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Hello to All That: A 70's Star Reborn

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IT was March in Provence, and Maria Pergay's summer house was chilly, its vines and trees stripped of greenery. The air smelled damp. The swimming pool was dry. Wood gathered from the grounds was piled on the 18th-century hearth. "It's not House & Garden," Ms. Pergay said apologetically. "I didn't buy flowers. I didn't do anything."

Except design a striking, forward-looking house in 1970 that has aged exceptionally well, with its traditional hand-laid stones, white rubber floors and glass walls. Ms. Pergay, a visionary furniture and interior designer — who, at 75, looks ageless herself — has recently been rediscovered, in the rage for all things 1970's.

Her first show in New York in 30 years is being held at the Demisch Danant and Lehmann Maupin galleries through April 29, and a book, "Maria Pergay: Between Ideas and Design," is being released by Demisch Danant to coincide with the show. Her new collection of 17 limited edition pieces, which combine stainless steel with bronze, wood and mother-of-pearl, will be on display, and a dozen examples valued between $15,000 and $150,000 have been sold in advance.

Vintage Pergay is also increasingly popular. In December 2004, the Chicago auctioneers Richard and Julie Wright sold a pair of chairs she designed in the late 1960's for $79,200, more than 10 times their estimated value.

"Even Maria Pergay can't afford Maria Pergay anymore," she said, laughing. "The antiques dealers and the auctioneers have sold everything — all the Charlotte Perriand, everything from the 40's. There's nothing left to buy! So now they're turning to the 70's, when in effect there was a boom. But they're the ones who make the trends. Someone who passes by on the street and sees a Maria Pergay, for them it's just a piece of scrap iron."

Ms. Pergay, who began her 50-year career as a window dresser in Paris, made a name for herself in the 1950's and early 1960's by creating modern silver decorative objects like cigarette cases for high-profile customers including Hermès and Christian Dior.

Later in her career she executed a number of private commissions in Russia and Saudi Arabia, most notably designing palaces for the Saudi royal family. But she is best known for the ultrasophisticated collection of stainless steel furniture she first presented in a big Paris show in 1968.

Originally produced by Ugine-Gueugnon, the French manufacturer, her furniture defied steel's prevailing image as hard-edged and industrial, transcending the technical limitations of the time.

Her work was never mass-produced (each of the pieces was a limited edition, produced in quantities of 40 or fewer), but she developed a following among discerning collectors like the fashion designer Pierre Cardin. He bought her entire first collection and commissioned additional pieces in 1977, among them a dramatic, clam-shaped couch with its framework covered in tortoise shells.

Ms. Pergay swept through the house, plugging in lamps, prying open sliding glass doors. Her famous 1968 Ring chairs stood out like modern jewelry in the white-on-white, split-level living room, with its slyly

curved banquette, open fireplace and giant vase lamps standing at attention like a pair of snowmen.

"We arrived 15 minutes before you did," she said, as she and her daughter Murielle hoisted open a blind to reveal a floor-to-ceiling tableau of forest. "That's why the house seems abandoned."

Family art work decorated the walls — framed drawings by her grandchildren in her bedroom, colorful flower paintings by one of her daughters in the living room — but there were no photos, knickknacks or bookshelves to parse.

Nevertheless, one didn't have to look far to divine the owner's taste. Ms. Pergay dreamed up every angle and curve of this sensuous house, which she built with the architect Pierre Baratçabal, her then-companion and collaborator.

Centered around a grassy interior courtyard that provides shelter from the mistral winds, the house has transparent walls on either side of an imposing wooden front door, allowing the eye to travel through the courtyard and out the other side to the surrounding forest.

Up one flight, her room has a dramatic view of Mont Ventoux from the bed and the bath, a deep tub sunken into the floor in a glass-walled corner. "I love to take a bath and be in the trees," she said. "Here, your eye goes right to the mountain."

Back in the kitchen, she urged her guests to eat cake while she sipped espresso from a tall white mug. "I wanted a big fireplace," she said, lighting the fire. "And I wanted the chimneys to be old, because they have a soul, and the doors to be old, because doors are the face of the house."

The kitchen is where the family gathers for birthdays, Christmas dinners and late-night Scrabble games, and where her grandchildren sit and draw when it's raining. Ms. Pergay, who immigrated from Russia as a 7-year-old on the eve of World War II, recently celebrated her 75th birthday there.

"It gave me a lot of joy," she said. "Everyone came. During the war, I was frightened. I was bored. I was a lonely little girl with a mother who was alone in a foreign country. I swore I would get married and have a big French family." She did, marrying Marc Pergay and eventually having four children before they divorced.

Ms. Pergay's work falls somewhere between art and design, but she insisted that she is neither an artist nor a designer. Instead, she explained, she envisions a finished object, making a quick sketch and then charming someone else into constructing it. To build the 6,000-square-foot house, which took four years, she persuaded local artisans to install sliding glass doors that disappeared into the wall, which was radical at the time. "It wasn't a little Provençal farmhouse with tiny windows," she said.

She traced the habit that inspired her life's work to a childhood afternoon when she was bedridden with scarlet fever and her mother gave her a set of colored pencils, sketching a house surrounded with flowerpots. Ms. Pergay said she copied the drawing incessantly.

"It was a shock," she said, one that "is repeated each time I do a little sketch on the corner of a piece of paper, and it becomes something. The moment when an unreality becomes a reality — that's what enchants me."