



## At Work With: Laurent Martin

A little more than a decade ago, *Laurent Martin* defected from the advertising world. At the age of 50, he developed a monomania that saw him retreat into an artist's life in rural Catalonia. The object of his deep-set and dense fixation? Bamboo. Words by Pip Usher & Photography by Mirjam Bleeker







Left: The inherent flexibility and graceful curve of bamboo allows it to sway gently with the breeze.

Right: Laurent leaves sticks of bamboo outside to dry for two to eight months before initiating the construction process.

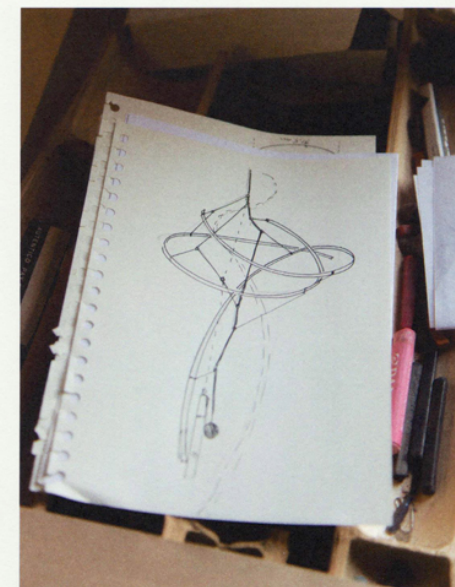
There are late bloomers and then there is Laurent Martin. The sculptor—a sturdily built man with bushy brows that dance across his face—began his “artist’s life” at 50 years old. Before that, the first five decades had followed a fairly ordinary path: There was a successful career as a creative director and relocation path from his native France to the sunnier climes of Barcelona. He had a son and a daily routine. Then he discovered bamboo.

“It was a revelation,” Martin recalls. After becoming intrigued by the interior architecture of Barcelona’s first sushi bar, he first split some bamboo to try to simulate its structure. He was immediately obsessed; in 2004, he left behind the “artificial world” of advertising and started life again, this time as a full-time artist. He has made a career of it ever since.

Look at Martin’s work and it’s easy to understand the appeal of his material of choice. Gracefully curved strips of bamboo circle in arcs through the air, suspended like mobiles so that they can sway with the breeze. Some are comprised of numerous pieces of undulating bamboo, others are elegant in their singular simplicity. But throughout all of his work runs an enduring theme of peacefulness. Bamboo gave Martin a sense of equilibrium—now he wants to transmit that inner calmness to others.

“Bamboo is about balance,” he explains. “I’m looking for balance and harmony.” As a result, Martin is more interested in the emotional resonance of his sculptures on viewers than any aesthetic ideal. His agent, Mercedes, remembers the first time she saw his work at an exhibition in northern Spain. “When I came into the gallery and saw all these sculptures floating in the air and moving, I was like, ‘Wow,’” she says, perched next to Martin throughout his interview. “You have a sense of magic; you are calm. The pieces are in balance and that means they give you a sense of balance.”

These days, Martin’s quest for tranquility has led to a simple life; the speed of the advertising industry has been replaced with a pace that mirrors his rustic surroundings. He’s relocated to a converted factory in the Spanish countryside that houses his living space and studio. Even the furnishings of his house are sparse and functional, with bamboo floors and a bamboo staircase banister. Martin’s quick laughter and expressive face seem like markings of a Mediterranean man. Mercedes suspects that, much like his beloved bamboo, his soul is from elsewhere.









Right: The walls and floors of Martin's home in rural Spain are made of the same material as his sculptures—bamboo.

*"The structure of bamboo is like an antenna. It makes you feel calm because it catches all of the noises and vibrations. It cleans the space and the atmosphere."*

In 2004, you said goodbye to your old life in the advertising industry and embarked on a journey around the "Bamboo Road" of India and Southeast Asia. What prompted this adventure? When I first started splitting and cutting bamboo [in 1998], I fell in love. I stayed in fashion and advertising for five more years, but by night I worked on this new hobby. I read a lot, and watched things on the internet.

Five years later, I stopped my life in Barcelona. I sold all I could sell and went to Asia to study bamboo behavior and bamboo handicrafts and everything I could learn about bamboo. When I left, I wasn't afraid of anything. I'd discovered a new passion and I went where my passion called me. I had a good job, good friends—but the call of the bamboo was very strong.

The first step was India, then Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. I was looking for people that were really living with bamboo. I wanted to see, to learn, to begin my "Bamboo Story." It was very interesting for me to feel the happiness of people living in villages where the houses are made of bamboo. In Europe, we talk about the prehistoric age; in northern Laos, they talk about the bamboo age. Bamboo was the first material they used to live—to hunt, to fish, to eat, to make a home. It was a very impressive experience.

**What is the appeal of the material for you?** If you walk through a bamboo forest, you feel a very special atmosphere. Its structure is like an antenna—you feel calm because it catches all of the noises and vibrations. It cleans the space and the atmosphere.

Bamboo is a very connective material. Thomas Edison's first lightbulb was built with the fiber of carbon and bamboo. Once, I was talking on the phone with a man in India and I couldn't hear him. He said, "Don't you work with bamboo?" I said, "Yes," and he said, "Take a piece of bamboo in one hand and then call me." I did it—and it worked!

For me, it's very important to work with natural and sustainable materials. Bamboo is the most sustainable plant on the earth. In Thailand, in India, in China, in parts of the world with bamboo, they talk about it as the material of the future. There are a lot of architects and designers studying the fiber because you can shape it more easily than wood. In areas where there are earthquakes, they use it in structural architecture because it moves, it's very flexible and it won't be broken.

**What is the process in creating your sculptures?** It's very important for my work that I don't draw. Instead, I follow the structure of the material to create my sculptures. I work with the bamboo's flexibility, resistance and lightness so that the sculptures are built from the material, not my mind. The first thing I'm looking for is the balance point. Then I split most of the bamboo and make sticks. Each piece is very different—you can feel the difference in the fiber. I remove the internal fiber and that's when I choose the flexibility of my sticks.

If you watch bamboo growing, there's a very particular structure because it is composed of knots. Between the knots there's space. That's why the bamboo is a balanced plant: The base is very strong, the middle is flexible for the wind and the top is strong for the leaves.

Once I'm ready for construction, I put the bamboo sticks outside my workshop and let them dry between two to eight months. I can modify the effect of the weather on the fiber. I work a lot with the rain, the sun,

the warm air, the cold air. The wind from the mountain is very dry, the wind from the sea is wet and the mixture between these two modifies the shape of my work. The curves it generates are very nice—better than what I can do with my hands. Nature is the best sculptor.

**Are you trying to explore something spiritual with your work?**

The people who understand my work say that it's nice to look at it because it's relaxing. It's not only the aesthetic; there's a lot of feeling within my work. In bamboo, I've found an answer to my own equilibrium and I think I wanted to transmit this sensation of balance. Now I'm doing sculptures I call energy domes. These sculptures aren't just something to see from outside, but from inside too thanks to the atmosphere that they generate. When I first worked inside the dome, I felt a very good energy—very quiet, very calm. When I told my friend, he said, "Yeah, yeah, Laurent—forget it." But two days later, my friend called again and said, "When my dogs saw your energy dome, they made a hole under it and now they sleep inside the dome."

**You're originally from Paris, but you've lived in Spain for 25 years now.**

**Why did you decide to settle there?** I'm very happy in Spain because of the character of the Mediterranean people. They're more funny, more enthusiastic, than the French. In Spain, I met a way of life, a way of thinking, that enchanted me. When you're an artist—because it's hard, you have to fight a lot—it helps that the people here are optimists.

**What has been the most exciting moment of your career so far?** The first exhibition, the last exhibition and all the exhibitions in between!

The last one was very exciting—it was in Hong Kong and it was my first exhibition in a bamboo country. They received me well.

**How do you make sure your studio is conducive to creativity?** I like to listen to good music, to be quiet, to be alone, to have good light.

**What is your home like? How does it reflect you?** I live between Barcelona and the French border. It's a very nice landscape: The sea is beautiful, the light is really special. It's like the Spanish version of Tuscany. There are a lot of painters in this area because the light is so good. These groups of artists are really helpful and easy. There's no competition. I needed a lot of space for my work so I was very lucky to find an old factory. I could do what I wanted for my home and for my workshop. It's a dream home. I feel really good in every part of it. When I eat, I feel good; when I sleep, I feel good. The floor is bamboo and there is a lot of natural light entering the house. It's functional—there is nothing superfluous. It's very simple... And it's very simple to clean! In my bedroom, there's an energy dome above my head. I sleep very well, and I dream very well, too. I like the futon bed—it's on a Japanese-style tatami. My barbershop chair is my favorite place to see my work. I put myself in the chair, I look at my work, I think, I smoke a cigarette. Outside my house, there are pieces of bamboo drying. They're all works in progress. When I finish one, I put it in the showroom because then I have to protect it from the weather. I keep a few secret pieces for me, but not a lot because I like when people buy them—not for the money, but for the work.





