

Opening of La Patinoire royale gallery

'WE SEE OURSELVES AS A CROSS BE- TWEEN A MUSEUM AND A GALLERY'

Brussels continues to attract galleries (sometimes from abroad) and collectors. The latest newcomer is La Patinoire royale, a gallery housed in a handsomely restored 19th-century roller-skating rink. Its programme comprises historical exhibitions of the art and design of the last sixty years.

Sam STEVERLYNCK

A city like Brussels has a great many architectural gems, many of which remain unseen by unsuspecting passers-by. One of these is the superb Patinoire royale, a stone's throw from Louizalaan. It was built for a roller-skating rink – a first in Europe – in the neoclassical style in 1877. After that it became a racing circuit and in 1900 was transformed into a Bugatti garage. Having later been used successively as an arms warehouse, a Siemens garage and an exhibition space for veteran and vintage cars, the building is now being given a new purpose once again.

During our visit, an army of building workers was engaged in a race against time. Because on 25 April the La Patinoire royale gallery opens. The initiator of this ambitious project is the French businessman Philippe Austruy, well known for his vineyard and sculpture park at Peyrassol in Southern France, where he lets his collection of sculpture – from Bernar Venet to Carsten Höller – merge harmoniously with nature. And now he has taken on a new challenge. "When Philippe saw this space, he immediately fell in love," says Constantin Chariot, the director of La Patinoire royale. "He soon had the idea of restoring it to create a gallery as an extension to that of Valerie Bach, but with a completely different programme. Since this is a protected building, an historical approach was chosen. So we shall be mounting major exhibitions of art movements and design from the last fifty to sixty years."

When it came to restoring the building they did not take any chances. "It took a lot of work," says Chariot. "It took two years. This is after all a classified building with a splendid façade, wooden beams and fine stained-glass windows. The

Belgian architectural firm Jean-Paul Hermant coordinated the restoration work. For the circulation and interior design we called in the French interior architect Pierre Yovanovitch."

A vertical volume was erected in this gigantic hall with its high ceiling that lets in a mass of light. It is hypermodern, but its minimalist style responds perfectly to the existing architecture. This shaft contains a staircase that narrows towards the top and leads to a catwalk that offers a superb view of the space. Smaller surrounding rooms enable more delicate work to be shown in a more intimate setting. The whole building comprises about 2500 square metres, 880 of which is exhibition space. At a later stage a restaurant will be installed in an adjoining building.

The gallery will open with the exhibition 'La Résistance des Images', a survey of mainly French narrative and figurative painting, including such artists as Adami, Babeu and Erro. "In fact they are individuals rather than a clearly delineated group. They are committed, militant artists who felt threatened by abstract art and wished to defend their values by means of figurative art."

The curator is Jean-Jacques Aillagon, the former French Minister of Culture and Communication.

"The second exhibition will be on design, and includes such names as Le Corbusier, Jean Ray, Charlotte Perriand and Jean Prouvé. That will be followed by an exhibition on Kinetic Art. We would like each exhibition to focus on a major movement. A catalogue will be published for each one and academic research will be carried out as in a museum. We have an educational department and will give guided tours. Visitors can see the exhibition free of charge and will have learnt something by the time they leave. If they would like to buy something, we shall of course be pleased. We see ourselves as a cross between a museum and a gallery."

The exhibitions will involve cooperation with other galleries. "For some of the historical exhibitions we shall not be able to buy up the whole stock. We have done so for a large part of the first exhibition. This cooperation will enable the other galleries to present items from their stock in the context of an exhibition that we have devised. For example, in the case of the design exhibition we are cooperating with François Laffanour's Downtown Gallery, which specialises in French design of the 1950s and 1960s."

The opening of La Patinoire royale is a confirmation of Brussels attractiveness as a city of art. "We are located in the middle of a neighbourhood with lots of galleries. The social, economic and cultural fabric of Brussels is becoming increasingly international. Belgium is a country of collectors. So Brussels is a true hub for the art market."

'La Résistance des Images', from 24 April to 31 July at La Patinoire royale, Voyerstraat 12, Brussels. Open Tue-Fri, 11-1 and 12-5.
www.lapatinoireroyale.com