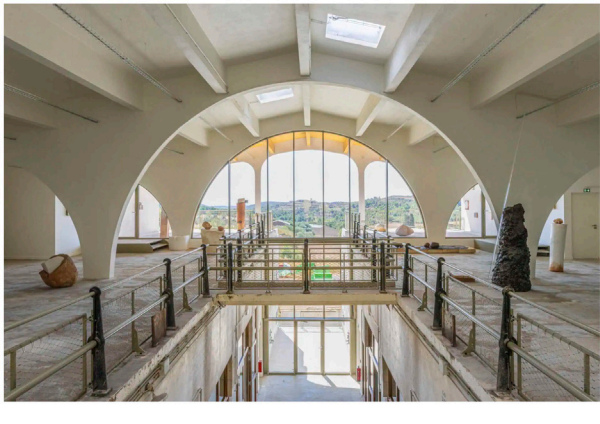




La Còla, Where Contemporary Art Meets Social History

Nia Sayer

A former wine cooperative turned creative hub, La Còla marks a new cultural chapter for the Minervois, preserving the rural heritage of Southern France's Languedoc region, through an exchange of history, creation and modern art.

I had the privilege of visiting La Còla myself, and what I found was an extraordinary initiative seamlessly merging exhibition with education. It is a collaborative gallery, library-cafe, and workshopping space which nurtures the very essence of creativity: prioritising firsthand artistic encounters, honoring cultural history and celebrating innovative new design.

Nestled in the heart of the medieval Southern French village of Aigne, within the winemaking region of Hérault, La Còla officially opened its doors to visitors in July 2026. Funded by the Fondation Pascaline Mulliez, the project is a collaboration with L'Ahah, a non-profit organisation committed to providing collaborative and informative artistic practices across areas of France. With multiple L'Ahah sites in Paris, La Còla intentionally prioritises audiences further away from the opportunities of the cultural capital. By bringing contemporary art to rural regions, it makes creative and cultural education accessible to all.

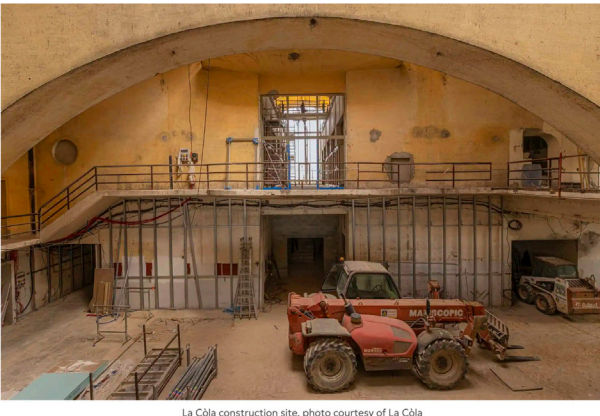
Rather than encouraging passive observation, the space urges proactive engagement with art. It invites visitors to immerse themselves directly in both the creative and historical processes behind the design.

The History of La Còla

Occupying the building that was previously the Aigne Wine Cooperative, La Còla is physically and symbolically built upon the social and agricultural history of the Minervois. Standing just twenty kilometres from Narbonne, the renowned wine-region of Southern France, La Còla grows directly from its viticultural roots.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a wine crisis and subsequent winemakers' revolt called for a reorganisation of the industry. And so, the concept of a wine cooperative was born, structured around communal production and shared regional resources. Built between 1949 and 1951 by architect Paul Brès, the cooperative initially housed 57 winemakers. It expanded in 1966 by René Villeneuve. Unfortunately this époque of Cooperative prosperity was not to last long.

In the 1970s the wine market began evolving from large-scale cooperative productions, to independent small-batch wine making. And so, production at the Aigne Wine Cooperative gradually slowed, until it permanently closed its doors in the 2000s. Vacant for fifteen years, the building's creative drought has come to an end. Its reopening marks a profound resurrection for the Cooperative. Once a space for the collective production of wine, now a sanctuary for the collective production of art.



La Còla construction site, photo courtesy of La Còla



La Còla library cafe, photo courtesy of La Còla

Modern Architecture, Built on the Beams of Heritage

Rather than demolishing the historical site, La Còla is built directly upon the foundations of the Cooperative. Designed by architect Yves Bour, the architectural rehabilitation project is simultaneously a preservation project. The new layout honours the pillars of its original design: former wine fermentation tanks become teaching spaces, old distillation vats stand alongside the ground floor exhibitions and industrial steel pipes spiral up the walls; like art installations all on their own. Even the ceiling retains the same sun-warmed shade of yellow that coloured the Cooperative decades ago.



Distillation vats from the Aigne Wine Cooperative, photo courtesy of La Còla

What's even more special is that the inaugural artists in residence were actively involved in the reconstruction process. Since they created their art alongside the roar of building machines, the architectural history is physically embedded in the contemporary art installations. Max Charvolen uses an old decommissioned staircase as the mould for his central piece, immortalising the now excavated structure in his art. Meanwhile, Corinne Mercadier photographs the space under construction. She freezes the building's transformation in time with the click of her shutter. The Cooperative's rich history serves as a direct inspiration to the modern art that now stands within its walls.

History Kept Alive

The Occitan term *còla* literally translates to a group of grape harvesters. Indeed, this spirit of community is crucial to the collaborative functioning of the center. Offering free admission for all, La Còla functions as a meeting place for creativity. It unites artists, visitors and the local residents through exhibitions, residencies, workshops and projects with local schools.

La Còla serves as a pedagogical platform, introducing visitors to regional traditions alongside contemporary design. Visitors are taught to make art, through a range of hands-on classes such as charcoal drawing and clay modelling. But even more importantly, to understand the creative and historical processes behind these practices.



Corinne Mercadier photography workshop, photo courtesy of La Còla

The program includes an ever-growing agenda of talks and demonstrations. There are conferences about the history of the building and the winemaking process. Storytelling sessions explain the 1907 winemaker’s revolt to children. Beyond the walls, guided walks explore the surrounding Hérault landscape. And short films and slideshows in the cinema room visually illustrate the architectural evolution of La Còla.

Ultimately, the project keeps the region’s heritage alive, through new artistic traditions, prioritising meaningful human interaction through shared creative process.

L’Orangerie: An Extension of La Còla’s Mission

La Còla’s sister venue, L’Orangerie, stands as a geographical extension dedicated to the same mission: cultural exchange through contemporary art. Held within the former wine-estate Château La Dournie, the surrounding estate remains a flourishing fully-functioning vineyard.

L’Orangerie also houses an ever-evolving program of artists. It hosts multi-media exhibitions as well as live concerts and social events centred around art exploration and conversation. The industrial tools of wine-making stand alongside the exhibits. As visitors walk round the estate, migrating between indoor galleries and outside gardens, the sweet smell of crushed grapes, the rustle of olive leaves and the chorus of cicadas break the interior silence of the exhibition spaces. L’Orangerie feels truly rooted in the living, breathing rural heritage of the Languedoc.

Current Residences at La Còla:

Corinne Mercadier

Where Max Charvolen captures the cooperative’s architecture via physical molds, photographer Corinne Mercadier frames its evolution through the lens. Her exhibition, *Opéra Silencieux* (Silent Opera), consists of ten mixed-media photographs that document the venue’s literal rebirth.

Mercadier first visited the space on the 20th July 2025, during its demolition phase. During this disembowelment of the winery, giant saws hollowed out the space, cutting into the tanks, and turning them into the workshop rooms. Standing in the decimated site of La Còla, surrounded by debris, she looked past the rubble and saw a realm of raw, industrial poetry:

“It is a process of metamorphosis from one use to another,” Mercadier explains. “A transmutation of a workplace specific to this land and the vineyard, to a place dedicated to showing contemporary art.”

The Process

Her creative process perfectly mirrors the reconstruction of the building itself. In the vacant building site, Mercadier was greeted by the perfect conditions to begin photographing. She found ‘a great silence except for the wind, late morning, perfect light.’ Here Corinne scouts the industrial machines as the unlikely models and casts them in her photos. She photographs the brutalist agricultural ruins and the resting machinery. Later, she layers these raw photographs with cosmic-inspired abstract paintings executed on glass.

The digital fusion of raw photo and glass paintings balances the real with the fantastical. Luminous, theatrical apparitions, which look like studio lighting effects, are really just the fusion of her white glass paintings onto the original image. By embellishing the construction site with hand-painted celestial shapes, like shooting stars and smoke clouds, she transports the original space to a dreamlike realm. Tracing the evolution of La Còla, she reimagines the brutalist agricultural space as a domain of otherworldly possibility.

Mercadier explains the underlying mood of this collection as ‘tragic-sympa’ (sad but nice), which she adds is ‘like the human condition’. This perfectly summarises the juxtaposition of each work, a poignant contrast between light and dark, past winery and present gallery, realist photo and surrealist glass painting. A fusion of concrete architecture and pure imagination, where photographed rubble blends into stardust. A metaphor for the modern Renaissance of La Còla, a vacant factory transformed to universe of limitless potentiality.

The Pieces

A prime example of such potentiality is her piece *Paradiso*, which Mercadier explains takes inspiration from her love of Sandro Botticelli. Indeed, much like his Renaissance paintings, this piece harnesses light to transform the atmosphere. The background photo here is concrete fragments of the cooperative, a desolate image focalising destruction. However, her overlaid glass painting introduces parallel lines of heavenly light ascending from the void of debris below. And so, the mood completely lifts.



Paradiso, courtesy of Corinne Mercadier

In *Astrolab*, Corinne turns her focus her camera to a piece of machinery used in the renovation process: a giant circular saw blade used for concrete cutting. From these silver jaws of destruction, glows her painted image: a celestial orb of light. Inspired by Saturn’s rings, the rippling halo of light spreads like a mini milky-way across the guillotine, softening the jagged edges of the cutting tool. And so, from the building site grows a small galaxy. Thus, by fusing the mechanical with the cosmic Mercadier takes something perfectly mundane and offers the viewer a ‘rêve’, a beautiful, unexpected dream.



Astrolab, courtesy of Corinne Mercadier

To conclude, we pause at ‘Aventure’. The final piece focalises an empty doorway of old cooperative, posing as a mysterious portal of pitch black. Mercadier’s glass painting outlines the door in a vivid rectangle of luminous white. The effect is cinematic, as though the doorway is glowing with energy, beckoning the viewer through to the realm beyond. The oeuvre presents an opening, a literal and symbolic pathway into somewhere entirely new new.

An alliance between physical reality and surrealist dreaming, *Opéra Silencieux* perfectly captures the dreamlike space of La Còla. A space defined by harmonious duality between endless contemporary creativity, built upon a foundation of rural history.