951, where, for the first time, phi was rendered its central role in the arts. We identified and explored the elements necessary to define our direction more clearly. A very enriching human and cultural experience for me.

**To highlight this universal harmony immediately leads one to question the link between order and chaos. How do you go about that in the exhibition?**

The exhibition is an incentive to forget the chaos of daily life. The five groundfloor pavilions, designed and built with natural materials in accordance with the five sacred proportions, akin to Plato's five elements (Air, Water, Earth,

Fire and Quintessence) form an introduction to the discovery of spaces dedicated to harmonious order. Each visitor will then invent his or her own circuit through the complex mosaic of artworks produced by the dialogue between the diverse visions of universal harmony, that careful balance between order and chaos.

**How do you manage to stage an Egyptian artefact alongside a canvas by Ellsworth Kelly?**

The Palazzo Fortuny is in itself a magical place. Its vast spaces that can be left open or partitioned off, its rooms wide or narrow, well-lit or in more subdued light, are the ideal showcase for contrasting artworks, whether ancient or contemporary, as well as the different cultures that produced them. The spaces and the works give a rhythm, as it were, to the display. Indeed, as in an orchestra, all the elements are arranged in such a way that the techniques, materials, the colours as well as the very different styles compose a veritable symphony in which you can sense the harmonious balance. The circuit through the 4 floors of the Palazzo is a journey which incites you to rediscover the liberating value in art and to perceive beauty even in the simplest things.

**Some works already existed but others have been specially commissioned (Marina Abramovic, Anish Kapoor, Massimo Bartolini, Rei Naito, Michael Borremans, Izhar Patkin, Maurizio Donzelli, Otto Boll, Francesco Candeloro, Riccardo De Marchi and Arthur Duff). How did you choose the artists and did you have any specific requirements?**

An artist will always have to strike a balance between intuition and limitations, between freedom and constraints. In art, as in life, there is never one single way of getting that balance just right. What has or hasn't changed in the way we view proportions? Obviously the interesting thing is the way human experience has evolved. The new concept of space is indissociably linked to time and movement, and that implies a totally different approach to proportion from that of the Middle Ages or the Renaissance. So we invited a group of artists many of whom had already taken part in our previous shows. Some were recommended, others selected for their work relevant to our theme. Via our meetings, discussions and correspondence, we spoke about the new challenge and asked them to present projects especially for the exhibition or to propose the works which they themselves judged most appropriate.