

Art, at High Altitudes

By Liam Freeman | December 1, 2016



A white cube housed within a 16th-century barn, the von Bartha S-chanf gallery was sensitively renovated by Ruch & Partners Architects (as were the Tschudi and Monica De Cardenas galleries in neighboring Zuoz). It's one of several galleries in the Engadin region of the Swiss Alps. Credit Courtesy Filippo Simonetti

When the curator and art dealer Vito Schnabel decided to open his first permanent gallery space last December, he chose St. Moritz over the art districts of Chai Wan, Chelsea or Wynwood. He's not alone: Exhibitions in ski resorts have become something of a phenomenon lately. This past summer, the curator Neville Wakefield organized a group show featuring work by Dan Colen, Damien Hirst and Richard Prince in an Aspen ski shop, while in Gstaad, Hauser & Wirth erected an exhibition of monumental Calder sculptures ("Calder in the Alps," on view through March 31, 2017), many of which had never been exhibited in Switzerland before.

For Schnabel, the desire to put down roots in the Engadin Valley was inherited. "My friend and mentor, Bruno Bischofberger, first opened a gallery in St. Moritz in 1963, and I visited often throughout my childhood," Schnabel says at his gallery, while its winter show of Jeff Elrod paintings is being installed. (It opens Dec. 29.) "When he offered me a space on Via Maistra, I knew it was an incredible opportunity to be part of the cultural conversation there."

The Upper Engadin slices through about 35 miles of the southeastern Swiss Alps, where altitudes soar to over two and a half miles above sea level. Despite the tiny population of 16,700 inhabitants and the brevity of the region's high season, which lasts from December through March, there are at least 30 international art galleries between St. Moritz and the municipality of Sent, providing an enlightening alternative for après-ski. Although Bischofberger — a legendary art dealer who brought American Pop Art to Europe in the 1960s — no longer has a gallery in the area, his legacy is omnipresent.



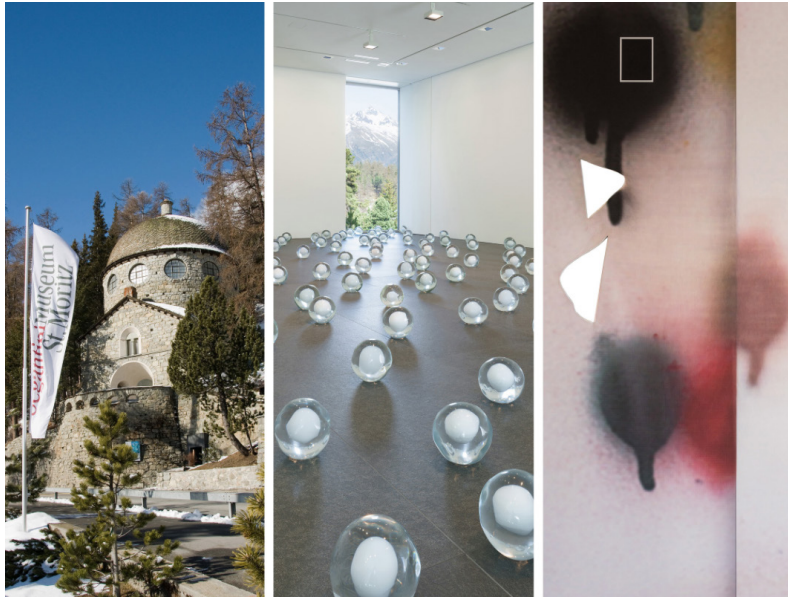
Clockwise from left: in Zuoz, the Hotel Castell's sizable collection includes "Skyspace" by the Californian artist James Turrell; "North South East West Circles," 2000, by Richard Long, from Galerie Tschudi's December 2004 group show; "Pila bei Maloja mit Blick auf den Corvatsch," 1932, by Giovanni Giacometti, who alongside Hodler and Segnolini is celebrated in Galerie Andrea Caratsch's winter exhibition. Credit Clockwise from left: Courtesy of Hotel Castell; Photo by FBM Studio – Franziska & Bruno Mancina, Zürich; courtesy of Galerie Tschudi; Courtesy of Galerie Andrea Caratsch

"Bruno single-handedly created the art market in the Engadin," Miklos von Bartha asserts as he walks through the von Bartha S-chanf gallery — a satellite to his main site in Basel. A white cube housed within a 16th-century barn hosts one artist at a time; on Dec. 29, a show opens of work by the British artist Terry Haggerty. "This isn't a commercial space," von Bartha continues. "There are obvious motives for opening a gallery in the Engadin. For one, a critical mass of wealthy vacationers, but it can't be for that reason alone."

Of the gallery owners T consulted, all concurred that the slower pace and temperament of the people in the Engadin provides the time to talk about art, which wouldn't be possible in New York or London. It also allows personal touches. When Elsbeth Bisig of Galerie Tschudi in neighboring Zuoz was preparing for the space's inaugural exhibition in 2002 — three installations by Richard Long that comprised hundreds of stones — she and her husband went to collect the basalt themselves for the four-time Turner Prize-nominated artist. (Starting Dec. 22, Tschudi will host a double show of Julian Charrière and Callum Innes, and Barbara Probst has an exhibition nearby at the Galleria Monica De Cardenas opening Dec. 10.)

Although art galleries are a relatively recent addition to the Engadin Valley (with the exception of Bischofberger's), the dramatic landscape and unique quality of light have always attracted artists, among them Alberto and Giovanni Giacometti, Ferdinand Hodler and Giovanni Segantini, who are celebrated in an exhibition opening at Galerie Andrea Caratsch (a Bischofberger protégé) in St. Moritz on Dec. 3. The Engadin has also been the site of some historic cultural events; it was on the shores of Lake Silvaplana that Nietzsche first conceived the idea for "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," and in 1919, the Russian ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky — on the brink of insanity — took his final bow at Suvretta House Hotel.

Today, Gerhard Richter, Julian Schnabel and Richard Long often come here to create, as does the artist (and Sent native) Not Vital, who describes the lasting influence of the Engadin on his work: "The height of my sculptures, often placed on poles, is related to living in the mountains, because you look up to them." Speaking from his home in Beijing, Vital adds, "Everything is up there — the sun that rises, the sun that sets — our viewpoint is much higher. The Engadin is the center of the world."



From left: the purpose-built Segantini Museum in St. Moritz, which was designed by the local architect Nicolaus Hartmann and completed in 1908; the Summer 2015 show at Galerie Andrea Caratsch, St. Moritz, included Not Vital's "700 Snowballs," 2001; Jeff Elrod's "To Be Titled" is part of the American abstract painter's solo show at the Vito Schnabel Gallery. Credit From left: Courtesy of Segantini Museum; Courtesy of Galerie Andrea Caratsch; Argenis Apolinario, Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery

Highlights of the Engadin Valley

SEE

Giovanni Segantini's Alpine Triptych "Life," "Nature" and "Death" at the Segantini Museum, St. Moritz, was painted en plein-air on the side of the Schafberg Mountain at 2,700 meters. The purpose-built gallery displays the works in the natural light in which they were created. Via Somplaz 30, St. Moritz, segantini-museum.ch.

DRINK

The proprietor of the Hotel Castell, Ruedi Bechtler, has amassed an impressive collection there, including works by Fischli and Weiss, Carsten Höller and James Turrell. Its Red Bar was built by the architect Gabrielle Hächler and the artist Pipilotti Rist. Via Castell 300, Zuoz, hotelcastell.ch.

EAT

The Clavadatsch restaurant at the Schweizerhof hotel, housed in an old cowshed on the side of Suvretta hill in St. Moritz, boasts an open stove, a romantic setting and breathtaking views of the surroundings where Giovanni Segantini lived and painted. Via dal Bagn 54, St. Moritz, schweizerhofstmoritz.ch.

STAY

The intimate Villa Flor guesthouse in S-chanf is Julian Schnabel's address of choice. The seven rooms in this traditional patrician house have original Art Nouveau details, and starting Dec. 27 the owner Ladina Florineth will hold an exhibition of Daniel Lergon's paintings. Somvih 19, 7525 S-chanf, villaflor.ch.