

INTERIORS



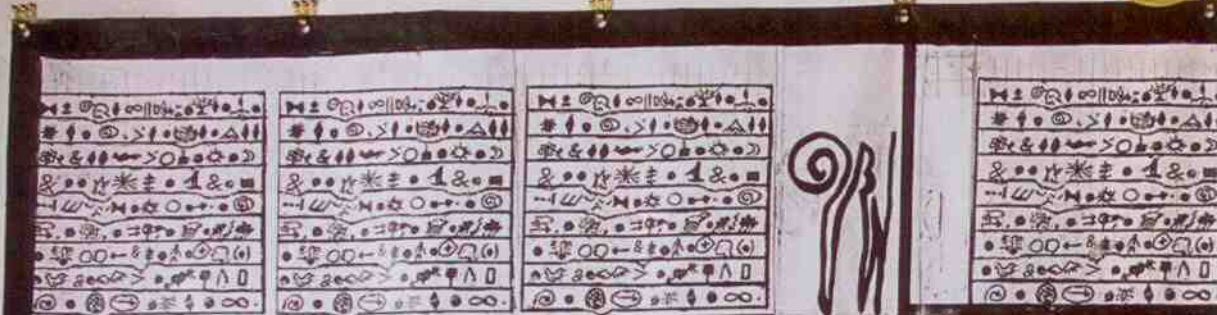


This page: a prototype in painted wood of Bernard's 'Alphabet' bookshelves stands against one wall of the studio. Opposite: the artist at his worktable, making paper models of Yule logs for pâtissier Pierre Hermé



COLOURFUL LANGUAGE

Obsessed with scripts, runes and letters since boyhood, Bernard Quentin recently invented his own picture-writing system, Babelweb. His apartment in Saint-Germain-des-Prés is an A to Z of this passion, from rainbow-hued calligraphic paintings to an 'Alphabet' cupboard. And yet, says Valérie Lapierre, this artist has never conformed to type. Photography: Eric Morin



A multicoloured crystal chandelier by Gio Ponti hangs in the studio. The rainbow continues on the far wall, on a large canvas sheet done in 2011. In front, on an Alvar Aalto table, sits a black 'Uccello' lamp designed by Bernard. On the far right is one of the artist's paintings from 1999, above a round 'Midway' table by Frank Lloyd Wright, with matching chairs from the same series





Top, in the hallway, an African Dogon chair stands next to a large black-and-white painting depicting a poem in Babelweb, the visual language invented by Bernard. A 'Hill House' chair by Rennie Mackintosh guards the door to the sitting room. Above left: a paper lamp by Isamu Noguchi and a 'Tolomeo' lamp by Michele de Lucchi flank 'Childebert', a large figure made by Bernard from cut metal. Above right: overlooked by a crowd painting from the 1960s, a carpet designed by Bernard reproduces signatures of legendary local artists. Opposite: a poem chair by Bernard gleams in the sitting room.



WE ARE IN AN

elegant building on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, in the home of Bernard Quentin, a 90-year-old artist who plays with letters and colours in a room in his apartment recently converted into a workspace. Bernard's office-cum-studio is visually dramatic, an explosion of colours from floor, strewn with drawings, to ceiling, from which hangs an enormous rainbow crystal chandelier by Gio Ponti. An alphabet cupboard with big multicoloured letters, a prototype, stands opposite a large canvas sheet illustrated with what look like stalagmites in cheerful hues. There are also colourful paintings, compositions like rebuses, a totem on which we can decipher the word 'Ecriture' and an accumulation of bits of engraved metal like ancient Egyptian cartouches. In a corner, on a round 'Midway 3' table by Frank Lloyd Wright, matching the half-dozen chairs scattered around the room, are models of plates for a Limoges factory, and on a table by Alvar Aalto, an 'Uccello' lamp designed by Bernard. In the middle of the room, on a long table cluttered with papers, pencils, scissors and glue, the artist draws, his elbows resting on a Rosetta stone. 'This table is by Scarpa, the father,' he explains. 'Basically, here there are only things made by people I've known.' Then remembering the 'Hill House' chairs in his hallway, he says with a laugh: 'Well, I didn't actually know Charles Rennie Mackintosh – he died in the 1920s!'

Turning up in Saint-Germain-des-Prés from his native Picardy in 1941 to study fine art, Bernard Quentin became friends, when he came out of the Resistance, with the Parisian intelligentsia – the likes of Boris Vian, Antonin Artaud, Tristan Tzara, Picasso, Sartre and Le Corbusier. Mention at random the name of an artist of existentialist Saint-Germain-des-Prés and there is every chance that he will have known them. In the 1960s he hung around with Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni in Milan, shared Arman's studio in New York and became pals with Warhol and Lichtenstein, then became a friend of Jean Tinguely, Yves Klein, César and others.

Quentin was himself a pioneer with his graffiti, which he exhibited in Galerie Maeght from 1945 onwards, encouraged by Picasso, or with inflatable sculptures that led to his being nicknamed 'Mr Cyber' by Dalí. A polymorphous creator, Quentin was eclectic enough to have contributed by accident to the invention of the look of his friend Juliette Gréco in her early days by lending her a suit, and to have designed the first inflatable armchair in the world by sitting on an inner tube. He could also be found writing 'Nymphéas' in giant anamorphic letters along three kilometres of motorway in Normandy, or transforming a Parisian street into a street-poem, or conceiving a monument 400m long in blown-up Kufic script in Saudi Arabia. A lover of bizarre calligraphies since school, where one of his friends had a grandfather who was the inventor of a stenotype machine, Quentin has used all sorts of scripts (hieroglyphics, cuneiform, runes, ideograms, alphabets) as creative material, in varying forms, from the minuscule to the monumental. In the 2000s, this sorcerer's apprentice of semiotics invented 'Babelweb', a 'visual

art-language' consisting of pictograms and colours, which he wanted to be 'universal like the highway code', and into which he transcribed poems or slogans and then transformed them into three-dimensional works.

A successful scriptwriter and director, Florence, Bernard's wife for over 45 years, shows us round the apartment. Four rooms interconnect in a loop, the hallway opening into a sitting room that leads into Florence's office, which adjoins Bernard's studio, which opens into the hallway.

There is not a single Louis XVI chest of drawers in sight; instead you'll find Rennie Mackintosh chairs and Noguchi lamps. From the hallway on, everything is modern, except for one chair and a Dogon mask, as well as a curious little table in the style of Armand-Albert Rateau. Works by Bernard make up the rest of the interior decoration: a large poem as a black-and-white picture reverse-painted on glass; a graffiti-picture from 1961; a sculpture entitled *The Passage of Time*; a colourful composition on which we can read 'Vive Saint-Germain-des-Prés', which might be the motto of the house.

For the sitting room, Bernard has had an impressive carpet made that reproduces the signatures of the legendary artists of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Other than an immense white sofa that seems to have seen a bit of life, a few lamps including a 'Pipistrello' and a 'Snoopy', a drawing by Cocteau and a photograph of the Quentin family by Mimmo Rotella, there are only works by Bernard: poem-furniture; sculptures, including a bronze 'Saint-Germain-des-Prés'; a silhouette of an immense figure in black metal; a crowd painting from the 1960s; a painting from 2011, *Rêve de Babelweb*, which Florence loves; and everywhere small glass objects with colourful symbols meaning 'Life is beautiful' in Babelweb. And finally, not so flamboyant but more intimate than Bernard's studio, Florence's office is filled with books, and in among them small objects or drawings given to her by her husband.

Overflowing with projects and curious about everything, Bernard would like to talk about anamorphosis with the artist Georges Rousse, exhibit with Bertrand Lavier, who shares his passion for cars, as well as get down to some designing. 'I'd like to make furniture in Babelweb.' In 2011, the actor Gérard Depardieu commissioned him to design some interior decorations for his mansion in Paris, and recently, pastry chef Pierre Hermé invited him to exhibit in his premises. 'I made an inflatable cloud with a cake and some LEDs, it was magical!'

It is surprising that Bernard is not more famous than he is. He wonders whether 'it might be from having refused to belong to a movement? For refusing to always do the same thing?' He may well be right. This cheerful, white-maned nonagenarian probably suffers from being unclassifiable in a world of readily labelled art. This doesn't dent his good humour, and he goes back to working on a scale model of a Yule log in candy colours for Pierre Hermé. 'Life is beautiful. That's an idea I was already championing in philosophy class when I was young' ■

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Top: bits of metal or clay engraved in Bernard's Babelweb language have an ancient look about them. Above left: *Ecriture*, a sculpture-totem made from cut metal, is silhouetted against the studio window. Above right, a white-painted composition in Babelweb stands on a red console table.