

## The visionary work of **Francois Dallegret**, artist, designer, and inventor, is undergoing a revival after almost 50 years of being hidden from view, writes *Isabelle Chaise*

The barn owned by multi-talented inventor Francois Dallegret, just outside Montreal, looks like any other in the neighbourhood. It has a red, rusted roof, and plain wooden walls, as simple as a house drawn by a child. But for Dallegret, the barn has special significance as it contains the achievements of a lifetime.

One consequence of the growth of the market for design objects has been the rediscovery of 20th century designers such as Dallegret. Now in his Seventies, the work for which he is best known was created in the late 1960s. But his career recently took an unexpected turn when a chair was sold at auction for a surprisingly high figure. Following the sale he was approached by Alexander Payne, director of design at Phillips de Pury who wanted to take a look at the precious contents of the barn.

The pieces there include enigmatic artworks of all shapes and sizes, with forgotten gems such as La Machine, the Cross Bed, the Red Cross, the Black and White arrows, and highly sophisticated Chinese ink drawings of super dragsters with parachutes, highways knots, and a futuristic bubble home. An auction is planned for December, and Dallegret hopes that as a result of renewed interest in his work, these once-famous pieces might emerge again as testimonies of a long and eclectic career.

The best example, which is strikingly contemporary despite being covered in dust and cobwebs, is La Machine. An installation which consists of an anodized aluminum structure of 10m-long by 2m-high, it incorporates 144 photocells, or Light-Dependent Resistors, fluorescent tubes, and loud speakers allowing people to create music as they interact with it. Created in 1966, it was first exhibited the same year at New York's Waddell Gallery, and traveled through America until

it ended up in Dallegret's barn in 1969, but not before its aluminium blades featured in the French Pavilion at the 1967 Montreal Universal Exhibition. Dallegret hopes that if the December auction goes well, there may be enough interest in his work to justify restoring La Machine for an exhibition in London.

When Dallegret learnt that Phillips had sold the Chaise Ressort of 1967 for \$36,000 (£24,000) in 2006 – more than five times its estimate – he decided to sell other artworks, choosing three favourites: another Chaise Ressort or Spring Chair, a unique sample of a chair made of a folded sheet of aluminum, which is meant to hang from above, 'floating in an air space above the world of pedestrians,' says Dallegret; the Lumikiik of 1970, a handsome lamp counterbalanced with lead shots, and made of spun and polished aluminum sections, and thirdly, a group of four plexiglass and steel Kubaltos sculptures from 1967-68, which were based on a project originally created in 1966 for the architect Walter Netsch of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill in Chicago.

Dallegret, who was born in 1937, studied architecture for three years at The École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts de Paris. He chose not to follow the career of an architect, though, and exhibited his first artworks, the Mechanical Drawings, in 1962 at the renowned Gallery Iris Clert in Paris. 'As a student, I could already make a living out of my artwork. I decided to break from architecture and academics and live my own life so I went to New York for one year which was an exciting place to be at the time,' he says.

While staying at the Chelsea Hotel in New York, he met Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Bob Watts, among others, but Dallegret did not recognize himself as part of any



Top: Dallegret's strikingly contemporary La Machine from 1966

Above: A Chaise Ressort prototype from 1967, made from aluminium sheet

Below: A Chinese ink drawing of a super dragster

particular movement. He was, and still remains, above all, a freethinker who uses whatever discipline and medium he pleases. Fun-orientated and unpredictable, Dallegret's creations erase the boundaries between architecture, graphic and industrial design, conceptual art and sculpture, and are inspirational but disconcerting at the same time.

When it comes to architecture, Dallegret's radical inside-out definition of the house is still daring by today's standards. His drawings on the subject challenged many architects who believed that accepting the dominance of machinery could only mean the end of creativity. In 1965, six

Chinese ink drawings made for the article A Home Is Not A House by Reyner Banham were published in Art in America. Banham appreciated Dallegret's drawings, especially one called Anatomy of a Dwelling. 'This baroque ensemble of domestic gadgetry epitomizes the intestinal complexity of gracious living – in other words, this is the junk that keeps the pad swinging... The house itself has been omitted from the drawing, but if mechanical services continue to accumulate at this rate it may be possible to omit the house in fact,' wrote Banham.

If Dallegret's creations can only be referred to as unclassifiable, it seems to represent an enigma for the author himself. 'I don't know what the red thread is in my work, I think it's for others to find out', he says with a thoughtful smile. Beyond the feeling that such a remark is simply an easy way out, Dallegret conveys the impression that, as long as his inner-world stays away from dogma, and marketing strategy, the magic wand that guides his hand will still be able to operate.

*Francois Dallegret's work will be part of the design auction at Phillips de Pury, New York on 17 December*

