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Diving Into the Paris Art World

BY KELLY CROW

THE LOUVRE and the Centre Pompidou are two of Paris's top museums, attracting roughly 13 million visitors a year and chronicling at least 6,000 years of art history between them. One thing the institutions have never done until now? Teamed up.

Earlier this week, both museums opened "[I]," a shared show featuring the same rising-star artist, Loris Gréaud. The Pompidou's portion will be up through July 15 and the Louvre's will be up through Jan. 20.

The museums' presidents came up with the idea three years ago to collaborate on an exhibit that could run simultaneously in both venues, and the Pompidou said Mr. Gréaud, a 34-year-old conceptual artist who lives in the Parisian suburb of Eaubonne, was a hometown favorite and easy pick.

Mr. Gréaud is known for his immersive, sometimes wacky installations that explore mankind's place within the vast, mysterious universe. He once hired scientists to re-create the odor on Mars, which he wafted into an otherwise empty room for passersby to sniff. More recently, he composed a symphony for ocean creatures, which he broadcast underwater with help from deep-sea divers. (His film about that project, "The Snorks: A Concert for Creatures," will be screened in Los Angeles and in New York's Times Square later this year.)

Earlier this month in Venice, Mr. Gréaud also unveiled a white, brightly lit room in French luxury-goods mogul François Pinault's museum, Punta della Dogana. The room evokes a temple on a spaceship, its sides lined with rows of floor-to-ceiling neon and glass tubes that taper into candelabra shapes.

Mr. Gréaud said he created the Venice installation in four months' time, but he's spent the past three years preparing for his shows at the Louvre and the Pompidou, and the resulting pieces are far more monumental.

In the Pompidou's bi-level lobby, he has erected a 46-foot-tall motorized, circular staircase encased in a black steel tower whose base cannot be seen from the street because it begins on the lower-level floor. Mr. Gréaud has hired 18 cliff divers to spend the next month riding up this pistonlike staircase and falling off its top to land, flat-backed, on an air bag sprawled below.

Walking into the museum, people can see divers falling from this tower every few minutes, but visitors must walk across the main lobby floor before they can peer down and see the divers landing safely.

Over at the Louvre, he has built a 30-foot-high black version of Michelangelo's "Rebellious Slave" in the atrium space beneath I.M. Pei's glass pyramid. But Mr. Gréaud's sculpture has been designed so that it appears to be covered entirely in black fabric and bound with rope.

At first glance, Mr. Gréaud's two pieces appear to share little in common beyond their

looming size. But Michel Gauthier, a Pompidou curator, said he sees "an interesting tension" between the kinetic, machinelike spiral in the Pompidou—which plays off the building's tubelaced exterior—and the frozen, what's-under-there curiosity stoked by the veiled slave in the Louvre. (The real thing by Michelangelo is much smaller and exhibited in a museum gallery nearby.)

For Mr. Gréaud, the reasons are more personal. Growing up, he said, his father sold gaso-

line and his mother cut hair, and neither had much time to take their three children to museums—but when he was 18, he took himself to the Pompidou and saw a show by conceptual-art pioneer Bruce Nauman that took his breath away. Walking through rooms pulsing with Nauman's neon signs and unseen speakers broadcasting phrases like "Get out of my mind," Mr. Gréaud realized his ideas about art could be bolder and stranger than anything hanging in a gilt frame. "It was all above my understanding,

but I knew I had to find out more," he said. Shortly thereafter, he went to art school.

Another formative experience shaped his piece for the Louvre: When he was 9 years old, he wandered into a reception being held in his hometown to unveil some wagon wheel-type sculpture in a roundabout. To him the sculpture itself was forgettable, but he was captivated by the moment of its unveiling, the whoosh as all that fabric fell away. "It was beautiful without meaning to be," he said.

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Crow, Kelly: Diving Into The Paris Art World

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Clockwise from left: Hervé Vénédicé/Centre Pompidou; Louvre Museum; Getty Images



DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME Loris Gréaud's, below, installation at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, left, involves 18 cliff divers falling off a tower onto an airbag. Above, his wrapped piece at the Louvre.

