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FROM ABSTRACT ART IN A  
INTRIGUING SCULPTURES  
BELMOND'S LATEST  
BREATHING NEW LIFE

WORDS BY

FLORENTINE MONASTERY TO  
AT A TUSCAN CASTLE,  
COLLABORATION IS  
INTO ITS ICONIC HOTELS

ISABELLA SULLIVAN

*Previous page: Window & Ladder by Leandro Erlich*  
*This page: Villa San Michele, A Belmond Hotel's arresting hillside location*

In the corner of a manicured terraced lawn, a ladder ascends to what looks like an open shutter suspended in the sky. The view could stop time – the inimitable Florence skyline: Brunelleschi's terracotta-topped Duomo, the tower of the Palazzo Vecchio and the gentle curves of the Arno River, all perfectly framed. "This window gives us the chance to see through human history, the birthplace of the Renaissance is behind," implores Argentinian artist Leandro Erlich, who, amongst the perfectly polished Italian gardens of Villa San Michele, erected the almost incongruous piece of art.

After years in the making, this year marked the debut collaboration between luxury hotel group Belmond, a group behind some of Italy's, and the world's, most iconic properties, and Galleria Continua, a global contemporary art gallery born in the hills of Tuscany. Named Mitico, the collaboration saw Belmond work with Galleria Continua to install unique and thought-provoking art pieces across four of its most revered Italian properties: stretching from the hills of Tuscany to Sicily and Venice.

Since its conception in 1990, Galleria Continua's roots have spread far from Tuscany, with destinations like Beijing, Rome, Havana and Sao Paulo, and now, Dubai, with a pop-up exhibition at the iconic Burj Al Arab hotel. But the gallery's roots are just a short drive from Florence in the hilltop villa of San Gimignano, sandwiched between Belmond's Florence property and its countryside retreat in the hills of Siena. It's here, under the Tuscan sun, that one of the most exciting luxury hospitality and art collaborations this season was born.



THE PIECE ITSELF APPEARS AS A FLOATING THREE-DIMENSIONAL SCULPTURE AND ASKS THE VIEWER, WHAT IS REALITY AND WHAT IS AN ILLUSION?

## VIEWING THE WORLD

Villa San Michele, A Belmond Hotel, is as elegant as a Renaissance painting – a work of art in itself. Carved into the hillside of the leafy Florentine suburb of Fiesole, the former monastery-turned-private-villa-turned 44-room-hotel is one of the most exclusive spots in the city. Its Mitico installation is aptly named ‘Viewing the World’, playing on the hotel’s dramatic position and unrivalled vantage point in the city. *Window & Ladder*, the installation’s focal, large-scale piece, depicts a ladder leading to a shuttered window and challenges viewers’ concept of reality – embracing ideas of universal beauty through differing points of view and almost enticing them to clamber up and take a peek. “A window is always something that we are attracted to see through, it’s such a symbolic element,” says artist Erlich, who was inspired by the hotel’s legendary views. Of course, there’s no climbing, but one can see the view from the hotel’s terraced gardens and sweeping pillared balconies. See the brilliant blue sky illuminate the ochre-hued city, or come at golden hour to see the entire skyline bathed in yellow amber. “It’s a great view,” chuckles Erlich.

A great view indeed. Guests ascend to the property via a winding, cypress-tree-lined road cut in the hillside, soon surrounded by forested hills where Leonard di Vinci tested his first flying machine. As with all Belmond properties, Villa San Michele’s rich history and heritage as a former monastery are truly embraced and palpable. Once admiring the façade designed by the school of Michelangelo,



check-in happens via the former chapel, ornate with frescoes and alter, still used for ceremonies and blessings to this day. Interiors reflect its role as a grand Florentine manor house and guests breeze between the handful of rooms as if it were their home. From the chapel, it’s a winding walk through flagstone floored rooms to find the cloisters, now covered with a glass ceiling and home to a sumptuous drawing room with ivy-clad walls, a sweeping terrace home to two restaurants transfixed on that same view, a seductive indoor bar and various Tuscan-style living spaces.

In the old refectory of the monastery is where Galleria Continua’s second piece can be found. Unlike *Window & Ladder*, Erlich’s *The Cloud* is far more abstract: what appears to look like plumes of smoke or clouds in the shape of the United Kingdom crafted from multiple panes of glass. “Like an idea, *The Cloud* is both totally real and an illusion,” explains Erlich. It’s a superb contrast to the poignant fading fresco above – a magnificent scene of *The Last Supper*. “I’m interested in perception because I believe it is a way to access knowledge,” continues the artist. “It’s really moving for an artist to be able to share the space with such a painting, where everything becomes part of the same story, which is a story of art.” The piece itself appears as a floating three-dimensional sculpture and asks the viewer, what is reality and what is an illusion?

Rooms at Villa San Michele are dotted around the main historic building and intertwined with the terraced gardens. Understated and filled with beautiful original architecture and features like window panes, period furniture and vaulted ceilings, some come with terraces and gardens. Tiered gardens hide platforms of roses, an organic herb garden and a newly transformed alfresco bar area following the hotel’s early 2022 refurbishment where aperitivo comes with a front-row view of golden hour and the sweet fragrance of lemons, rosemary and lavender. At the top sits a pale blue swimming pool where guests position their sun loungers towards the view and enjoy bites from a striped gelato car and woodfire pizza oven.

Launched in 1990 by three friends, Galleria Continua’s journey has led it around the world, but its latest collaboration was closer than you’d think. The original museum lies in the small Tuscan hilltop village of San Gimignano, south of Florence in the province of Siena. Encircled by 13<sup>th</sup>-century walls and a maze of cobbled lanes, travellers leave their cars at the gates to traverse its medieval towers and charming gelato shops. Galleria Continua’s spaces are dotted around the town in abstract and unassuming places – the top floor of an unassuming hotel, a cellar and the headquarters in the town’s old theatre. It’s bold and stark modernity against the Tuscan hilltop village surrounded by patchwork hills and vineyards.

*This page: The Cloud by Leandro Erlich*

*Facing page: an elegant drawing room in the monastery’s former cloisters*





## LOVING THE WORLD

Just a short drive from San Gimignano and travellers are met with Belmond's second Tuscan property. The citadel cuts a striking shape on the forested horizon, the long driveway framed by slender cypresses building anticipation as you pull up to the pale-lemon façade. Castello di Casole, A Belmond Hotel sits on the site of an Etruscan village and many ruins and artefacts are still on show today. The impeccably restored 10<sup>th</sup>-century castle was once the estate of vaunted Italian filmmaker Luchino Visconti, where he hosted weekend parties attended by Sophia Loren, Burt Reynolds and the Italian glitterati.

The same grandeur and glamour live on today – a Dior Vespa is parked outside, loungers are decked with Belmond's signature striped cushions, there's a sizeable glass-tiled infinity pool and the property is abundant in flora. Among the thousands of pink and yellow roses planted outside is a sculpture of a man gently caressing a tree – Castello di Casole's contribution to the Mitico collaboration dubbed 'Loving the World'.

"To caress the present, to caress trees, to caress nature, like a human being would do," explains Italian sculptor Michelangelo Pistoletto, who crafted four bronze sculptures, named *Accarezzare gli Alberi (l'Etrusco)*, around the estate's 4,200 acres of grounds. "The Etruscans represent the liaison between the ancient land and the future we are about to embark on. There are four Etruscans in different colours so that all human cultures are represented in harmony with each other." Each sculpture stands next to ancient trees, showcasing the

connection between Castello di Casole and the surrounding Tuscan countryside. "The work is a universal message of love, mutual care and peace," continues the artist. "The sculptures are here to encourage us to embrace our differences, to love nature and to approach a third phase of humanity". Take a walk through the bucolic grounds to best experience the installation, from the sophisticated main building to the suites and villas on the estate, hidden by towering cypress trees and looking onto vineyards and fields where hare, pheasant and deer roam free.

What was once the hamlet-turned-medieval castle-turned-movie-producer-playground is now a quintessentially Tuscan country retreat of 39 bedrooms. Impeccable detail has been paid in bedrooms with touches like reclaimed timber and terracotta tiles along with period furniture and marble bathrooms. The former bell tower now houses two-story suites – miniature Tuscan castles in themselves with their evocative interiors comprising exposed stonework, lots of dark wood, mosaic bathroom floors, heavy drapes and paintings.

Homage is paid to Visconti in the hotel's Visconti Bar, seductively Italian serving aperitivo and nightcaps – the glamorous vibe spilling out into the terrace. Dinners take place out on the terrace, which, like Villa San Michele, offers some of the most breathtaking views in the region. While Villa San Michele's terrace sees the Duomo and stars of Florence, Castello di Casole's sees the charming hilltop village of Esola and rolling hills and vineyards: the hotel is not far from Chianti. Dine on slow-cooked wild Tuscan boar ragu and butter ribbons of silky truffle pasta locally sourced from the rich and fertile countryside.

"THE SCULPTURES ARE HERE TO ENCOURAGE US TO EMBRACE OUR DIFFERENCES AND TO LOVE NATURE"



This page: a suite at Castello di Casole, A Belmond Hotel Facing page: dining in the hotel's extensive grounds



Previous page: *Accarezzare gli Alberi (l'Etrusco)* by Michelangelo Pistoletto  
 This page: Pascale Marthine Tayou's *Les Routes du Paradis* at Grand Hotel Timeo  
 Facing page: *Cooking the World* by Subodh Gupta at Cipriani, A Belmond Hotel



## COLOURING AND COOKING THE WORLD

While Tuscany, undoubtedly, is the heart of Belmond and Galleria Continua's Mitico collaboration, the gallery's roots between the two Tuscan properties, the collaboration can also be experienced in two of Belmond's other iconic Italian properties. Almost caught adrift between Europe and Africa, the sun-baked island of Sicily has lured guests with its sparkling bays, lemon-scented air, mountainous hinterlands and timeworn cities like Palermo and Catania. Belmond's Grand Hotel Timeo is amongst the most beloved and revered establishments on the island, perched in the mountains of Taormina overlooking the cerulean blue bay and Mount Etna, and the third location for the Mitico collaboration – 'Colouring the World'.

The collaboration saw Cameroonian artist Pascale Marthine Tayou create his *Les Routes du Paradis* (paths to happiness), a coloured path from the hotel's grand entrance through six acres of property gardens to the magnificent third-century Greek Theatre. Four crystal sculptures entitled *Totem Cristal* dot the path: human-sized totems each uniquely dressed and embodying creolisation – the mixing together of different people and cultures. The project perfectly encapsulates Sicily, a colonial crossroads conquered by Greeks, Romans, Arabs and Normans. "Sicily is a mythical place for a mythical

project," explains Tayou. "I told myself I would do a triumph of colours to set the energies free and celebrate beauty again. How is it that sometimes it all seems so dark around us? We need to look inside our souls. That's where the light is, there is harmony there."

Galleria Continua and Belmond's final Mitico installation lies in the ancient floating city of Venice, across the lagoon at the iconic Cipriani, A Belmond Hotel. Here, the theme pays homage to one of Italy's greatest loves, cooking. Marked by the 59<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, Cipriani's Mitico opened in the Casanova Gardens Giudecca island hotel and is the work of Indian artist Subodh Gupta. Echoing his work displayed in San Gimignano, Gupta crafted his installation using thousands of discarded cooking pots, pans and utensils. The piece itself named *Cooking the World*, inside is a kitchen, where Gupta himself has cooked his family recipes and hosted events.

Belmond and Galleria Continua's thought-provoking installations are available to view until November when the sun begins to fade and winter draws in across Italy's rolling patchwork landscape. But for now, this merging of modern art, culture and the zeitgeist is very much alive, and with it, giving a renewed sense of life to these timeless and beautiful Italian escapes. 🍴



PHOTOGRAPHS: AGOSTINO OSIO, MARCO VALMARANA