



FORCE *of* NATURE

Photographs by PHILIP SINDEN

For the sculptor Lélia Demoisy, the relationship between human life and the natural world is a source of wonder

By

LAURA KETTLEWELL

as I approach the gates of Maison Ruinart, a magnificent white Belle Epoque country house outside Reims, I spot a cluster of construction workers hoisting a curvilinear stainless-steel contraption into a pair of trees. In their midst is a slight figure in combat boots, cargo trousers and high vis, directing the operation.

This is Lélia Demoisy, the French sculptor who has most recently brought her remarkable ingenuity to the home of the grande marque champagne house – and is overseeing the installation of a striking creation designed for its newly opened gardens.

Demoisy has been steadily accruing a constellation of awards, commissions and collaborations – as well as the world's attention – since her graduation from L'École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs de Paris in 2015. She has thrown herself into exploring our relationship with nature, channelling her lifelong passion for the living world into large-scale abstract sculptures and installations crafted from natural materials. Many have permanent homes in parks across France, including Le Parc National de Forêts near Dijon. Now represented by the gallery By Lara Sedbon, she is one of eight recipients of the 2024 Franco-Italian Prix Carta Bianca, an initiative aiming to foster a dialogue between the worlds of art and health, and in July she was nominated for the Coal Prize, which supports artists working towards environmental change.

'My aim is for people to understand how closely linked we are to nature,' she says during a break in the installation process. She is driven to unearth the specifics of this connection. This means intensive reading (she devours works by French botanists such as Francis Hallé and Gilles Clément, as well as podcasts on botany) and stints of isolation in the great outdoors, which has included a week-long solo venture into the Canadian forest during a -25°C winter. This creative *modus operandi* caught the attention of Ruinart's artistic director last year, and Demoisy was selected to be one of 20 international artists whose artwork is displayed in the maison's gardens.

Threaded between two maple trees in a figure of eight, *entre nous* ('between us') is constructed from white pipes intertwined to represent tree roots and the interconnectedness of living beings.

The artist lists the ways in which the plant kingdom alters the air, water and minerals – both for their own benefit and for ours. 'We see nature as inert; a backdrop. I want it to take centre-stage,' she says. 'We should be treating it as a living being.' Wood is her material of choice, but for *entre nous* she turned to steel for pragmatic reasons: 'I wanted to get the shape right and I wanted it to last.'

She explains how the sculpture forms a halo, crowning the two trees, and speaks passionately about their interdependent relationship (they share the same mosses, lichens, mycelium and root networks, providing vital support to one another). 'There are so many intricate mechanisms that we're unaware of,' she says. 'By bringing attention to the roots, I hope to raise the visibility of the hidden life of plants and trees.'

Softly spoken, contemplative and self-effacing, Demoisy is also tremendously driven. 'I've always wanted to dedicate my life to nature,' she says. 'As a child, I spent all of my time outside.' Now, every day is bookended with time in the fresh air – either in her garden or walking her dogs in the woods. 'I spend a lot of time just watching and listening. I like to observe the small changes that happen as the seasons go by.' She hopes her work highlights the fragility of nature and encourages people to protect it. 'If we learn the name of a tree or flower, it instantly becomes more important to us. It's no longer an intangible concept.'

As for what's next, she will be working with cancer patients in remission for her Carta Bianca project, connecting the sound emitted by the human body with that of trees. Right now, she is

putting every part of a favourite childhood cedar-tree to use in her creation for the Coal Prize, after it was felled against her wishes. She is rarely short of projects. 'I work on three to four sculptures at a time. I always have ideas in mind for the future.'

The evening sun casts a rosy glow across the gardens, and Demoisy glances at the sky – ablaze with a symphony of colours. 'I hope that people see the garden a little differently now, as a complex network of living beings.' She shows me the huge cedar-tree inked on her right bicep. 'I want people to realise how precious nature is; how lucky we are to be in its presence.'

'entre nous' by Lélia Demoisy will be permanently on display from October in the Maison Ruinart gardens (ruinart.com). □

