

Maria Pergay in her Paris studio working on *Bronze Tree*, the centrepiece for *Secret Garden*, an exhibition at the Demish Danant Gallery in New York City.



## Metal Matriarch

In the 1960s, Maria Pergay's intriguingly voluptuous one-off pieces in steel were, perhaps, design art *avant la lettre*. Now 56 years into her career, she's still pushing the boundaries between disciplines.

Words **Chris Scott**  
Photos **Felipe Ribon**

**S**he started her career 56 years ago making decorative silver objects, but it was her move to stainless steel in the 1960s that transformed Maria Pergay's work and life. Then an unconventional material in furniture design, stainless steel quickly became her trademark, and the work won immediate acclaim. Important commissions followed for interiors and furniture that enhanced the homes of well-heeled clients. She has been bending, folding and draping metal into curvaceous shapes ever since.

The Russian-born designer, who has never belonged to a distinct design movement – 'I don't want to be part of a troupe' – became a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2011, the ultimate acknowledgment of having made a notable contribution to French culture. On the eve of her latest exhibition (*Secret Garden* at the Demish Danant Gallery in New York City), Pergay offered insights into her world from the Hôtel Lutetia in Paris.

**Would you describe yourself as a designer or an artist?** Maria Pergay: No, please – I'm just a worker; I get an idea and work on it. These days, everybody is an artist. You do a bit of this, a bit of that, 'create' art and obfuscate everything with words. Young designers move things around to a degree and call themselves artists.

**Let's talk about your latest project, the *Secret Garden* exhibition – new direction?** Absolutely. Life is a fantasy, and I like the idea of having something material – dead, cold, steely – come to life. Most of the elements are in copper and bronze and relate to natural forms – a lot of jewellery-like handwork, flowers and leaves in metal. It's an imaginary world – my *Tree Light*, *Column Seat*, *Secret Cubes* and *Secret Garden Cabinet* – a total of seven pieces presented in a domestic environment.

**Where do you get your creative strength and energy from?** Speaking psychoanalytically, I am Russian, as you are aware, and suffered under Stalinism – incidentally, did you know that *stali* is the Russian word for steel? Stalin caused a great deal of trouble for my father, who was an officer and spent 14 years in the Gulag. My mother escaped Russia

with me, a child of seven, and moved to France. That experience gave me confidence and strength of character.

**You have a very creative mind and seem to have no problem finding ideas.** I don't look for them. I'm not a designer who sits down and thinks. My ideas come when they want to – pop into my head, like a picture, from one moment to the next. I see finished things: the thinking and making come together after the initial image. Sometimes I think: okay, you did well, and as a reward I get another idea. I have no fantasy. I'm different, but not by intention.

**And for inspiration? Do you go to exhibitions, performances, salons and fairs?** Everything interests me – painting, toys, whatever. If I'm attracted to something, it may give me an idea. I visit places and events for my pleasure. I'm curious and have a hunger to see things.

**Can you say something about your method of working? How do you progress from the initial idea?**

I see the object in my head. That's the easy part. I don't really draw. I don't mind using a pen, but I can do without. I prefer that nothing comes between my ideas and the objects. Occasionally I make little sketches at the corner of the paper, as reminders. I have a small office – next to my apartment – where I've got papers, papers everywhere. I work there with my daughter. Sometimes we draw our ideas directly onto the kitchen walls before taking them to the workshop.

The technical side is less easy. After I've seen the piece in my mind, I confer with my assistants. I've worked with this material so long that I know what to do. At the workshop, I can put my hand on theirs and guide them. I often rely on dressmaking tricks – used while making dresses for my daughters – to create pleats and folds. My assistants are the actual workers, as they have the strength to produce the designs. *Tout ce qu'existe de moi, tout ce que matérialise de moi* [Everything that exists of me, everything that is made by me] is here by virtue of the people I work with, their knowledge, patience and kindness.

**I understand that you work with only a handful of people, including your children. What role do they play?** Alexei, who trained as an...



*Bronze Tree* is a unique piece with trunk and branches in bronze and leaves in patinated copper.

**History in Steel**  
**5 Pieces by Pergay**



Flying Carpet Daybed, 1968



Wave Bench, 1968 (reintroduced in 2013 as part of the Fendi Casa Icons collection)



Ammonite Table, 1977



Ribbon Pouf, 2007



Ammonite Table, 2010

... architect, is responsible for manufacturing. Valerie is involved in the design process, and she draws. She's very different from me. She's bright, goes further and quicker than I do, and also designs her own things. Another daughter, Catherine, is in the field of church renovation, where she often uses marble and trompe l'oeil. She works with me sometimes as well.

**You have completed a wide range of projects for many interesting clients. Do you have a favourite – or one you consider better than all the rest?** I don't have a favourite project, but the time I spent in Saudi Arabia – from 1978 to 1985 – was like a dream out of *One Thousand and One Nights*. Very different from traditional Louis XIV and XVI stuff. I got to use marbles, silks and other exotic materials. My clients followed me, trusted me and had the money to pay for what they wanted. As a 'creator', you don't always get that kind of opportunity. What's more, they complimented my work rather than criticizing it.

**You have worked with stainless steel since the late 1960s. Do you never tire of it?** No, I have worked with it for so long that I know exactly what to do with it. I explore the material, exploit its limits and respect it. I've discovered that metal has something to say. There's an exchange between the material and me.

**Your iconic Flying Carpet Daybed – how did that come about?** Another form in stainless steel... I've got no idea where it came from. I had a dream and when I woke up I remembered the object clearly. When I told my assistants I wanted a flying carpet, they thought I was mad. I drew a flowing, undulating, 3-m-long line in chalk on the wall. I was young and good-looking and they made it for me – for fun.

**Have you ever taught or been interested in sharing your knowledge?** I don't work in a normal manner, so I cannot teach anyone to do it my way. When people are really keen to know more, however, I share whatever I can.

**What advice have you got for young designers?** You have to be very passionate and to know what passion is. It takes you over, from the cradle to the grave. Young designers should follow their instincts and be aware of what's going on around them. I'm 82 now and still keeping my antennae out, staying in touch with the big wide world.

**You have a home in southern France, in Béziers, but you've lived abroad and you travel a lot. Are you drawn to any particular country, culture or people?** I'm crazy about Japan and China, their stories and colours, the quality of the work, the art, the finishes, the passion of the people. They put that passion into everything they do. The Orient is like a civilization within a civilization. I've never been invited to work there, and I would feel incredibly small if that were to happen. I'm not

**'Young designers move things around a bit and call themselves artists'**

afraid to show what I do – take it or leave it. But what can I show to people with thousands of years of history?

**How do you feel about the extremely high prices that some of your early work has gone for at auction?** I have no right to speak for the people who like my work and are willing to pay those prices.

Personally, I think it's crazy and a bit of a shame, but it seems that people have to find a 'new antique' every two years or so.

**What are your plans? Are there dreams you want to fulfil?**

No... yes! I would like to make a monumental sculpture. Don't ask for a description, because I don't have one yet. I'd like to do something that surprises me.

**Do you ever think of retiring?** Retiring... ah, you touch a very sensitive point. Sometimes I wake up early in the morning and think of going back to sleep, but I'm unable to do that. After all, I like my work and my life very much, especially the adventure, but even the negative points and certain crazy clients. We work together, and I add something that's not part of their wacky concepts. I want people to understand that, other than physically, this work isn't hard for me. It's a pleasure. It's my *bonheur*. I am not tired in spirit. On the contrary, work lifts me up. I'm connected to it. I'm interested in the life of my objects. Do they rouse emotions? Are they still dynamic? \_

mariapergay.com



Each leaf of Bronze Tree has been individually made and patinated by hand. The trunk was cast using natural branches selected by Maria Pergay.



Most of Pergay's pieces are functional, but some of the designs shown at the Secret Garden exhibition are a foray into sculpture.

## Maria Pergay

1930 Born Maria Alexandrovna Kachnitskaya in Chişinău, Moldova

1937 Immigrates to Paris with her mother

1947 - 1949 Studies costume and set design at the Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques, Paris

1954 Designs objects for window displays for Torrente, Claude Tabet, L'Art du Cuir, Peau de Porc, Dürer and others

1957 Exhibits prototypes of silver collection at Salon Bijorhca, Paris. Hermès includes several Pergay objects in its catalogue

1960 Opens shop at 2 Place des Vosges, Paris

1967 - 1968 Designs first collection of stainless-steel furniture, including Ring Chair and Flying Carpet Daybed

1970 Exhibits stainless-steel collection at two New York locations

1977 Designs Tortue Sofa and Ammonite Table for Pierre Cardin. Sells her shop on Place des Vosges

1977 - 1985 Relocates to Saudi Arabia; designs four villas for the royal family

2000 - 2003 Relocates to Morocco

2006 - 2010 Exhibits in Paris, London, Seoul and Miami

2011 Awarded the French Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres

2011 Publication of *Maria Pergay: Complete Works 1957 - 2011* by Suzanne Demisch and Stephane Danant

2012 Maria Pergay: Place des Vosges, a retrospective organized by Demisch Danant and JGM, appears in Paris

2013 Secret Garden, an exhibition, appears at Demisch Danant Gallery, New York



Column Seat, which appeared at the Secret Garden exhibition in New York City (2013), is made of solid oak and polished stainless steel.

**'Metal's got something to say; I explore the material and exploit its limits'**

Like most of the objects shown at the Secret Garden exhibition, Secret Garden Console refers to natural forms.

