



Raw material

On the eve of his private selling exhibition with Sotheby's, Bernar Venet discusses his theories and the arduous process involved in the creation of his sculptures with **Stephane Connery**

Monumental Sculpture, Isterworth

From January to April of this year at the lush grounds of Isleworth Golf and Country Club in Windermere, Florida Sotheby's will, for the first time, present a private selling retrospective exhibition dedicated to a single artist, the renowned sculptor Bernar Venet. A key player in the Conceptual art movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Venet evolved a new aesthetic with steel as his medium and mathematical configurations as his subjects. In doing so he achieves a visual poetry of an abstract kind.

Bernar Venet's work has been exhibited in public spaces across the world, from New York to Shanghai, Paris to Rio de Janeiro and features in the collections of numerous museums from MoMA and the National Gallery, Washington to the Centre Pompidou in Paris. On a crystal clear Friday morning down at Isleworth, during a break from the installation, I was able to sit down with Venet and get a view into his world.

Stephane Connery: Over the years, you have explored the mathematically-based notion of 'the line' and its many variants. When did you begin this study and how important is it to the entirety of your oeuvre?

Bernar Venet: I believe that every artist sets off empirically and intuitively in a chosen direction. For me, the line is the support, the very matter of my demonstration. It has been part of my work since 1966, when I was working on my first mathematical diagrams. However, I did not become aware of the central role of the line in my artwork until 1976, when I made large paintings with angles, arcs, circles, curves and straight lines. Those paintings are the basis of everything I have created since.

SC: How and when did your attention shift from two-dimensional to three-dimensional works?

BV: I first started creating a series of wood reliefs covered in graphite, which touched on the same subjects as in my paintings but released the lines and variations from their two-dimensional support. This was a real change and advance in my work, letting the notions of disorder and uncertainty play such a role. My first *Indeterminate Line* was a wood relief applied to a wall and the larger sculptures naturally followed. As they became more complex and had a greater volume, steel became a necessity.

SC: How do you bend the steel to your lines?

BV: I twist the steel cold, a technique unheard of before I began. XC10 is a soft steel that breaks less easily when unheated, but it is an alloy rarely available on the market, so I have had around 200 to 300 tons forged specially. Occasionally I 'break' the line by heating a precise point with a blow torch, which lends a nervous vigour to the

work. The forces involved are enormous and so the work is extremely strenuous and potentially dangerous.

SC: Do you prepare preliminary drawings before working a line?

BV: Creating a sculpture is a permanent process of improvisation. Sometimes, although rarely, I come to the studio with a model that will serve as a starting point, but the end result can hardly ever be foreseen. Mastering this technique remains difficult; I occasionally begin with the intention of creating a work made up of two indeterminate lines, then I quickly realise that the result will be more satisfying if I add another. Chance and the improbable run the show and I often bow to their laws.

SC: Does the feeling of elation for a particular work arise at a specific time during the creative process?

BV: The real moment of happiness is when I discover that the sculpture is a success, not necessarily because it corresponds to what I had anticipated, rather because the assembled elements invariably surprise me.

SC: Tell me about your interest in mathematics.

BV: I wanted to make works of art that had their own specificity. From 1966 to 1971, during my so-called Conceptual period, I used the language of mathematics and its monosemic symbols. My work today continues to develop this idea. I aim to limit

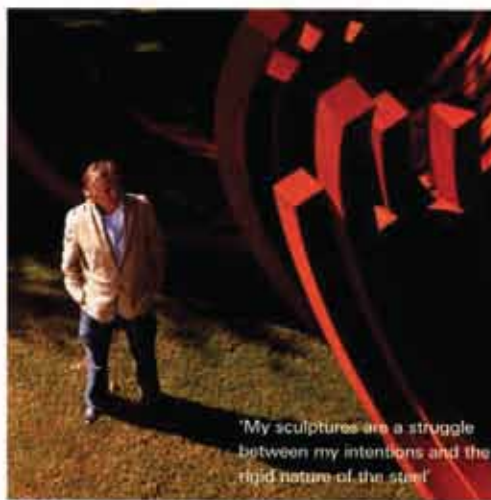
interpretation so that my sculpture is perceived in its intrinsic, physical reality, as if I were borrowing the expression 'a real object in a real world'. With *Random Combinations* my aim was to free sculpture of the constraints of composition and to challenge the utopian principle of ideal order.

SC: Is it important to understand the mathematical principle?

BV: It is preferable, in order to grasp the originality of my work and comprehend its theoretical nature – that one understands the reason why I remain faithful to the mathematical connection – and to my desire to maintain the univocal character in my sculptures. Yet no one needs to be a mathematician to approach my work. In a way, I am proposing to take the principles of Minimalist artists and push them to their limits – the 'Untitled' of Judd's objects is replaced by a mathematical definition that eliminates ambiguity and undermines fanciful attempts at interpretation.

SC: Is this the reason why you boldly mark the title on each of your Arc sculptures?

BV: Yes, the degrees of measurement of each sculpture are engraved in the steel in a visible manner; they are an integral part of the





work. These measurements are not symbolic; the arcs are arbitrarily broken down into groups of four, five and seven, or according to the number I want to use.

SC: There are 25 of your sculptures at Isleworth. Were you involved in the installation process?

BV: Yes, the installation of certain *Indeterminate Lines* was especially complex and I wanted to choose the sites according to the nature and dimensions of the sculptures. Isleworth is an ideal location – the spaces are large, clean and the green environment is exemplary for bringing out steel and its weatherproof look.

SC: Is it unusual to display this number of works together?

BV: This is the first time I've exhibited so many sculptures at once. The show is almost a retrospective, or in any case a coherent installation, representative of what I've been creating since 1985. It encompasses such concepts as dissemination, uncertainty, order, disorder, the accidental and entropy, all intrinsic to my oeuvre.

SC: Why have you chosen to hold this exhibition with Sotheby's?

BV: It's a novel experience and an interesting challenge. This kind of action makes plain the dynamism and daring of an institution such as Sotheby's looking to question its potential and explore ways in which to renew itself.

SC: In which direction are you planning to take your work next?

BV: Each year I ask myself the question 'Now what?' but experience has shown me that it is in working and grappling with the material that surprises arise, that discoveries are made. The improbable will always be at the root of my next proposal.

Stephane Connery is a senior vice president & worldwide head of Private Sales.

**Bernar Venet: Sotheby's at Isleworth
Isleworth Country Club, January–April**

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