MARIA PERGAY

A STAR OF 1970s MINIMALISM RETURNS TO THE SCENE WITH NEW DESIGNS BEARING HER TRADEMARK SLY HUMOR AND ELAN

BY NICOLAI HARTVIG
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ED ALCOCK

IN 2004 THE FRENCH DESIGNER MARIA PERGAY was retired and running a guesthouse in the town of Essaouira on the Moroccan coast. Her four children had grown up and given her seven grandchildren. The house she built and furnished in Provence with the spoils of her long career had been sold.

It had been nearly 50 years since she began decorating storefronts in Paris—moving on to design bespoke objects and interiors for Pierre Cardin and Saudi

Maria Pergay in the metal workshop at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where she fabricates works like this copper-and-bronze tree, here and far left, which will be shown next month at Demisch Danant in New York.

royals, opening her own shop in the French capital, helping pioneer stainless steel Minimalism in the 1960s and '70s, and making works that surprised even Salvador Dalí—and the 73-year-old Pergay was not contemplating a return. She had relegated her craft to a hobby.

Then she received a visit from New York gallerist Suzanne Demisch, who brought Pergay an auction house magazine whose cover featured one of the designer's couches as the month's best-selling lot.

"She had the courage to come and fish me out," says Pergay, today 82 and back to producing 7 to 10 original works each year. Though she jokes that the magazine cover "hit the sweet spot," her return was never about sales, and the designer, who modestly calls herself an "unknown lady," dismisses talk of a grand revival. "What would you want people to say—that everyone had forgotten about me, that a generation had come and gone?" she asks with a smile.

In 2006 Pergay had the first show heralding her comeback in New York at Demisch Danant and Lehmann Maupin galleries. And last year she returned to the Place des Vosges, where she had a shop her husband helped run from 1960 to 1977, for a show of new and old creations. From May 1 through July 13, her latest works will be on view at Demisch Danant in a show with a "secret garden" theme, marking the 45th anniversary of a seminal Paris exhibition that launched the stainless-steel period of her career.

So Pergay now finds herself back in the metal workshop of the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts (ENSBA), France's top art school, where some of her works are created. She is inspecting the latest piece being prepared for the show, a wrought-bronze sculpture of a tree with copper leaves, some of which will soon be tinted yellow through oxidation by blowtorch. Watching as she twists a branch, I feel a twinge of alarm: The work, based on a real piece of wood she found, looks incredibly lifelike and fragile.

"Bravo, it has grown!" Pergay tells her collaborator Michel Salerno, who runs the workshop and reports resurgent interest in Pergay's work over the nine years he has been assisting her. "People seem to be gathering around the arena to see her arrive," suggests Salerno, expecting to see her claim her rightful place among such talents as Charlotte Perriand and Jean Prouvé. "There is freedom in her work. She doesn't settle into a single vein or tap a formula for success," he adds. "Doing the same thing twice is unbearable," agrees Pergay.

Indeed, she's made a project of confounding expectations throughout her career. Born in Moldavia in 1930 to Russian parents, she arrived in Paris at the age of six. She entered the Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques in Paris in the early 1950s to learn costume and set design, but wound up studying sculpture on the side with Ossip Zadkine. After marrying business student Marc Pergay and starting a family, she was asked by a decorator friend to help design shop windows. "She would rent her things, but I wanted to create the pieces that I put in the shop fronts," recalls Pergay. She soon made that her trade, attracting notice for her large bird sculptures and glass spiderwebs with raindrop-shaped rhinestones in the windows of a shoe store neighboring the famous Parisian flagship of Hermès. »

Pergay's Lampe Nautile, ca. 1972, above, hinted at a fascination with natural forms that she is now exploring in depth, as in her Cabinet Jardin Secret, 2012, below.

BOTH IMAGES: THIERRY DEPAGNE

For her latest works, Pergay relies on the ENSBA workshop to fabricate her intricate bronzes, while she entrusts her stainless steel creations to the hands of Yves Jaquet at an industrial facility on the outskirts of Paris that has the necessary laser cutters and presses. "Here [at ENSBA], it's like embroidery. Over there, it's heavyweight," she explains. Jaquet has recently been working on a chaise longue shaped like a three-part gondola, commissioned for a Venice apartment, with Pergay making frequent visits to ensure that authentic details of the classic boat are included—even though Jaquet had proposed some shortcuts.

"Maria likes a challenge. She always pushes us to go a little further than we otherwise would," Salerno says.

"They're your hands, not mine. I just take advantage," replies Pergay cheerfully.

In fact, stainless steel, which she values for its "samurai-like" properties, has long been a Maria Pergay trademark. Spurred by an invitation in 1967 by French steelmaker Ugine Gueugnon to use its product, she transitioned from small silver items to furniture. "I had made boxes with buckles and ribbons, things that did not exist in silversmithing at the time. I was copied a lot," Pergay remembers. "Finally I had had enough with the small things."

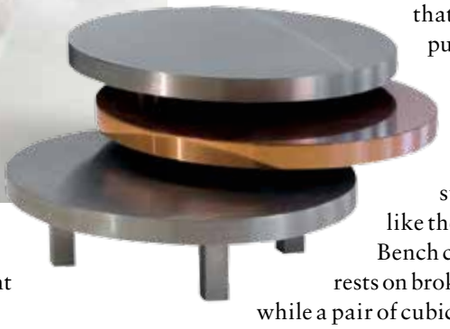
Her first furniture pieces gave new meaning to the term *instant classic*: The Lit Tapis Volant (Flying Carpet daybed) and the Chaise Anneaux (Ring chair) remain her best-known works today. Emblematic of her elegant yet imaginative style, they came to her within 30 minutes of waking one morning, the ideas jotted down on scraps of paper. "I don't know how to draw," confesses the designer. "I only begin to take an interest in an object when it is complete, in my head. And that includes how it will be made." To capture fleeting thoughts, Pergay doodles on ticket stubs from the Paris Métro. "People make fun of me. When I say that I have an idea, they say, 'Wait, let me give you my Métro ticket.'" She now works both from home and on the road, developing detailed instructions but leaving the manual labor to her ateliers.

Within a few years she would be commissioned by Hermès itself as well as Dior and other luxury brands to design small silver objects, from cigarette cases and decorative champagne coolers to ornate jewelry boxes and antelope-inspired letter openers. Her signature elements—ribbons, pom-poms, and buckles—have stayed in her creations ever since. Fashioning many pieces herself in metalwork, she also forged relationships with local craftsmen. For harvest dinners thrown by Hennessy, Pergay asked a friend's blacksmith father to help her create centerpieces of cast-iron vines set with glass grapes. The aforementioned spiderwebs were ordered from a glass cutter who owned a small custom shop inside the old Montparnasse railway station.

Shown at Galerie Maison et Jardin in Paris in 1968, her stainless-steel works gained fame when fashion designer »

Clockwise from top: The steel Ring chair was a breakthrough for Pergay in 1968, and one of them fetched $43,750 at Christie's New York last December; Pergay inspects a bronze branch in the ENSBA workshop; her Pouf Colonne chair, 2012, incorporates wood and stainless steel.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: CHRISTIE'S; ED ALCOCK; DEMISCH DANANT, NEW YORK



Pierre Cardin—who had commissioned Pergay's Vase Coq (Rooster vase) in silver-plated brass in 1957—bought the entire exhibition. Subsequent editions have become auction favorites of late, especially since most of her pieces are one-offs or produced in editions of 20 or fewer. Pergay's record remains the $421,000 paid for a rare one-arm Banquet daybed, circa 1967, at Phillips de Pury & Company's December 2007 design sale in New York.

Full-scale works like these, more streamlined than Art Nouveau but too fanciful to be considered strictly modernist, dance the fine line between the functional and the decorative. "My husband was worried when I emptied the shop to make space for the steel. 'What will I tell the clients?' he fretted. I scared a lot of people," Pergay says, not displeased by the memory.

The new, more austere designs quickly found favor, especially with businessmen and, in the 1980s and '90s, with private clients that included Russian oligarchs and members of the Saudi royal family. But the more whimsical works didn't always go over. "I remember a gentleman with very white hair and a tiny voice who got out of a beautiful car," says Pergay. "He looked at a Ring chair, and without thinking twice, he said, 'I like it a lot…It's just a shame it isn't square.'"

Although the more minimalist pieces were her bread and butter in terms of sales, Pergay found ways to inject decorative touches. "The Lit Tapis Volant, the Chaise Anneaux—they are so-called iconic objects that I have come to treat with a certain indifference," she admits. "The works that interest me the most are the slightly odd ones, like those I made for Salvador Dalí." These included a pure-gold butterfly set with semiprecious stones for his late-1950s project "The Myth of the Butterfly and the Fire." Pergay recalls, "he commissioned a piece from me, and when I brought it to him, he exclaimed, 'You dared!' So I said, 'Yes, I dared, master.' I called him master. His majesty."

Hints of Surrealism persist in Pergay's work, which since the 1990s has taken a decidedly lighter, more liberated and playful turn. There's the fake door that remains ajar—pulling it opens the real door behind. Her 1992 Daisy chair looks as much like an egg sunny-side up as like the flower. The Brick Bench couch, 2010, rests on broken slabs of stone, while a pair of cubic light fixtures has been punched open and fitted with LEDs.

"They're gags," she says of these works. "I don't dislike humor in art. For some people, if humor in art is not obvious, they don't get it." As part of an upcoming project at the Petit Palais next September, she has proposed supersize, decayed versions of her leaves, measuring up to 15 feet, "as if they had fallen from a giant tree and spent the winter outside, leaving nothing but the skeleton. It all makes me feel very tiny."

With Pergay, "there is a core vision that is more indicative of an artistic endeavor, certainly not a commercial endeavor," says Suzanne Demisch, who co-authored Pergay's catalogue raisonné with Stephane Danant. "You see it only in hindsight. I think she has typically been ahead of the trends because she was not associated with a group or movement. Even now, she's not really a contemporary designer, but she's also not historical. She's running her own trail."

And it's an unmapped trail at that. "It doesn't even occur to me to have boundaries," Pergay says. "The only thing I want is that the work not leave you indifferent, one way or another. My work is passionate and I please myself, perhaps at the expense of many things that you'd think I would have acquired at this point in my life, like a bit of money. Instead," she continues, laughing ruefully, "I immediately spend it—not on knickknacks but on trying to do new things." ⊞

From top: An untitled 2005 desk featuring exotic-wood inlays, the steel and copper Table Eventail, 1968, and a Lit Tapis Volant, one of Pergay's most famous 1960s designs, which fetched $134,500 at Christie's New York in 2010.

FROM TOP: TWO IMAGES, DEMISCH DANANT; CHRISTIE'S