

# ART



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UGO RONDINONE JORDAN WOLFSON BJARNE MELGAARD SAM GILLIAM RASHID JOHNSON

Ugo Rondinone, in his Harlem studio, with works in progress.





# HOLY MOLY

Ugo Rondinone has converted an abandoned church into one of the most divine live/work spaces in New York.

*Linda Yablonsky is awed.  
Photographs by Jason Schmidt*

**t**hree years ago, while driving through Harlem, Ugo Rondinone spotted a for-sale sign on an abandoned Romanesque church with a stone facade, immense stained glass windows, and arched wooden double doors at the entrance. At the time, the 50-year-old Swiss artist was not in the market for real estate. He already owned a loft in the East Village and a storefront studio space in NoHo. He also had country homes with his companion of almost two decades, the poet John Giorno, in upstate New York and in Switzerland, and had just acquired a two-bedroom cottage on the North Fork of Long Island. Nonetheless, three weeks after first seeing the church, he plunked down \$2.2 million to buy it.

Built in 1887 and designed by the architect Henry Franklin Kilburn, the 20,000-square-foot building was badly in need of repair. But, Rondinone says, "I just like an open space." Two years later, he sold his loft, leased his studio to Karma (Brendan Dugan's bookstore and gallery), and embarked on a \$2 million gut renovation. "Somehow I thought it was a bargain," he says, as he shows me around one day in late June. "I was naive. That \$2 million turned into \$4 million." Still, he doesn't regret it one bit. "I love the church. I can stay here for weeks without going out."

Working with Alicia Balocco, the architect who had renovated his loft and studio, Rondinone divided the church into work and living spaces, including two guest apartments, and five studios (with a common

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kitchen) for visiting artists. He replaced the splintered street doors with translucent glass panels, sandblasted the facade, and fixed the broken front steps. Off the entry hall, in a high-ceilinged room with Moorish arches suggestive of a chapel, he installed an office and dedicated a large room opposite as a studio for *Giorno*. (The two have always maintained separate residences.)

Rondinone also restored what he calls the “fake Spanish tile” floor and abundant wood paneling along the several staircases and the hall outside the church’s former sanctuary. That space is now a studio so palatial that Rondinone can produce two or three exhibitions at a time there, or design his frequent museum shows using full-scale models instead of tabletop maquettes—even when they involve 20-foot-tall bluestone figures like those he showed last year at Rockefeller Center with the Public Art Fund.

A balcony that extended halfway over the sanctuary is gone now, as is a dropped ceiling that once covered a stained glass skylight three stories above. (Rondinone discovered it when he was looking at the site on Google Earth.) Clear glass panes bring daylight to the roughly 4,300-square-foot room, which has new white walls and a pristine wood floor. Smaller stained glass windows in the corners remain, as do painted moldings that trace the seams of the vaulted ceiling as piping does on a suit.

Rondinone plans to invite curators to organize shows here from time to time, which will be open to the public, but at the moment it is strictly his workplace. Freestanding, thickly impastoed oil-on-burlap paintings of bright pink, yellow, green, or blue brick walls are placed at angles across a third of the room. Between them are a couple of bare black olive trees cast from those on a property the artist owns in Matera, Italy, the ancient town his parents left when they immigrated to a small house in Schwyz, Switzerland’s founding village. “Matera is a very special city,” Rondinone says. “I spent every summer there as a boy. The old part, the Stones, is carved into gigantic limestone. When I was 7, my father showed me where he grew up. It was a cave with an open pit for a fireplace.”

That may explain Rondinone’s taste for primitivism (and fireplaces), though the works currently in his studio represent new approaches to motifs that have become his signature: striped “horizon” paintings, pastel target paintings, rainbow signs with phrases like *HELL, YES!* or *OUR MAGIC HOUR*, oversize wax light bulbs, diminutive wax clouds, bronze birds, giant bronze heads, closed windows and doors, and corpulent wax clowns that recline on the floor or slump against walls. But what launched his career, and continues to occupy him, are his nighttime landscapes: wall-size ink drawings of gnarled trees so evocative

and detailed that they suggest photographic negatives of dreams.

“The landscapes are the foundation of my work,” he says. “My first boyfriend died in 1988, and then I just wanted to enjoy myself, be in nature.” Everything Rondinone makes in some way refers to German Romanticism. “That’s the first movement that implicated feelings,” he says. But the unifying thread in his oeuvre is a meditative, restful passivity, a condition that in no way is evident in the boundless artist himself.

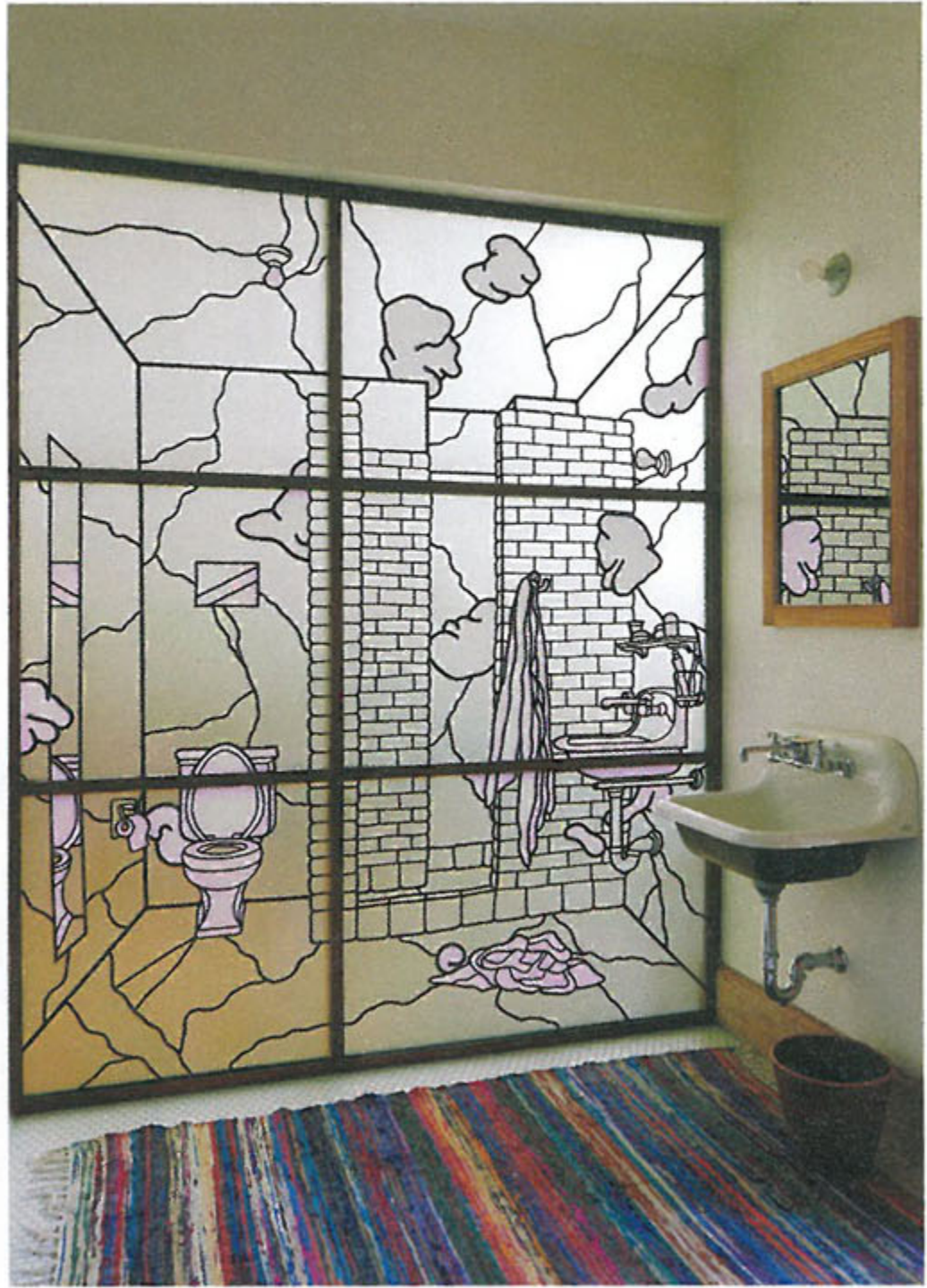
Rondinone doesn’t just make art, he also seriously collects it, and he’s championed the work of other artists in group shows for galleries and museums. But the most startling display may be the one in his living room: He has mixed works from his approximately 200-piece collection—a comically large bright pink rubber phallus by Sarah Lucas; unusual drawings by Paul Thek in yellow Plexiglas frames; a heavy, stone-patterned gray canvas by Peter Halley; an upright cannon by Valentin Carron; an array of silk screens by the reclusive Cady Noland—with a resin prototype of his first tree. Yet the ballroom-size space, three stories tall and about half the square footage of the studio, is furnished so simply that it feels both baronial and personal.

“It’s the most beautiful room in Manhattan, no?” Rondinone says, and it’s hard to argue with him. Three towering stained glass windows on the street wall are buffered by new double-hung steel-frame windows that open onto small balconies that Rondinone added to the facade. The decorative floral and geometric patterns of the glass suggest Louis Comfort Tiffany; only a pale yellow cross in the rosette at the top of the center window gives away the building’s original purpose. Right below, the stone arch that frames the street door juts up through the floor. “I’m going to make it look like a sunrise,” Rondinone says.

Ornate brass chandeliers date from the church’s construction, but the ceiling fans came from Home Depot. A rustic dining table that seats 10 is flanked by canvas-covered chairs by the artist Franz West; the coffee table Rondinone fashioned out of a stack of industrial palettes. A nearly life-size ceramic zebra sits on the edge of the carpet (“my pet,” he says). Open archways lead to a bedroom and to the kitchen, where all the cabinetry (made in the basement workshop) is done up in plywood.

An opaque stained glass window by Urs Fischer that pictures a toilet, a shower, and a sink, is actually a wall of the bathroom. Like all the furniture, the window came from Rondinone’s old loft, as did the bathroom sink. “It’s from England, and they don’t make it anymore,” he says. The bathroom, which is not large, has only a shower stall, no tub. (“I never take baths,” he says with a shrug.) But the uncluttered walk-in closet is the biggest he’s ever had. »

Clockwise, from right: A stained glass piece by Urs Fischer in the bathroom. In the dining area, Franz West chairs flank a table by Rondinone—on which rest maquettes for his upcoming "Seven Magic Mountains" installation—and on the wall are etchings by Paul Thek, 1975–1992, and Bruno Gironcoli's sculpture, *Head*, 1964. A West side table supports Fischer's *Sigh, Sigh, Sherlock!*, 2004, and on the wall is Latifa Echakhch's *Frame*, 2012. An Italian ceramic zebra holds court in the living room among Rondinone's tree sculpture *Bright Shiny Morning*, 1997, Sarah Lucas's phallic *Oboddaddy 2*, 2010, Valentin Carron's cannon, *Le Souffleteur*, 2005, and, on the wall, from left, Peter Halley's *Stacked Rocks (Cinema Cavern)*, 1990, and Cady Noland's metal newsprint works, *Untitled*, 1989, and her *Untitled (The Lincoln Years)*, 1990. The covered chairs are by West.

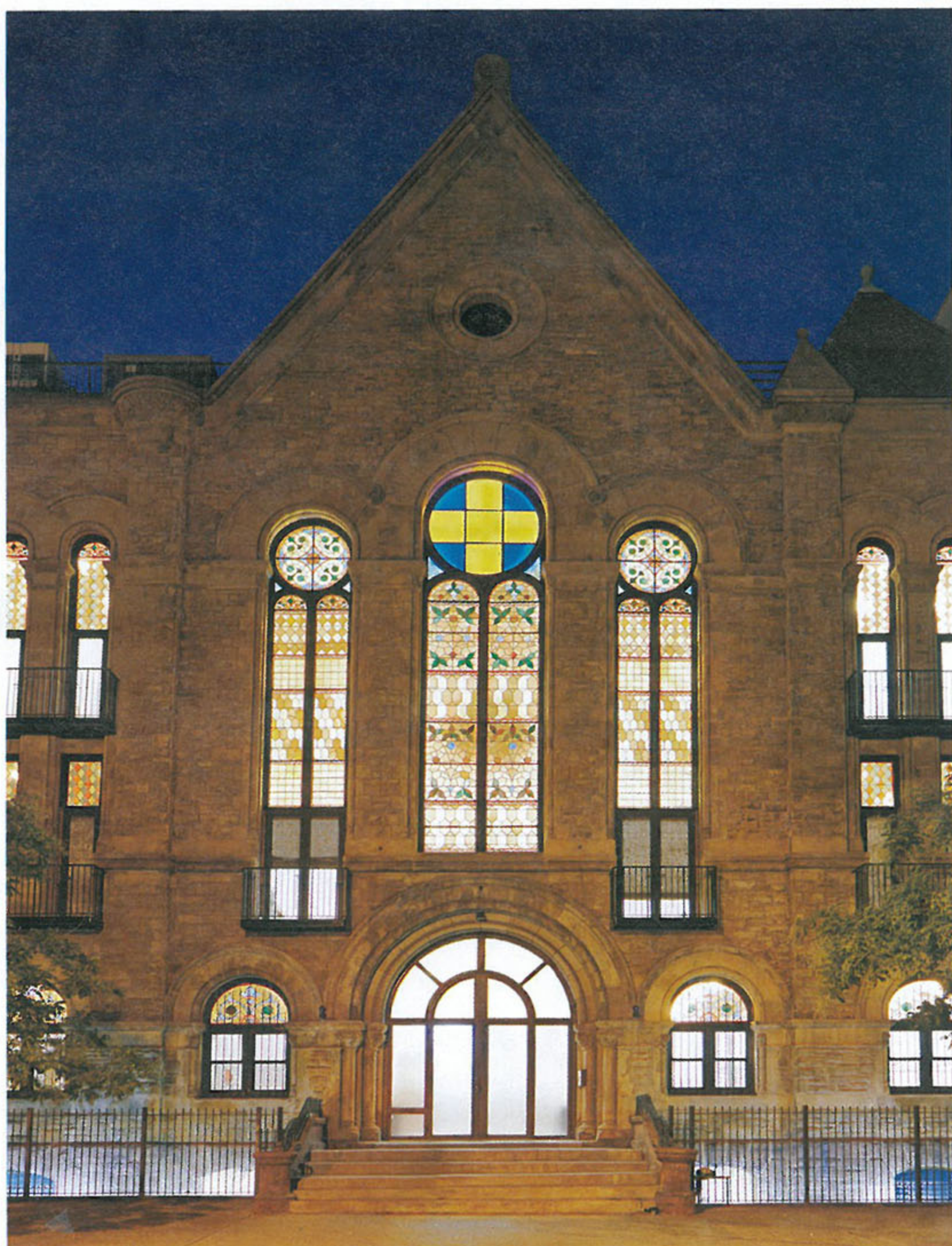






“Ugo was always ambitious,” says the Swiss art dealer Eva Presenhuber, who met Rondinone in the mid-’80s, when both were art students in Vienna. During their senior year, a commercial gallery there gave Rondinone the first show of his landscapes. The pieces sold out almost immediately. “It did not look like the work of a student,” Presenhuber recalls. In 1989, with Rondinone’s encouragement, Presenhuber opened a gallery in Zurich, where Rondinone not only showed his own work but also curated group exhibitions and invited younger artists to show with him. “He doesn’t make distinctions between well-known artists and an unknown or forgotten one,” Presenhuber says. “He just sees the artwork.”

Presenhuber pays rent on one of the church’s two third-floor guest apartments. Each has its own



staircase from the ground floor—not to mention its own kitchen and stained glass windows. “Nothing is for free with Ugo,” she says, laughing. However, Rondinone does plan to give the five studios to young artists who can’t afford a space of their own.

“Ugo may invest money in real estate, but he’s also very interested in curating, or reconstructing, all of his houses,” Presenhuber observes. “He has all these collections—of Italian ceramic vases and cat figures, Chinese stones, art. I think that’s what drives him to get more space.” But Rondinone thinks of every home as a studio. As he puts it, “The mind is always working.”

Currently, he’s organizing “Artists and Poets,” a cross-generational group show opening in February at the Vienna Secession that is the last of a trilogy of exhibitions dedicated to Giorgio. (The others were at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris and the Gladstone Gallery, where Rondinone shows in New York.) He’s also putting the finishing touches on “Seven Magic Mountains,” a series of brightly painted 22-to-30-foot-tall stone figures that is heading for installation early next year in the desert outside Las Vegas under the auspices of the Art Production Fund and the Nevada Museum of Art. And his first show in China is now on view (through January 4) at the Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai. “It’s called ‘Breathe Walk Die,’” Rondinone says. “That’s what we all do.” ♦

This page, from top: The exterior of the church. Valentin Carron’s *I Miss the 20th Century*, 2006, hangs above Rondinone’s bed; Martin Boyce’s chair sculpture, *Anatomy* (for Saul Bass), 2003, sits below Verne Dawson’s *Coronation*, 2004. Opposite: Rondinone’s living and dining area, with its soaring stained glass windows.