

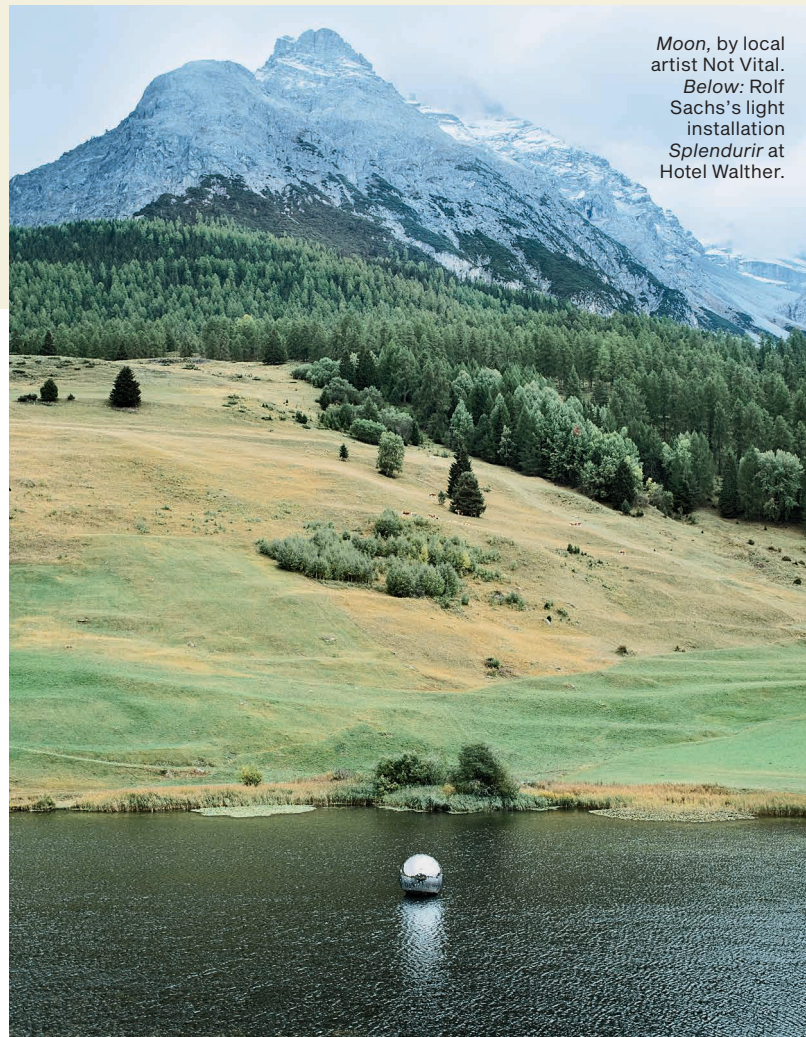
CULTURE

Visitors gather
inside James
Turrell's *Skyspace*
Piz Utèr at Hotel
Castell in Zuoz.

High Art Long a getaway for artists and aristocrats, the Swiss ski town of St. Moritz has blossomed into a major cultural destination thanks to prestigious new galleries and fairs. *by Gisela Williams. Photographs by Federico Ciamei*

I WAS DRIVING up a narrow, winding road in Switzerland's Upper Engadine Valley, focusing on the tiny mountain village ahead, when my concentration was suddenly broken by a small lake, in mesmerizing shades of fern green, down a steep slope to my right. More striking than the lake itself was a boulder-sized silver orb that was floating in its center, as if a celestial body had dropped from the night sky and landed on the surface of the water.

The surreal aberration of it evoked an almost sacred sense of wonder, which managed to overwhelm even the great beauty of its wild, alpine surroundings. I later learned it had been placed there by the artist Not Vital (pronounced "note vee-TAHL"), possibly the valley's most beloved resident and native son, a world-renowned Swiss artist who has, for years, been installing site-specific works within the natural landscape. Other works include his *Disappearing House*,

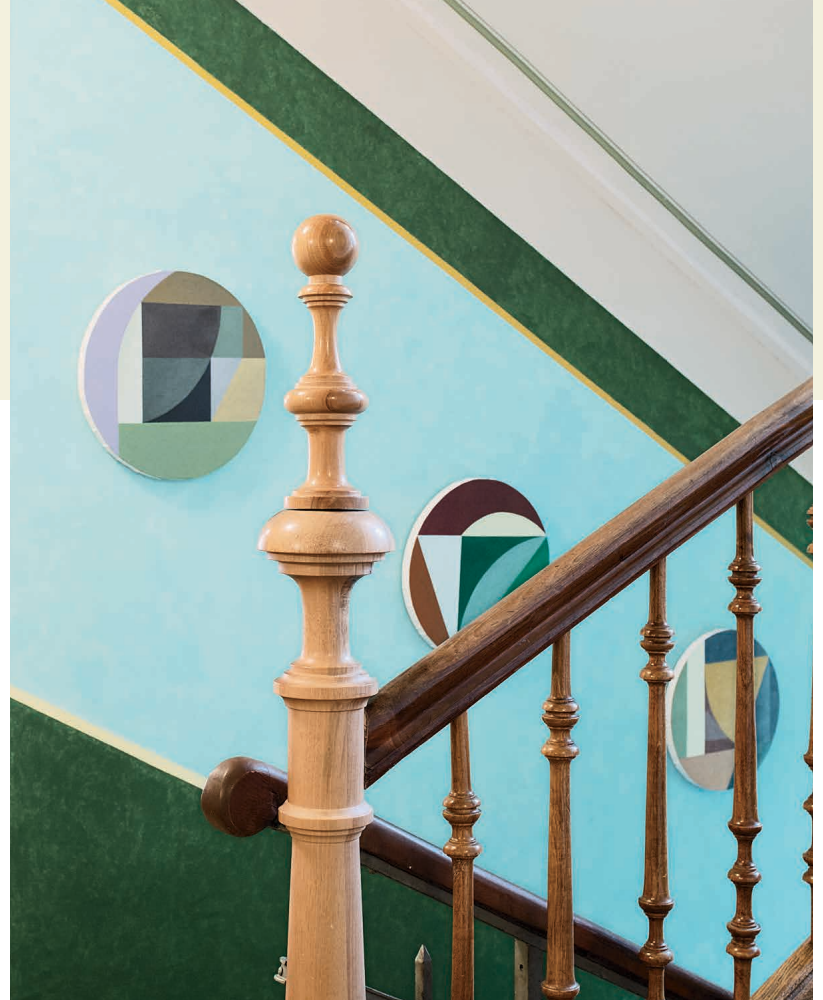


Moon, by local artist Not Vital.
Below: Rolf Sachs's light installation *Splendurir* at Hotel Walther.



well as artists, philosophers, and writers to "take the waters." The sculptor Alberto Giacometti was born and raised in the Engadine. For several summers in the late 1800s Friedrich Nietzsche lived in the picturesque village of Sils. He wrote later that the landscape inspired *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Today the Nietzsche-Haus (nietzschehaus.ch) is a library and museum—and occasionally an exhibition space—that's open to the public. The eminent Swiss curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist, now the director of London's Serpentine Galleries, organized one of his first shows there: Gerhard Richter's photographs of the surrounding landscape. Richter himself stays every year at the Waldhaus Sils (waldhaus-sils.ch), an Art Nouveau fortress of a hotel that some compare to Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. Run by the

From left: Hotel Walther, in Pontresina; a stairwell in Villa Flor, in the village of S-chanf.



same family for five generations, the Waldhaus Sils has a cult following among European intellectuals and art-world personalities, including the German photographer Andreas Gursky and the avant-garde Swiss director Christoph Marthaler.

Starting in the 1960s, the area became more famous for its hedonistic après-ski scene than for its thermal waters, and prominent wealthy socialite families began to flock to St. Moritz during the winter season. The Italian industrialist Gianni Agnelli owned a chalet in the hamlet of Suvretta, for example, and the German playboy Gunter Sachs moved into a penthouse in the illustrious Badrutt's Palace Hotel.

The main catalyst for the emergence of St. Moritz as an art destination was the distinguished and respected gallerist Bruno Bischofberger. In the '80s, he added a studio to his chalet so that his artists, including painters Francesco Clemente and Jean-Michel Basquiat, could work there. Julian Schnabel, whom Bischofberger also represented at the time, continues the tradition, spending an entire winter month in the Engadine, based at the Villa Flor (villaflor.ch), a historic guesthouse with modern interiors. (One of his paintings hangs over the reception desk.) Located in the village of S-chanf, a 20-minute drive from the center of St. Moritz, the Villa Flor overlooks the Inn River and serves as the home of the gracious and connected woman-about-town Ladina Florineth. A former fashion executive, Florineth oversees the seven rooms with flair, taking care of her guests as if they are family, sometimes even taking them hiking in the mountains. "Thank you for today. I'm destroyed!" read a note left in her guest book by the artist Tom Sachs.



a grass-roofed building that sinks into the earth at the push of a button, and *House to Watch the Sunset*, a white tower from which visitors can appreciate the descent of dusk.

In this breathtaking region in eastern Switzerland, world-class contemporary art shows up in the most remote and unexpected corners. At least it *used* to be unexpected. With the opening of two major art spaces—a new Hauser & Wirth gallery and the Muzeum Susch—and the arrival of several international cultural fairs and events to the picturesque resort town of St. Moritz, the Engadine Valley has emerged as a top destination for art seekers as well as skiers.

For millennia one of the valley's primary architects has been the Inn River (Engadine translates roughly as "garden of the Inn"), which flows from the Piz Bernina, a 13,000-foot peak that towers above St. Moritz, through some of the region's most spectacular lakes, eventually merging with the Danube.

Ask those who know the area well, including Not Vital, what they find most striking about the valley, and they usually answer: the light—the Engadine is the highest and widest valley in the Alps—and the water. Fabled for its healing mineral waters since the Bronze Age (one of Europe's oldest wells has been found here), it was for centuries a pilgrimage site for armies and religious leaders. By the 1800s St. Moritz was one of Europe's most famous thermal resorts, attracting aristocrats as

"A few hours from Munich, a few hours from Milan, a few hours from Zurich," said gallerist Vito Schnabel. "There are a lot of people in this area who care a lot about art."



Bischofberger's legacy continues with Schnabel's son Vito, who founded a gallery in Bischofberger's old location about four years ago (vitoschnabel.com/st-moritz). "Beyond the history of the space, and the fact that Bruno is a mentor and family friend," said Vito, "it's an interesting location: a few hours from Munich, a few hours from Milan, and a few hours from Zurich. There are a lot of people in this area who care a lot about art." This winter he will exhibit work by Pat Steir and Tom Sachs.

Rolf Sachs, the artist son of Gunter Sachs (and no relation to Tom), has spent much of his life in the region and has lately noticed a dramatic change throughout the valley. "With all the innovative contemporary galleries moving in, the cultural scene has become incredibly vibrant," said Sachs, who has created, among other local works, a light installation at the gorgeous

Not Vital's *House to Watch the Sunset*, one of several of his installations in the Engadine Valley.

Hotel Walther in nearby Pontresina (hotel-walther.ch). He gave credit to the Engadine Art Talks, a high-profile symposium organized by Obrist that comes to the village of Zuoz the last weekend in January. Sachs also mentioned the design fair NOMAD (nomadstmoritz.com), which will take over a private mansion outside St. Moritz in early February. It will overlap with SOMMET (sommenet.art), a new small-scale contemporary art fair billed as a "winter salon."

But perhaps the most important addition to St. Moritz's cultural landscape is the opening of the new Hauser & Wirth gallery this winter (hauserwirth.com). Although Iwan Wirth and his wife, Manuela, the Swiss cofounders of Hauser & Wirth, have launched several ambitious and well-received art spaces in the past decade, it's this new outpost in St. Moritz that seemed to excite Iwan the most. Having spent much of his childhood in the valley, he described returning as a homecoming: "We have been homesick for the Engadine, and many of our artists love the region and being in the mountains."

Wirth said they purposely built a traditional white-cube gallery and anchored it in the heart of St. Moritz because they knew they couldn't compete with the more experimental art spaces scattered in the valley. He mentioned the Galerie Tschudi (galerie-tschudi.ch), a warren of small rooms, accessed by all sorts of doors and stairways, in a former barn in Zuoz; and the Hotel Castell (hotelcastell.ch), in the same village, a pioneering luxury property and spa that doubles as a private contemporary art museum.

One evening the owners of the Castell,



the Swiss art collectors Ruedi and Regula Kunz Bechtler, led me up a steep slope near the property to a small chapel-sized installation by James Turrell. A woman wearing colorful hiking gear was already inside, sitting on the bench that hugged the circular wall. We sat without speaking, taking in the shifting colors as light entered the aperture in the ceiling. We seemed to be observing a lifetime of sunsets. Suddenly the woman started playing a Native American flute. The haunting sound filled the cylindrical space as if we were inside the instrument itself.

Afterward Ruedi Bechtler, a talented and prolific artist in his own right, led me on a tour of Hotel Castell. The hallways were lined with just a portion of his eclectic art collection, much of it subversively humorous. We passed, for example, a sculpture of birds carrying a pair of lederhosen by the German conceptualist Carsten Höller, photographs from the Swiss duo Peter Fischli and David Weiss, and a neon sign by the British artist David Shrigley that reads It's Freezing in Here. We finished the evening with a drink next to the glossy fire-engine-red bar, which was designed by artists Gabrielle Hächler and Pipilotti Rist: If we looked closely it was possible to spot tiny video projections playing on several liquor bottles. A mesmerizing totem-like sculpture by Angela Bulloch changed color next to our table.

The next afternoon, under a cerulean sky, the Bechtlers brought a group of art collectors and artists to the Muzeum Susch (muzeumsusch.ch), in the village of Susch. Founded by the collector Grażyna Kulczyk, a Polish real estate entrepreneur who was once married to the late billionaire industrialist Jan Kulczyk, the museum officially opened to the public on January 2, but has been the talk of the valley for a while. It's one thing to open a seasonal art space in St. Moritz, but it's a whole other level of ambition to build an experimental cultural center in a traditional Swiss village with a population of 200. "When I first spotted the site, a former monastery and brewery, a few years ago," explained Kulczyk, "I realized that maybe such a remote, rural location might be perfect for the disruptive approach for the future I had in mind."

For Kulczyk, the Muzeum Susch should reflect the history of the buildings, both sacred and profane, as well as the power of its

From top: Zofia Kulik's *Ethnic Wars*, at the Muzeum Susch; artist Andrea Büttner with her work *Tent (Two Colours)* at Hotel Castell.

location, which, depending on the season, can seem either "beautifully idyllic or uncompromisingly harsh." In addition to its three floors of exhibition space, the complex will also host visiting artists, who will live in a house next door; symposia; and the Instituto Susch, a think tank that will research gender issues in art and science.

One of the most extraordinary rooms in the museum was a dark cave, originally used by the monks to store ice. An ancient spring flowed from the natural black stone of the back wall. The room felt very primal, like a shrine rather than a gallery. Kulczyk calls it the Weeping Room and wisely decided not to add art to the space. Sometimes what is already there, in nature, is enough, especially when it's in the Engadine.

