Hans Ulrich Obrist

Interviews

Volume I

FONDAZIONE PITTI IMMAGINE DISCOVERY

CHARTA

MANCOBA, Ernest

*Ernest Mancoba was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1904. At the age of 24 Mancoba became the first artist in South Africa to depict the Virgin Mary as black and barefoot (*African Madonna *or* Bantu Madonna, *1929). As it happened, black Africans thought Mancoba's sculpture fat and ugly, while white critics felt it was too European to be "authentic". Mancoba worked as a sculptor for a number of years, producing ecclesiastical and secular pieces in which he Africanized the prevailing Western norms of iconography and aesthetics. Because he saw no future for a black artist in the white-dominated South African art world of the time, he eventually left the country in 1938 to further his art studies at the École des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. There he befriended the Danish artists who later took part in the CoBrA group. In Europe, his focus gradually shifted from sculpture to painting, drawing, and printmaking. In 1942, Mancoba married Sonja Ferlov; they both showed in Copenhagen in 1948 and 1949 and in several of the CoBrA group exhibitions until the demise of the group in 1951. Reflecting on Mancoba's contribution, Elza Miles wrote, "Throughout his career his integrity was impeccable, and he fully understood the responsibility of the artist who upheld the spiritual heritage of the past by expressing himself in the idiom and materials of his lifetime to ensure the survival of humanity." In 1994, after 56 years abroad, Mancoba returned to South Africa to attend the opening of "Sibambene/Hand in Hand," a retrospective exhibition of his art and that of his wife's, at the Johannesburg Art Gallery and the South African National Gallery in Cape Town. In 1997, Mancoba received a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant. His work was featured in the exhibition "The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994," which opened at the Museum Villa Stuck Munich in 2001, and traveled to Berlin, New York, and Chicago. He died in Paris in November 2002.*

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This interview took place in Paris in March 2002.

Hans Ulrich Obrist:

Let's begin with the beginnings. How did you become an artist in South Africa in the early years of the twentieth century?

Ernest Mancoba:

I was born a black miner's son in 1904 in Turffontein, along the goldfields of the Reef near Johannesburg. My mother influenced very much what I later became, even though she was not an artist herself. But she went out at times with other women of her age group, as was the custom, to make (with clay, in a collective oven built with branches of wood) the earthenware pots which we used at home. I remember that she told me about the origins of my clan

among the Fingo people. They were originally Zulus who had emigrated, under persecution for opposing the military conquest of other tribes by King Shaka, in a way that they estimated contrary to the African tradition of democratic kingship. So they though it might have been justified to unite our nations against the colonial invasion. So they had taken refuge among the Xhosas—fingo means "wanderer." She taught me Ubuntu, the African "philosophy" of human brotherhood, and she was at the same time a fervent Christian. She also used to read us poetry aloud, African poetry from an old book wrapped in a piece of cloth, and she explained the importance of poetry, especially the notion of expressing the "unspeakable."

HUO:

What were your first works like?

EM:

I had never received any formal art training as such. During my school years, my vocation started at Grace-Dieu, the Anglican Teacher's Training College, near Pietersburg, where I learnt the technique of sculpting in wood from a nun, Sister Pauline. I made altar fronts and such pieces of church furniture. I became a teacher thereafter. But by then I already knew that I wanted to become, one day, a full-time artist. At that moment, what as I was doing was mainly woodcarving that was both inspired by and struggling with the European style, trying to make it my own. One of my religious carvings even got a fine reception, *Bantu Madonna* (1929), for which an African girl, one of my fellow-students, had posed. It didn't interrupt my studies though, and after Pietersburg I went to the University of Fort-Hare, at Alice, a little town in the Eastern Cape. Fort Hare had only just received university status; before that it had been known as the South African Native College. Religion and a certain form of humanism were at the heart of the institution; it was a tradition shared by the "black elite" (as they were expected to become) and by the white liberals, many of whom belonged to the clergy. Unlike the Bantu education later implemented in South Africa from the '50s, Fort Hare was not based on the assumption that black Africans require and deserve a different, inferior kind of education.

HUO:

The history of the African intelligentsia is inextricably linked to the University of Fort Hare...

EM:
Absolutely. It's in Fort Hare that political activists like Nelson Mandela, my friends Govan Mbeki, Isaac [Bangani] Tabata and Jane Gool, or poets like Dennis Brutus or, later on, Can Themba, the *Drum* journalist, receive their higher education.

HUO:
Were there a lot of students training in art in Fort Hare?

EM:
In Fort Hare I did not study art—there was no such thing. My subjects were English, history, mathematics, psychology and biology. And like many black students then, I was also thinking about becoming a journalist.

HUO:
Did you have "dialogues" about art and the role of art in South Africa there nevertheless?

EM:
When I was in Pietersburg I became friendly with Gerard Sekoto, who later became an important painter, and Thomas Masekela who, though he was to dedicate his later life to an organization of hospitals for our people, worked privately with sculpture; we had a constant dialogue. And also, together with other African students and young teachers like Nimrod Ndebele, another close friend, we organized theatrical representations at the school and discussed the future of the arts in South Africa. At Fort Hare, where I was head of the debating society, we rarely spoke about art as such. When I came to Cape Town (on a cargo ship from Port Elizabeth), the most intense conversations that I had on the subject were probably the ones with Lippy Lipschitz, whom I often visited in his studio, while I had mine in "District Six," the ghetto for Colored people. Lippy was a sculptor who had emigrated from Eastern Europe. He introduced me to another South African sculptor, also of European origin, Elza Dziomba, whose studio in Johannesburg I entered by the backdoor, pretending to be the service boy—as it was situated in an area for "whites only." It was also Lipschitz who told me about the growing interest in Europe for African art and about the influence it had had at the beginning of the twentieth century. Paul Guillaume's book *Primitive Negro Sculpture* (*La sculpture nègre primitive*, with Thomas Munro, 1929) was at the heart of those discussions. I remember that on Lippy's advice I had gone to the National Library in Cape Town to read that very book. People there could hardly

understand it, that a black man could have had anything to do in the place, and, even less, that he should have been asking for such a recently known trench author. But I argued and finally had the possibility to sit down and read the book, which they kindly brought me. While absorbing what I found in it, which astonished me very much, I began to think about how enriching it would be to have an exchange of ideas with such an open mind, who spoke with such deep respect about the expression of Africans—when I wasn't even considered as a full human being in my own country.

HUO:
So you decided to leave South Africa. It was 1938. How did you decide that it was time to leave? Did you see Paris as a place of freedom, both politically and artistically?

EM:
The first reason for my leaving South Africa was probably when I understood that I would not be able to become either a citizen or an artist in the land of my fathers, especially after a meeting I had with the Commissioner for Native Affairs in Pretoria, who, after seeing some of my works reproduced in a newspaper (*The Star*, I think it was), had decided that I should take part in the upcoming [British] "Empire Exhibition" (Johannesburg, 1936). The idea was, at first, to show visitors the production of folkloric art by natives, and, secondly, to develop a whole indigenous art trade by selling all sorts of pseudo-tribal figures for tourists. He offered me a good job with a fine salary, to gather young Africans to provide for this kind of traffic. I was shocked and, as politely as possible, refused the proposition. In my daily life I felt more and more humiliated at the conditions made to my people; and I had a growing difficulty in containing myself on certain occasions. Thus, I soon understood I would never be able to feel free enough, in my mind, to express myself as fully as I wished, but would always knock the head against the barriers which the colonial order had set up in my country, wherever I went.

HUO:
And at the time, Apartheid wasn't even instituted as a wholly legal coercive system?

EM:
It came only after the Second World War, but it had, indeed, existed ever since the European colonists decided, with full support of the metropolis, to exploit the black Africans in a system of near slavery for the purely economic reason of gold and diamonds. I felt

I had no time to lose with the petty vexations, the daily wrongs that the indigenous man had to put up with. Moreover, there was, basically, at the time, no public to receive what I had to express, in the colonial society where I was normally destined to spend the rest of my days. Several of my works have disappeared, probably because those who got them in hand at the time did not consider them worth preserving. Even some of my political friends told me that the artistic activity was not the most urgent thing to concentrate upon while our people were undergoing such a terrible plight. But I believed, on the contrary, that art was precisely also a means to favor a greater consciousness in Man, which, for me, is part of the struggle for any human liberation, and without which any practical achievement would probably, sooner or later, deviate and miss its point. Therefore, making art, I thought, was as urgent as working for the political evolution which, at the time, anyhow seemed still a faraway prospect. So I decided to engage upon a debate with European artists, by coming to Europe.

HUO:

But could you leave just like that?

EM:

As I had absolutely no means to travel, I had the good fortune to be helped by missionary institutions, and when I arrived in London I lived by Bishop Smythe, whom I had known as the head of my student hostel at Fort Hare. I naturally visited the British Museum, the National Gallery, and other institutions of art. But my goal was Paris, for all that this city represented as a center of artistic concern and responsibility: unique in the world, as I had been told by the artists who had emigrated from Europe. During these years you could come and, almost from one day to the next, enter into a universal debate about the political, cultural and spiritual destiny of mankind. Even if you did not join any group, and might at times feel isolated as an artist—indeed many have died there, in loneliness and poverty—you at least were given the minimum respect to breathe as an individual, and had the full freedom to create in a town that was open to the winds of the world.

In South Africa I had not been able to find anyone to discuss the work, apart from a traditional carver from the noble tribe, one or two schoolfellows, and the few immigrant artists I have mentioned, who themselves encouraged me to go to Europe. Moreover, certain words of my mother were ringing in my head. When I was a little boy, I had wept because I, on certain occasions, missed having someone to play with, so I asked her for a brother, as she, at the time, only had given me sisters. But she answered: "Do not weep, Ernest. Your brothers—you'll find them in the greater world." So now I was going away to try to find them in my fellow artists.

HUO:

And it happened when you arrived in Paris?

EM:

I took the ship from Cape Town. When I arrived in London I remember that, out of solidarity, I had dressed up as a worker with a cap, but when I crossed certain poor areas, children stared and soon followed me through the streets, singing "Nigger, Nigger go to hell. English, English ring the bell!" But already I had decided not to stay, for Paris had always been the destination. Through Bishop Smythe's connections in Paris, I got into the École des Arts Décoratifs, rue d'Ulm. In fact, the students and the staff there had been told that an Englishman from London would arrive the following day. So they were not a little astonished when they saw me!

HUO:

Was it at the École des Arts Décoratifs that you met the group of Danish artists with whom you worked closely afterwards?

EM:

Yes, at the art school I met Christian Poulsen. He was studying sculpture at the time, but later became a famous ceramist. He told me he was in connection with a group of young Danish Surrealists. He invited me to follow him to one of these, at the latter's studio. Thus, I first met Ejler Bille, who was very interested in African art, as were all the other members of the group. So he told me that I would surely be glad to speak with one of his comrades. It was a woman, who also had been a member of the "Linien" group, together with Richard Mortensen and others. That is how I saw, for the first time, Sonja Ferlov, who was to become my lifetime comrade and spouse. She came from a bourgeois family in Copenhagen. And she happened to have been very familiar with African expression from early childhood, because her parents had a friend who was the greatest collector and connoisseur of African art, Carl Kjersmeier. So, as a little girl, instead of dolls, she had been sitting with African masks and sculptures on her knees. This had developed in her an intimacy with, and a feeling for African sculpture—but also for Oceanic and Mexican expression as well—that was unique. Thus, I know not which kind of destiny had brought me into the

presence of the ideal person, and the right group of artists, for a fruitful dialogue and collaboration. They were very interested to know more about the continent that had produced the objects they so admired. Only a few, though, wished to hear more about the actual conditions of the people in South Africa. But they appreciated my work, so I got more and more integrated to the group, and I could have many conversations with them, especially about the creations we had seen in the studios, the galleries, and the museums we visited regularly.

HUO:
*You arrived in Paris only a few years after two other famous immigrants had arrived, one from Martinique, who was Aimé Césaire, the other from Dakar, Leopold Sédar Senghor. It was the beginning of "*négritude.*" Did you meet them then?*

EM:
In fact, strangely enough, I could well have met them, because the School of Decorative Arts was situated on the rue d'Ulm, in the same street as Césaire's school, l'École Normale Supérieure. But the occasion was not given to me of an encounter with these two great personalities. Césaire and Senghor both belonged to the French-speaking colonies or territories and were part of other circles than I was. Personally, it took me some time to learn the language, while the Danes spoke almost fluent English, which made it easier for me. I suppose I would have managed to understand Césaire and Senghor. But we might have had some disagreements also because the problem with their approach was that I never believed, for my part, that the racist ideology of the Occident is a problem of defective reason or insufficient comprehension. And I do not think, therefore, that it can be treated by forming new ideological concepts, like "*négritude*," any more than I would imagine that the humanity of the white man might rely upon any virtual concept of "*blanchitude*." For you will never prove or disprove the truth of our humanity, any more than a child needs material evidence to instinctively know that his mother is his mother. No scientific or moral demonstration, no genetic test, nor any ethical imperative will ever add to this simple recognition, identification, and love. I made a sculpture on this fundamental relationship between mother and child (*Faith*, 1936).

HUO:
But "négritude" was part of an anti-colonial struggle strategy…

EM:
Indeed, but I do not believe that we Africans, any more than other people, should need (as it would not diminish racism a jot) to show the white man how good we are at speaking or writing his language, performing in his sports, learning his customs, manners and intellectual actions or developing ourselves along the lines of his so-called "universality," to be considered as human beings and his equals. Because the true universality is a common goal on the cultural, political, and spiritual horizon, that will be reached only when all ethnic groups achieve, through an authentic dialogue, the many-faceted diamond shape and the full blossom of the deepest and widest human integrity.
I hold Aimé Cesaire's oeuvre as vital, though, particularly in that he was the first in the West Indies to insist on the fact that black people, there or elsewhere, must reject the prejudice which the colonial masters have engrained into them about their African origins being something to be ashamed of. I, for my part, have only relied throughout my life on two ideas—one, from the deepest heart of Africa, which constitutes the basis of *ubuntu*: "Man is man by and because of other men," and the other, the precept of Christ: "Do unto others as you would have done unto you." I do not bother with anything else.

HUO:
Who were the artists that you met in Paris that you consider to have been influential?

EM:
So I met the Danish Surrealist group, that is, among others, Richard Mortensen, Egill Jacobsen, and particularly, also as I have said, Ejler Bille. At my studio on rue Daguerre, my neighbor was Henri Goetz, an American artist. Bille's neighbor was a German Expressionist painter, Erwin Grauman, who remained a good companion to us until his death, and by the intermediary of whom I met German anti-Nazi artists and, in particular, befriended Hans Hartung. In 1938 I also became friends with Alberto Giacometti. It was on his proposition (to help me live closer to Sonja, who had her studio next door on rue du Moulin Vert), that I even left my atelier in rue Daguerre for a little room on top of his atelier on the rue Hippolyte-Maindron. In fact, apart from his brother, Diego, I can say I remained for nine years (interrupted by my four-year internment during World War II) his nearest neighbor. We caught sight of each other practically every day, spoke from time to time,

and were always ready to give a hand for mutual support if need be. Sonja knew that she could always count on Alberto when we had a difficulty or were, as happened once or twice, economically in a fix. He also gave Sonja some good advice on working with plaster. But it was, above all, his unique personality that brought us one of the richest experiences in our life.

HUO:

Later you left for Denmark and took part in the CoBrA group. Could you tell me about your meetings with the other members of this group, such as Constant and Asger Jorn?

EM:

In Denmark we were members of the Höst group, and later the CoBrA group in the years 1948–1950, together with, among many others, Asger Jorn, Carl Henning Pedersen, Heerup, Erik Thommesen, Egili Jakobsen, and our Dutch comrades Karel Appel, Constant, and Corneille. But Sonja and I worked rather isolated in a little village, going to Copenhagen only for meetings with our Höst or CoBrA friends. As there came some misunderstandings in the group, we soon left the country. I felt a certain form of silent opposition to Sonja and me that hardly manifested itself openly, but, for instance, invitations to take part in exhibitions of the group inexplicably never reached us. I think that there was a certain irritation towards Sonja for repeatedly insisting on the movement, and also taking into account the plight of people still colonized by Europe. Though most of the founding members of CoBrA agreed with us—Jorn wrote a letter to us, just after the movement ended, expressing his solidarity with our attitude and his understanding for our reasons to go away—it seems that the time was not yet to come, in 1950, for the question to be clearly posed. The embarrassment that my presence caused—to the point of making me, in their eyes, some sort of "Invisible Man" or merely the consort of a European woman artist—was understandable, as before me there had never been, to my knowledge, any black man taking part in the visuals arts "avant-garde" of the Western world. Of course, Wifredo Lam showed his work along with the Surrealists in Paris, but he was a Creole, from an independent country, Cuba. Personally, coming from a colony where people were segregated by the law, but was still vital economically for Europe, my status was unclear. And probably it was also our very conception of mankind and of art that not only contributed to our isolation from some in the group, but that invalidated us in the appreciation of the official art world, especially later, in the eyes and the evaluation of certain critics and art historians. Some critics totally obliterate my participation in the movement, as modest as it admittedly has been, on the reason that my work was suspected of not being European enough, and in his words, "betraying (my) African origins."

HUO:

I'm interested in knowing what kind of relationship you maintained with Africa in those years.

EM:

In those days, I also met regularly with my friend Gerard Sekoto, who had fled South Africa for Paris after the war. We discussed the news from home. And as he was at the time more in contact with other artists and intellectuals of the Parisian or English scene than myself, he kept me informed. I also had a few meetings at the library Présence Africaine with Alioune Diop. And from the '50s to the early '60s, I was a regular, or rather irregular, correspondent of the magazine *Le Musée Vivant*, which was at the time the only French publication genuinely interested, at least at the beginning, in giving the word from time to time to African intellectuals and artists. I had a rich dialogue for many years with Madeleine Rousseau, its editor, who, it must be said, with unbelievable courage—given the colonial context—faced the confrontation with the Other. She offered a possibility of expression and a platform for dialogue to people from the so-called "Third World" at a difficult time, until the political pressure became too intense because the struggles for independence had begun.

HUO:

Can you tell me about the oscillation between figuration and abstraction in your work?

EM:

In my painting, it is difficult to say whether the central form is figurative or abstract. But that does not bother me. What I am concerned with is whether the form can bring to life and transmit, with the strongest effect and by the lightest means possible, the being, which has been in me and aspires to expression—in the stuff or any material that is at hand. Our history has brought about, little by little, this dichotomy between abstraction and figuration, which provokes, more and more, a terrible atomization in the very essence of life. In no domain more than in the arts has this systematic dichotomy caused such destruction of the very foundation to the human identity, as both belonging to nature and sharing in the essence of an ideal being. Certain artists in Europe have too often been under

the dictatorship of philosophy, or what is known under that name—which denomination, by the way, has always been puzzling to me, because that area of learning has, for a long time, been used not so much to put in practice any love of wisdom, as its name would imply, but rather for trying to fit our conception of man into the social structures offered by history at any given time. Moreover, certain philosophers in Europe have had a more or less hidden aim to get rid of art altogether—for supposedly belonging to some outdated form of humanity—or to replace it by some purely intellectual ersatz that would help discipline and control the inspired freedom of poetry, a concern shared by the political authority: this, as far as I can understand, was the main motivation behind the foundation of the Academy. Hence we have lost the capacity to unite in our vision the outward aspect with the inner significance. Because our eye has been mis-educated, so to speak, by the superficiality of academicism, which can only estimate the worth of any representation of man according to the abidance by the purely esthetic rules it has established—as, for example, the one decreeing that the human head must come eight times (or seven, I have forgotten) into the full length of the body. So when they see an African sculpture with, for example, an enormous head and short legs, they will consider it ugly and judge it "worthless." But for the African artist it is not so much the abidance by certain rules (though he, too, generally works according to particular canons) that makes a thing beautiful, but its capacity to evoke the inner being by the strength of the outward aspect. To that effect, he uses all means, both figurative and abstract. When, in my younger days I made the *Bantu Madonna*, I worked along certain European or classical canons which some believers in the conception of "progress" in art will judge outdated. In the *Madonna* I followed a certain canon that was in contradiction with the newest Cubist or abstract ways and forms (which I, at the time, hardly knew) but without ever stopping my struggle with a style that was foreign to me. And the viewer, I hope, if I am lucky enough to have been understood and heard, can feel under the surface of the classical mould an African heart beat. In time, the inner spirit breaks through, first in the very innovation within the South African context, of taking a black woman to represent the Virgin Mary, and secondly in the warmth of the pulse that, though provisionally contained by the strictness of the style, speaks up under the skin or surface and threatens to burst free.

HUO:
In 1962 you wrote, "For the object of African art is not to please the eye or the senses but to use art as a means, as a language to express feelings and ideas in relation to the present, the future, and the past, to discover new concepts by which to regard the world for the salvation of man."

EM:
Yes, I remember when I wrote these lines. In fact, I would not change a word today. I think that this definition is still valid and could apply to the way I personally see my vocation as an artist even in the world to which I still belong, at this beginning of the twenty-first century. In my opinion, a certain evolution of art in the second part of the twentieth century has been influenced by the misunderstanding around Duchamp. Duchamp never pretended that exhibiting a manufactured product was, in itself, art. But the world, the so-called art world, has always made as if he had. In fact, as he himself insisted, his readymade—bought at the supermarket and put upon a pedestal—is only a challenge thrown at the face of the Academy and its spiritually empty canons. However, the misunderstanding became the accepted interpretation of this artist because it fitted into the aims of a certain established nihilism which, under the fastidious form of an objective aestheticism, in turn came to constitute a sort of new academism. Hence the development among many creators of a more or less imposed or self-imposed notion of non-art considered as art, which had the advantage of getting rid of the problem posed in a materialistic society by the invisible and by the enduring power of the universal mask, before or without ever facing the question: "What is art?"
I believe that one cannot answer this question as long as one has the false idea that humanity can be pigeonholed into different categories. That is why, for instance, I could never be considered as an artist in the South Africa of the early '30s, where the commissioner for the native affairs wished me to make what the colonial authority called "native art." There was a time when, also in Europe, even among apparently progressive people or certain modern artists, the notion existed that there was an art for the "savages," which was only fit for them and could never be appreciated seriously by modern humanity. Bertolt Brecht spoke of "children of science." One day, at the end of '50s, I met a well-known modern painter of the so-called Hard Edge group. When he saw me together with Sonja Ferlov, addressing both of us he said: "Ah, it is you who like the art of the negroes. They are too full of sensuality, always making sculp-

tures with a big sex, while we modern artists of Europe have left behind these primitive obsessions. Here it is all geometry, purity of lines, and clarity of the intellect." When I tried to tell him that there also was geometry in African art, he shook his head and went away. For me, art can only be founded on the single notion—of which it is both the confirmation and the proof—that Man is One. That is why an expression from a most foreign culture (let's say New Guinea, or the Mexico of the Aztecs)—and even without my having any knowledge of the particular customs and rites that gave birth to it—may touch me to the core, and sometimes infinitely more than some from my own cultural background and times. And this does not make me a Primitivist in any way. Only, the first condition for entering the world of the spiritual expression we call art is to be open to the Other, even to the ultimate Other, whoever he be, with the knowledge so well condensed by Arthur Rimbaud in his famous phrase: "Je est un autre" [I is somebody else]. It is still today shocking to many, that he, the "Gaul with blue eyes," as he called himself, should at times during his years of poetry have seen himself as "un nègre" ["a negroe"]. But it is upon this very awareness that he founded the meaning of any true modernity. Our present times, though, have completely misunderstood the notion, because when we hear Rimbaud's message: "Il faut être absolument moderne," ["one must be absolutely modern"] we think it is about driving the fastest car, surrounded with all the paraphernalia of the very latest technology, when what is meant thereby is much deeper and more radically subversive to all upon which we have based our society and our conceptions—even that of "modernity." That is why the fact of seeing creations from the farthest elsewhere may help us to break free from our prejudices and our formalistic or ethnic enclosures.

I remember how my friend Gerard Sekoto, in our younger days, was fascinated when I showed him reproductions of pictures by Van Gogh, and how touched he was—to the point of being inspired by it in his own work—when I told him the story of this Dutch painter's life, while we stood in the middle of the bush, near a distant country village in a tribal zone of the northern Transvaal.

HUO:

Like Asger Jorn you have been very interested in the Folk Art from Greenland.

EM:

Asger Jorn had participated, with other Surrealists, in the reappraisal and enthusiastic appreciation of ancient African art. When

the Second World War broke out, he could no longer travel but stayed in Denmark, where he could not see so many works from Africa and Oceania. So it dawned upon him that in the North, too, they possessed an original, primitive, pre-Christian art, which had previously been neglected or misrepresented: that of the Vikings, and also, in Greenland, that of the Eskimo people who had lived for so long out of reach of the influences of modern history. Together with Asger, all the members of CoBrA were touched by the strength, simplicity, and boldness of this expression. Sonja Ferlov was also fascinated by the reports of the great polar explorer Knud Rasmussen, who had lived for a long time among the Eskimos and had described abundantly their culture and customs. I was influenced by the art of the Eskimos, essentially in its economy of means and its capacity to treat just the essential in a harsh and difficult environment of nature.

HUO:

Can you think of any unrealized project of yours, a project that you have dreamt about but could not fulfill?

EM:

Yes, but I am not thinking about an artistic one. For me, what is still not realized is a common acceptance and understanding between whites and blacks (as the most contrasted opposition in terms of color, but between other races as well). The dialogue has not started yet. It reminds me of a passage in one of the books of the Danish writer Karen Blixen's where she says that if the encounter or the meeting between blacks and whites has happened historically; it has, in fact, not yet taken place.