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The greatest scenography is the kind you never notice. You notice the Basquiat, the fever of it, the words broken open like wounds across the canvas. You notice the way a George Condo holds two realities at once, his figures lurching between comedy and catastrophe. None of it happens by accident. The rhythm of the walls, the calibration of the distance, the silence placed around each work so that it could speak at full intensity: each is a decision, and each decision belongs to @ceciledegos and her art of scenography.

For nearly thirty years, Cécile Degos has been designing the conditions under which we encounter some of the most significant art of our time. At the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris



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Details of Cécile Degos: Inside the Mind of the Woman Who Designs the Way You See Art

A conversation with Cécile Degos about the art of scenography.

The greatest scenography is the kind you never notice. You notice the Basquiat, the fever of it, the words broken open like wounds across the canvas. You notice the way a George Condo holds two realities at once, his figures lurching between comedy and catastrophe. You notice how an entire room at the Royal Academy in London compresses and releases around the armour of Charles I. None of it happens by accident. The rhythm of the walls, the calibration of the distance, the silence placed around each work so that it could speak at full intensity: each is a decision, and each decision belongs to **Cécile Degos** and her art of scenography.

The word "scenography" traces back to ancient Greece: from *skēnē*, meaning "stage or scene building," and *grapho*, "to describe," first detailed in Aristotle's Poetics as skenographia. For centuries it belonged to theatre, to opera, to the engineering of illusion. Today, in the context of the museum or gallery, it is a practice of generating the conditions for the performance of visitors, crafting a heightened encounter with the spaces of exhibitions. It is the art of making you feel before you think. Not decoration. Not staging. When scenography is understood at its fullest potency, it becomes the very means by which the aims and content of an exhibition are defined, and it can even precede the selection of the exhibits themselves. For nearly thirty years, Cécile Degos has been designing the conditions under which we encounter some of the most significant art of our time.



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Born in Paris, she might have taken a different path entirely. A passion for drawing, sculpture, and photography led her to sit the entrance exam for the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs (ENSAD) alongside her baccalaureate. She graduated in 1997 from its prestigious Stage Design section, the most demanding spatial design programme in France, before sharpening her craft at the Salzburg Festival and the Théâtre du Châtelet. Since then, the list of shows she has shaped reads like a survey of the art world's most ambitious recent decades. At the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris alone, she staged the Basquiat retrospective, awarded the Globe de Cristal, then *L'Art en Guerre*, awarded the Historia and El País prizes before travelling to the Guggenheim Bilbao, and most recently the George Condo retrospective, nearly eighty paintings, a hundred and ten drawings, twenty sculptures, a show demanding its own spatial language for one of the most psychologically charged bodies of work in contemporary art. At the Royal Academy of Arts in London, her scenography for *Charles I: King & Collector* won the Apollo Prize for Exhibition of the Year in 2018. At the Bourse de Commerce in Paris, she was central to the installation of the Pinault Collection. At Christie's, she designed the scenography for the historic Hubert de Givenchy Collection sale.



Courtesy of Museum of Art Pudong, Shanghai.

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In China, she designed the presentation of Musée d'Orsay masterpieces at the Museum of Art Pudong in Shanghai, a show of over a hundred works spanning French art from 1840 to the early twentieth century, and is currently staging *The Wonder of Patterns: Masterpieces of the Louvre* at the same institution. In Norway, her scenography for Pablo Picasso: The Code of Painting is on view at PoMo Trondheim. In Switzerland, she shaped the major Félix Vallotton retrospective at Plateforme 10 in Lausanne. At the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, she created the scenography for the Paul Troubetzkoy exhibition. On the horizon: *Eva Gonzalès* at the Petit Palais, *Painting the French Riviera* at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, and a Kerry James Marshall retrospective at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris.

To each of these projects, Degos brings a rare double fluency: the technical rigour of an architect and the plastic intelligence of someone trained equally in painting, sculpture, drawing and photography. She is, in the most precise sense of the phrase, a designer of perception.

This week, we visited "Face au Ciel" at the Musée de la Vie romantique alongside Cécile Degos, walking through the galleries she designed room by room, and sat down with her to talk about the art of scenography, the discipline of spatial restraint and what it means for her to build an experience that makes people put their phones away.

POD: What initially drew you to scenography and exhibition design? Was there a particular moment that made you choose this field?



"Face au ciel. Paul Huet en son temps" Musée de la Vie romantique. Photo by Diane Barroin

CD: What drew me to exhibition design was the possibility of bringing together the artistic practices that have always been part of my life - painting, sculpture, drawing, photography, and graphic design. I've long been drawn to volume and to space, to the way forms can converse with emptiness, and how a physical environment can frame what we see and feel.

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For me, scenography is an interval: between the artwork and the visitor, between architecture and perception, between material presence and emotion. I've always been sensitive to how a place can alter our gaze and, more importantly, how it can generate emotion. Quite early on, I realised that architecture alone was not enough for me; I needed an ongoing dialogue with content, with narrative, with history, and with the works themselves.

There wasn't a single dramatic turning point, but rather a gradual clarity: scenography allowed me to unite constructive rigour, narrative thinking, and a plastic sensibility. It is a profession of listening and precision. You don't create for yourself - you create to reveal. The visitor is the true actor of the exhibition, and I try to awaken emotion through multiple channels: light, scale, materiality, and rhythm.

POD: Your scenographies create a strong emotional and physical proximity to the works. When beginning a new project, what comes first: immersing yourself in the universe of the artist, understanding the curator's narrative or studying the architecture of the space?

CD: The three dimensions - artist, curatorial vision, and the architecture of the site - are inseparable. Yet the first gesture is always a period of quiet, almost physical immersion. I spend time looking at the works without immediately searching for a spatial solution. I try to identify what they produce in me: tension or softness, unease or density, a sense of breath. That first "impression" is invaluable, because it often contains the project's emotional truth. It is what I then try to make possible for the visitor.

From there comes a close understanding of the curator's narrative, not only as an intellectual framework, but as an affective journey. I ask myself: when should the visitor be seized? What rhythm should the experience follow? Where can a shift - of scale, of light, of pace - transform interpretation into lived experience? Emotional proximity is built through this dramaturgy: an alternation of compression and release, of face-to-face encounter and distance, of silence and intensity.

Then architecture enters as an active partner, sometimes even as a fourth actor. Some spaces impose a strong cadence and clear constraints; others offer a neutrality that must be structured. In every case, I work with space as an instrument of sensation: the proportion of a wall that subtly changes the body's posture, the width of a passage that slows the pace, a light that reveals a surface and tips the work from image into presence.

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This physical and emotional closeness does not come from spectacle. It arises from concrete, micro-scale decisions: the precise distance between two works, the tempo of the route, the way the gaze is guided and then released. My aim is that the visitor does not "consume" an exhibition, but moves through it the way one moves through a state of being: fully present, receptive, and touched. Scenography is born precisely at the point where these forces - the work, the narrative, and the place - find their balance and become palpable.



Simone Veil. Mes sœurs et moi ©Mémorial de la Shoah/Photo: Yonathan Kellerman

POD: You have created scenographies for some of the most influential institutions and collections in the art world including the Musée d'Art Moderne, the Guggenheim Museum, Royal Academy of Arts, as well as galleries and collections such as Gagosian, Mennour, Pinault Collection. What differs most in your approach when working with historical works versus contemporary art?

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CD: With historical works, there is a profound responsibility to heritage - materially, of course, but also symbolically. You are working with objects marked by time: fragile, rare, and often surrounded by strict constraints, preventive conservation, humidity control, light levels, safety distances, non-invasive hanging systems, and a route that must feel both legible and reassuring. This technical reality is not an obstacle; it is a framework. It demands restraint and a kind of almost "musical" precision, where every decision must be justified, calibrated, and never ostentatious.

In that context, scenography is first and foremost about creating the conditions for a clear, respectful reading. I look for an active sobriety: a structure that steadies the gaze and grants the works presence without "dressing" them. Emotional proximity then arises from very fine elements - the quality of light that reveals materials, the breathing space between pieces, the rhythm of the sequence, the relationship between the work and the wall, the colour that supports a palette without betraying it. The goal is to establish trust: for the visitor to feel they are in a space that is right, one that allows them to look without effort and to be quietly moved.

With contemporary art, the relationship shifts because the work is often conceived in dialogue with space or at least with an idea of space. Certain pieces call for a specific dispositif: a frontal encounter, an immersive situation, a counterpoint. Conservation requirements may be different, and the exhibition can accommodate more friction, surprise, or a deliberate displacement of reference points. The space can become a field for experimentation: shifts in scale, fragmentation, even moments of discomfort or, conversely, the staging of radical calm. Scenography can meet the work head-on, and at times even provoke it - not to create effect, but to reveal an intention, a tension, a way of being in the world.

What changes most, ultimately, is the degree of "authority" the space can take. In historical presentations, the space recedes so that the continuity of time and the density of heritage can lead. In contemporary contexts, the space may become more active, more conceptual, more narrative. Yet my guiding principle remains the same in both: never impose a gratuitous gesture. Scenography is not décor; it is a structure of perception.

I often summarise it this way: with historical works, I pursue a sense of inevitability - a clarity that makes the visitor feel everything is simply "in its place." With contemporary art, I pursue a sense of rightness - a living relationship between the work, the body, and the site. And whatever the institutional context - museum, foundation, gallery, or private collection - I work with the same demand: to ensure that space makes the work more legible, more present, and more necessary.

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Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris - Condo ©Pierre Antoine

POD: For the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris exhibition dedicated to George Condo, you worked with a powerful and psychologically intense body of work. When designing for a living contemporary artist like George Condo, how does the dialogue with the artist influence your scenographic choices?

CD: Working with a living artist such as George Condo is a particular experience, because the dialogue is immediate and direct. It is not a matter of interpreting the work from a distance, but of exchanging with the person who conceived it - testing intuitions, refining intentions, and aligning the exhibition's spatial language with the artist's own sensibility.

Condo's work is psychologically intense, almost vertiginous. The challenge was to create a framework capable of holding that force without weighing it down. Conversation becomes a design tool: it shapes decisions about scale, the proportions of the walls, the breathing space between works, and the quality of light. Everything must support the paintings' internal tension while maintaining clarity and ease of reading.

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For an exhibition with a contemporary artist to feel right, trust is essential. I need to earn it - through attentive listening, precision, and a dialogue that remains fluid and sincere. When that relationship is in place, scenography can become a true spatial extension of the artist's thought: not an overlay, but a calibrated environment that allows the work to speak at its fullest intensity.



"Face au ciel. Paul Huet en son temps" Musée de la Vie romantique. Photo by Diane Barroin

POD: "Face au ciel, Paul Huet en son temps" marks a significant moment for Musée de la vie romantique. What was your vision for this exhibition?

CD: For this exhibition at the Musée de la Vie romantique, I wanted to create an experience of contemplation. Paul Huet speaks through sky, landscape, and light - so the space itself needed to breathe.

The scenography is built around an amplification of the celestial motif, expanded to the very scale of the galleries. Large fragments of sky, printed directly onto the walls and at times extending beyond the frames, establish a visual and symbolic continuity between the works and their environment. This immersive gesture dilates perception and gradually dissolves the boundary between pictorial surface and spatial depth.

The gaze is no longer contained by material limits; it moves freely, as if drawn toward an undefined horizon. The visitor navigates a suspended atmosphere - at once intimate and expansive - oscillating between Romantic interiority and an opening onto the infinite. The space becomes a sensory experience, a site of contemplation in which the sky motif functions like a breath: a passage between the tangible and the imaginary.

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POD: The museum has an intimate atmosphere. How did the spirit of the house influence your scenographic choices?

CD: The Musée de la Vie romantique is not a white cube. It is a house - marked by memory, with an intimate scale, and that atmosphere had to be protected.

Rather than imposing an autonomous architecture, I worked through subtle interventions: colour, proportion, and visual continuities. The scenography needed to enter into conversation with the building's own character. Here, delicacy matters more than assertion.



"Face au ciel. Paul Huet en son temps" Musée de la Vie romantique. Photo by Diane Barroin

POD: During our walk, you mentioned something very interesting: in this exhibition, visitors are not on their phones. The space itself absorbs their attention. Do you see scenography as a way to reclaim attention, almost as a counterpoint to digital overload?

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CD: Yes - profoundly.

We live in a constant state of visual and informational saturation: everything competes for our gaze, everything tries to capture our attention. In that context, an exhibition can become a rare space for deceleration—provided the scenography truly creates the conditions for presence. When a space is right - structured, legible, balanced - it installs a form of calm. It makes possible something other than rapid consumption: availability, sustained attention, the time to look.

During the visit, visitors weren't checking their phones. That isn't accidental. When a route is coherent, when light, scale, materials, and the rhythm of movement form a whole, the space naturally "absorbs" attention. It generates an immersion that is not spectacular but sensory: the body slows down, the gaze lingers, and you begin to observe, really observe.

A concrete example is the scenography currently presented at Gagosian for The House on Utopia Parkway: Joseph Cornell's Studio. You don't enter the space; the experience happens from the outside, in the middle of the city's noise. And yet you stay. You look at the volumes, the details, the layers, the density of this reconstructed place. Without scenography and without the way architecture choreographs that distance - this curiosity would not arise. Attention is captured by spatial quality: by the fact that the space creates an enigma, a tension, a desire to see more.

I believe scenography can "reclaim" attention precisely because it offers an embodied experience. It returns the visitor to their body, their gaze, and a different sense of time. It becomes a counterpoint to the digital: a moment when we stop scrolling and begin to look again.

POD: How do you decide when technology enhances an exhibition and when it risks weakening the direct encounter with the artwork?

CD: Technology is a tool, never an end in itself. It strengthens an exhibition when it clarifies, contextualises, or makes perceptible what is not immediately accessible.

It becomes problematic when it pulls attention away from the work or imposes an artificial tempo. I always return to the same question: does this device deepen the encounter, or does it weaken it?

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I often encourage curators and museums to integrate technological elements, but with great vigilance. Technology and contemplation can absolutely coexist, provided they are carefully choreographed. Creating distinct, well-defined zones helps preserve concentration and silence, while allowing digital tools to operate where they are most useful: as support, not spectacle.

POD: You have worked across different countries and cultural contexts. Have you observed differences in how visitors respond to scenography depending on cultural background?

CD: There are important nuances. In some countries, audiences adopt a more contemplative posture; elsewhere, movement through galleries is more dynamic. Behaviours vary greatly across cultures, and my experiences in China have been especially instructive in that regard.

During the exhibition of Musée d'Orsay masterpieces at the Museum of Art Pudong, I was struck by the way visitors inhabited the space: their attention was sustained, almost studious. People often took the time to read, to look closely, and to photograph as well, but not in a distracted way. There was a focused curiosity, and a strong responsiveness to interpretive devices. That observation proved invaluable later, when designing the Louvre presentation in the same museum: the context was similar, but the galleries were different, and the scenography had to adapt while maintaining the same demands for clarity and rhythm.

In those projects, scenography needed to support an analytical form of attention: clarifying the route, structuring sequences, and offering clearly legible stopping points - places where one can understand without blocking circulation. Flow management was also essential, because attendance could become extraordinarily dense at certain moments - I had never experienced that elsewhere. The challenge was to maintain the quality of the visit even at peak intensity: preserving reading distances, preventing works from being visually "crushed" by the crowd, and allowing each visitor to find their place, even briefly.

With the upcoming exhibition "Alberto Giacometti – La vie en mouvement" at the Minsheng Art Museum, the stakes shift again. Giacometti engages the visitor's body: his sculptures work through verticality, distance, and void. In a context where spaces can be vast and audiences numerous, the scenography must protect the fragile tension between isolation and monumentality. It means creating breathing room around the figures and maintaining very precise distances, so that the dialogue between the work and the visitor's body remains intimate despite the scale of the venue. It is a subtle balance between mastering flows and preserving the perceptual solitude these works demand.

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These experiences have taught me to observe visiting habits with great precision: the speed of circulation, the way labels are read, the relationship to groups, to silence, to photography. Scenography must accompany these cultural differences - sometimes channelling them, sometimes amplifying them. It becomes an invisible tool of mediation.

Yet one thing remains universal: sensitivity to spatial quality. A "right" space is perceived intuitively, whatever the culture. When light is precise, proportions are balanced, and the route is clear, the body understands immediately. Beyond cultural differences, there is a shared, embodied intelligence, and that is what I address when I design my projects.

POD: Is there a country or institution where you would particularly like to create a future project?

CD: I'm drawn to institutions that make room for genuine intellectual and artistic dialogue. Working more in Asia, the United States, or India particularly interests me—especially in contexts where the architecture is strongly articulated and scenography must find its place within powerful volumes.

In many of these projects, the spaces are themselves architectural statements - almost works in their own right - and I have to navigate them carefully. What matters most to me is not the prestige of the venue, but the ambition and rigor of the project, and the quality of the space I am entrusted with.

POD: What advice would you give to young design architects entering this field today?

CD: I would tell them: learn how to look. Not only at artworks, but at light, proportion, rhythm, and images, at everything that shapes perception.

Scenography demands real humility. You have to accept that you are working in the service of something larger than yourself. Cultivate technical precision as much as artistic sensitivity. Above all, develop your capacity to listen: to artists, to curators, and to technical teams.

This profession is profoundly collective. Its strength lies in shared intelligence - and in the quality of that collaboration.

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Final Details



Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris - Condo ©Pierre Antoine

What emerges from a conversation with Cécile Degos is a philosophy of attention to details, a sustained argument that space, when rigorously conceived, can return us to ourselves. She builds rooms where visitors stop scrolling, slow their pace, and allow the artwork to speak fully, whether it is the intimate skies of Paul Huet at the Musée de la Vie romantique, the psychological intensity of George Condo in Paris or the reimagined universe of Joseph Cornell at Gagosian. Across continents, centuries, and mediums, her scenography transforms exhibitions into immersive experiences, where architecture, light, and rhythm become the language of emotion.

And yet, Degos's vision never rests. On the horizon are projects that promise to stretch both imagination and space: Alberto Giacometti at the Minsheng Art Museum, Eva Gonzalès at the Petit Palais, Painting the French Riviera at the Royal Academy of Arts in London and a Kerry James Marshall retrospective at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris. With each new venture, she continues to explore the delicate balance between emptiness and fullness, narrative and perception, history and the contemporary.

With a practice spanning nearly thirty years, two continents, and the most demanding institutions in the art world, Degos continues to ask the same essential question with every new project: not how to fill a space, but how to make it speak.

Until next time,

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