


DV EIGHT

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DELAWARE VALLEY EIGHT



FEATURING
AMBIKA CONROY
BEN YOUNGER
BENOIST DRUT
KAZUSA JIBIKI
MARISA SCHEINFELD
PETER SMITH BUCHANAN
TAYLOR FOSTER

CHILLY BENOIST

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It is a late fall day in Sullivan County. The few leaves left on the trees have turned a sad rusty brown, with an occasional dab of muddy mustard mixed in. The clouds, in many shades of grey, are draped deep from the sky like heavy velvet portières. Once in a while, the sun breaks through as if to reassure us that life is good.

The moment you arrive at Benoist Drut's home, hidden deep in the woods, you see it right away: Life is good.

set smack in the center of an alley of pine trees. Little lamps illuminate the structure at night. (No, he does not hide his quirks.) There are ceramic frogs next to a small watering hole, proudly indicating that their French owner is, after all, a frog himself. A giant white elephant sits in the company of other oversized cement animal figures that spit water when connected to a hose. "Kitschy, *n'est ce pas?*" winks Drut. His friend is expecting a baby and he's already imagining a cute little blond boy happily playing in these magical woods.

In the last decade, Maison Gérard's scope has expanded into Art Nouveau and, spearheaded by Drut, into works by contemporary artists.

In Drut's house in Sullivan County, a beige linen-covered Leleu sofa graces the center of a living room of epic proportions. It appears to be about 2,000 square feet with a cathedral ceiling soaring up to 28 feet. (The owner does not keep track of such irrelevant information). But he has no doubt that a coral-red lacquer table dates from 1930. The furnishings are an unabashed



There is a new driveway made from crushed local stone. *Take a left*, the lord of the manor had instructed earlier, even though a left turn seems only to lead deeper into the trees. But suddenly you come upon a designated area that sports the sign "Porsche Parking ONLY." Drut, a gallery owner and collector, thought it would be funny to nail the instructions to a tree. It is here that Carol Egan, one of his artists, leaves her vintage Porsche cabriolet before moving on to the house, where a tiny French flag is waving in the wind.

The Frenchman loves his little jokes and they can be found throughout the garden. There is a 6-foot-high Eiffel Tower made of rusty iron

The imagination, the free roam of thoughts that comes with leaving the city behind, is important for Drut, who arrived in New York from Paris in 1992. His urban environment is prettier than most—the 45-year-old is the heir apparent and creative head of Maison Gérard, the renowned gallery in Manhattan. Founded in 1974 by now-retired Gerardus Widdershoven, the dealership has long specialized in French Art Deco furniture, lighting and *objets d'art*, with a particular focus on the French design studio Maison Leleu. A particularly brilliant piece by Leleu, a sideboard from the Fireworks series (*Meuble feu d'Artifices*) from the late '30s, was recently snapped up by a New York collector after a year of careful deliberation.

mix of Art Nouveau and Art Deco. And then some.

When he started to look for land twelve years ago, Drut gave himself a two-hour radius from the Village. "I don't mind driving two hours to come here. I do not like to be dealing with neighbors," he remarks. Which isn't to say that he lacks interpersonal skills; his considerable charm and persuasive talent have been instrumental in the success of Maison Gérard. "I wanted privacy, I wanted to be away from a thoroughfare, at the end of a long driveway. And I could not afford anything near Hudson." After being invited for a weekend in the Upper Delaware Valley, he fell in love with the

neighborhood.

Building took a while, in part because he chose an Italian architect based in Paris. “I wanted to have a view of the creek and a view of the pond and to be far away from any road,” he explains. “And I wanted each room to open to the outside, even the bathrooms, so that I could capture the beauty of winter without going out.” Beaver Dam, as the property is known, is a two-bedroom house, but it is grand. Drut knows how to stage this. “At night you have light coming in. You have very few lights in the kitchen, because the light is streaming in from the lanterns outside.”

The house is by no means difficult to heat, he insists. One of its focal points is a huge fireplace. Two hands are required to tame the embers. Drut grew up in the tiny village of Omerville near Giverny, across the river from Monet’s famous garden. “We are a family of people who love fire. We always had a big fireplace.” He recalls how one stormy day, pieces of ember went up, got stuck in a flue that had never been cleaned and caused a fire.

When he was just 14, Drut bid on his first collector’s item at auction: a Dinky Toy. At the time, it was illegal for him to bid because he was too young. The auctioneer, amused and possibly moved by a young boy’s passion, let him get away with it. The miniature vehicle is still around somewhere, buried among many other treasures of wildly exotic provenance.

After school, Drut set off for Paris, where he worked for a small but reputable auction house specializing in African art. At the time, it was mandatory to study law to become an auctioneer, so he chose that route, only to abandon his studies when he became bored. Since then, Drut has established himself as a connoisseur of 20th century decorative art, but brings something else to the table. Christina Grajales, owner of the namesake Manhattan gallery of contemporary art and design, says: “I love his passion and warmth as a gallerist.”

The house reflects both. The dark cement floor (“Built way before it became fashionable!”) provides a spectacular backdrop for an ever-revolving juxtaposition of treasures. Almost every week, the gallery’s driver brings in new loot and takes bits and pieces away. One would be hard-pressed to find a favorite spot, but a pair of buttery leather armchairs from Yves St. Laurent’s Paris pied-à-terre is certainly a contender. Designed by Jacques Grange after



Jean Michel Frank, their slightly frayed edges, enough to catapult another collector straight into buyer’s remorse—didn’t bother him the least when he snapped them up at auction. “That’s life,” he shrugs. Drut’s life has room for beautiful imperfections, like the Louis XVI chairs, war-torn and all, which he found in Tivoli near Hudson. He combines them to great effect with a clear-lined limed oak stool by Carol Egan.

Many of Drut’s purchases are the result of happenstance that he cannot—and does not want to—avoid. A grouping of Royal Czech vessels was bought in Brooklyn, near the Maison Gérard warehouse. “There is a small store with lots of shit in it and it’s always closed, but one day I saw the elderly couple—the husband looking rather sick and the woman very active but no young chicken herself,” he recounts. “I asked if I could see those cups in the window and it took them 10 minutes to move the many vases in front to access them. But she did so nicely that I was forced to buy them. I needed to buy something from them because it was good karma.”

For his home, Drut does not care if his pieces—or his outfits or his mutt, Maxine—have a pedigree. His personal style at home tends to be laid-back, stylish lounge wear accessorized with Moroccan babouches that just happen to look like Alexander McQueen. “I’ve fallen in love with Marrakesh,” he exclaims. “Morocco is so beautiful and so full of French culture.”

Drut loves to travel and it’s always productive for the business. He incessantly scours new sources

and makes new connections. “These bowls are made by a friend—a former accessories designer for Givenchy who uses a traditional Moroccan technique,” he says, holding up a sand-cast bronze piece that is polished by hand. “Every bowl is different and the imperfections are part of the design. If you can’t live with that, it’s your problem.”

Landscape designer Kimberly von Koontz, who is currently reconfiguring the garden sums Drut’s aesthetic: “Throughout his space, there is a pervasive, deeply romantic acknowledgement of classical beauty, strikingly presented within a raw, modern setting.” Obviously, she adds, this is a combination many try to strike these days. “But by his hand, there is something touching and totally knowing about the proportions and the sincerity of this mix. The way Benoist invites objects into his world, it’s very sensual, very provocative...very felt.”

