

FINANCIAL TIMES

HOW TO SPEND IT

3 JULY
2021

GOOD DAY SUNSHINE

GIA COPPOLA'S
LA STYLE

HAUSER & WIRTH'S
MENORCA TAKEOVER

INSIDE MAX
RICHTER'S STUDIO

EDDY GRANT'S
GRAND DESIGNS



How To Spend It Travel

'It's a Trojan horse for art' – Hauser & Wirth hits Menorca

An exclusive tour of the gallerists' new outpost on the tiny island of Isla del Rey

Jan Dalley. Photography by Anna Huix

I've often described our business model as a non-traditional gallery curriculum," says gallerist Iwan Wirth. "We've done things differently from the beginning." We're talking about Hauser & Wirth's newest gallery/restaurant project, in a surprising location: a tiny island in the middle of the harbour at Mahon, in Menorca. Accessible only by boat, the Isla del Rey measures just 41,000sq m – you can stroll from one side to the other in a couple of minutes – and although for much of the year the sea around it is a heavenly blue, with sky to match, the winters bring vicious winds and a climate hardly suited to expensive art. At night, the rabbits and lizards have the place to themselves.



The dock at Isla Del Rey © Anna Huix/Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

What's more, for a commercial gallery to bring blue-chip art to this place seems, at first, bizarre. This is the most low-glam of the Balearic islands, hardly a billionaire's playground, and its devotees like to keep it that way.

“Doing things differently”, as Wirth puts it, has seen Hauser & Wirth grow into an art-world behemoth with more than a dozen galleries around the world and a roster of artists and artists' estates that is probably the world's largest. Yet somehow it retains the feel of a family business – it was established in 1992 in Zurich by Iwan Wirth, his wife, Manuela, and Ursula Hauser (Manuela's mother) –and in each of its many locations the gallery fits the local scene. So in Hong Kong that means a gleaming tower; in Manhattan, an elegant Upper East Side townhouse as well as a new-built West Side space near the High Line; in Los Angeles, a converted flour mill in formerly derelict Downtown with a restaurant with live chickens.

In central London, whole tracts of Savile Row are converted into huge, airy white-box spaces, but in Bruton, Somerset, an ancient set of farm buildings has been made into a sort of compound with a restaurant and gallery in a converted barn, wonderfully extensive gardens, and spaces for resident artists and for educational and community projects.



Autostat, 1996, by Franz West, is placed at the jetty to greet visitors
© Anna Huix/Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.
© Archiv Franz West © Estate Franz West



Spider, 1994, by Louise Bourgeois, in the central patio
© Anna Huix/The Easton Foundation/DACS, courtesy The Easton Foundation and Hauser & Wirth

This is, loosely, the model for the Menorcan idea. In the planning stages, the Wirths took a group of local officials from Mahon to visit Bruton: no doubt a clever sell, because getting permission to make their gallery on the Isla del Rey was never going to be easy. Although tiny, the island hosts significant historic structures. Dominating the skyline is a former naval hospital built in the early 18th century by the British, who then controlled Menorca. Its arcaded façade topped with a bell tower forms a U-shape with a chapel at one end around an old medicinal garden, now restored by volunteers. Since 2005 it has been protected by a Foundation and slowly brought back to life; it now houses a museum. But only a decade or so ago, the buildings were completely abandoned, crumbling and on the point of collapse.

And most people, if they did visit the old hospital, hardly even noticed a low line of ancient auxiliary buildings that runs across the island from one side to the other, a few dozen yards away. No one bothered with these. Just five years ago, they were in ruins – some parts nothing but rubble and collapsed beams, half overtaken by thick undergrowth. If you fought your way around them, pushing through thorny bushes and stepping gingerly over smashed tiles, broken beams and mucky rubbish, you would come to another of the island's treasures, the remains of a sixth-century Christian Basilica, scarcely regarded and almost impossible to see as it was surrounded by a hideous chain-link fence. Despite the island's startling natural beauty, and the gloomy romance of its history, the place was, frankly, pretty horrible.



Le Père Ubu, 1974, by Joan Miró, in the garden designed by Piet Oudolf
© Anna Huix/Successió Miró/VEGAP, 2021/courtesy Hauser & Wirth

It would have taken some imagination to guess that the site would be opening this month as Hauser & Wirth Menorca, the ruined buildings remade into a line of eight galleries, education spaces and offices, the former hospital kitchen transformed into a restaurant whose outdoor tables now look out through rescued trees onto the water, the gardens replanted and dotted with sculpture. And that chainlink fence around the Basilica ruins has gone.

« Little did we know that the art world was going to get decentralised, and that people were going to be re-evaluating their relationship to nature and to cities »

Iwan Wirth, Hauser & Wirth

Architect Luis Laplace, an Argentine who now runs his own design and architecture practice in Paris, talks with loving enthusiasm about the project he undertook with Mar Rescalvo Pons, the director of Hauser & Wirth Menorca. On a tour of the site, we talk about rescuing buildings, about the problems and regulations of historic listed structures, and about lizards. The Isla del Rey has a unique lizard, a bright green, fat-fingered little thing with a long tail. Laplace designed special homes for them underneath built-in benches. “They don’t like each other much so we had to make lots of different compartments,” he says.

We talk about trees, a lot. On the site, swathes of dense undergrowth were laboriously stripped out, leaving the larger pines, olives and cypresses – though none grows very large on this wind-whipped island – so the buildings are surrounded by shade and half-veiled. Working to preserve trees sometimes only a few feet from the foundations was a building challenge, Laplace admits – pointing to one especially inconvenient pine, he tells me, laughing: “Iwan said to me, ‘If you move that tree, I’ll kill you.’”

“Even building the [access] steps, which involved taking out a single tree, was a long, long conversation. But Piet finally solved it by saying that it was a non-native tree and should go anyway.”



A wild olive tree forest in front of the gallery’s restaurant, Cantina © Anna Huix



A walkway through the garden © Anna Huix

He's referring to Piet Oudolf, the Dutch garden designer and writer who has created the landscaping and planting here. Oudolf is renowned for projects that include New York's High Line, and for gardens that use herbaceous plants and grasses in dramatic clumps and drifts, with an eye always on ecology. His lush, almost Monet-esque garden at Hauser & Wirth Somerset is one of the chief delights of the place. But the dry, rocky soil of the Isla del Rey and a volatile climate is a different proposition, one that Oudolf has approached by going local. His new planting focuses on the herbs and shrubs of the Balearic Islands. In June, rich clusters of purple and yellow were emerging, with lavenders, alliums and potentilla, camomile, what I guessed were camassia, and more.

As we walk, Mar Rescalvo shows me the sculpture dotted around the buildings. The first I have already seen: a vibrant pink egg-shaped piece, *Autostat* (1996) by Franz West, that greets you when you dock at the little jetty on the island and which announces the gallery's presence in no uncertain terms. The entrance to the galleries themselves, up a paved, flower-bordered avenue directly facing the old hospital, is heralded by a corten-steel piece by Eduardo Chillida, *Elogio del vacío VI* (2000). The Spanish sculptor, Rescalvo tells me, was from the Basque country, but found in Menorca the wildness and stillness he needed for his work. She points me to a second piece by Chillida, *Escuchando a la piedra III* (1996), nestling under olive trees behind the restaurant. A small patina'd bronze abstract by Joan Miró, *le Père Ubu* (1974), continues the Spanish theme. Then, as she leads me into the courtyard entrance, there is the sculptural pièce de résistance, a 3m *Spider* (1994) by Louise Bourgeois.



The main gallery space, soon to be filled with works by LA artist Mark Bradford © Anna Huix

But the buildings clamour for attention almost as much as the art. Talking to Laplace, we also spend a lot of time on ceilings. The once roofless structure that is now the restaurant – named Cantina and run by a local vineyard-restaurant called Binifadet – has a magnificent beamed roof that looks as if it has been in place for 200 years. But it is a new structure. “Every piece of wood,” he says, “was found on the site. We gathered them all up, cleaned them – but not too much – and remade this roof on a model of local ships.” He points out other details that echo the nautical setting: handles, hinges and latches made for boats, and the use of Menorcan craftspeople and makers for every possible element.

Despite this almost obsessive attention to the finer points, the overall feeling of this mighty undertaking is surprisingly light-touch. Iwan Wirth describes Laplace’s architectural interaction with the buildings as “almost invisible”, and I agree – if by that he means that the buildings created, some of which are at least 90 per cent new, already look as if they have always been there and have had only a light facelift.

When I ask Manuela and Iwan Wirth the obvious question – why this, why here? –they look at each other for a moment as if to imply that the choice was, to them if not to others, an obvious one. “Like so many times in our gallery life,” Iwan Wirth replies, “these places choose us. Opportunities find us.” Manuela’s mother, Ursula Hauser, had a holiday home on Mallorca, but it was a visit to the smaller island that planted the idea. “There are lots of great buildings in the world,” he continues, “but you need to know what you want to do with them. And to be mad enough to put heart and soul and a lot of money into it.”

They describe the decision as “instinct, backed up by strategy”. “Little did we know that the art world was going to get decentralised, and that people were going to be re-evaluating their relationship to nature and to cities. We knew it would be an amazing place for people to visit and for artists to come and work – setting is so important.”

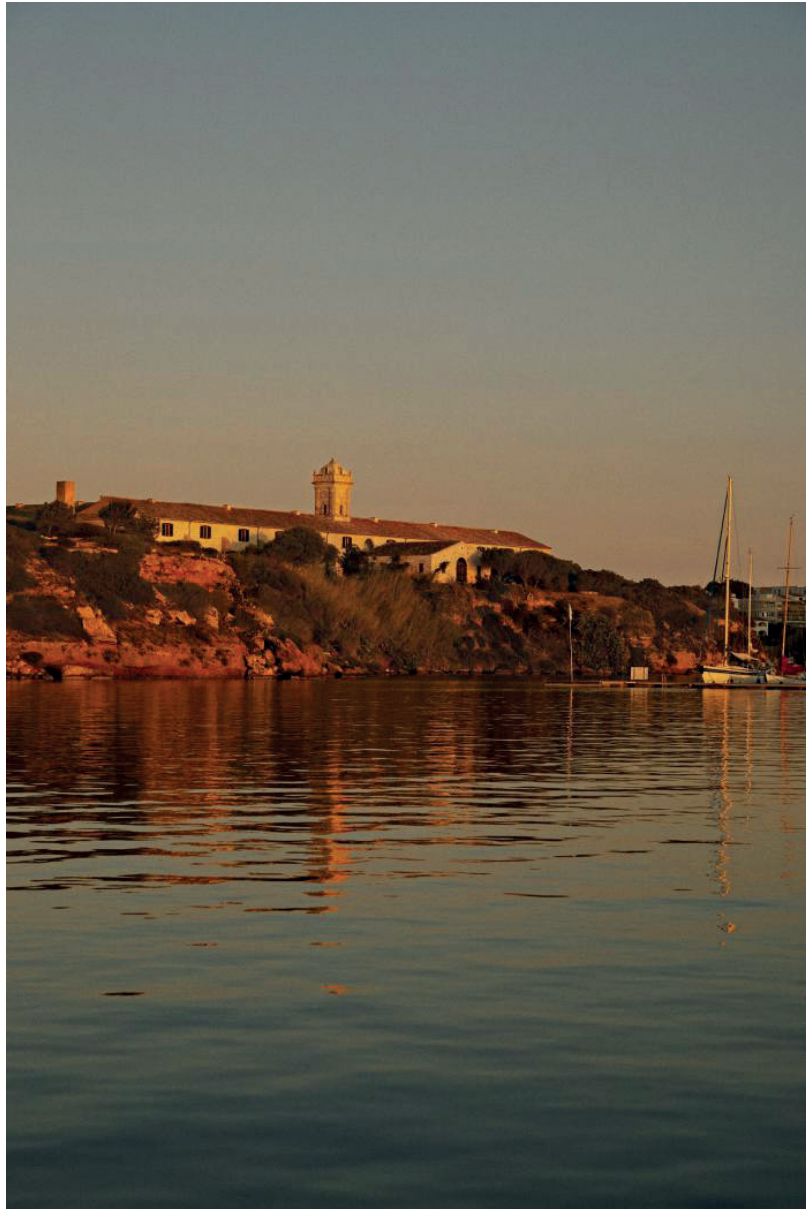


A walkway through the garden © Anna Huix

Mahon has the largest natural harbour in the Mediterranean, some three miles long and deep enough for ships of any size. The small bays along its edges are now, of course, dotted with buildings, but there's still plenty of wild green space. The Isla del Rey sits about halfway down the harbour, so Mahon's picturesque town meets your eyes on one side, the mouth of the harbour and the open sea in the other direction.

The harbour's extraordinary size and depth made it strategically important enough, in the days of sail, for the great powers of the day – France, Spain and Britain – to fight over it bitterly. Against this setting, into this complicated and beautiful place, steps Hauser & Wirth's first gallery artist, Mark Bradford. At first, a painter from Los Angeles might seem a baffling choice. As does the arrival of a blue-chip name, now one of the most expensive living artists, in this small place. But, as Rescalvo explains to me, Bradford had been integral to the plans from an early stage. Some years ago the artist spent time in the Balearics and found the enchantment of the islands – and even knew the Isla del Rey itself. His new series of work, entitled *Masses and Movements*, is inspired by a 16th-century map of the world thought to be the first ever mention in print of the word "America". The sense of sea crossings and trade routes, of migrations and resettlements, echoes through the Menorca exhibition, with globe sculptures as well as canvases, and a site-specific mural that Bradford is currently creating with the assistance of art students from Mahon.

And does Hauser & Wirth expect to sell these multi-million dollar works on a small Balearic island? That's not really the right question, these days. An artist of Bradford's stature will have a waiting list of eager buyers, private and institutional – it hardly matters where he shows the work. What does matter is the creation of an environment that will inspire an artist, beguile visitors and provide a deeper cultural resonance. It's a symbiotic partnership between gallerist and artist that goes far beyond the simple selling transaction.



The 18th-century naval hospital and bell tower © Anna Huix

As the new galleries open, two of the rooms will be given over to an installation designed by Bradford that explores the vast complexities of global immigration. “This will be a multifunctional educational space,” Rescalvo tells me, “and Mark will be there to develop it at the start.” Menorca’s schoolchildren and students will be involved as projects unfold, and Rescalvo, whose background is in music (she was director of the Balearic Symphony Orchestra), also has plans for performing arts.

“It’s important to have hired people from the island,” emphasises Manuela. And they have certainly done that. Rescalvo herself is a Menorcan but, like so many talented people, she had to leave to find opportunities: now she is back, living in her grandmother’s old house in Es Mercadal, a small town in the middle of the island. Her director of communications, Marta Coll, is another returnee, back in her Menorcan home town of Ferrerías after six years working abroad. The restaurant is run by local vineyard owners, and staffed mostly from the island. Local craftspeople and makers, local talent – it has all won local approval. There will be free access to everything, and boats will run every hour; in the winter months when the galleries themselves are closed, the sculptures and gardens will still be open for walkers. “It is a public island”, as Rescalvo reminds me. Hauser & Wirth doesn’t own the real estate, and its initial 15-year lease (with an option to renew for 10 more) is already ticking. They make it clear that the success of the project, on both sides, will determine its future.

« It’s about accessibility, to open your mind to contemporary art in a magical setting »

Iwan Wirth, Hauser & Wirth

And what about that future?

When I ask about next year’s artists, it seems very much a game of wait-and-see.

“The pandemic has taught us not to make so many plans,” Rescalvo says, and although the first artist-in-residence will hopefully be in place in 2022, even that isn’t yet firm.

So the plans for this all-round art centre, which they intend as a cultural resource for Menorca, are somewhat vague, if enthusiastic. In the end, Wirth is passionate first and foremost about the art itself. Rather beguilingly, he describes the creation of a gorgeous setting – the gardens, the restaurant, the ambience – as a “Trojan horse”, almost a subterfuge, for bringing people to the art. “It’s about accessibility, to open your mind to contemporary art, in a magical setting.

“It changes people’s lives, touches their hearts. What more can you ask for?”

Hauser & Wirth Menorca opens to the public on 19 July. Masses and Movements by Mark Bradford is showing until 31 October. hauserwirth.com