High Art  Long a getaway for artists and aristocrats, the Swiss ski town of St. Moritz has blossomed into a major cultural destination thanks to prestigious new galleries and fairs. by Gisela Williams. Photographs by Federico Ciamei
I was driving up a narrow, winding road in Switzerland’s Upper Engadine Valley, focusing on the tiny mountain village ahead, when my concentration was suddenly broken by a small lake, in mesmerizing shades of fern green, down a steep slope to my right. More striking than the lake itself was a boulder-sized silver orb that was floating in its wild, alpine surroundings. I later learned it had been placed there by the artist Not Vital (pronounced “note vee-TAH-UH”), possibly the valley’s most beloved resident and native son, a world-renowned Swiss artist who has, for years, been installing site-specific works within the natural landscape. Other works include his Disappearing House, a grass-roofed building that sinks into the earth at the push of a button, and House to Watch the Sunset, a white tower from which visitors can appreciate the descent of dusk.

In this breathtaking region in eastern Switzerland, world-class contemporary art shows up in the most remote and unexpected corners. At least it used to be unexpected. With the opening of two major art spaces—a new Hauser & Wirth gallery and the Museum Susch—and the arrival of several international cultural events and festivals to the picturesque resort town of St. Moritz, the Engadine Valley has emerged as a top destination for art seekers as well as skiers. For millennia one of the valley’s primary architects has been the Inn River (Engadine translates roughly as “garden of the Inn”), which flows from the Piz Bernina, a 15,000-foot peak that towers above St. Moritz, through some of the region’s most spectacular lakes, eventually merging with the Danube.

Ask those who know the area well, including Not Vital, what they find most striking about the valley, and they usually answer: the light—the Engadine is the highest and widest valley in the Alps—and the water. Fabled for its healing mineral waters since the Bronze Age (one of Europe’s oldest wells has been found here), it was for centuries a pilgrimage site for pilgrims and religious leaders. By the 1800s St. Moritz was one of Europe’s most famous thermal resorts, attracting aristocrats as well as artists, philosophers, and writers to “take the waters.” The sculptor Alberto Giacometti was born and raised in the Engadine. For several summers in the late 1800s Friedrich Nietzsche lived in the picturesque village of Sils. He wrote later that the landscape inspired Thus Spoke Zarathustra.

Today the Nietzsche-Haus (nietzschehaus.ch) is a library and museum—and occasionally an exhibition space—that’s open to the public. The eminent Swiss curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist, now the director of London’s Serpentine Galleries, organized one of his first shows there: Gerhard Richter’s photographs of the surrounding landscape. Richter himself was every year at the Waldhaus Sils (waldhaus-sils.ch), an Art Nouveau fortress of a hotel that some compare to Wes Anderson’s The Grand Budapest Hotel. Run by the same family for five generations, the Waldhaus Sils has a cult following among European intellectuals and art-world personalities, including the German photographer Andreas Gursky and the avant-garde Swiss director Christoph Marthaler.

Starting in the 1960s, the area became more famous for its hedonistic après-ski scene than for its thermal waters, and prominent wealthy socialite families began to flock to St. Moritz during the winter season. The Italian industrialist Gianni Agnelli owned a chalet in the hamlet of Survette, for example, and the German playboy Gunter Sachs moved into a penthouse in the illustrious Badrutt’s Palace Hotel.

The main catalyst for the emergence of St. Moritz as an art destination was the distinguished and respected gallerist Bruno Bischofberger. In the ‘90s, he added a studio to his chalet so that his artists, including painters Francesco Clemente and Jean-Michel Basquiat, could work there. Julian Schnabel, whom Bischofberger also represented at the time, continues the tradition, spending an entire winter month in the Engadine, based at the Villa Flex (villaflex.ch), a historic guesthouse with modern interiors. (One of his paintings hangs over the reception desk.) Located in the village of S-chanf, a 20-minute drive from the center of St. Moritz, the Villa Flex overlooks the Inn River and serves as the home of the gracious and connected woman-about-town Ladina Florineth. A former fashion executive, Florineth oversees the seven rooms with flair, taking care of her guests as if they are family, sometimes even taking them hiking in the mountains. “Thank you for today. I’m destroyed!” read a note left in her guest book by the artist Tom Sachs.

“A few hours from Munich, a few hours from Milan, a few hours from Zurich,” said gallerist Vito Schnabel. “There are a lot of people in this area who care a lot about art.”
Among other local works, a light installation at the gorgeous innovative contemporary galleries moving in, the cultural scene noticed a dramatic change throughout the valley. “With all the to Tom), has spent much of his life in the region and has lately he will exhibit work by Pat Steir and Tom Sachs.

said Vito, “it’s an interesting location: a few hours from Munich, years ago Bischofberger’s legacy continues with Schnabel’s son Vito, (vitoschnabel.com/st-moritz) Beyond the history of Engadine Valley. installations in the of several of his Not Vital’s one Zuoz the last weekend in January. Sachs also knew they couldn’t compete with the more traditional white-cube gallery and anchored it in the heart of St. Moritz because they called it the Weeping Room and wisely decided like a shrine rather than a gallery. Kulczyk of the back wall. The room felt very primal, not to add art to the space. Sometimes what is already there, in nature, is enough, especially when it’s in the Engadine. location, which, depending on the season, can seem either “beautifully idyllic or uncompromisingly harsh.” In addition to its three floors of exhibition space, the complex will also host visiting artists, who will live in a house next door; symposia; and the Instituto Susch, a think tank that will research gender issues in art and science. One of the most extraordinary rooms in the museum was a dark cave, originally used by the monks to store ice. An ancient spring flowed from the natural black stone of the back wall. The room felt very primal, like a shrine rather than a gallery. Kulczyk called it the Weeping Room and wisely decided not to add art to the space. Sometimes what is already there, in nature, is enough, especially when it’s in the Engadine.