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At Home With Patrick Blanc

All His Rooms Are Living Rooms



Ed Alcock for The New York Times

Off the Wall Patrick Blanc, a French botanist who made his name with the plant wall, is an unusual mix of scientist and artist.

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Créteil, France

ONE April afternoon in a rented bungalow in this small city on the outskirts of Paris, a Kelly green Madagascar lizard slithered across a plant-covered wall. In the next room, a blue-green Malaysian frog balanced on a Thai pandanus branch, still as a stone. Birds careered from room to room — in this house, the doors to the outside are closed to keep them in — dodging human heads as they went, and pausing only briefly to perch in the rhododendron leaves growing up the wall above the aquarium.

The house, and the elaborate ecosystem inside it, are home and laboratory for Patrick Blanc, a 53-year-old French botanist and the inventor of the plant wall, a kind of vertical garden, as he puts it, that grows without soil on a durable frame of metal, PVC and nonbiodegradable felt.

Since 1988, Mr. Blanc has created dozens of these botanical tapestries in public and private spaces around the world, including the Marithé & François Girbaud boutique in Manhattan, the Siam Paragon shopping center in Bangkok and the 21st Century [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in Kanazawa, Japan. It is only fairly recently, though, that his work has begun attracting serious international attention, thanks to high-profile projects like the Jean Nouvel-designed Quai Branly Museum in Paris, which opened in 2006 and has an administrative center covered in 200 species of plants — a city building seemingly made of leaves.

“I like to reintegrate nature where one least expects it,” Mr. Blanc said as he sat at a table in his overgrown back garden, smoking a Vogue Menthol and drinking chilled white Jurançon. (“I leave the water for the plants,” he said.) He wore green shoes and shocking green highlights in his hair, and brandished a two-inch thumbnail painted a glittery shade of forest green.

“We live in an era where human activity is overwhelming,” he continued. “I think we can reconcile nature and man to a much greater degree. People become much more sensitive to nature when they suddenly see a plant wall in the Métro” — where he has not yet built a plant wall, but hopes to. “It calls out to them much more than plants in a garden.”

But while most of his plant walls present nature through formally elegant design, the plants in his home, and his home itself, are another matter. The house is a tangle of leaves with a mold-smudged ceiling and a sitting area formed from mattresses covered in the bright orange robes of Thai monks. Fraying photographs of Mr. Blanc in faraway jungles are taped to the walls, which are covered in many places with bamboo shades. Out in the front yard, a jumble of iris japonica, Chinese epimedium and carex leaves covers one wall, a plant wall experiment begun five years ago.

“We call it our little jungle bungalow,” said Mr. Blanc’s longtime partner, Pascal Héni, a singer who is well known in India by the stage name Pascal of Bollywood. Mr. Héni’s tidy office is the only room in the house with a door, aside from the toilet room. (Plastic beaded curtains do the trick elsewhere.)

Andrée Putman, the French interior architect and designer, first saw Mr. Blanc’s work at the house several years ago, and hired him to create a much-publicized vertical garden in the courtyard of the Pershing Hall hotel in Paris in 2001. Although the wild look of the interiors at Créteil seems to have little in common with her own highly refined work — “Don’t you find it touching that someone who has had such great success would keep his little cardboard house?” she said — she clearly values it as an expression of Mr. Blanc’s personal style. “He is very surprising,” she said. “Very fresh and sincere. And there’s a very strong sense of his character in that singular house.”

Ms. Putman called his plant walls revolutionary. “It’s like a magic trick,” she said. “There is no soil in this operation, and yet the plants seem to grow faster. It creates a rather miraculous atmosphere.”

Mr. Blanc has long practiced his botanical experiments at home, beginning with a crude version of the plant wall that he created at 12, when he planted flowers on a mesh frame along the walls of his parents' garden in the Paris suburbs. After reading about how rooting plants in water can purify them of nitrates, he grew rhododendrons in his aquarium, training them to climb the wall as they do here in Créteil.

Fascinated by plants that flourish without soil and in low light, he went on to study this phenomenon at Pierre & Marie Curie University in Paris and traveled to Malaysia and Thailand for the first time in 1972 to observe how plants managed to grow on rocks or in forest underbrush. This research has been the foundation of his botany career — he has been a researcher with the National Center for Scientific Research in Paris for 25 years — and central to his work with plant walls, which thrive indoors using artificial lighting. A fixture in the French media, he has also published a handful of books for a general audience about his work.

“He’s a curious character because he is the symbiosis of a scientist, an artist and a communicator,” said Stéphane Martin, the director of the Quai Branly Museum. “He has created a personality with his green hair, a look and an image.”

In addition to exterior walls, Mr. Blanc installed vertical gardens in the museum’s administration offices. “It puts me in a good mood when I come into the office,” Mr. Martin said. “His walls are at once beautiful, friendly and funny. They look from certain angles like a forest that is standing up on its own.”

Mr. Blanc approaches his projects the way a landscape architect would. “If a wall is going to be seen from up close,” he said, “I pay attention to the texture and form of the leaves; from a distance, the colors must be considered.” He prefers leaves to flowers and avoids plants with trailing vines. “I’m sensitive to the architecture of leaves,” he said. “I use plants with curves.”

A plant wall begins as “a two-dimensional surface, like a painting,” he said, “and as the plants grow it develops volume.” It does not, however, need to be trimmed, he added, and the density of the planting prevents weeds from sprouting. He pointed out that a wall he designed at the Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art in Paris nearly a decade ago has never been pruned. “It’s superb,” he said. “Very natural and very beautiful.”

One wall in the living room of his home is 25 years old. He pointed out that it is the use of artificial materials that allows for this endurance. “People often have a hard time understanding that by using materials which are not biodegradable, it allows biology to install itself, and to last,” he said.

Construction costs for the walls vary, but in general, Mr. Blanc said, the materials cost about \$680 per 10 square feet, plus labor. He takes a percentage of the overall cost of a project, and leaves the installation to gardeners, though he does visit the site during installation to make corrections.

Thanks to projects like the Quai Branly Museum and the outdoor wall for the BHV, a popular Paris department store, which Mr. Blanc completed this spring, plant walls have become increasingly fashionable in France, and various imitators have stepped in to offer alternatives, including less expensive do-it-yourself systems with hanging clay pockets or iron grid systems. “In human society, as soon as there’s something new that seems to work, it’s normal

that everyone wants to do it,” Mr. Blanc said. “It’s like what people said about Édith Piaf — around her, even the hobos wanted to be singers. If I’m imitated, it’s good.”

But he has been careful to copyright his walls, like works of art. “When I am invited into museums to create permanent works, I am treated like an artist,” he said, “meaning someone capable of choosing the plants and the plant sequences that will function together in the long run. If someone wants to copy one for himself, it’s no problem. But they’re protected from being reproduced for financial gain or public recognition.” (He added that he never copies himself: “Out of the question.”)

A recent exhibition in Paris of Mr. Blanc’s work, which included experiments in growing plant ceilings, was so popular it was extended twice. “In the tropics I always noticed how hanging plants grow from the top down at cave entrances,” he said. “It’s interesting to show that plants don’t always have to grow upward.” But his main focus remains the plant walls. He said he is planning to concentrate increasingly on improving public spaces with them in years to come.

“Humanity is living more and more in cities, and at odds with nature,” he said. “The plant wall has a real future for the well-being of people living in cities. The horizontal is finished — it’s for us. But the vertical is still free.”