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VOGUE

Searching for the Architect Eileen Gray on the Lower East Side

JULY 29, 2015 5:41 PM *by* JULIA FELSENTHAL



Le Corbusier painting one of his murals at Eileen Gray's E.1027 / Photo: Courtesy of Foundation Le Corbusier / Artists Rights Society, NY

The legend of Eileen Gray's E.1027 goes like this: In 1926, the Irish-born designer and architect and her then boyfriend, the Romanian architect and critic Jean Badovici, decided to build a summer home in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin on the French Riviera. Gray, best known at the time for her furniture, traveled to the house site, camped out on the property, and eventually designed—with some help from Badovici—a widely-celebrated, nautical-looking, flat-roofed white building that responded to her copious observation of weather patterns and sunlight. The name of the house, E.1027, was an ode to the union of its co-owners: E for Eileen,

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ten for the tenth letter in the alphabet J, and by that logic, two for B, and seven for G.

Gray and Badovici ran in the same circles as the famous Swiss-born architect Le Corbusier, and he was a frequent visitor to E.1027, both while the couple was together, and after they parted ways in 1932. Then in 1938 things got weird: Le Corbusier made the dubious decision while visiting to add his own touch to Gray's masterpiece, painting eight large-scale murals on the walls—working some of the time, per photographs, naked—which featured some graphically sexual motifs. Gray was reportedly, and understandably, furious. To add insult to injury, Le Corbusier proceeded to build his own summer home, the log-cabin-like Le Cabanon, on a nearby plot of land in 1951. In 1965, he died while swimming in the sea below both houses. Gray passed away in 1976. The story of E.1027 and Le Cabanon lives on as design-school lore, a perfect example of Modernist machismo run amok, of the architectural ego gone wild.

Last spring the design-minded Lower East Side gallerist **Joe Sheftel**, a fan of Gray's, was reminded of this story while doing a studio visit with the long-time New York City painter **Gary Stephan**. Two of Stephan's paintings—architectural abstractions featuring similar forms and palette—caught his eye: one was titled E-1027, the other *Le Cabanon*.



Eileen Gray's Modernist house E.1027

Photo: © Manuel Bougot / Courtesy of Friends E. 1027

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Sheftel realized he had found the subject of his gallery's summer group show. "So there's a summer beach house, and the worst possible houseguest, who gets naked and begins desecrating one's legacy," Sheftel explains, laughing, when I drop by the gallery to see the resulting exhibition, "E.1027," (open until August 5). "For me the important part wasn't so much about Le Corbusier. He gets tons of press. It was more about Eileen and her legacy, which was"—quite literally—"covered over by this guy."

Alongside the Stephan paintings that inspired the show, Sheftel has lined the walls of his narrow, rectangular Orchard Street space with five artists' work that he feels, in various ways, reflects the Gray-Le Corbusier dustup: Denise Kupferschmidt's muralistic, androgynous figures; Sofia Leiby's canvases screen-printed with appropriated handwriting samples from cursive guides and the test pads for pens at art supply stores; the nod to architecture in Mike Pratt's highly textural three dimensional paintings; Graham Collins's canvas collaged from sewn-together strips of landscape oils found in thrift stores across Bulgaria and Greece. "Gesture, appropriation, landscape, identity, and authorship—there are a lot of cool questions in that one," Sheftel remarks while I peer closely at Collins's neat stitch-work and hand-wrought wenge frame.

Other than Stephan, Block Shop textile designer and painter **Lily Stockman** (also a Vogue.com contributor), who has spent time in the Le Corbusier-designed Indian city of Chandigarh, was the only artist to respond directly to the prompt. In addition to contributing two canvases depicting architectural motifs, Stockman painted delicate oils of begonias and oleanders, flowers that she learned grow on location at the house.

"I've been aware of Le Corbusier for 50 years, since I really got knocked out by him in college," Stephan tells me when I call him at his studio to discuss the show. Le Cabanon just happened to be the inspiration behind Stephan's wife's remodeling of their city kitchen, which got the artist reading about that house, and which subsequently lead him to E.1027.

Though architecture has long inspired his work, Stephan wasn't consciously trying to channel Eileen Gray's summer home; it just sort of happened. "Last summer, I'm making a painting," he explains. "It was horizontal and it was going nowhere. I have a rotating easel, and at one point I turned it vertical. All of a sudden you could see a window, water in a sense. I thought, it's secretly been a house! It must be the one I've been thinking about! It's almost dreamy: as though my unconscious was saying, we're trying to get you to paint something, we know you have a rotating easel . . ." He painted *Le Cabanon* next.

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Gary Stephan, E-1027, 2014

Stephan tells me he's planning to visit the actual E.1027, which was opened to the public in May following a long-in-the-making restoration (the murals, controversially, remain), when he visits the South of France for his brother's wedding in October. And for those of us with no future Côte d'Azur travel plans, he also alerts me to the forthcoming release of *The Price of Desire*, a feature-length drama that, per its Twitter bio, takes on "the controversial story of how Eileen Gray's contribution to 20th century architecture was almost entirely effaced from history." (If you

need more reason to be intrigued, Alanis Morissette has a meaty role in the film.)

Sheftel has a similar goal in mind. "This was a very misogynistic thing that Le Corbusier did," he tells me back in the gallery. "I wanted to kind of reassert Gray's legacy as an important founder of the Modernist movement." In the end, though, he believes the joke may be on Le Corbusier. The architect's fundamental architectural belief, that a house should be a "machine for living," has "lead to these massive anonymous housing projects that don't work. It almost leads to totalitarianism," Sheftel says. "Gray's much more humanistic approach is the ultimate victor."