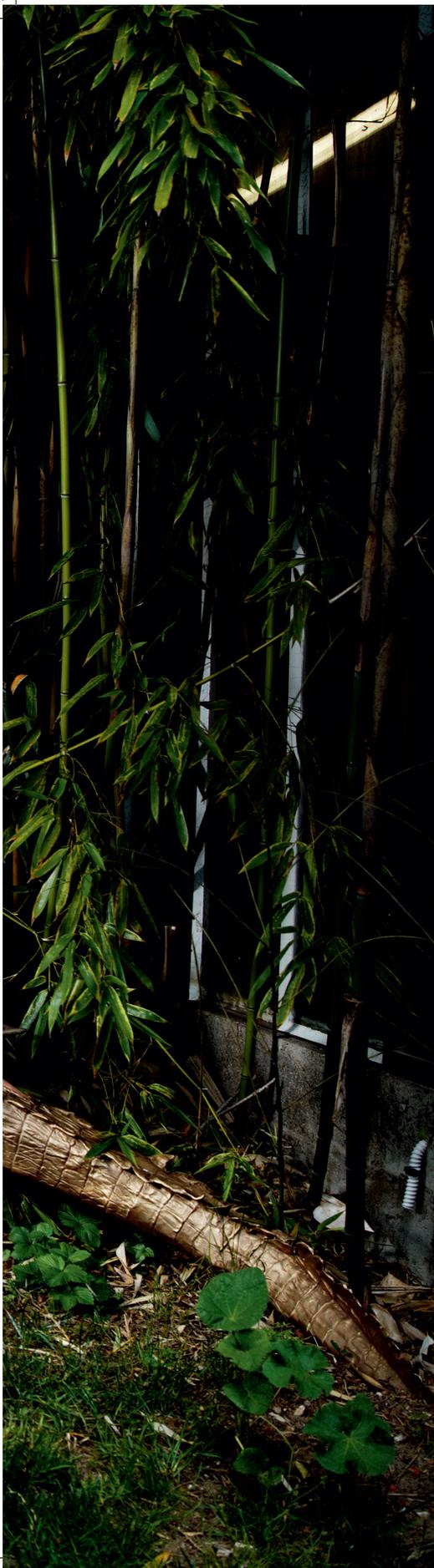




Claude Lalanne in the garden of her home near Fontainebleau, with two of her 2012 bronze *La Femme du Crocodile* sculptures



# oooh LALANNE

Claude Lalanne has been springing sculptural surprises since the 1960s, but only in the past decade has there been a surge in international interest. **Helen Chislett** has an exclusive at-home audience with the artist on the eve of two exhibitions. Portraits by **Léa Crespi**

**O**n Claude Lalanne's coffee table stands a tiny bronze cabbage on chicken legs – you would need a heart of stone not to smile at the wit and joy in that little *Choupatte* (Cabbage Feet). Made as a gift for her late husband, François-Xavier, it perfectly encapsulates the artist's love of nature and her sense of play. *Choupatte* is now famous, with versions included in museum and art collections across the globe, but Lalanne admits that the first – this very one – was nothing but a happy accident. "I had taken a mould of a cabbage and just wondered what it would look like with legs – the moment I saw it, it felt right. It had emotion." As François-Xavier once declared: "The cabbage leaf is to Claude what the acanthus leaf was to Greek art!"

This year, Christie's in Paris sold a 1996 woven branch-like chandelier by Claude, *Lustre Structure Végétale* (pictured overleaf) for €1,833,500 – about six times the estimate. It elegantly illustrates that 2016 is becoming something of a high point for Claude. This autumn, Ben Brown Fine Arts is organising two shows by Les Lalanne – the name that melds Claude and François-Xavier's highly individual bodies of work into a single title – one in Hong Kong, opening on September 16, and another in London, opening in November. In New York on October 27, Paul Kasmin (who was introduced to the work of Les Lalanne through Brown) is also including their works in a group show: *Impasse Ronsin* – named after the Paris artistic community that they were a part of – and which includes works by Niki de Saint Phalle, Jean Tinguely, Max Ernst and James (Jimmy) Metcalf, alongside a small blue *choupatte* and a crocodile chair by Claude, and a *mouton* by François-Xavier (prices from \$300,000 to \$1m). Meanwhile, earlier this year, Jean-Gabriel Mitterrand, who has worked with Les Lalanne in France for 40 years, staged a show of their work, while London-based artist-jewellery gallerist Louisa Guinness, Ben Brown's wife, held the first show of Claude's jewellery. Here, pieces "sold



Clockwise from left: Claude Lalanne with her 2016 bronze *Choupatte Géante*, price on request, a pair of her 2015 bronze *Fauteuils Entrelacs* armchairs, price on request, all available at Ben Brown Fine Arts. Her 1996 gilt bronze and galvanised copper *Lustre Structure Végétale* chandelier, sold at Christie's for €1,833,500



*“Supply is going down as fewer of François-Xavier’s pieces come to market and Claude is producing less – but demand internationally is ratcheting up”*

strongly across the board to a range of global collectors”, says Guinness, “with particular interest in the new, unique works created especially for the show”, such as the wrapped vine necklace *Collier Groseilles* (€60,000, pictured overleaf), a dahlia brooch (€7,200), and a beautiful butterfly ring (€6,000, pictured overleaf).

But it is the Ben Brown shows that will surely most excite, with their important, well-documented Les Lalanne pieces – such as a striking dining table with deer legs by François-Xavier, *Table aux Pieds de Cerf* – and both historic and new work from Claude, including romantically garlanded *Miroirs*, the surreal *Osiris* (pictured overleaf) with cast crocodile-leg base, a pair of *Fauteuils Crocodile* (one pictured on final page), this time with a crocodile crawling around the back of the chair, and a pair of *Fauteuils Entrelacs* (pictured top right), armchairs poetically wrought from interwoven bronze leaves of ginkgo. All prices are on request, but it is worth noting that a *Fauteuil Crocodile* (an armchair in copper, bronze and brass) dating from 1972 sold at Sotheby’s Paris in 2012 for €1,352,750, roughly eight times the estimate. Four years have passed and prices for Lalanne have moved only northwards. As Brown says: “Supply is going down as fewer of François-Xavier’s pieces are coming to market and Claude herself is producing less than she used to – but meanwhile demand internationally is ratcheting



up. Usually I expect to sell out of a show after six months – with Les Lalanne it is three.”

Incredibly, until as recently as 2007, there had been no Lalanne show in London for over 30 years – between the Whitechapel Gallery exhibition of 1976 and the first (of what will soon be three) at Ben Brown Fine Arts. The dramatic turning point in international recognition came in 2009, when Christie’s held a sale of Yves Saint Laurent’s possessions following his death. This included the unique *Bar YSL* of brass and crystal glass by François-Xavier and Claude’s *Salon des Miroirs*. In both cases, the work of Les Lalanne exceeded 10 times the reserve price, sending their work spiralling into figures of which they would never

have dreamed. Of reaching such success in her mid-80s, Claude says, “It was incredible, formidable – for a long time we had worked with so little real interest being shown in our work.” This was rectified in 2010, with a major retrospective at Paris’s Musée des Arts Décoratifs designed by one of their most ardent fans, the architect Peter Marino, who owns around 40 pieces and says of the “really wondrous” Claude that he loves “her surreal, humorous combination of natural forms with her own highly refined aesthetic”.

For passionate lovers of all things Lalanne – myself included – the journey from Paris to Les Lalanne’s rarely accessed, higgledy-piggledy assortment of farm buildings near Fontainebleau, tucked discreetly behind village walls, is quite simply as good as it gets. It is here that Claude and François-Xavier lived and worked – side by side, but in separate studios – for nearly half a century. From the moment I step through the gates, heralded by the barks of Lalanne’s three dogs, it is hard not to gape at what lies in the courtyard beyond. I look one way and my eye is caught by a 2m high bear, I look another and my gaze settles on an enormous gorilla, both iconic works by François-Xavier. Glimpsing through to the garden I can see giant red apples (her), tables of ginkgo leaves (her), crocodile seats (her) and a veritable menagerie of owls, birds, lizards, apes and black-faced sheep (him).

François-Xavier died in 2008, but Claude is as driven to create as ever, although at the age of 91 she does



*“Like Louise Bourgeois, Claude shows no sign of diminishing as an artist now she is in her 90s”*



Clockwise from left: Claude and François-Xavier Lalanne in 1976 with his 1970 iron *Le Minotaure*. Claude's 2016 18ct-gold *Collier Groseilles*, €60,000, 2016 gilt bronze *Papillon Ring*, €6,000, and 2015 bronze *Osiris*, price on request

admit to finding some of the work rather heavy to handle. Happily, she is helped by her daughter, Caroline, granddaughter, Julie, Julie's husband, Darius Metcalf, and a handful of other assistants. A tiny brunette *moineau* who chirrup her answers half in French and half in English, Claude does not disappoint in the flesh. Today she is wearing sturdy worker's boots, bright red woollen socks and jeans – occasionally she lights a slim roll-up with Gallic nonchalance.

Claude's enchanted garden is much more than a backdrop to the weird and wonderful genius of Les Lalanne. It is the physical source of her inspiration. A keen horticulturalist since childhood, she plants the seeds from which she grows flowers, fruit and vegetables – and then uses them as a blueprint for her creations: “I never stop walking in the garden, looking at what is there and using what I grow.”

For her work, Claude uses the electroplating process that was first discovered in the 18th century by the Bolognese physicist Luigi Galvani (hence galvanisation), and that was taught to her by fellow artist Jimmy Metcalf – the father of Claude's grandson-in-law Darius. Objects gathered from her garden are placed in a bath of sulphuric acid and copper sulphate, through which an electric current is flowed, resulting in a mould of thin copper. She then refines the object through hours of hand-tooling, harmonising the original form with her own poetic interpretation.

Her artistic expression has changed little over the past 50 years, but this does not make her any less exciting or relevant as an artist. As Brown says, “Claude found her language a long time ago, but that doesn't mean she has lost the ability to surprise. For this show, she has produced *Choupatte Géante* [price on request, pictured on previous page], which is a stonking sculpture – mind-blowing and fabulous. When I saw it for the first time, I



told her I think it's the best thing she has ever done: absolutely incredible. Like Louise Bourgeois, she shows no sign of diminishing as an artist just because she is now in her 90s. She is still a workaholic who is in her studio every day – starting while the rest of us are probably having breakfast.” Claude shrugs this off with: “I like to be busy. There is great satisfaction to be had from working hard.”

Claude herself is rather pleased with this new body of work. “It has been very difficult at times – in particular making *Choupatte Géante*, because it is so heavy and each leaf had to be made separately over many months. I think my husband would have been rather amazed by it.”

François-Xavier once famously declared that “painting is finished”, and certainly one thing that set Les Lalanne apart from the beginning was the way they combined

modern methods with traditional craftsmanship to create what Metcalf once described as “objects to live with”. While that notion of design art is very on-trend now – look no further than the artistic fodder of international shows such as Design Miami/ Basel and PAD – it was radical back in the early 1960s, when the postwar art scene in Paris had long been dominated by abstraction. To an extent, Les Lalanne lived a life deliberately out of step with contemporaneous influences, innocently and joyfully determining their own parallel paths. Claude herself says, “the words artist and artisan have the same roots. Why should one be more important than the other?”

There is no hierarchy.” It is a viewpoint that has also encouraged her to produce works that range in scale and purpose from jewellery to furniture to sculpture.

The pair met in 1952 at François-Xavier's first exhibition of paintings at Galerie Cimaise on Boulevard Raspail in Paris. They had both been married before: he had one daughter; she three. It was not love at first sight – “I did not like him straight away,” recalls Claude – but it did not take long for François-Xavier to change her mind.

He was then living at number 11 on the aforementioned Impasse Ronsin, a modest – now legendary – community of artists who were drawn to the north-facing studios dotted around the tree-filled courtyards of this corner of Montparnasse. Claude (née Dupeux), born and raised in Paris to a musician mother and a gold-broker father, studied architecture at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and later attended external classes in drawing, clay modelling and casting. By the time she met François-Xavier and moved into the Impasse Ronsin, she was keen to spread her artistic wings once more and together they began working on collaborations.



From top: Claude and François-Xavier Lalanne in 2007. Claude's 2014 bronze *Fauteuil Crocodile*, price on request

François-Xavier once compared them to musicians, saying: "My wife would improvise while I would have to write out my part before playing it."

However intertwined their art may appear, there were always in fact two separate careers running in tandem. For a while they did share a studio, but Claude insisted on having her own when François-Xavier said he did not like this or that, "because then I would undo everything and start again. It was the same for him. We were in tune with each other and yet also very distinct." That is not to say they never collaborated – joint pieces included *Le Grand Centaure* (the Large Centaur) for the French embassy in New Delhi, 1985, and a topiary dinosaur structure (1989) that stands guard in the garden.

While their artistic reputations grew within their own circle, it was not until legendary gallerist Alexander Iolas began to exhibit their work in 1966 that they started to attract the attention of serious art collectors, as opposed to relying on commissions from interior designers. Their close friends included René Magritte, Max Ernst and Victor Brauner, who also showed with Iolas. The fashion designer Valentino Garavani was first introduced to the work of Les Lalanne through Marie-Hélène de Rothschild, who gave him a beautiful frame Claude had made. "Everything she does, I love – she is poetic, romantic, artistic and absolutely unique," he says.

Other key collectors of Lalanne include fashion designers Tom Ford, Karl Lagerfeld and Marc Jacobs, as well as French business magnates François-Henri Pinault, CEO and chairman of Kering, and Bernard Arnault, chairman and CEO of LVMH. However, if there was one figure who was to influence the careers of Les Lalanne both in life and from beyond the grave, it was Yves Saint Laurent. Inspired by Claude's series of *Pomme Bouche* (Apple Mouth) in solid gold and by the *Bracelet Bouche* (Bracelet Mouth) of "stolen kisses," Saint Laurent

*Yves Saint Laurent commissioned 25 mirrors for the alcoves of his grand salon, while Salvador Dalí requested a snail-encrusted cutlery set*

commissioned Claude to mould the breasts and hips of the legendary model Veruschka for his autumn 1969 haute couture collection. These gilded *empreintes* were then paired with diaphanous, Greek-style drapery, transforming catwalk models into shimmering metallic statuary. He also commissioned 25 mirrors between 1974 and 1985 for the alcoves of his private grand salon on the Rue de Babylone, which created the impression of a room hung with golden vines. Another notable commission came from Salvador Dalí, who requested a snail-encrusted

cutlery set – for which he attempted to take all the credit. For all of this, Claude says she never felt financially secure until she reached the age of 70 – a remarkable admission given the collectability of Les Lalanne today. "They had huge early recognition through Iolas, but then spent nearly 20 years out in the wilderness. What is wonderful is to see how they have been rediscovered

and reappreciated once more," says Brown. "If you have not seen a Lalanne show but think you know their work, you're wrong. It is not about one piece here or there. It is about stepping over the threshold and entering a whole Lalanne world."

The concept of a Lalanne wonderland both amuses and flatters Claude. So is all of this creativity the result of vivid dreams? "I dream when I am awake," she says. "There is nothing left over by night." For the artist herself, sitting in her light-filled sitting room surrounded by *mouton* sculptures and dogs, where a small plastic tourist toy of a waving Queen Elizabeth II is juxtaposed with a stately *Grue Lumineuse* (Luminous Crane), and the Yves Saint Laurent sale catalogue covers a hole in the carpet, to have such success in the absence of her beloved husband.



"It is difficult to be here without him, not so much artistically as personally. But I am happy because his spirit is all around me through his wonderful art. Everything brings a smile to the face." ♦

#### KEEPING IT SURREAL

**Ben Brown Fine Arts**, 12 Brook's Mews, London W1 (020-7734 8888; www.benbrownfinearts.com); **Les Lalanne**, November 23-January 26; and 303 Pedder Building, 12 Pedder Street, Hong Kong (+852-2522 9600); September 16-November 9. **Galerie Mitterrand**, 79 Rue du Temple, 75003 Paris (+331-4326 1205; www.galeriemitterrand.com). **Louisa Guinness Gallery**, 45 Conduit Street, London W1 (020-7494 4664; www.louisaguinnessgallery.com). **Paul Kasmin Gallery**, 515 West 27th Street, New York, NY 10001 (+1212-563 4474; www.paulkasmingallery.com); *Impasse Ronsin*, October 27-December 23.