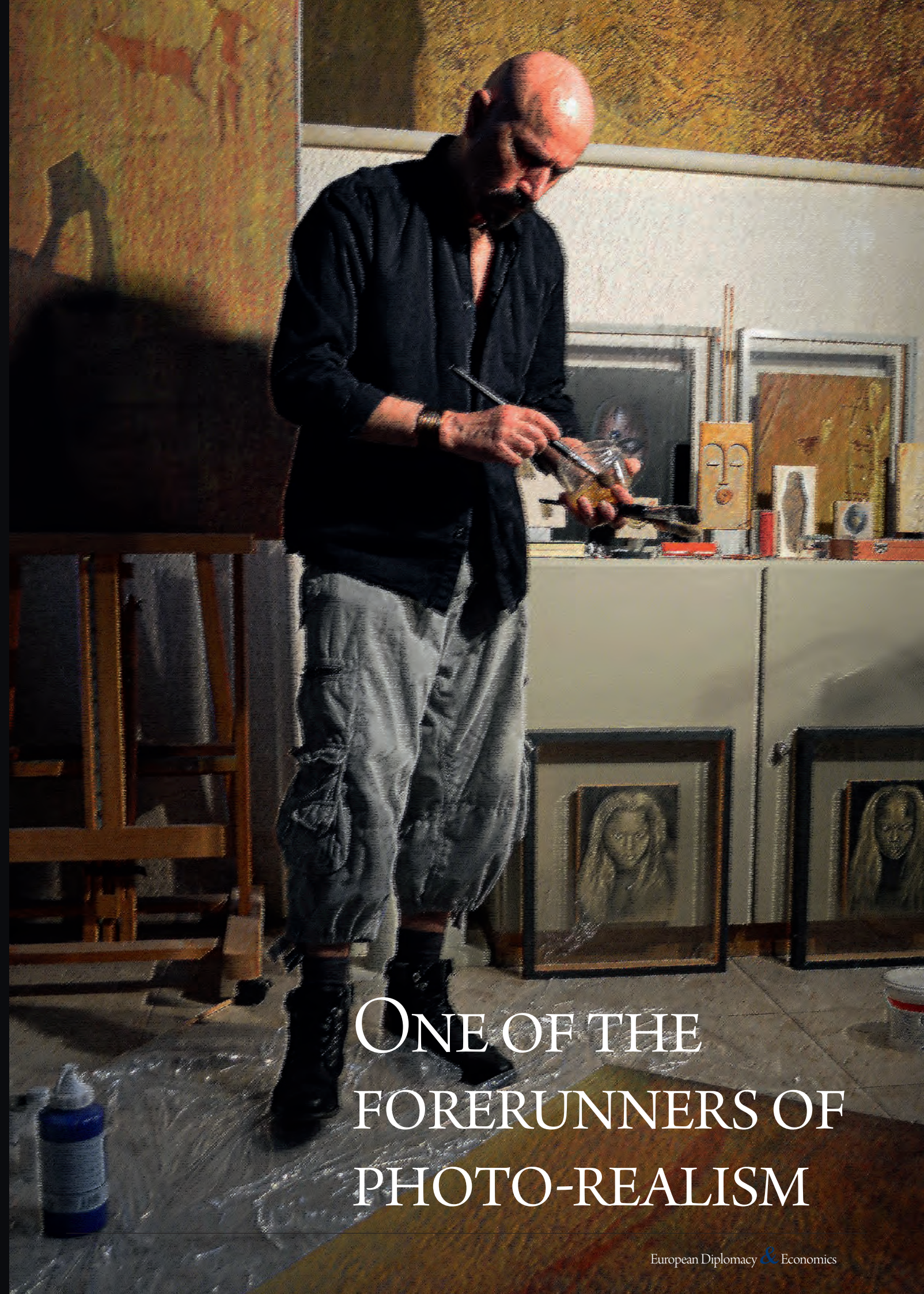
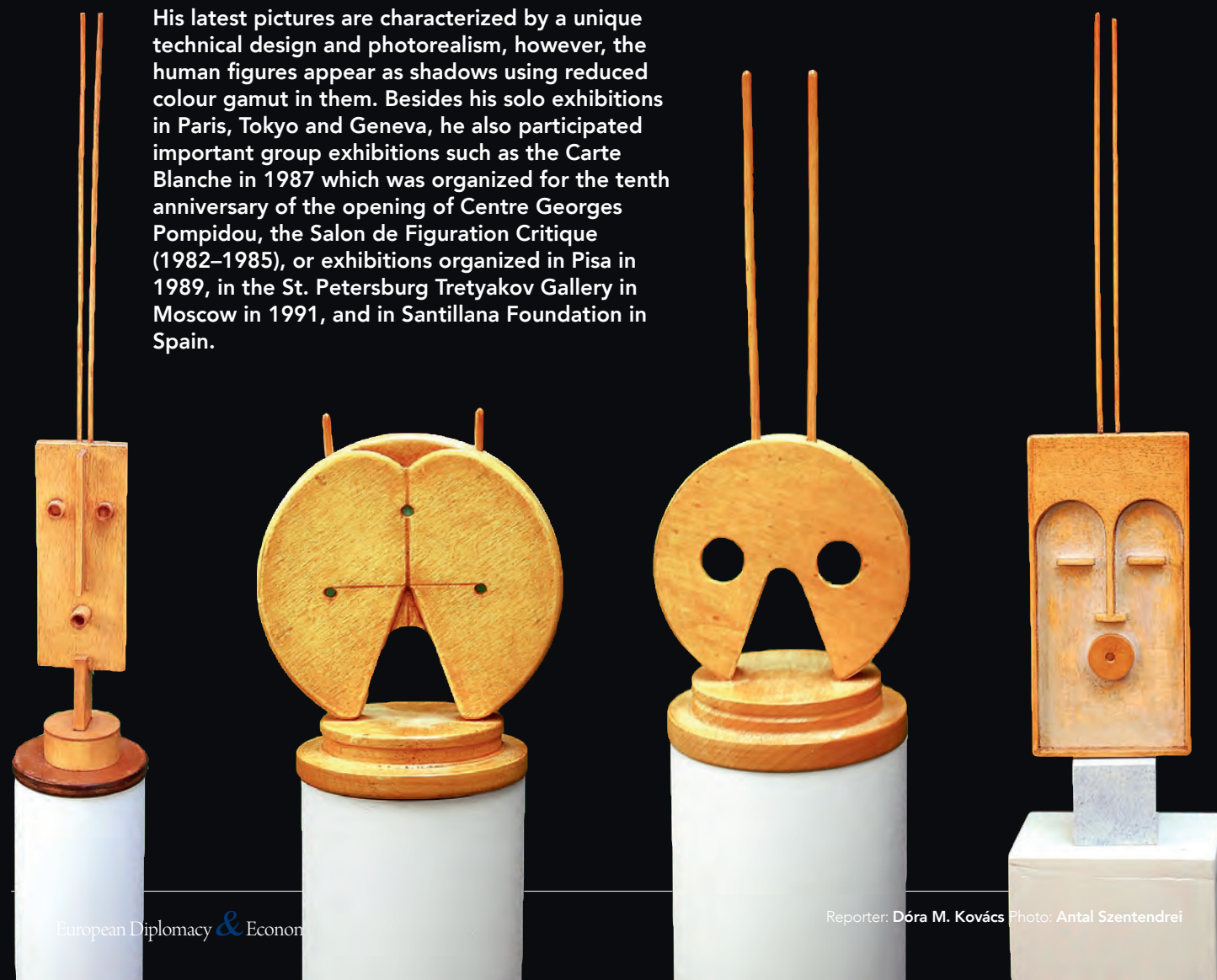


LÁSZLÓ MÉHES

Over the past 34 years his works have been exhibited in a number of countries from Japan to the USA at both solo and group exhibitions. László Méhes has been living and working in Paris for 34 years, he is the pioneer of the photorealist painting. We talked to the Hungarian-born painter in his home in Paris.

His latest pictures are characterized by a unique technical design and photorealism, however, the human figures appear as shadows using reduced colour gamut in them. Besides his solo exhibitions in Paris, Tokyo and Geneva, he also participated important group exhibitions such as the Carte Blanche in 1987 which was organized for the tenth anniversary of the opening of Centre Georges Pompidou, the Salon de Figuration Critique (1982–1985), or exhibitions organized in Pisa in 1989, in the St. Petersburg Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow in 1991, and in Santillana Foundation in Spain.



ONE OF THE
FORERUNNERS OF
PHOTO-REALISM

Let's go back in time a bit. When were you first touched by the love of painting?

I was about five years old when I got enchanted by a large nineteenth century oil painting and I told my parents that I would be an artist. At the age of six, in a large pastel picture I portrayed the interiors of a circus from a top view perspective depicting also the clowns and spectators. They could not believe that I painted the picture myself but fortunately my teacher proved it as I had made it in sight of him.

When did you begin to consciously prepare for this profession? Who were your teachers and idols?

I began my art studies in the Hungarian Grammar School of Art and Design. At that time my idols were the surrealists from the modern painting. Then at the University of Fine Arts I was taught by the best professors. The ideological master of my master, Aurél Bernàth was Joseph Rippl-Ronai, the member of the French "Nabis" group.

At the time of your studies and individual style seeking what were the effects that led to the development of your own personal style? Was it the European traditions or the American figurative painting that influenced the establishment of your Photorealist style?

Perhaps both of them, but there was also a third factor. In 1961 I was experimenting on a new technique. I managed to make imprints of objects which resulted in photo-like effects. What really determined my program-like efforts towards photorealism was a photomontage picture of Robert Rauschenberg, an American Pop Art painter which was made with the silk-screen technique. Screen-printing procedure provided new artistic effects to photographs which were very similar to what I achieved in a totally different way with imprints without screen and photographs.

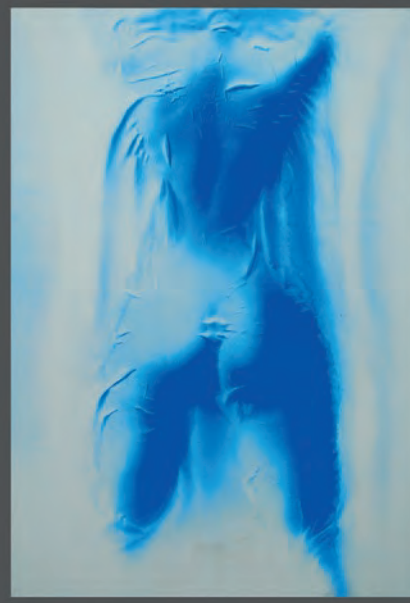
I decided to give up all the fashionable pop elements at the time and be only inspired by the opportunities of the photo-effects.

From the early sixties a number of my drawings and small pictures were made in that spirit. My first photorealist large oil painting was exhibited in 1969.

Why did you settle in Paris?

I have always loved the cosmopolitan Paris and I also had French ancestors through my paternal grandmother. In addition, in 1968, the French art critic /later the director of the Paris Biennale/, Georges Boudaille was in Budapest. Returning to Paris, he published an article

"Art is democratic, but there have always been and there will always be some outstanding artists."



about the Hungarian avant-garde art in the "Les Lettres Françaises" journal. I received special attention in his article which says that he can mainly imagine my work in the Sonnabend Gallery, which was one of the major galleries in Paris at the time. I first exhibited in France, at the Paris Biennale in 1971 which was also the first representative tutorial of the Concept Art. My concept work was exhibited here.

In 1972, my parents and my brother lived in Nigeria as my father worked in a Nigerian-English-Hungarian cooperation. I was going to travel to Nigeria too for my family's invitation. I was going to travel through Paris but I was completely captivated and detained by the atmosphere of the city. The one year and a few months of period I spent in Paris was a lot of experience to me (for example, Anton Prinner's regular table in the Coupole Coffee House, a lot of interesting meetings in René de Montaigne's Salon and in the Lucien Hervé house and most of all the photorealist exhibition in ARC 2 / Musée d'Art Moderne de Ville de Paris in April 1973) and it brought important events in my life. I was deeply impressed by Yves Klein's philosophy and gesture painting. My new series continued from the imprint of female nude torsos, including the 1975 triptych, the Hommage à Yves Klein was born from that experience. In 1972, I exhibited with the American Hyperrealists in the Galerie Quatre Mouvements.

The great cultural event of 1972 was the Documenta in Kassel where the American hyperrealism, a new trend was first introduced at an international forum. I arrived at the most favourable moment. The contemporary section of the Parisian ARC opened in 1973 as ARC2 with the introduction of the European, mainly the French photorealism. The opening consisted of a solo exhibition of the three of us: me, Fanti and Sandorfi. I got a French state-owned studio apartment in the Cité Internationale des Arts and got involved in the French picture trading.

These exhibitions made it clear that isolated from the western world you were still able to keep pace with the universal art. At this time several art magazines, such as the Opus International, Art Press and Art International wrote about your work. How did it continue?

A year later, in the autumn of 1973, I returned to Budapest to ask permission to stay longer in Paris. After several attempts, I only managed to get passport for the exhibition of Gallery Liliane in François in 1979, but I only had a three-day permit to stay. I settled down permanently in France then.

How was your period following your "hyperrealism" received?

After 1973, the hyperrealism came into fashion. A photography copying hysterics evolved. The real spiritual power was lost; it only became a commercial possibility. This is the reason, I began a new period, where I applied the already existing method from the sixties which provided photo effects but did not use any photographs. By developing a new technology, I made paintings of draped objects by a contact technique. Due to its photo-like effect, this period was related to both the hyperrealism and the gestural painting. This series of mine was a commercial success in Paris.

How did your style change in the 80's and 90's?

In 1982 I was in Japan. I was gripped by the installation of the Japanese hanging scroll paintings. Returning to Paris I began to paint large hanging canvases in post hyperrealist style, as well as large canvases on orders: for the tenth anniversary of Centre Georges Pompidou and for the grandiose prestige exhibition of the Association Française des

Banques which took place in ELAC in Lyon. In the hanging pictures I more and more diverged from hyperrealism. I simplified my motives and made my style more succinct for the beginning of the 90s. From the beginning of the 90s I found inspiration from the art of the caveman, the "primitive" people, the African and antique art.

What do you think about eclecticism in general and about the fact that you have also applied a variety of styles?

I have always been loyal to my basic style, which is interpreting my own personal feelings and thoughts by always searching for new and more expressive possibilities. Sometimes the "personal" style of great classic and modern masters may also appear "eclectic" though they express search, development and crystallizing. As a young artist, Turner also painted detailed landscapes in baroque style, then virtually in impressionist style, and later he worked in almost a tachist style. Not to mention modern masters such as Picasso, Dali, Mondrian, Marcel Duchamp, etc...

Don't you think it is controversial that in your present works, as a European artist you get inspiration from the "primitive" art of indigenous people?

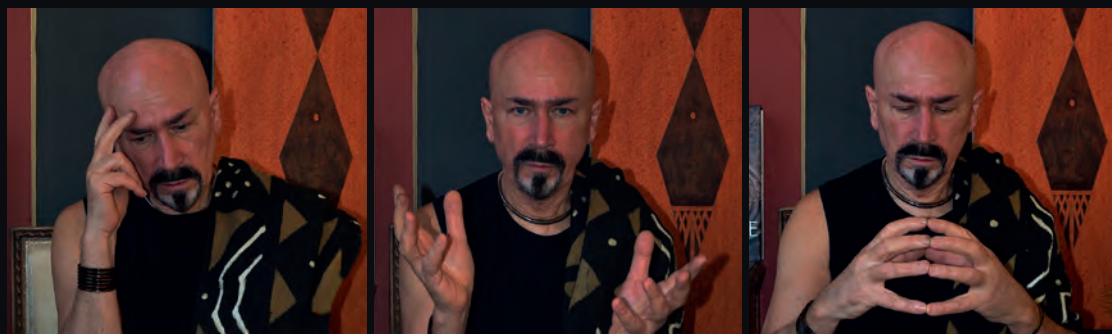
Art has been in universal interaction of the different human civilizations for thousands of years. I'm not only inspired by the art of the "primitive" people and the African arts but by all ancient sources which European art was inspired by and developed from, in particular the prehistoric man, the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Scythian, Crete-Mycenaean, Etruscan, Greek-Roman art etc... Most European painters, Gauguin, Klimt, etc. were inspired by the Japanese and Pacific art. Picasso was inspired among others by the African art.

The institution is operating under your leadership even today. What do you consider to be the primary task of the Ecole des Languages de l'Art Plastique?

First of all, one of its main tasks is the preparation for college. Besides our permanent teachers, guest professors are also involved in the work of the institution. In recent years, however, the conditions allowed me to return to my artistic work again.

What are your plans?

To prepare the restoration of my works, to complete my unfinished work, to realize all my work which only exist in sketches and to complete my different periods/eras. Furthermore, I'm also working on the establishment of a monograph and I would like to create a permanent collection of my work, of course, not only in-house...



How do you see the future, the intellectual and mercantile role of visual arts?

In Modern Art, the release from the previous systems of values, the techniques, the endless variations of styles lead to "eclecticism". There are very few completely reliable values for collectors. In art, the freedom of expression has a great importance; art may be or I would even say should be critical, provocateur, surprising, interesting, novel, etc. but neither criticism nor the novelty or curiosity can be considered art in itself. Great styles have always been expressing the decisive "spirituality" of a civilization. Art is democratic, but there have always been and there will always be some outstanding artists. Internal spaces are limited; there is a need for a structure which makes it possible for people to enjoy arts. Besides museums and private collections with exceptional financial potency, it is important that the limited impression serigraphy, lithography and gravure with the help of experts regain credibility. ■



"I have always been loyal to my basic style..."



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