

# Hélène Nguyen-Ban, Victoire de Pourtalès Open VnH Gallery

WWD by Paulina Szmydke, wwd.com

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Following in the footsteps of a living art legend can — and probably should — be intimidating, if not flat-out terrifying. But Victoire de Pourtalès and Hélène Nguyen-Ban remained calm and did the only thing they thought was appropriate under the circumstances: They called on Cameroon-born artist Pascale Marthine Tayou to purge their new VnH Gallery of envious spirits, all 8,600 square feet of it, strategically planted in the heart of Le Marais, Paris’ contemporary art hub.

Tayou’s voodoo-like installations, created specifically for the occasion, turned into a refreshing new start for the venue, which was originally established by famed gallerist Yvon Lambert, who shaped the French art market for more than four decades. He is also credited with setting up the first contemporary art outpost in the neighborhood, creating a reputation for the avant garde that continues today.

“No pressure at all,” quips Nguyen-Ban, making herself comfortable in a Fifties vintage fauteuil in the gallery’s vast premises. Surrounding her are some 300 wooden poles protruding from the freshly painted white walls. Though somewhat menacing, they are

instantly intriguing, invoking giant colored crayons ready to be repurposed. “It was Pascale’s way of providing us with the means to write our own history,” she explains.

Elsewhere in the gallery are voodoo dolls assembled out of cotton balls, plastic fruit and beaded necklaces as well as a series of ceiling-high totems built from Chinese porcelain. They’re meant to symbolize the transition from old to new and vice versa, creating an engaging, fresh flow of energy. The gallery is slated to close for the months of July and August to make time for finishing touches under the aegis of architect Elliott Barnes. “If there was one thing that we wanted to achieve with this, it’s to give people a new experience in a space they have known and frequented for decades,” says Nguyen-Ban.

Called “Gri-Gri” (or “Lucky Charm”), the inaugural exhibitions didn’t sell out entirely (that would be too much of a cliché) but kicked off on a high note, attracting young collectors like Alexia Niedzielski and Eugenie Niarchos, among others. The turnout was representative of a brand-new breed of buyers.

When Lambert revealed in December that he was closing his historic gallery, he sent chills through the local art community. It didn’t help that he had no benevolent words of wisdom for the next generation, instead lamenting the art market’s growing greed and lack of intellectual exchange, which was a fundamental pillar when he started out, collaborating with the likes of Cy Twombly, Sol LeWitt and Anselm Kiefer.

But the new kids on the block insist there are plenty of stories left to tell and dots to be connected, seeing the changing art landscape defined by price inflation and short-lived trends as an opportunity to be different from the pack.

“Paris remains an inspirational place for collectors and artists. There is a high density of talent in this town. It’s perhaps ambitious, but our goal is to show artists never shown in France before and create a space where people can exchange ideas,” explains de Pourtalès, adding that there would be a program of “atypical discussions, transcending cultures and generations.”

The art scene’s new power duo is itself an example of a merger of two worlds.

De Portalès, of noble origin (her ancestors have been rubbing shoulders with Europe’s decision-makers since the early 18th century), cut her teeth at the neighboring Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, and brings a classic touch. The discreet 34-year-old excuses herself numerous times during the interview to welcome new visitors, tending to them with equal care and attention, patiently explaining each oeuvre’s genesis.

Fashion is Nguyen-Ban’s home turf. The former fashion director of Nina Ricci and

collections director at Louis Vuitton under Marc Jacobs caught the collector's bug on her numerous business trips to Asia and says: "Working for a structure like LVMH is great, but after the 158th fashion show, things start to get repetitive. While in art, I like to think, there is continuity. It's a more serene place. And the biggest luxury, anyway, is to be able to realize a personal project."

The duo spent the last two years trotting the globe to meet with potential new artists, putting the focus on talents from Asia, Africa and the Middle East, all to prepare for the gallery's opening, which happened on April 25. "The biggest challenge, really, is to prove that you have a legitimate cause. It takes a lot of convincing," concedes Nguyen-Ban.

And, so far, the spirits seem to be smiling on them — perhaps thanks to Tayou. Without revealing details, the duo has already signed 10 new names, eager to introduce their oeuvre to a different audience, coming this fall.

"Work in progress," says Nguyen-Ban.

**See the show:** Pascale Marthine Tayou: "Gri-Gri" is to run until June 20 at the VnH Gallery, 108 Rue Vieille du Temple, 75003 Paris. Open Tuesday to Saturday from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.; [vnhgallery.com](http://vnhgallery.com).