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THIS PAGE: in the living room, Organic Loop chairs (on left) by JULIAN MAYOR; Ren coffee table by IFEANYI OGANWU; General Dynamic chair (near table) by Julian Mayor; Igloo sofa and Magyar rug by MATHIAS KISS. OPPOSITE PAGE: an external view of the house. Details, last pages.

PEAK INTEREST

One of France's foremost champions of contemporary design, Armel Soyer has turned a 19th-century farmhouse in the French Alps into a cosy mountainside home that doubles as a gallery.

By IAN PHILLIPS Photographed by STEPHAN JULLIARD



THIS PAGE, FROM ABOVE LEFT: *Armel Soyer with her husband, Gilles Pernet. In another view of the living room, Lamp L1 by THOMAS DURIEZ; artwork by HUMBERTO POBLETE-BUSTAMANTE. OPPOSITE PAGE: in a view from the kitchen, LAMBERT & FILS Beaubien Suspension 4 light; table by DENIS MILOVANOV; vintage dining chair (left) by JENS RISOM.*

Last summer, French furniture dealer Armel Soyer invited the Moscow-based designer Denis Milovanov to her home in the Alps for a three-week artist's residence. She had five huge blocks of Burgundy oak delivered, the largest of which measured 3.5 metres long x 80 centimetres in diameter. The Russian arrived with two chainsaws, a red pencil and a mighty 120-kilo Georgian whose job was to displace the wood. From it, Milovanov crafted a sculptural table, two benches and a chair, which sat for several months on the terrace until a nearby client acquired the table. It was so heavy it had to be transported by helicopter.

Soyer is one of France's most astute and compelling purveyors of contemporary design. Among the cutting-edge artists she represents are France's Mathias Kiss and Pierre Gonalons, and the UK's Julian Mayor. "When a piece is proposed to me, I always ask myself what's novel about it and whether it will still be relevant in 50 years," she declares. "My goal is to create something that will really stand the test of time." One of the latest recruits to her roster of designers is Melbourne-based Christopher Boots, whose lighting she discovered via Instagram last September. "His work is very clever and original,"

enthuses Soyer, who commissioned from him a number of exclusive pieces incorporating gradated rock crystal, which were unveiled earlier this year at an exhibition at her Paris gallery.

Nothing predestined Soyer to become a figure in the design world. She was born into a horse racing family in Chantilly to the north of the French capital. Her father was a trainer, her mother worked for one of Europe's leading owner-breeders, the Aga Khan. Soyer moved to Paris to attend boarding school at the age of 15 and quickly developed an ambition to work in a creative field. For 10 years, she oversaw marketing and communication for crystal manufacturer Lalique before opening her Parisian gallery in the Marais district.

She never expected to find herself living in the Alps. She and her husband, the photographer and image consultant Gilles Pernet, used to divide their time between a loft in Paris and a weekend house in Normandy. His work, however, took him regularly to the ski resort village of Megève, where Soyer would join him. "We started to fall in love with the valley here," he says. "It's extremely wide and sunny."

When they decided to take the leap to acquire a property, it didn't take long to find one. "I was so excited that I immediately started searching on the internet," he recalls. "I found our farmhouse in »

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW LEFT: a view of the dining room. In another view of the living room, Strata chair by JULIAN MAYOR; Handcrafted Skis Experience (on wall) by XAVIER VEILHAN for Akonite. In a corner of the dining room, Miroir Froissé JC mirror by MATHIAS KISS; lamps and Pyrée table by THOMAS DURIÉZ; light sculpture by STÉPHANE MOUFLETTE. Applique L11 wall light by Thomas Duriez; Aurelia shelves by Julian Mayor; Lightscape cups and jug (on top shelf) by RUTH GURVICH for Nymphenburg; sculpture (on bottom shelf) by PERRIN & PERRIN. Bench #2 and rocking horse (back left) by DENIS MILOVANOV; Le Jour Qui Me Traverse by CHARLES BELLE. OPPOSITE PAGE: in the dining room, Pavillon chandelier by PIERRE GONALONS; Parallax table and chairs by Julian Mayor; Lightscape plates, vase and bowl by Ruth Gurvich for Nymphenburg; White Disorder tapestry on wall by GILLES PERNET; Désordre Ancien sculpture (on right of tapestry) by Stéphane Mouflette.





THIS PAGE, FROM ABOVE LEFT: *in the guest bedroom, bed cover from NORKI; pillows from LINDELL & CO; Sunset lamp (left) from ASCÈTE; 1970s Italian floor lamp; painting on ceiling is Choux Rouge by CHARLES BELLE. In the living room, Orp chandelier by CHRISTOPHER BOOTS; Paravent #1 screen by DENIS MILOVANOV; Glenda Gold chair by JULIAN MAYOR; table by Denis Milovanov; Egon bowl by THOMAS DURIEZ; Magyar rug by MATHIAS KISS. OPPOSITE PAGE: in the entry hall with a view of the office, Divinité Tactile Plateau sculpture by CHRISTIAN ASTUGUEVIEILLE; Applique L11 wall light by Thomas Duriez; Maru pendant lights (in office) from LADIES & GENTLEMEN STUDIO; Prompte à l'oubli painting by Charles Belle. Details, last pages.*

« just 48 hours.” They were attracted to it for several reasons. It came with two hectares of land, on which Soyer’s two horses could be stabled. It was also not too remote, which meant that it was easy for them to school their two sons, Ernest, 9, and Ange, 7. Finally, there were the spectacular views, especially those of Europe’s highest peak, Mont Blanc. “It’s like a protective figure, a point of reference,” notes Pernet. “Just like the Eiffel Tower in Paris.”

The farmhouse itself dates from the first half of the 19th century and was operative until the 1960s. When Soyer and Pernet first saw it, there was still a metre of hay on the upper level and no central heating. Converting it into a home took three years. Although they made few changes to the external structure, they completely gutted the interior, making particular efforts to salvage the original materials. As Pernet says, “It would have been a sacrilege not to repurpose the old wood.” Former floorboards were used for walls, as was burnt wood from the previous chimneybreast. And when new planks had to be added, Pernet stained them different colours to give them an aged effect. He scratched the pink-painted walls to give them a patina, too. The staircase that links the two floors, meanwhile, was topped with an angular structure reminiscent of a hut.

Quite early in the construction process, Soyer decided the space would also be a second gallery. Today, much of the ever-changing furniture consists of creations that are actually for sale. Many of them are in perfect sync with the Alpine setting. An angular sofa by Mathias Kiss is named Igloo, while Julian Mayor’s General Dynamic chair resembles a faceted block of ice. Then there is a rock crystal chandelier by Christopher Boots and a bedside table made from pyrite, which both reference natural materials found in the region. A pair of tapestries created by Pernet was inspired by the environment, too. The one in the dining room is based on a digitally distorted photo of the ski slopes opposite, where he and Soyer often descend a few runs during extended lunch breaks in winter.

“Being here gives me a feeling of great freedom,” says Soyer. “I’ve been able to demonstrate that a contemporary design gallery can exist outside a big city.” Pernet seems equally contented with their new life. “With our children, we often listen to ‘Il Est où le Bonheur?’ [‘Where Is Happiness?’], a song by a singer called Christophe Maé,” he recounts, “and for the first time in my life, I really have the impression of relishing the joy of every moment.” *VL*

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