



**CONTINENTAL STYLE**  
Suzanne Demisch, of gallery Demisch Danant, photographed in her New York home. The gallery's co-founder, Stéphane Danant, is based in Paris.

STUDY IN DESIGN

## FINDING GLORY

Suzanne Demisch is one-half of gallery Demisch Danant, which opens a major new Manhattan space this fall, the better to champion a fresh frontier: French design from the '50s through the '70s.

BY JEN RENZI  
PORTRAIT BY CLÉMENT PASCAL

WHEN SUZANNE DEMISCH looks around her Manhattan design gallery at the stainless-steel lamps, sculptural glass tables and marshmallow-like chairs that might be on display at any time, she doesn't just see ways to furnish a room. She sees the chance to discover a narrative. "There's so much to know about a chair, and that's what makes it exciting," says Demisch, who specializes in French design, primarily pieces from the '50s through the '70s, decades

that are still under the radar for many collectors and curators. She and her Paris-based partner, Stéphane Danant, often spend their days like an elegant pair of private detectives: piecing together the histories of forgotten visionaries, digging through archives, knocking on doors and locating once-lost pieces. They've cultivated a strong following, with clients including Design Miami founder Craig Robins and collectors Amalia Dayan and Adam Lindemann, by promoting talents both well known (designer Pierre

Paulin) and obscure (the artists' collective Atelier A). "We like to tell the story and not isolate an object from its context when possible," Demisch says. This September, she and Danant are opening a West Village gallery that is more than double the size of their former Chelsea place. "This space allows us to do both—it's like a Milanese townhouse."

In 2005, when Demisch and Danant opened their first gallery, the audience for 20th-century design, particularly the later decades, was still nascent. Yet they found themselves drawn to the fertile period of French postwar reconstruction when the cultural ministry, under the leadership of André Malraux, energetically supported design, leading to public commissions ranging from metro stations to Georges Pompidou's Élysée Palace residence. Demisch and Danant presciently saw in the pieces of the era attributes that collectors covet: formal inventiveness and technological innovation as well as a timeless quality and the ability to live alongside contemporary art. Rarity is also a factor: Many examples exist solely as prototypes or were produced in limited editions. Demisch and Danant now mount three heavily researched exhibitions a year, appear at international design fairs and publish weighty books and *catalogues raisonnés*. They also discreetly advise clients like Robins and his wife, Jackie Soffer, on collections of all genres, and Demisch takes on a handful of interior design projects, with clients including Dayan and Lindemann. The design market is growing: This June, the major auction houses sold a record \$30 million of 20th-century furniture and objects. "Look at Royère, Prouvé, Perriand—all that stuff from the '40s and '50s: It's blue chip now," says Demisch, 49. "It took 20 years to create that market."

"Suzanne and Stéphane have a passion for the works they represent and design in general," says arts patron Dasha Zhukova, an interiors client and the founder of Moscow's Garage Museum of Contemporary Art. "The storytelling adds context and dimension. The collaboration between us is also an important part of their process, making for a more meaningful collection." With their guidance, she has acquired pieces by French designers Maria Pergay and Jacqueline Lecoq, as well as decorative artist and furniture designer René-Jean Caillette.

Demisch Danant's airy new location has a domestic vibe that makes it easier for collectors to appreciate, say, a César Expansion table or a Pierre Paulin Élysée chair. "We like presenting in a living environment if possible," says Demisch. So much about a designer or movement "can be understood through mood and atmosphere," adds Danant. Architect Rafael de Cárdenas, who has created boutiques for Cartier, Nike and Delfina Delettrez, helped find the space, formerly the Italian bookstore and de facto cultural institution S.F. Vanni. He raised the ceiling and created a travertine-floored space that can be subdivided, allowing for a white-box gallery or more intimate settings.

"They are so unlike most dealers," says de Cárdenas, who met the pair when buying pieces for clients. "They don't have something for everyone."

While Demisch runs the gallery and takes the lead on client relations, Danant initiates much of the archival research and sourcing. He also often works with

the families and estates of the designers, an effort that rewards persistence and patience, which Danant, 51, has in abundance. It took him seven years of communicating with the family of designer Joseph-André Motte to be granted access to his sketchbooks and files. Motte, who died in 2013, was one of a band of creatives who shaped the aesthetics of his time, designing interiors of the Louvre and the Orly and Charles de Gaulle airports in Paris, as well as furniture and lighting. "He made use of the newest materials and techniques available: molded plywood, Formica, plastic. He was the first in France to use stainless steel for furniture," says Danant. The gallery has been introducing Motte's work in shows and will soon publish a monograph.

Another success story is the revival of Pergay, who began designing furniture and accessories in the late '50s. Once well known, with lines for Hermès and Dior, Pergay had fallen out of public view by the '90s. Demisch, drawn to the expressive pieces in stainless steel she discovered at flea markets and unable to find much information on Pergay, set out to write a book on her. She tracked Pergay down in Morocco, where she was then running a guesthouse; she had begun traveling to the Middle East in the '70s to work for the Saudi royal family. "I telephoned her out of the blue one day in 2004, and a few days later I was on a plane," explains Demisch. The two hit it off, and Demisch encouraged her to reboot her career. Today, the 1968 Ring chair that Demisch and Danant bought in the early 2000s for \$1,500 fetches upward of \$43,000 at auction. New-production designs are even pricier, ranging from \$16,000 to \$425,000. "She has one idea after the next," says Demisch. In November the gallery will showcase new Pergay creations alongside unseen working drawings, many executed on napkins or dashed off on hotel stationery.

"Her working process is so immediate; there's such energy," says Demisch. "I always think, How can I translate that for others? That's what we always aspire to do with the gallery."

DEMISCH AND DANANT met at Paris flea market Paul Bert Serpette, where Danant had a booth that Demisch frequented. The pair bonded over their affinity for '70s design. "The mid-'90s was an exciting time, when these pieces were first coming onto market," says Danant. "We liked them but we didn't know what they were, and there were no books to tell us."

Demisch, who grew up in Bloomfield, Connecticut, started antiques as a hobby in her teens, initially gravitating to Americana. After graduating with a degree in international relations from the University of Southern California, she did brief stints at the Environmental Protection Agency and at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. She also had begun dealing part-time, and in 1993, she moved to the city to pursue an M.F.A. in folk art from New York University. After she earned her degree, she dedicated herself to dealing full-time. "I launched a website back in 1995, when there were only like 10 design dealers on the internet," she says. As Demisch spent more time in Europe purchasing inventory, her aesthetic evolved from New England fare to new-wave French.



**LIVING LEGENDS**  
Rare pieces from Demisch Danant include, from top: Pierre Paulin's 1971 Élysée bookshelf; Joseph-André Motte's Radar chair, 1955; a 2007 stool by Maria Pergay; a 1962 table by René-Jean Caillette.

**GREAT IMPORT**  
Clockwise from right: A 1962 cabinet by Antoine Philippon and Jacqueline Lecoq; Michel Boyer's 1974 Brasília lamp; Élysée chairs by Paulin.

Design was also a constant for Danant, who grew up in Paris and today lives in the third arrondissement with his wife and 9-year-old son. His father was a furniture dealer—"the last business I wanted to do," Danant says. He attended Sotheby's educational program in London, which led to some auction house jobs. In 1992, he co-founded a gallery representing young painters. Art drew him to design. "At first it was lamps, because they were cheap," he says, later adding, "Their sculptural aesthetics attracted me." It proved a gateway drug to larger objects: chairs, credenzas and his particular obsession, desks. "It's the piece that feels closest to the designer's heart. But desks can be very hard to sell.

"I feel '60s and '70s design in a certain way," Danant adds, "because I grew up in Paris during that period." When he was a kid, his father opened a contemporary furniture shop on Avenue Victor Hugo. "Only later did I learn that the door handle—a bronze lion's head—was designed by Maria Pergay." A similar eureka moment occurred when Danant discovered that the lamps in his family's country house were by Michel Boyer, whose work the gallery now showcases. "I hadn't known what this stuff was growing up. But when I started working with this material professionally, all the memories came flooding back."

Demisch and Danant wanted to celebrate these undersung icons—and design as a discipline on par with fine art. They started collaborating informally around 2000. "At that point, we were just having fun finding and selling things," says Demisch. "But as we developed more relationships and clients, we realized we needed a space." In 2005, Demisch Danant opened in Chelsea and debuted a buzzed-about booth at the inaugural installment of the Design Miami fair. The next year, the partners collaborated with art gallery Lehmann Maupin on a Pergay show, at a time when such alignments were unusual. The business grew, and the need to expand again prompted this fall's move to the new location.

Both gallerists practice what they preach in their own homes, particularly Danant, since they don't keep a separate showroom in Paris. "My wife is like, 'There's no room for it! Get this out!'" Danant says. Demisch is currently conjoining her East Village co-op with the neighboring apartment, previously owned by the photographer and painter Saul Leiter, into a space for her and her 9-year-old son. Pieces by Paulin and Pergay, whose works Demisch finds especially livable, mix with Americana, furnishings by Frank Lloyd Wright and contemporary objects. Her Accord, New York, country home is also a work in progress; she has spent the past two years building—and rebuilding—the property's dry stone walls by hand.

The new gallery will open with a sweeping exhibition that will include 1970 Pergay stainless-steel armchairs alongside '60s and '70s lamps from the French architectural lighting workshop Verre Lumière and wall pieces by textile artist Sheila Hicks. "We wanted to transmit the energy of the moment we started this, what caused the spark," says Demisch. "It's still happening today. It's easy to think, 'Oh, everything's been uncovered already,' but that's not true." ●