

An extended family

by *Karen Wilkin*

How to describe Vincent Barré? For about half a century he has been a presence in the cultural life of France, with excursions into the rest of Europe, the United States, and Canada. But how do we categorize him? Sculptor, maker of generously scaled monotypes, passionate draftsman, installation artist, author of public art, architect and urbanist, filmmaker and occasional performer, dedicated teacher, intrepid traveler . . . And if that list weren't long enough, we must footnote "sculptor" to acknowledge that Barré has made work in ceramic, porcelain, bronze, wood, cast iron, cast aluminum, and steel, sometimes in provocative combinations, at both intimate and public scale.

Born in Vierzon, France, in 1948, Barré trained initially as an architect in his home country—he is descended from a long line of distinguished practitioners—and then earned a master's degree with Louis Kahn at the University of Pennsylvania. Yet Barré soon abandoned a burgeoning practice to concentrate on making art. He has remained deeply involved with how his work is presented, contributing importantly to the siting of his public works and to the design of his own exhibitions. In addition, he has had a profound (and beneficial) influence on the urbanism of Amilly, about two hours south of Paris, near his main studio; the town is notable for the intelligent configuration of its new buildings, all designed by gifted architects, and its carefully considered infrastructure and plantings. Add showings over the past few

years at the New York Film Festival of projects on which Barré has collaborated with his partner in life and work, the filmmaker Pierre Creton, plus a week dedicated exclusively to their films at the Brooklyn Academy of Music earlier this year, and we get an inkling of the multivalent abilities of this modest, unassuming, but intensely engaged artist.

None of this listing, however, captures the effect of Barré's work, no matter what discipline he chooses to explore or what medium he works in. For that, most recently, one could have visited "A Family of Rooms: Vincent Barré," an ambitious exhibition, part overview, part autobiography, part stock-taking, on view from June through mid-October at the Centre d'art contemporain d'intérêt national—Les Tanneries, a former leather-tanning factory handsomely transformed into an expansive, beautifully lit, multistory exhibition space just outside of Amilly.¹ (The title of the show comes from Louis Kahn's observation that a city is a family of rooms.) The ample, varied selection, chosen and installed throughout the entire building with the full participation of the artist, presented Barré whole, illuminating his evolution and revealing the many influences, experiences, works of art, people, and places that have been significant to him for the past five decades. And it did all this not with a flood of overwhelm-

1 "A Family of Rooms: Vincent Barré" was on view at Le Centre d'art contemporain d'intérêt national—Les Tanneries, Amilly, France, from June 7 through October 19, 2025.

ing detail, but through a judicious selection of essentials.

The story was told more or less backwards, beginning dramatically with the artist's most recent largest works. Only at the very end, in the exhibition's most intimate section, were the origins of what we had been looking at revealed, partly through notebooks that Barré has filled with incisive drawings from his student years to the present. They contain an astonishing, eclectic series of images. In a wall text, Barré noted: "My sketchbooks have always accompanied me during my travels, on visits to museums, when I am with those closest to me, in the solitude of my studio." His urgent, accomplished drawings record everything from celebrated artworks of all periods, to ancient tools and artifacts, to portraits of people met on his travels in India and the Himalayas, and more. Between the gathering of recent sculptures at the entrance and that last illuminating gallery on the second floor of Les Tanneries, we discovered works by Barré's artist friends that he finds stimulating or with which he feels particular sympathy. (That description also includes examples by masters from the distant and recent past.) These comparative works were accompanied by selections of Barré's oeuvre that parallel or respond to these chosen ancestors. Not surprisingly, the comparative works were an unpredictable assortment ranging from Constantin Brancusi, Jean Arp, and Simon Hantai to Barré's colleague Richard Deacon, with a short detour for Barré's *Homage à Giotto*, rendered in four small, chunky sculptures made in 1988.

But first, the newer work. We entered on the ground floor, a vast "great hall" punctuated by concrete columns, where we encountered the section titled "La grande nef" (the big nave), an assembly of large sculptures made between 1999 and 2025 in cast iron and cast aluminum, generously arranged in the light-flooded, high-ceilinged room. The big, unbroken space of the former tannery has been thoughtfully adapted for its present use but retains its industrial character, an ideal setting for Barré's muscular, eloquently simplified large sculptures. (The section title refers not to the space at Les Tanneries, but comes rather from one of the

artist's energetic early drawings, a relic of his education in architecture, which came into full view only much later in the exhibition.) As we moved among these recent sculptures, the cast-iron ones a warm red-brown, the cast-aluminum ones a cool, light-responsive gray, we realized that they fall into several general categories, which he refers to as *Colonnes* (columns), *Noyaux* (cores, like the pits of stone fruit), *Annaux* (rings), *Fuseaux* (spindles), and *Outres* (wineskins), among other names, as rough allusions to their shapes. The *Fuseaux*, for example, taper, while the *Outres* swell. There were also outliers, such as the *Colonnes jumelles* (2013), a pair of columns not quite identical in size and bulk, which reveal themselves to be weathered tree trunks, shorn of branches and partially wrapped in aluminum. Whatever their material, the recent sculptures are always massive and economical and often serial in conception, constructed of repeated elements. They are usually vertical and confrontational, but we also discover chains of repeated forms deployed horizontally, with one nesting inside the other. Usually, whatever the sculptures' orientation, openings allow us to realize that for all their bulk, they are hollow, so that we momentarily associate them with paper volumes inflated by air, without ever losing our awareness of their weight and density. That contradiction animates them, in the same way as the contrast between the rough oak of *Colonnes jumelles* and the matte gray of the aluminum does. Throughout, we are engaged by repetition and variation. Barré makes us aware of how a slight alteration of size, the expansion of an angle, a change in stacking or nesting, or an unpredictable indentation can cause nearly identical forms to seem very different.

Barré's massive sculptures in "La grande nef" have an uncanny presence. Walking among them, one had the impression of being surrounded by a crowd of individuals, each with a particular identity as well as a strong family resemblance. The viewer is increasingly aware of likeness and unlikeness and concentrates on small differences that alter even closely related volumes. There is nothing body-like about their proportions, nothing particularly organic

about their forms, yet the sculptures become anthropomorphic, the economy and geometric underpinnings of the vertical sculptures, in particular, allying them with archaic Greek kouroi. That's no accident. As later portions of the exhibition made clear, Barré is a keen observer not only of works of art ancient and modern, but also of utilitarian objects from antiquity and of fragments of the natural world, all of which have informed his work in important ways. His earliest sculptures clearly evoked the standing figure, in nonliteral ways, and that incipient anthropomorphism has persisted. The most recent works in "La grande nef" were at once among the most abstract and the most evocative of human presence. A small selection from a series titled *Soeurs* (Sisters), made in 2024, is clustered together like people at a social gathering. Each *Soeur* is over six feet high, a sinuous, narrow shape cut from a single sheet of steel. At first encounter, they seem to be simple silhouettes with crisp edges, but as we move around them, we discover folds and angled projections that make the flat sheets fully three-dimensional. I suspect that the *Soeurs* gain from being seen in a tight group, as they were in "La grande nef," since the gathering sets up spatial relationships among the individual works, challenging the flat shapes with which they begin and emphasizing the three-dimensionality and unexpectedness of the folds and projections.

"La grande nef" had two surprises. One was a large sculpture exhibited in progress, in order to reveal Barré's working methods, showing us the origins of his cast-iron or cast-aluminum pieces. As this inclusion made plain, he constructs them, full-size, in polystyrene, which he cuts with a hot wire. Volumes are taped together to make life-size equivalents of the final metal sculptures. The polystyrene versions become the cores of molds in which the iron or aluminum is cast, just as a wax or clay model can become the beginning of a work cast in bronze. The repeated sweeps of the hot wire, slicing the polystyrene into flattened curves and planes, survive in the cast metal, subtly inflecting the surface and subliminally reminding us of the history of the work's making. (According to Barré, that

history affects our perception of the sculpture whether or not we know his process.) While he acknowledged, in a wall text, that the mass of much of his recent work provokes architectural connotations, he also suggests that "because they are the result of very physical work, they have a corporeal, fleshy presence that gives them a sense of 'bodyness,' a certain gentleness perhaps." That elusive contradiction between what is literally in front of us and the associations it can provoke is part of what keeps us engaged.

Encountering the polystyrene sculpture in "La grande nef" was unexpected but instantaneous. Surprise number two took time. Moving through the gallery, one gradually became aware of a low, droning sound, unsure where it was coming from or what it was but assuming that it had something to do with the rural setting of Les Tanneries, amid minimally tamed woods. Then, at the far end of the ground floor exhibition space, the drone became louder and suddenly intelligible as the buzzing of bees. In fact it was part of a video installation, set back on the end wall: an image of two men embracing, their connection endlessly prolonged, as they stand in front of one of Barré's columnar aluminum sculptures; an actual, angular aluminum column stood in front of the projected image. Titled *Est-ce aimer?* (Is it love?) (2021), the video is one of Barré and Creton's collaborations, originally shown at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, during the COVID pandemic. (The protagonists are Barré and Creton themselves, who often appear in their films; the bees are probably from the hives Creton keeps on his Normandy property.)

Proceeding upstairs for the rest of "A Family of Rooms," we first moved along a broad exterior corridor punctuated by works by some of Barré's students from the master's program of the École des Beaux-Arts, where he headed an atelier for many years. All are now mature artists, some with substantial careers. None makes work like Barré—a sign of good teaching—but they seemed to share his clearheadedness and his interest in the specific properties of materials. When we entered the second-floor exhibition spaces, after this

demonstration of a legacy, we were offered insight into both Barré's formation and his connections. In each gallery, a number of his works from different periods were installed with works of art that influenced him and that he admires. Some were by artists with whom he has had long friendships, such as *Back of My Hand No. 9* (1991), a major wall piece by Richard Deacon, with whom Barré taught at the Beaux-Arts. A large, undulating plywood shape like a complicated torso supports a rubber tube, punctuated by rings that hold it away from the plywood, not quite echoing the underlying shape. Barré paired the Deacon with his own large, wall-mounted *Couronne de Dionysos* (Dionysus's crown) (2017), part of a series deriving from a Crown of Thorns in one of Barré's favorite paintings, a Pietà by the fifteenth-century master Jean Fouquet. Cast in bronze from interlaced twigs modified, thickened, and transformed with areas of wax that bear the imprint of the artist's hand, the *Couronne* made plain why it was installed near Deacon's linear, looping, three-dimensional "drawing" at that same time that it proposed its own ideas.

Elsewhere, similar affinities were made visible by the presentation of a pair of small, voluptuous plasters by Jean Arp, one from 1942, the other from 1965, alongside a selection of Barré's bronzes from a series titled *Retraits* (Withdrawals) made in 2021. Vaguely the size of heads, elegantly lined up on a handsome, minimal table designed by the artist, they trigger associations with portraits, Greek helmets, primitive cooking utensils, and more, while resembling nothing but themselves. Like the recent *Soeurs* with their slowly revealed three-dimensionality, the *Retraits* become increasingly complex as we move around them and discover that we can see into their suave, apparently self-contained volumes, which adds enriching considerations of the meaning of interior and exterior. Barré's relationship to the works he chose for comparison is complex and varied. A bold black-and-green, broadly swiped canvas by Judith Reigl, *Untitled* (1990), entered into an interesting conversation with Barré's brooding, large-scale, black-on-white monotypes, but Reigl's presence was also tes-

timony to a friendship that developed when Barré was showing in Germany. The high-level, varied, often unexpected works in this section about relationships were rewarding not only for their own merits but also for making us wonder about why they were included and for enlarging how we think about Barré.

The last gallery was the key, a portrait of the artist drawn from Barré's entire working life, starting with the earliest included drawing, an architectural exercise titled "la grande nef." We found works by artist friends, images of people close to him, resonant objects, and more that suggested recollections of what we had seen already on our progression from the dramatic presentation of recent work, through the galleries of affinities and connections, to this glimpse into the artist's life. Most revealing, perhaps, were the sketchbooks, opened to pages made at different times. The black-bound books have been Barré's constant companions through all the years documented by the works in the last gallery. He explained in a text panel that they are

notebooks as much as drawings. They report on things seen—landscapes, architecture, objects and works of art, the inhabitants of places I visit or those who accompany me in my life, I collect notes from my reading, what I hear on the radio, texts and projects that are ripening.

This last gallery was a summing-up that signals the passage of time, but it could also have been interpreted as a reverse prologue intended to provoke as-yet-unanswered questions about the rest of the exhibition. If so, we could retrace our route through "A Family of Rooms" and, informed by revelations of the last gallery, make new discoveries as we left.

A coda: Barré has exhibited regularly and extensively throughout France and elsewhere in Europe and had a spectacular show of small bronzes in Toronto in 2022. While his collaborative films with Creton are increasingly known, he hasn't shown sculpture in New York for decades. An exhibition of recent work or, better yet, a survey is long overdue.