

## Alexandre de Betak Creates a Futuristic Booth at TEFAF

Galerie Gmurzynska boasts a show space unlike any other

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Bureau Betak's booth for Cologne's Galerie Gmurzynska.

Photo: Courtesy of Galerie Gmurzynska

At *TEFAF New York Spring*, the Manhattan satellite of the glamorous *international arts fair*, Cologne's *Galerie Gmurzynska* is offering cutting-edge masterworks from the 1910s through the 1980s. The decoration of the booth, though, exists somewhere far off in the future.

“Modern art is usually displayed on pure white walls,” says Alexandre de Betak, a dashing Frenchman known for his portfolio of innovative and edgy fashion shows as well as hotels and restaurants, and who was commissioned to design Galerie Gmurzynsk’s space, his first-ever art-fair installation. “But how do you want to see modern art today?”



Artwork on display in the booth. Photo: Courtesy of Galerie Gmurzynska

The ever-inventive ball of energy answered his own question by conjuring up a space that feels as edgy as the proffered works—including a large 1980 Tom Wesselman oil-on-wood sculpture of a smoldering cigarette—were in their heyday. “It was time to see them in a new way,” de Betak says, “by putting them in a setting that is just as powerful.”

To that end, de Betak sheathed the gallery’s floor and walls with gray concrete panels of surprisingly humble origin. The designer delightedly points out that the material is “very common, very practical,” being the lowly concrete backer board traditionally used as the waterproof base for bathroom tiles. These, in turn, are separated by LED strips that transform the space into a mysterious glowing grid—think *2001: A Space Odyssey*—that seems to pull viewers from front to back, as if by a irresistible force field. The only thing missing, say, is the woozy, space-age hum of a theremin.



An angled metallic freestanding wall at the rear of the booth reflects several works, including one of Christo's shop-window pieces and a wall-spanning 1954 painting by Roberto Matta, which sold shortly after the fair opened. Behind that wall is a surprise that I initially overlooked: A hidden door swings open to reveal an installation of brilliantly polychrome 1919 watercolors by Varvara Stepanova and 1920s works on paper by El Lissitzky. For the center of the booth, de Betak designed a table and seating covered entirely in artificial fur, a deployment that conjuring up a mental image of artist Méret Oppenheim's legendarily strange gazelle-furred teacup, saucer, and spoon. "I'm impressed and amazed that the gallery agreed to my plans," de Betak says. "I like it, but I don't know if everybody will. Since it's an art-fair booth, you should obviously appreciate the art but the space should be more than just about selling. It should transport."