



ORGANISED CHAOS

While Bernar Venet was serving in the French army, he made his first artistic performance by laying in the trash. More than 50 years into his career, we chat with the artist on bringing the unconventional into his art. By ADIBAH ISA



Unpredictability could be so heavy – most notably in 35mm steel plates. Often, the simplest of black, scribble lines could lie within them an unconventional wisdom. Such reflections are evident in Bernar Venet's GRIB series. An extension of the original wooden Indeterminate Lines developed by the artist between 1979 and 1983, the update sees a rougher edge.

Hailing from Saint-Auban, a small village in the northern alpine region of Provence, Bernar Venet never imagined that he'd be exhibiting his work in Singapore. Based in New York, the French artist saw his first solo exhibition on our shores, which debuted at Art Plural Gallery last September.

Poor grades in school led the young boy to believe that becoming an artist would be a way for him to survive. Since his first exhibit at the age of 11 – a small oil painting, which, he says, was "a landscape that was far from being a masterpiece", the former military man has had an illustrious career which encompasses multiple disciplines and forms. From painting, sculpture, performance, photography, music and poetry, common themes which resurface include mathematics, immanence and neutrality. We find out more.

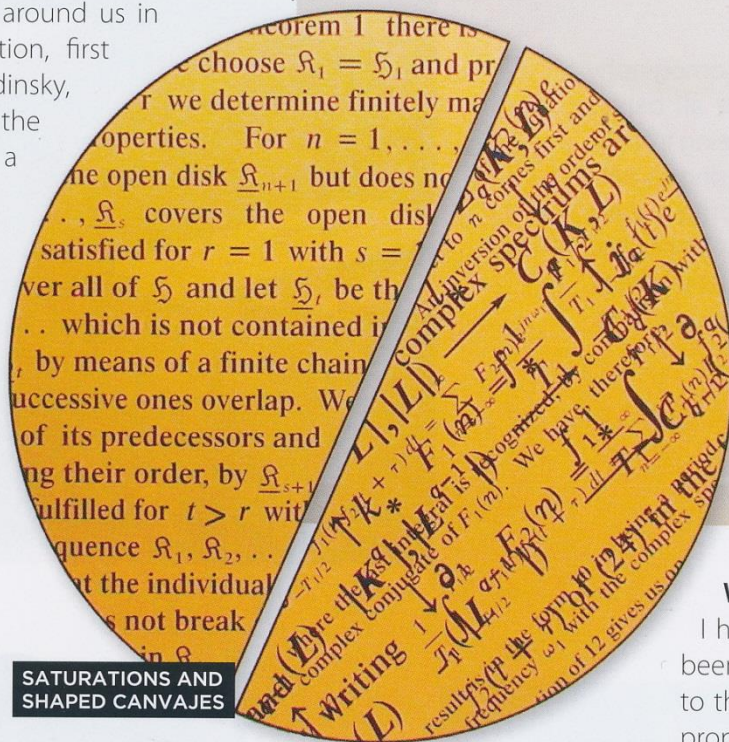
There was a time when your work was related to a geometric aesthetic, with a theme centring on lines, angles and curves – then came Indeterminate Lines. Tell us how that happened.

I began to feel the formal limits of my work, and I wanted out. Then I thought that a free line, that is to say, liberated from the rigidity of geometry, could open up new possibilities. So I made my first "indeterminate lines" in the form of reliefs before finding the opening for them to become sculptures in the forms that you see today.

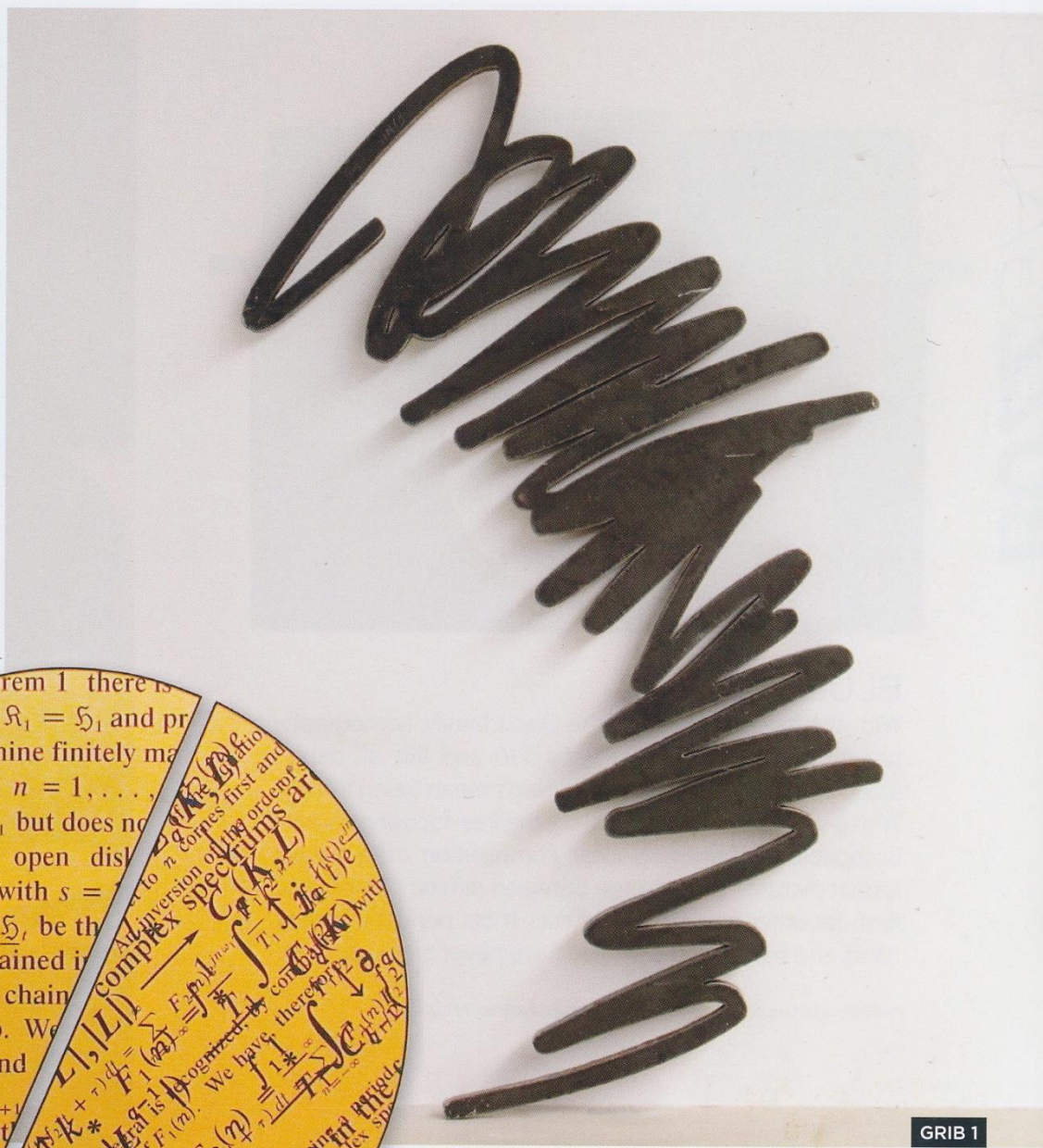
What do you find is unconventional about your pieces?

I would say that art in the past and still today has been developed along two paths. Firstly – figuration, that is to say that it refers to what we see around us in our environment. Secondly – abstraction, first introduced in 1910-1912 by Kandinsky, Malevich and others who allowed the artwork to refer only to itself. This was a crucial point in art history.

In 1966, when I introduced mathematical diagrams as the main subject of my paintings, I liberated myself at that moment from the heritage of figuration and abstraction. I introduced another type of symbol that the semiotician Jacques Bertin described as monosemic, something totally foreign to the art of the past.



SATURATIONS AND SHAPED CANVAJES



GRIB 1

Why mathematics?

I have taken liberties in recent years that I would have been prohibited from doing in the past. I no longer try to theorize about what I do. My intuition leads to formal propositions that seem so new and interesting that they must be explored.

Intuition often leads to unpredictability.

How important is the latter to you?

The unexpected is crucial to the creation process. My Cartesian mind is not always the source of my inspirations. Unforeseen events while I am in the studio, for example with my Accident pieces, are often the impetus for my most original works, such as the Pile of Coal and the Effondrements (Collapses). What is necessary is for an artist to have the ability to recognize what is interesting when it presents itself.

What's the greatest misconception about the life of an artist and sculptor?

Since Van Gogh and Modigliani, people have mistakenly believed that artists live and die in misery. They also think that most of them are unemployed and taking drugs. Even at the risk of not being considered a good artist or an artist only on weekends, I assure you this is not the case!

After more than 50 years into your career, how do you define success?

As something that is responsible for a certain type of pleasure. That can, more than anything, help you to realise your dreams. But it is mainly something ephemeral, intangible, even if it lasts a lifetime, and beyond. What will become of it in 5,000 years? **H**



The Bernar Venet exhibition runs till 24 November at Art Plural Gallery, 38 Armenian Street; Tel: 6636 8360

GRIB 1

