

# Village tells local artist: Not in your backyard

By John Tagliabue

## ST.-ROMAIN-AU-MONT-D'OR, France

**T**hierry Ehrmann recounts that a Japanese guest, after visiting his home in this sturdy stone village in the gentle hills north of Lyon, remarked, "I have seen the church of the 21st century."

Mayor Pierre Dumont is not so sure. "It's humanly intolerable, ugly, dramatic, with its images of destruction," he said. "Whatever you think, for me it's not art, it's a provocation."

Ehrmann, 44, is a businessman-turned-artist who over the past seven years has poured his soul, his religious and worldly convictions and roughly \$5 million into the transformation of a 17th-century stone house into a complex work of art that he calls "The Abode of Chaos." He became wealthy after founding an online service for determining the cost of art objects and through other ventures.

Together with artists from several countries, Ehrmann has painted the two-story house and the wall around it black and arrayed them with giant portraits of noted personalities, including eight popes, but also President George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden.

The garden is strewn with sculptures, mainly by Ehrmann, including a crashed helicopter, a wrecked oil truck and a model of the jagged steel remains of the World Trade Center. A reproduction of an oil platform perches on the roof, draped with camouflage netting.

Ehrmann, who is married and has two children, began the project in 1999 as a kind of monument to his eclectic religious beliefs, which range from Roman Catholicism to alchemy. Hence the popes, but also salamanders, an animal sacred to the alchemists, cut in steel and affixed to the walls of the building.

But Sept. 11, he said, was a turning

point, prompting him to focus his attention on aspects of life like war and destruction and hatred and terrorism. Hence portraits of men like Kofi Annan but also bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Qaeda leader in Iraq who was killed in June by a U.S. airstrike.

"Terrorism in the world has 1,000 faces," he said, standing under portraits of Ariel Sharon and Yasser Arafat. "Always see the face of the other."

Dumont, 70, a retired electrical engineer, had been mayor of St. Romain for

17 years when Ehrmann began his project on the peaceful Rue de la République. "It's something that brings nothing to humanity; it's completely harebrained," he said in his cramped office, under a copy of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. "I paint myself — I have a certain sensibility. But I cannot understand what someone means by an airplane crash, an oil platform."

So Dumont has taken Ehrmann to court, arguing that he has violated laws concerning building within the town limits. In June the court ruled against Ehrmann, fining him and ordering him to restore the house to its original state. A final verdict by an appeals court is not expected until September.

When Marc Allardon, a neighbor, peers across from his yard at Ehrmann's house, he sees the crashed helicopter and the oil platform, but they do not disturb him. He considers Dumont and Ehrmann equally stubborn. "I try to mediate between the mayor and Thierry," Allardon said. "Both are born hardheads."

Indeed, Allardon has begun parodying Ehrmann, decorating his own home and declaring it a monument to a mock religion. Atop a stone column in his front yard stands a statue of the Virgin Mary arrayed in a rainbow-colored garment. A serpent made of pipe wraps its curls around her; in its mouth a sign says, "Let's Be Tempted." On the roof of his house are signs with words like "Tol-

erance," "Utopia," "Joy," "Hope." Artificial flowers sprout from the chimney, which is wrapped in green paper.

But Dumont says it is not only his own sensibility but also that of other townspeople that has been hurt. "For older people that house was magnificent, with a farm," he said. "People bear that badly."

Nicole Floris, who lives just behind Ehrmann, said it was a "shame that he ruined a beautiful house, in stone, in the local style." But Marie Dumont, her neighbor (no relation to the mayor), said she was not troubled by the look of the house. "The most disturbing thing are the visitors," she said, who arrive every weekend, sometimes in the thousands.

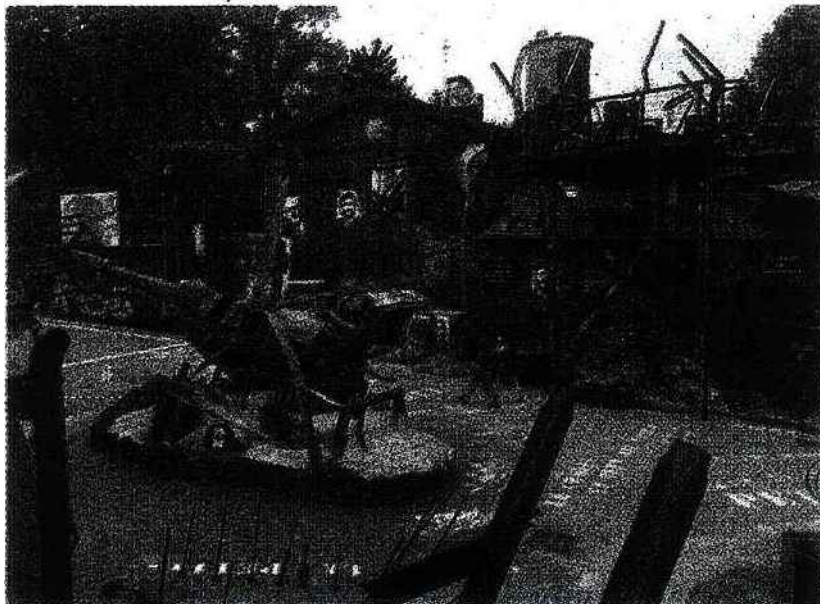
A local member of Parliament, Christian Philip, has applied to France's culture minister to place the house under protection. But the ministry has not yet responded.

In the meantime, Ehrmann says he has received 54,000 postcards supporting his work and that 27,000 people have signed a petition.

He speaks dismissively of his opponents. "I told them, 'Don't commit the irreparable,'" he said. "In your resistance, I tell them, 'you are contributing to this work. This work is encapsulating you, absorbing you.'"

His friend Allardon is confident. "It's like the Eiffel Tower," he said. "At first, people were against it. Here it will be like that. Someday the Japanese tour buses will come."

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Photographs by Tomas van Houtryve for The New York Times

*Thierry Ehrmann, below, has turned his 17th-century French house into a work of art called "The Abode of Chaos." Some villagers, however, find it "humanly intolerable."*