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NEWSLETTER

355

22 janvier 2024

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Untitled (2020), André Cervera

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Direction of publication:	Pierre Naquin
Editor-in-Chief:	Carine Claude Stéphanie Perris Gilles Picard Clément Thibault
Editorial office:	Carine Claude Stéphanie Perris
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Distribution:	260,000+ digital subscribers 1.000 printed copies



FIGURINES

Figurines installation, Barbès (2016), Hervé Di Rosa

© Hervé Di Rosa



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*Hommage à Miró (1992),
Richard "Buddy" Di Rosa
© Richard Di Rosa. Courtesy Galerie Vallois*

FREEDOM IS WRITTEN IN SÈTE

Figuration libre is a comet in the history of art. Neither a theoretical movement nor a self-proclaimed trend, the creative frenzy of the artists who represented it was primarily a response to the societal changes of the late 1970s. However, *Figuration libre* could only have been born in Sète, and nowhere else.

Sète is a magnet. This small port town, with the river jousting and its gentle way of life, has been a welcoming land for Spanish and Italian immigrants since the 19th century. It is fertile ground for the inspiration of artists captivated by its unique aura and palette nuances between its surrounding ponds and the Mediterranean. Around the Montpellier painter Frédéric Bazille, a prematurely deceased impressionist figure during the 1870 war, the “Bazille Group” formed in the vicinity of Sète. After World War II, a new group, the Montpellier-Sète Group, was invented around Gabriel Couderc, the main creator of the Paul Valéry museum, François Desnoyer, and Camille Descossy. This group, mostly comprising artists from the École des Beaux-Arts de Montpellier, was formally established in 1953 by two people from Sète and five from Montpellier under the patronage of Vincent Auriol, André Chamson, Jean Cocteau, Joseph Delteil, and Jean Vilar. It included André Blondel, Jean-Raymond Bessil, Camille Descossy, Georges Dezeuze, Pierre Fournel, Colette Richarme, Jean Hugo, Gérard Calvet, among others. “The overall homogeneity owed more to mutual esteem than to a common style,” Gérard Calvet explained in a 2011 speech at the Montpellier Academy of Sciences and Letters. “The twelve exhibitions we held in French and foreign official museums, despite the artists’ egomania and the prevailing southern character, prove this.”

However, this pictorial lineage alone does not explain why, two decades later, Sète would become the crucible of *Figuration libre* [see box p.10]. According to Stéphane Tarroux, director of the Paul Valéry Museum in Sète, one must look further back and beyond the strictly pictorial field: “One personality

greatly contributed to creating this cultural atmosphere in Sète that allowed for the emergence of Figuration Libre: Paul Valéry. Valéry, the great man of Sète, was invited in the 1930s by the boys’ middle school to present end-of-year awards. This was done with great pomp and in academic attire, his brother being the rector of the University of Montpellier. He gave a speech about the future, reflecting on his own youth. Among the students listening were Jean Vilar, Georges Brassens... Valéry’s speech and the influence of his work were decisive. Brassens took over in his world, as did Jean Vilar in his.”

A cultural buzz then vibrated in the live entertainment scene. Friends of each were invited to Sète, like François Denoyer in the late 1940s, already a renowned painter well before the creation of the Montpellier-Sète Group. He stayed with Jean Vilar in his early days. Agnès Varda, who spent her childhood in Sète and knew the wife of the great director, became the photographer of the TNP. She also shot her first film in Sète in 1954, *La Pointe Courte*, featuring unknown actors Philippe Noiret and Silvia Monfort.

“The city’s role was significant at that time,” the curator recalls. “It was the era of municipal communism. The communists had a strong commitment to popular education, leading to the establishment of a fine arts school in the early 1960s, headed by Eliane Beaupuy Mancier. She had won the Rome Prize after World War II and welcomed the youth. Among it were Hervé Di Rosa and Robert Combas.” In Sète, the connection to the wider world came through its port. Music and record shops were part of this explosion in the 1970s. Social hubs developed, and the youth vibrated to the sound of rock’n’roll. It was in a record shop that Robert Combas and Hervé Di Rosa formed their friendship [see p.20].

“Hervé Di Rosa, his brother Richard, alias ‘Buddy’, and Robert Combas were primarily connected through music,” Stéphane Tarroux recalls. “Later, Buddy and Robert Combas played in the same band, Les Démodés [see box p.48]. They lived in the same neighbourhood. These young people frequented the same places, some attending the fine arts schools in Sète or Montpellier.” The eldest of the group, Robert Combas, born in Lyon in 1959, spent his entire childhood and adolescence in Sète. The Di Rosas were born there, Hervé in 1959 and his younger brother, Buddy, in 1963. After his Baccalaureate, Hervé Di Rosa went to study at the Arts Décoratifs in Paris. Robert Combas, then a student at the Montpellier School of Fine Arts, joined him at the end of his studies. “Originally, *Figuration libre* was a group of friends,” Stéphane Tarroux reminds us. “In the 1980s, there was a particular atmosphere created by the election of François Mitterrand and

3 questions to... Stéphane Tarroux

Stéphane Tarroux is the director of the Paul Valéry Museum in Sète.

How does *Figuration libre* fit into recent art history?

In a way, artists of *Figuration libre* found themselves at the vanguard of the rearguard. In the 1970s, we were still under the dominant influence of *Support-Surface*, conceptual art, and minimalism. Painting was loathed and seen as having no future. Nonetheless, a kind of return to the pictorial began among some, and a few artists started turning away from *Support-Surface* to return to figurative art. This is how Robert Combas and Hervé Di Rosa, a few years later, continued something that had already been initiated in the 1970s.

The question of Pop Art’s influence on *Figuration libre* often comes up. What’s your view on this?

When you listen to the artists of *Figuration libre*, it would seem they influenced the Americans instead! Particularly Keith Haring. In reality, like in all inventions, it’s an underlying movement. We see it in the United States, Italy, Germany with the *Neue Wilden* (New Fauves), etc. These are international artistic concerns linked to societal changes. Ultimately, *Figuration libre* is the local expression of something more global, and exchanges took place on both sides: Combas and Di Rosa went to New York in 1982, and Basquiat and Haring came to Paris in 1983.

Ultimately, was *Figuration libre* a momentary bubble or a deep-seated current?

This question has always been a source of misunderstandings and misconceptions. I myself talk about it as a current or a movement, but in truth, it was more like a pack of wolves, artists primarily concerned with their work who, at a certain point, for circumstantial reasons, found themselves together — it’s simpler to organise an exhibition with three or four artists and to find collectors when in a network rather than alone. So, of course, they had common interests, but at some point, each was mainly preoccupied with their own work. There was indeed this bubble effect, as very quickly, each carved their own path. It’s often said that *Figuration Libre* ended in 1987 or 1988, but for me, I’d say it ended in 1984, the year when everyone reclaimed their freedom.

a growing interest in popular cultures. And these two ‘characters’ fitted perfectly into the mould of the 1980s. Besides their immense talent, they were also fortunate to meet Ben, who gave a label to this group initially united by personal bonds [see p.62].”

Joined by new accomplices they met during their studies, François Boisrond and Rémi Blanchard,

influenced by music, advertising, comics — in short, everyday life — each began painting in their own style. This small troupe was first assembled at the foundational exhibition “Finir en beauté” (“Ending in Beauty”), organised by critic Bernard Lamarche Vadel in spring 1981 in his recently vacated Parisian loft. And as Hervé Perdirolle wrote in his reference book,

Hervé Di Rosa and Robert Combas are blank pages. They find themselves in the rearguard of 1970s art, but as precursors of something new. They are in tune with the times because they are young and embody a popular milieu. — Stéphane Tarroux



Un dimanche en mer (2023), André Cervera

Photo Pierre Schwartz. © André Cervera



Deer (1981), Rémi Blanchard
Sold for €1,188 on 16 April 2013 by Christie's Paris

© Christie's Images





Jeune fille à la guitare physhiédéliqueue (2018), Robert Combas

Courtesy Opera Gallery

“Until the mid-1980s, those sometimes referred to as the “Musketiers of *Figuration libre*” truly destabilised the art world. They disrupted its norms and conventions.

— *Phillipe Piguet*

La Figuration libre: “Robert Combas, François Boisrond, Hervé Di Rosa, and Rémi Blanchard in France; Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf in the USA, first and foremost made painting for fun,” specifies Hervé Perdrille, an early defender. He was also the one who, with critic Otto Hahn, organised the landmark 1984 exhibition “5/5: Figuration libre, France-USA” at the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris, orchestrating a confrontation of works by Basquiat, Blanchard, Boisrond, Combas, Crash, the Di Rosas, Haring, Jammes, Tseng Kwong Chi, and Scharf.

buried in the 1970s, painting was no longer discussed. Outdated by conceptual art, mocked by minimalism, shunned by collectors, figurative painting was relegated to oblivion. Yet, it was during this very time that images proliferated in society, in comics and cartoons, in advertisements, on TV, glorifying consumption before being hijacked by a young generation of “disenchanted” artists. And cash-strapped. The era was one of both punk and the reign of money. It was from this paradox that *Figuration libre* was born. “A kind of quiet force led

dead? As if that were possible!” As they began to carve out a notable reputation, the Sète group and their friends made several trips to the United States in the early 1980s. The impact was profound. From then on, it was challenging to untangle the mutual influences between the pioneers of Figuration Libre and their American counterparts, creators of a radical pop art influenced by urban cultures: Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf. After an initial visit, Di Rosa and Boisrond returned to New York thanks to scholarships from the French government in 1982.

“Perhaps their freedom comes from the fact that they are spoiled children of the 1960s, unlike those born just after World War II who were marked by the darkness of the times. It was more difficult in the 1950s to embark on an artistic career. The 1960s were about consumer society, a gentler zeitgeist. — *Stéphane Tarrow*ux

A few years earlier, Ben, an unclassifiable and essential artist of the French scene since the 1960s and associated with Fluxus, had already discovered the work of the Sète troublemakers and exhibited them in Nice [see p.62]. He coined this label for them. “In 1979, I created the term *Figuration libre*. In Italy, they talk about *Transavanguardia*, in Germany about *Violent Painting*, in America about *Bad Painting*, but France was missing a movement. Templon proposed ‘Nouveaux Français’. But I preferred Figuration Libre, as I think this return to figuration primarily contained a claim to freedom.”

Punk and the reign of money

This observation must be understood in the context of the art world at the turn of the 1980s. Declared dead and

the new generation to overturn the existing order, an overly established, excessively elitist order that was gorged with narrow-minded biases and had declared the death of the pictorial. It was then a widespread explosion,” testifies Philippe Piguet in *Once upon a time Figuration libre*. “The subject, the form, the colour, as history has sometimes seen. Painting, relegated to the realm of outdated things, the figure, disparaged in favour of the concept, freedom, strangled by learned theories, then reclaimed their rights. From one continent to another, from France to the United States, from Germany to Italy, groups and movements then multiplied in all kinds of events to loudly proclaim the perpetuity of a mode and its prospective fortune. Painting,

Blanchard and Jammes received the same grant the following year. The first Franco-American friendship happened between Hervé Di Rosa and Kenny Scharf in the summer of 1984 when Di Rosa invited the American artist to his home in Sète. “Boisrond and Keith Haring had the opportunity to confront each other during an event I organised in June 1984, as part of the Le Mans race,” recounts Hervé Perdrille. Hervé Di Rosa exhibited at Tony Shafrazi, François Boisrond at Anina Nosei, and Robert Combas at Castelli — all leading galleries. The English dealer, Robert Fraser, materialised these affinities in May 1984 in London with a group show that brought together Blanchard, Blais, Boisrond, Combas, Di Rosa, A-One, Basquiat, Futura 2000, Haring, and Scharf.

WIDE ANGLE

Tseng Kwong Chi also illustrated this new Franco-American trend at the Pittsburgh Museum in an exhibition that grouped Blanchard, Di Rosa, Friedman, Haring, Jammes, McEwen, Magnuson, Scharf, and himself during September and October 1984. “The new relationship with the environment, immediately understood by those under twenty, is evident in Haring, Scharf, Crash, Combas, Boisrond, and the two Di Rosas, Blanchard, and Basquiat,” writes critic Otto Hahn in *Avant-garde, théorie et provocation*. “Although starting from the same premises, they involve themselves differently in the bubbling of the news. Without forming a group, these eight painters reflect the effervescence of an era where art and music blend with the street.”

Yet it turns out that the label *Figuration libre*, which propelled the group to the forefront of the international art scene, eventually weighed on its members. Each quickly took their own path. By 1987, *Figuration libre* as a group had already faded. A movement as ephemeral and impactful as a punch. What is their legacy today? “A uninhibited approach to painting. And in a way, they were representative of the spirit of modernity in culture, which consists of not making hierarchies, as long as it is used to create,” says Stéphane Tarroux.

Forty years after its inception, *Figuration libre* remains firmly rooted in the imagination. In 2018, nearly 35,000 visitors came to discover the exhibition “Libres figurations — années 80” (“Figurations libres — 1980s”) organised by the Hélène and Édouard Leclerc Fund for Culture in Landerneau, an exhibition “that we could have subtitled ‘sex, drugs, punk, and rock’n’roll,’” summarised Pascale Le Thorel, its curator.





La partie de carte (1987), François Boisrond
Sold for €15,120 on 26 October 2022 by Sotheby's Paris

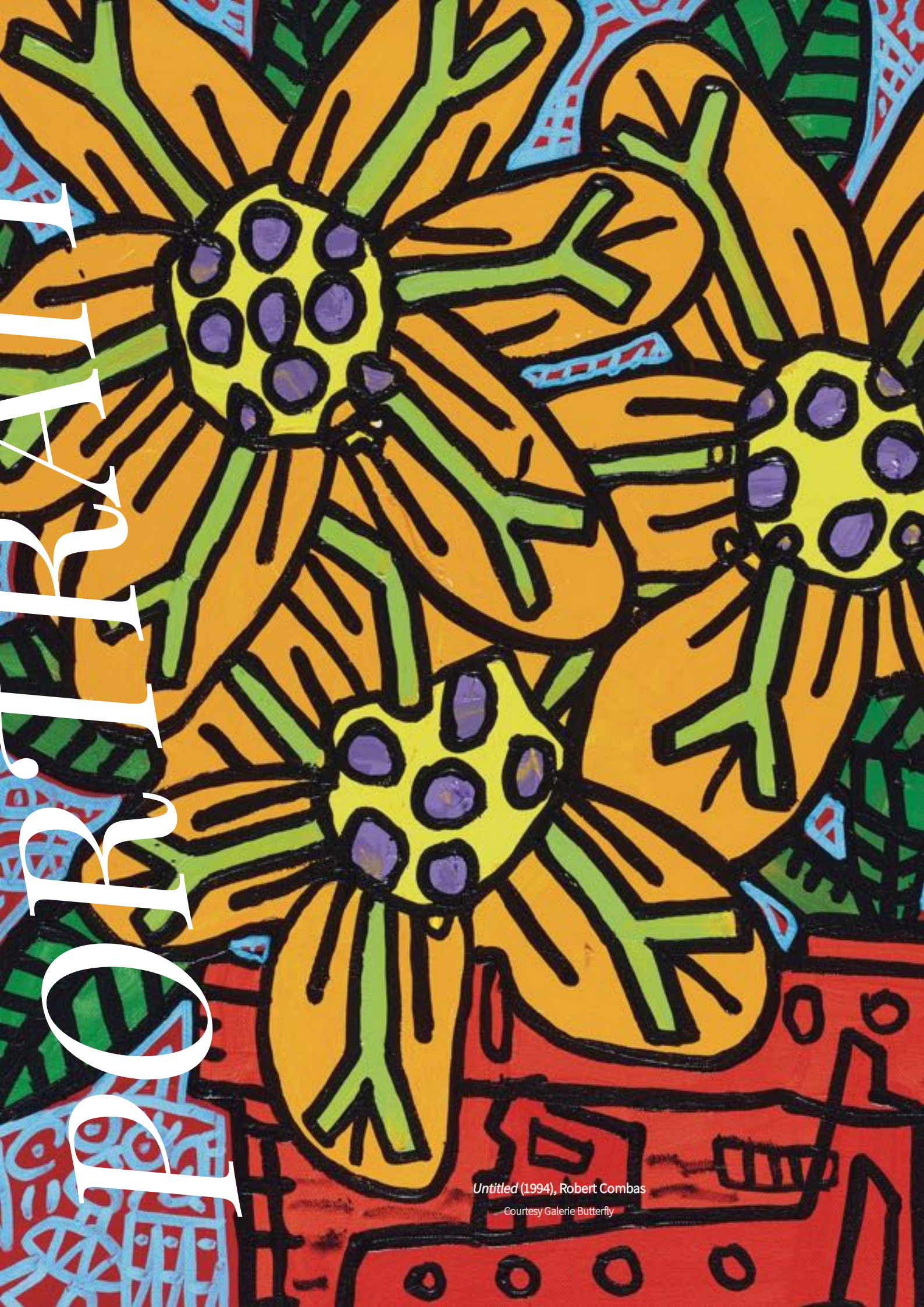
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Musée International des Arts Modestes
Courtesy Musée International des Arts Modestes

ROBERT



Untitled (1994), Robert Combas

Courtesy Galerie Butterfly



BRUSH AGITATOR

Leading figure of the *Figuration libre* movement, Robert Combas is one of the most unclassifiable painters of his generation. A sincere, irreverent, and whimsical artist, whose prolific work is utterly joyful.

In the south of France, Combas is a must-see. From Arles to Béziers, from Montpellier to Avignon, the painter is adored, exhibited, hanging in bistros as well as museums when he signs posters for the Nîmes bullfight or pays tribute to Brassens in his hometown. Because Combas, native of Sète, is never far from his home port, despite his early international fame and forty years of uninterrupted production. A troublemaker of contemporary art, a prankster, a freethinker, Combas has composed a work like a whirlwind, an assembly of metaphors, desires, and poetics, coexisting on the canvas in an ever-unsatisfied desire to paint forever. “A visit to his studio strikes with the saturation of space and the abundance of works that occupy the walls and spill into adjacent rooms. Objects of all kinds, polychrome sculptures, self-made furniture, guitars, photographs, mountains of books, and toys. These accumulations move or disappear,” described Yolande Clergue, president of the Vincent Van Gogh Foundation, which hosted his exhibition “Qu’ès aco?” in Arles in 2008.

Combas, the painter, holds nothing back. In one stroke, his complex compositions with vibrant motifs outlined in black sweep away any temptation of hierarchy in genres, norms, or subjects. A “style” like no other, infused with pop culture, mythology, advertisements, sex, wars, rock, and everyday life. Rabelaisian, Combas constantly overflows from his canvases. Also, he is not just a painter. Sculpture, music, and cinema are equally his playgrounds [see box p.24]. “In his tremendous inventiveness, his jubilation in bringing together the most contradictory universes (comics, news, rock music, art history, religious traditions, etc.), in his ambivalence, verve, sense of satire, and grotesque,

there are aspects that liken him to Alfred Jarry and even Rabelais,” wrote art critic Bernard Marcadé.

Against the establishment

He likes to say that he was born in Lyon in 1957 “as a result of a workplace accident” before his parents returned to Sète, where he grew up in a working-class and cosmopolitan environment marked by communist thought. After a year at the Beaux-Arts of Sète, then directed by Éliane Beaupuy-Manciet, he studied Fine Arts in Montpellier from 1974 to 1979. At that time, conceptual art reigned supreme — in fact, the *Support-Surface* group partially formed at the Beaux-Arts of Montpellier with one of its founders, Claude Viallat from Nîmes. Combas, on the other hand, was steeped in pop culture, comics, and rock. Distrustful of the prevailing intellectualism at the fine arts school, he asserted from the late 1970s onward a personal painting as the “result of the pleasure of the gesture”, opposed to the asceticism of minimalists and the dictates of “legitimate culture”. In contrast, he reclaimed the canvas space, played





Robert Combas in his studio, 1987

Courtesy Robert Combas

Combas, musician

For Combas, painting and music are inseparable. A renowned vinyl collector and a fan of the Beach Boys, he created the short-lived band Les Démodés with his friends Hervé and Richard “Buddy” Di Rosa a few years before the adventure of *Figuration libre*. In fact, Robert Combas met Hervé Di Rosa at a record store in Sète. At the time, they talked more about rock music than painting. Buddy played the drums, Robert played the guitar, or sometimes vice versa. Ketty provided vocals. After a few concerts at the Théâtre de la mer, in Avignon, Montpellier, and even at the Gibus in Paris, the band stopped after a year.

Three decades later, Robert Combas returned to the stage. During the exhibition “Sans filet” at Guy Pieters in 2010, he met the Sétois visual artist and videographer Lucas Mancione. They formed their rock-electro duo, Les Sans-pattes, shortly after. Combas took on the role of writing lyrics and composing, while Mancione handled the arrangements and recording. On stage, they engaged in performances — rather than concerts — in which videos shot in fixed shots resembled living paintings. Robert Combas sang at the microphone, performing tracks that were sometimes electroacoustic and sometimes punk. After releasing their first EP in June 2016, they participated in Michel Houellebecq’s exhibition “Rester Vivant” at the Palais de Tokyo and recorded their first album, Notre Renaissance, the following year. Last September, the band performed at the Théâtre Molière on the occasion of the 350th anniversary of the foundation of the city of Sète, with the participation of visual artist Marc Duran and saxophonist Lionel Martin. With Combas, Sète is never far away.

and a member of the jury, noticed him. Surprised by the energy of Combas’s painting, which he associated with the Italian Transavantgarde (Enzo Cucchi, Francesco Clemente...) and the new German and Austrian fauves (Georg Baselitz, Martin Kippenberger...), he offered him his first collective exhibition in 1980, “After Classicism”, at the Museum of Art and Industry in Saint-Étienne. “Critics would later be captivated by his multifaceted work that destabilised prevailing aesthetic concepts and designated him as the leader of a new painting style named ‘*Figuration libre*’, a term coined by Ben in 1981,” wrote Cristina Agostinelli of the Centre Pompidou. Around the same time, Combas met art dealers Bruno Bischofberger and Daniel Templon and decided to move to Paris. There, he reunited with Hervé Di Rosa, who had been studying at the Arts Décoratifs. Di Rosa had already met François Boisrond,

My brain is an incubator that works consciously but mostly unconsciously. Images come into me: one day, they come back out. But not only... emotions and sensations too.
— *Robert Combas*

with colours, and used a constant flow of images from cultural industries. Believing that “everything has already been done anyway”, his sources of inspiration were multiple and dehierarchised — comics, advertising, ancient or religious mythologies, magazines, history, TV, news. Street art against white cubes. The Montpellier years would be decisive for the future. As early as 1977, Combas painted the series of *Battles*, a central subject in his work, then appropriated the figure of Mickey Mouse. Playing on the widespread image of Walt Disney’s hero, Robert Combas claimed it for free use, as evidenced by the declaration in his paintings: “Mickey is no longer Walt’s property.” These very first works earned him

early recognition — the Centre Pompidou acquired one of his early Mickeys, dating from 1978, in 1992. A cherished figure for Combas, Mickey later became *Nickey* (2002), with the painter associating it with his recurring motif of Battles and transforming the mouse into a symbol of violence.

The beginnings of *Figuration libre*

During his final years at the Beaux-Arts in Montpellier, in 1979, Robert Combas and his friend Hervé Di Rosa created the magazine *Bato* in Sète, which they described as a “collective assemblage artwork”, along with Catherine Brindel (Ketty). In the same year, he finally obtained his diploma in Saint-Étienne. Bernard Ceysson, then director of the city’s museums

through whom they met art critic Barnard Lamarche-Vadel, who invited them in 1981 to participate in an exhibition in his apartment, which he was vacating. Titled “Finishing in Style”, the exhibition included Rémi Blanchard, Jean-Michel Alberola, Denis Laget, and Catherine Viollet, and it marked the starting point of the *Figuration libre* movement [see box p.62].

From that moment on, exhibitions followed one after another for Robert Combas. First at Ben Vautier’s in Nice and at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris with his fellow artists, then at ARCA in Marseille and at CAPC in Bordeaux. However, Combas’s work cannot be reduced solely to *Figuration Libre*, to which he remains



Monstre vert à double incarnation a fond bleu (1995), Robert Combas

Courtesy Omer Tiroche Gallery



*Mickey black monté sur boeuf TORO
en cheval de compagnie, Robert Combas*

Courtesy Opera Gallery

“Sometimes I work abstractly with paint splatters, a kind of abstract expressionism. The figurative is the fun side, grounded; initially, it was a derisive reaction against the intellectual paintings of the art world in the 1970s. I come from a working-class background, I lived in two different worlds. There are still messages in my painting: initially, it’s a certain energy, I wanted to paint what I wanted. In comics, you’re stuck with the characters, whereas in this painting, I’m free, completely free, even with the format.”

— *Robert Combas*

closely connected. “Caught in the *Figuration libre* movement, Robert Combas’s painting was the subject of passionate debates at the turn of the 1980s. However, this multifaceted work distinguishes itself from the ‘return to painting’ that characterised this era in many ways. Robert Combas has always been wary of the labels placed on his art. From *Figuration libre*, he retains only the adjective ‘free’; from *art brut*, he retains only ‘raw’. From *art brut*, he claims purity; from *Figuration libre*, impurity,” analyses art critic Bernard Marcadé. Nevertheless, citations and references to art history permeate his work. “This has especially developed over time, as exhibitions progressed,” Robert Combas explained in an interview with Philippe Piguet. “From the beginning, I painted battle scenes influenced by comics and all popular media. Later, Yvon Lambert conveyed his passion for ancient art, and thanks to him, I started revisiting a whole range of historical subjects. It allowed me to establish milestones, to gradually channel my culture, and it advanced things intellectually.”

Unclassifiable

Quickly, Combas’s work gained widespread visibility in France and Europe, with galleries showcasing his work in Düsseldorf (Eva Keppel), Amsterdam (Swart), Venice (Il Capricorno), and even in the United States (Leo Castelli, New York), and as far as Seoul (Blue). After retrospectives at the Museum of Les Sables-d’Olonne (1985) and the

Museum of Saint-Étienne (1986), and his tribute to Toulouse-Lautrec at the Museum of Albi (1990), Combas explored the territories of spirituality and esotericism in his painting. This is evident in exhibitions such as “Du simple et du double” at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris (1993), retrospectives like “Fantaisies héroïques” in Sérignan (1996), and “Savoir-faire” at the Museum of Art in Seoul, South Korea (2006). In 2012, highlighting his career, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Lyon organised a major retrospective titled “Greatest Hits”.

Art brut, Arab and African imagery joined his pop imagination. “If there are things in my paintings that may resemble art brut, it’s the way of working that makes you think of it. It’s close to the visuals of art brut, but it’s not,” he said. Above all, writing plays a significant role in his work. Initially, he incorporated quotes into his canvases, but eventually, the texts broke free from the support and became lengthy titles, serving as keys to interpreting the paintings, such as *Énergie sortant des oreilles de moi-même. Double énergie oreillère avec geneviève bras traverseur émetteur. Et énergie oreillère affluent du Soleil au oreille par la chaleur printanière. Point*, a work from 1990 acquired in 1992 by FRAC Alsace. “At first, because I was self-conscious about selling my paintings, I would create a title like a BONUX gift that went with the painting,” Robert Combas explained. “I came from the School

of Fine Arts, where the generations before me, *Support-Surface & Co.*, were all about ‘UNTITLED’ works. Since I like to do things differently from others, I started giving titles that became longer and turned into little stories that explained my paintings. But some people tell me that it can work without the painting.” Some of these titles, written by the artist after completing the work, have been compiled in a book. “It’s a sort of little poem in relation to the image and composition, but at the same time, I put personal things in it that you can’t see in the painting,” he continued. “I have worked on preexisting texts that weren’t mine, but in general, it comes afterward. It’s really free text.”

Today, Combas’s prices skyrocket at auctions, as seen with *A pet hit parade : musique avec des gens pour la faire et une jeune femme à petits seins. APPETISSANTE* (1986), which sold for €319,000, exceeding the high estimate of €90,000 at Artcurial in December 2019. While the Strouk gallery, a steadfast supporter, regularly displays his works on Avenue Matignon, the Paul-Valéry Museum in his hometown remains his stronghold. In 2021, it hosted a double tribute with “Robert Combas chante Sète et Georges Brassens” (“Robert Combas sings Sète and Georges Brassens”) on the occasion of the centenary of the chansonnier. Two tutelary figures from Sète animated by the same spirit of liberty and poetry.



Robert Combas's studio

© Robert Combas





HERVÉ DI ROSA

Hervé Di Rosa
Photo Victoire Di Rosa





“I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN A CONCEPTUAL ARTIST”

Leading figure of the *Figuration libre* movement in France, Hervé Di Rosa has built a body of work enriched by his travels and openness to the world... with the ongoing aim of opening contemporary art to all fields of creation.

Elected as a new member of the Academy of Fine Arts in November 2022, Hervé Di Rosa began his career in the late 1970s. Originally from Sète, he moved to study in the capital and, as early as twenty years old, was already exhibiting in Paris, Amsterdam, and New York alongside Robert Combas, François Boisrond, or Rémi Blanchard, with whom he formed what Ben named “*Figuration libre*”. Then, the artist travelled and developed a practice that gradually broke away from his early works. In 2000, he founded the Musée International des Arts Modestes (International Museum of Modest Arts) with the idea of making contemporary creation accessible to everyone.

**You are one of the founding figures of *Figuration libre*.
How did the movement form?**

In 1975, while I was studying at the Beaux-Arts in Sète on Wednesday afternoons, I met Robert Combas. Three years later, at the École des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, I met François Boisrond. With Combas, we organised an exhibition at Ben Vautier’s in Nice in 1981. On that occasion, he coined the term “*Figuration libre*” for us, which spread quickly afterwards. When we returned to Paris, we did the exhibition “Finir en beauté” (“Finishing Strong”) organised by Bernard Lamarche-Vadel, with Rémi Blanchard and François Boisrond. Initially, we were four. Around 1984, I introduced my brother and incorporated his work in sculpture [see p.48]. By 1986-1987, it was over. After that, there were no more *Figuration libre* exhibitions. There were never any writings or theories to define it either... Ben wrote a few small things, and Hervé Perdirolle wrote most of the texts. But “*Figuration libre*” is a term invented by Ben to define Combas and me, then it was extended

to Blanchard and Boisrond. Later, other artists joined the movement.

**What defined the movement?
Your practices?**

Above all, we were friends — Combas, Boisrond, Blanchard, and I. We wanted to paint and were indeed a bit fed up with the conceptual art dominating the era. We all did figurative painting, were about the same age, and except for Boisrond, we all came from working-class backgrounds, so there were connections. However, we didn’t create the same type of painting, either aesthetically or conceptually. Boisrond moved towards almost classical painting, Combas towards something rawer and mythological, and Rémi produced very poetic paintings linked to fairy tales. We were very different, but we knew that together, we were stronger — as a group of four, it was easier to establish ourselves, but everyone soon went their separate ways. I was twenty at the time. The paintings from this period are now considered major works; they have historical importance, but for me, they are works of youth.

Musée International des Arts Modestes

The MIAM was founded in 2000 in Sète by Hervé Di Rosa and Bernard Belluc, both driven by the idea of opening a space for their two collections. Toys, figurines, gadgets, or trinkets: the museum's top floor displays objects gathered over the years by Bernard Belluc. But MIAM is not just about nostalgia for the past and childhood. "It also represents a political stance in the network of art and the representation of contemporary creation in France", explains Hervé Di Rosa. Thus, the museum organises exhibitions like "Machine-made", to showcase aspects of contemporary creation often ignored by institutions. "The museum is first and foremost an artist's project, linked to my reflection rather than my works. I also wanted to revalue craftsmen, the anonymous, those who don't sign their work. And the third pillar was the idea of opening contemporary creation, in its most difficult or pointed aspects, to a public of neophytes," adds the artist. Supported by the City of Sète and the Ministry of Culture, the museum now exports its exhibitions through partnerships with the Museum of Modern Art in Lille-metropole, Friche de la Belle de Mai in Marseille, La Maison Rouge in Paris, MAAT in Lisbon... Always with the aim of narrating another story of contemporary art.

presented the "Viva Di Rosa" exhibition at MAM in 1987. Later, he developed his own practice. There are always limits to collaboration, just like there were with *Figuration libre*: we loved exhibiting together until 1984, then the desire dried up, and afterwards, there were only reconstructed exhibitions. But the idea of collectivity has always been important to me.

You initiated a break from *Figuration libre* by travelling. Why this desire for elsewhere?

The movement around *Figuration libre* did help me, but it became

“Being the son of working class parents, I really wanted to earn my living with my hands, with what I was doing. It was contradictory to the spirit of the time, where all artists taught to live: there was very little private market in the 1970s, and the prices weren't the same as today. — Hervé Di Rosa

How did you stand out at the time in the contemporary scene?

In 1981, in the art world, no one spoke of comics, rock'n'roll, or genre films. We arrived with these references. We were primarily facilitators as we opened up the field of possibilities. This was the major break from the very intellectual art milieu of the time. The idea of expressing oneself through the medium of painting, i.e., a piece of canvas stretched over four pieces of wood and some colour, was very rare among artists in the late 1970s. I also think people wanted to see images. We were accepted because the same phenomenon was happening in other countries: the new expressionism in Italy, the new Fauves in Germany, graffiti artists in the USA... I remember the joy of seeing artists my age on the other side of the Atlantic who had the same concerns... but with, obviously, very strong American specificities.

In 1977, you founded the magazine *Bato*. Was it a precursor to this movement?

I created the magazine with Robert Combas and Ketty Brindel, four years before the term *Figuration libre* was coined, it's true. And the idea was to do things together. It was the punk era; we were in action, and as we really had no budget, we made a magazine with whatever means we had. Our interest was in production and trying to make a little money. It was also a way to reach an audience, the embryo of the idea I developed later in 1987 when I inaugurated my first shop and gallery, trying to open contemporary art to the novice. And this is the idea that I still carry with the MIAM today [\[see box\]](#).

You also worked with your brother, Richard...

Yes, we worked together for ten years from 1984 to 1994. I painted and he made sculptures of my characters; it was a true collaboration. We even

redundant; I felt like I was copying myself. So, at the end of the 1980s, I set off around the world to meet with craftsmen and explore different techniques to transform my painting. It was this grand journey that made me realise the vastness of the world. I learned lacquer techniques in Vietnam, bronze work in Cameroon... I worked in various workshops, in Cameroon, Ghana... This too was a collective effort, as I shared my work with artisans. I spent twenty years learning, and I'm still learning; I just started ceramics in 2016. It enriches me. But it's also true that I need to be alone in my studio to paint.

You mentioned opening up contemporary art, especially through MIAM...

Some artworks require a lot of explanation to be understood. At MIAM, we try to open the field of art to a broader audience through a protocol involving various objects.



Fille (2019), Hervé Di Rosa

© Hervé Di Rosa

Tous contre Yvan, Hervé Di Rosa
© Hervé Di Rosa



“I am a conceptual artist. It’s Leonardo da Vinci who said, “painting is an intellectual thing”. If there’s no idea behind it, it’s just decoration. — Hervé Di Rosa

We present complex artists in ways that make them accessible through different setups and perspectives, unique to each exhibition. My goal with MIAM is to attract an audience that has possibly never even been to a museum or an art centre before.

What kind of exhibitions does the museum offer?

The Musée International des Arts Modestes is a museum for collectors and for the revaluation of modest, popular objects and images. The exhibition we’ve just inaugurated,

they build themselves, low tech. The works thus completely fit into the notion of modest art, which is much broader than one might imagine. It goes well beyond just small toys.

What scope do “modest arts” encompass, then?

I’m not an academic, so I initially struggled a bit to formalise this idea of modest arts. I had to visualise it by making maps. In the world and in the visual arts, there are territories more or less defined. Contemporary art itself has become a genre in its own

right, but a large part of contemporary creation does not fit into this field. So, I distinguished several segments: commercial art, art brut, naïve art, popular art, decorative arts, graphic design... Modest arts encompass all creation that is rejected on the fringes of these domains of expression. For example, I’ve been collecting for forty years a new genre of toys that are figures from cartoons, manga, series, etc. They’re not made for playing but for collecting because they’re beautiful, well-made... but they can’t be classified as “popular art”.

“What bored me, and still bores me today, is that contemporary art is often reserved to an intellectual elite. Many exclude themselves even when the spaces are free. Even in galleries, very few people dare to step through the door. — Hervé Di Rosa

“Libres!” (“Free!”), focuses on two unique collectors of contemporary and modern art, showcasing very diverse objects. I believe we’ve organised exhibitions that nobody was doing 23 years ago, offering a transversal approach that blends contemporary art, art brut, comics, popular art, etc. We try to present, on specific themes, a broad spectrum of creation, from the smallest object to the grand artwork. After us, places like Quai Branly or La Maison Rouge began to offer these types of exhibitions, but in the 1990s, no one else was doing this.

MIAM recently organised an exhibition on “machines”. What connections have you made with modest art?

We handed over the keys to the museum to two artists, Michel Paysant and Miguel Chevalier, so they could exhibit not their own works, but those of other creators who really use modest means: earth, wool, glass... with machines like small 3D printers

3 questions to... Françoise Adamsbaum

Françoise Adamsbaum is the director of the Musée International des Arts Modestes.

You come from the finance sector. How did you end up in art?

In the 1990s, I created a collection of watches with renowned contemporary artists. I was lucky to work with Keith Haring, Sol LeWitt... and Hervé Di Rosa, with whom I got on very well. We became friends and companions on the journey. Then Hervé set up his museum in 2000, and I found the project very original, so I first worked there voluntarily. Then in 2020, I became its director.

What makes MIAM special?

Hervé Di Rosa works from maps of art territories, and MIAM encompasses everything. Contemporary art is an island in the art world; it’s talked about a lot because there’s a market. But many areas are not highlighted. Comics, for example, can be very expensive today, but they were once completely despised. The concept of modest art, invented by Di Rosa, encourages an open view of all art forms by focusing on its peripheral territories and marginal creations.

How do you work for the visibility of these arts?

I take care of all the museum’s artistic programming, often with group exhibitions for which curators are appointed. We are currently between two exhibitions. The last one, “Fait Machine” (“Machine-made”), revolved around artists using new digital tools, like 3D printers, or repurposing machines to create. The next exhibition, “Free!”, opened on 16 December 2023, and showcases two private collections, one close to surrealism with small statues of popular art, particularly Brazilian, and the other very eclectic, which started with *Figuration libre*.





Mr World (2008), Hervé Di Rosa

© Hervé Di Rosa

INTERVIEW

The museum is also a place to house your personal collection...

Yes, I started collecting comics at six or seven years old, then I became interested in figurines, which were quite rare in the 1970s. From 1977, the first *Star Wars* merchandising appeared, which fascinated me. During my travels around the world from the 1980s, I've collected numerous objects, paintings, like *ex-votos* in Mexico, and even some sculptures. Then, when you don't know where to put these objects anymore, you make a museum. The museum's permanent exhibition also features collections by Bernard Belluc, co-founder of MIAM. Mine are stored in reserve. We plan to open in the near future a much larger museum in Sète to display all our collections.

How do these objects influence your work?

These objects have always nourished my work. I don't do pop art, I don't reproduce, I create through painting a universe close to comics, illustration... but that's not it. I arrived in Paris at 18, discovered Matisse's paintings at the Centre Pompidou. Before that, in Sète, I had hardly ever seen a work of art, I only knew them through reproductions in magazines, books... There was a real distance, a real isolation, which I broke over time because the world has always interested me. Economic globalisation has failed, but perhaps the globalisation of people, of ideas, one day, will happen.

What are you working on today?

There are still many things we want to show at MIAM, which other institutions do not present. After 23 years of activity, if there were no more perspectives or things to defend, we would have to consider closing. I've been working for ten or fifteen years on an exhibition dedicated to commercial art, this part of contemporary creation that includes paintings sold in supermarkets, on cruise ships, in Disneyland galleries. I'm working with Jean-Baptiste Carbolante with whom we have developed a chronology of this production, dating back to the 1950s. No one talks about it, as it's considered in bad taste. It will be significant...

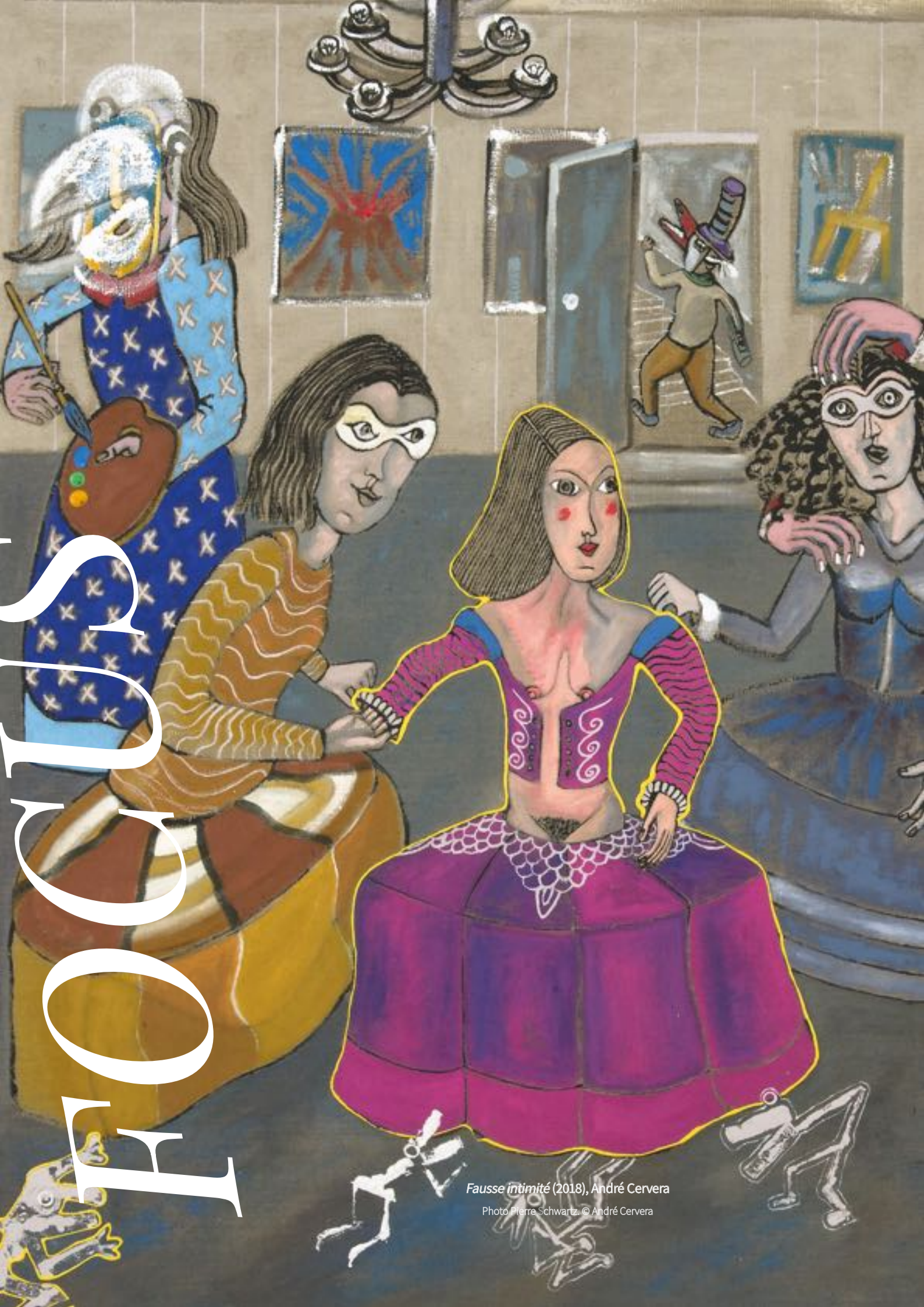




Wedding room of the Bobigny town hall (2006), Hervé Di Rosa

© Hervé Di Rosa

FROG



Fausse intimité (2018), André Cervera

Photo Pierre Schwartz. © André Cervera



CERVERA, PAINTER AND TRAVELLER

Following in the footsteps of his elder, Robert Combas, André Cervera decided to become an artist. He quickly developed a practice enriched by the idea of collectivity, as well as his travels to Africa and Asia.

Born in Sète in 1962, André Cervera began painting at age sixteen, influenced by his older brother, the poet Michel Zoom, who was three years his senior. Through Michel, the young Cervera met Robert Combas and witnessed the creation of the first paintings labelled as “*Figuration Libre*”. This pivotal encounter spurred him towards creation: “It was a real shock. Robert introduced me to pop art, to the culture of painting, and to cinema. We shared a lot. If I started painting, it was all because of my meeting with Combas,” the painter reveals.

It was in Sète, the city where he grew up and where, in the 1980s, a fresh wind was blowing, that André Cervera found his footing. “In this small town, we were punks, just like Paris was punk. We were in sync with the times, and sometimes even ahead of larger cities like Montpellier or Marseille. We also had connections with Paris, with the United States through music, cinema,” the artist comments. With the punk movement, everything seemed possible — “Make music even if you haven’t learned, and if you want to paint, paint!” Cervera claims. This encapsulates the spirit of the movement: uninhibited and experimental.

Expanding horizons

In 1982, Robert Combas left Sète for Paris, and André Cervera went to study at the Beaux-Arts de Marseille with two friends, Aldo Biascamano and Tino Cosentino. Driven by boredom and the desire to try something new, to mix genres, they formed a painting group, the Yaros group. “We had this idea of total art in mind. From there, for four years, we performed by combining painting, music, and cinema. We also did shows. A quarter of an hour

before playing, we wrote the scene, drank on stage... Everything we did, we did for real,” the artist recalls.

The group grew from three to four with the arrival of André Cervera’s brother, then to twelve. However, the collective disbanded four years later due to disagreements. From those punk years, André Cervera retains a collaborative spirit, which still drives him today. Even now, he still works with other artists: “In 2016, in Kolkata, India, where I lived for six months, I collaborated with an Indian artist; we worked on the same canvas and then put together an entire four-handed exhibition,” he remembers.

Mystical performances

The artist also retains a fondness for performance, or as he calls it, the “performative act”. “For me, performance is like a ceremony where I am masked. Last year, I created two paintings to music, live, and sacrificed one of them, setting it on fire,” he recalls. “I danced around the canvas to celebrate the energies.” These energies hold a privileged place in Cervera’s work, infusing it with a mystical dimension. Fire, air,





*La liberté guidant le peuple dans
les rues de Damas (2017), André Cervera*

Photo Pierre Schwartz. © André Cervera

“My first trip to Africa was decisive. I discovered an entire world that was both subjective, a world of superstition and shamanism. It was from that point I realised I needed to travel.”
— *André Cervera*

water, earth — elements that nourish his practice.

Influenced by Jean Rouch’s ethnological cinema, Cervera also places great importance on masks. They appear in his carnival-like, colourful paintings, worn by characters he enjoys depicting. A trend that began in the 1980s. In his 1986 painting *The sorcerer of the yellow river*, the protagonist already appears with his face hidden by a tribal mask. Cervera shares: “As there are many masks in my works, I thought, why not wear them during my performances. So it’s quite new. Previously, I performed unmasked.”

The importance of travel

Following the Yaros group’s split, Cervera turned to solo practice, which he developed in his studio. However, 1994 marked a pivotal year for him. He travelled to Senegal and then, a few months later, to Yugoslavia. “I went in place of Hervé Di Rosa, who sponsored me for an exhibition, a meeting of French and Croatian artists about war and peace,” he reveals. Profoundly impacted, he spent ten days experiencing curfews, bombings, trees damaged by bombings, ruins, and the deeply affected people, “both in soul and body”. These travels renewed the artist’s perspective, leading him to explore the concept of the “painter-traveller” with a motto: paint to travel, travel to paint.

Between 2000 and 2017, André Cervera travelled annually. In Africa, he explored Morocco, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger; in Asia, he visited India and China for five years. Wherever he went, he collected stories and materials for his travel diary, elements of which appear in his paintings. In China, he was inspired

by Cultural Revolution posters; in Africa, by the lands, objects... and masks. “I am a collector of primitive arts. But then, I divert these masks, I paint them,” he comments. Beyond the collected objects, he draws inspiration from traditions, symbols, and worldviews of other cultures: “That’s why I try to live there for a long time, three months, six months, sometimes more. And in China for instance, I learned Mandarin.”

In Beijing, Cervera spent seven months in the Songzhuang artists’ village, discovering another form of collective emulation, competitive this time, and a new perspective on his work. During his second trip to Mali in 2002, he befriended the son of a Hogon, the highest spiritual authority of the Dogon ethnic group.

Other perceptions of the world

In his paintings, sometimes with naturalistic undertones, mystical and phantasmagorical elements clash, like a carnival of the absurd populated with characters surrounded by symbols and elements enriched by his travels and openness to other modes of perception. “There is an attraction to shamanic questions, to the afterlife, which Westerners struggle to perceive,” he notes. “What interests me is perception, the opening to another world. In my work, even if I draw from reality, I can also draw from the beyond.”

Similarly, the artist sees himself as a transmitter of an artistic legacy: “I revisited *The Raft of the Medusa*, and I’ve done several interpretations of *Luncheon on the Grass*. For *The Last Supper*, I replaced the original thirteen characters with animals wearing masks. It’s interesting to confront great painting, like Picasso

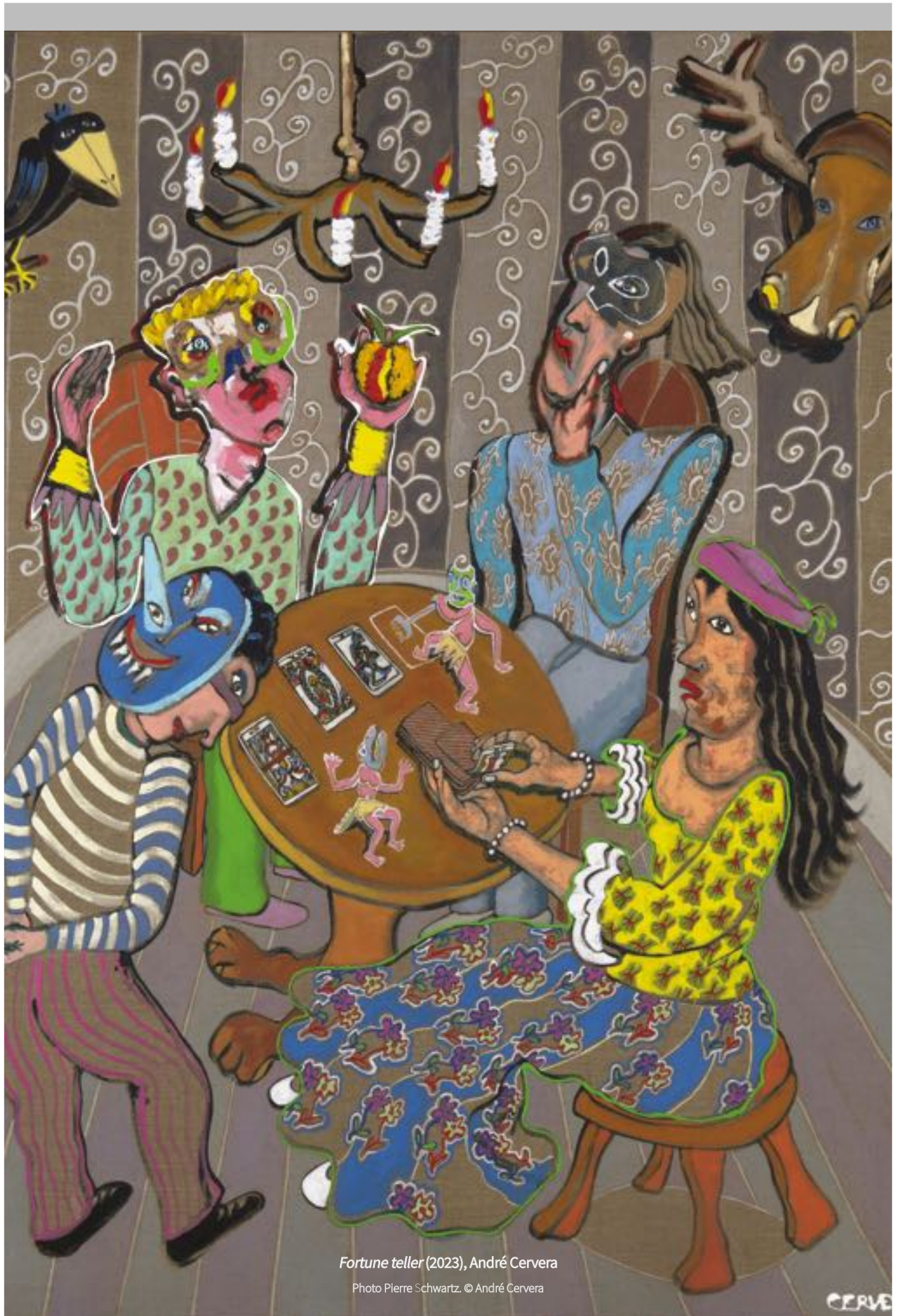
did, while adding my own touch. In the composition of his paintings, there’s also the idea of staging, “like making cinema within painting”. And in his scenes, motifs recur and align.

Through Cervera’s journey as an artist, he blends the traditional with the innovative, the local with the global, creating a rich tapestry that reflects his diverse experiences and perspectives. His work, a fusion of performance, painting, and storytelling, transcends cultural boundaries, inviting viewers to explore not just the art, but the myriad worlds and perceptions it embodies.

For André Cervera, objects from tribal art, embodying both functional art and the vehicle for celebrations — harvests, births, eclipse endings — possess a force that captivates him. He now buries his canvases, a practice inspired by his travels in China, India, and Africa. This acts as a metaphor for the passing of time and a way for the artist to imbue his works with new symbolic significance.

His last major trip was in 2019 to Morocco. Since Covid, forced to remain in one place, André Cervera slow his travels down. But the artist doesn’t plan to stop there: today, his gaze turns towards South America and Mexico. New projects and performances are in preparation, undoubtedly to be enriched by future discoveries.

Cervera’s journey not only illustrates his commitment to exploring and incorporating diverse cultural elements into his art, but also highlights his continuous evolution as an artist. Each journey brings new insights and experiences, deeply influencing his artistic expression and worldview.



Fortune teller (2023), André Cervera

Photo Pierre Schwartz. © André Cervera



André Cervera
Photo Fouad Maazouz



ZOOM



Elvis (2021), Richard "Buddy" Di Rosa

© Richard Di Rosa. Courtesy Galerie Vallois

PUNK IS NOT DEAD

As the sole sculptor in the *Figuration libre* movement, Richard “Buddy” Di Rosa is an unrestrained force, bursting with raw energy. Renowned for his straightforwardness, he keenly and accurately examines the vital need for creation, as well as the adverse effects of the market and, occasionally, fame.

Richard Di Rosa, the youngest member of the group, was still a teenager during the early days of Robert Combas and Hervé Di Rosa, who were in their twenties. Born in 1963, he got his nickname from Buddy Holly, as music was the initial bond among these friends, long before their engagement with visual arts. Hervé Di Rosa and Robert Combas first met at a record store. Buddy, skilled on the drums, attended the conservatory while his elders enrolled in Fine Arts. “Robert Combas and I had a band, Les Démodés, which started to get popular... so we quit!” Buddy Di Rosa recalls with amusement, thinking back to those wild days. “Moreover, the star wasn’t me or Robert, but the girl who sang on stage. Robert didn’t like being in the background.”

They performed at venues like the Théâtre de la mer in Sète, Montpellier, Avignon, and the Gibus in Paris. In 1979, the newspaper *Libération* even wrote a brief piece about them. Jean de Loisy, former president of the Palais de Tokyo, noted their affinity for rock as much for its inventive and energetic popular music, free from strict musical constraints, as for the mythos of the rock star, famed for rapid social ascension and a life perceived as dazzling, romantic, and fragile.

At this stage, they weren’t yet associated with *Figuration libre*, a term later coined by Ben to describe the creativity of these three mavericks, quickly joined by Rémi Blanchard and François Boisrond. While Robert Combas and Hervé Di Rosa began painting, Buddy spent his time building model kits when not playing the drums. “I made heaps of models, like 300-piece airplane kits, which I’d set up on a tarmac with painted little soldiers loading ammunition to

create dioramas. That’s how I started creating three-dimensional characters. Unlike the others, I never attended art school; I got into sculpture simply because I painted these small figures.”

Buddy then started creating three-dimensional versions of characters drawn by his brother, along with diorama scenes. Soon, a distinctive Buddy Di Rosa world emerged, filled with anthropomorphic sculptures and *Diromythological* beings, showcasing his talent for neologisms. As a self-taught artist, he used whatever he could find, from toys to figurines, altering and adding various materials to create volume. “It all happened without me fully realising it. It was just natural. We didn’t come together and decide ‘Let’s do Figuration libre’. I was the only one doing sculpture, and eventually, I initiated what was later called Toy Art. Very few artists were doing this kind of thing, except maybe Calder, who had created wooden toys at Maeght before me.”

In 1983, Buddy travelled to New York and befriended emerging street art artists like Futura 2000, Kenny Sharf,

Buddy’s sculptures, unique and one of the most original of this century, are born from subjects and realised in significant masses, without referring to anything existing. They are undoubtedly a fresh perspective on how to approach volume in art. Few can make materials speak so vividly, and no one does it with the same freshness as he does.

— *Jean Seisser*

Daze, and Crash, with whom he later exhibited. Returning from New York, he participated in the famous 1984 exhibition “5/5 Figuration libre, France/USA” at the Musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, which brought together the artists from Sète and their new American friends.

“When you go to New York from Sète, it’s a real shock! I’m still friends with Futura, Kenny Sharf, and the others. They were already using spray paint, something that hadn’t caught on in France. We did everything with brushes. But it’s essentially the same thing. Keith Haring’s last exhibitions, where he began to fill in his lines, looked like Robert’s paintings. There were similarities. Sometimes people mixed us up. For us, it all happened naturally, without planning, and things just evolved. In the 1980s, everyone was nice to us because we were successful... I’m not naive, but I don’t complain either. We were twenty or thirty, revolutionary and anti-bourgeois, but we weren’t against making a bit of money.”

In 42 years, Buddy Di Rosa hasn’t given up. He tirelessly works in his studios at Porte de Saint-Ouen and in Sète. “Too many people think they’re artists when they’re just decorators. We’re fundamentally researching emotions and sensations. We’re not trying to create pretty little characters and claim ‘I made this with my own hands’. That’s been over since Duchamp, since Malevich. Art isn’t about calculation. Gradually,

we made our mark, but I’m not naive; I know our work has been criticised by some. However, we outlive them, and I think that bothers quite a few.”

Wood, clay, resin, metal... In his workshops, he works with any material at hand. “I keep up with everything new, like Kevlar. I’ve been interested in inflatable materials for several years now. It’s important not to limit oneself, but it does require a certain level of skill and a lot of work. That’s probably why there are so few of us in sculpture. Someone like Twombly, it’s not just a few squiggles and a line, he works incredibly hard. You don’t achieve that kind of result just like that. That’s why those frauds on Artsper make me laugh. I know the Burens and the Raynauds, you may or may not like their work, but they believe in it, they’re sincere. Meanwhile, the real genius might be out there, starving somewhere.”

His sculptures, true totems reflecting African influences and popular cultures, are brightly coloured and made of eclectic assemblages. They combine a knowledgeable bestiary, whose apparent simplicity is based on a subtle balance and an incredible sense of spatiality. “True statuary is about conveying emotions through volume,” he says. “I go beyond appearance, realistic figures, or anecdotes; I abstract the essence. In painting, they cheat a bit by telling you a story, an anecdote. Sculpture doesn’t lie; it’s immediate, like music.”

Currently, he is preparing his next exhibition, a retrospective at Vallois 41, the Rue de Seine gallery that has represented him for five years, known especially for pioneering the emerging African scene. “I went to Cotonou in Benin where Vallois has a foundation,” he recounts. “Like Perrotin and Mennour, they are true gallerists, old-school, who make and support artists, similar to Nahon, Templon, and Lambert when I started. Today, most galleries are more like brokers. Artists appear and disappear on Artsper or Artprice, both the bad and the good, unfortunately. They’re asked to produce, produce, produce. Art isn’t a job. There are months when I don’t sell anything, but I’m thinking. That’s my work. Having fame is the cherry on the sundae, but doing a good job isn’t enough. You have to win over institutions, journalists, patrons. And then there’s luck and chance. Lambert used to say, ‘I made money from what I sold, but I made a fortune from what I kept.’”

Sometimes he picks up the guitar, films himself on Instagram, plays live at Vallois on weekends. He doesn’t forbid himself anything, nor does he force anything. “I’m sixty years old, I know I’ve revolutionised a thing or two, but I’m under no illusions anymore and I do things for myself, which is already quite something. And then sculptures, they’re like children, they take a long time to create.”

Pop Art and the new realists came from advertising, and we came from rock’n’roll, drugs, and comics. It was a sort of international movement, with Germans, Russians, Italians. Graffiti in the United States was similar.

— *Richard “Buddy” Di Rosa*



Atelier de Richard "Buddy" Di Rosa

Photo Richard Di Rosa





Richard "Buddy" Di Rosa

Photo Richard Di Rosa

SAINT



Maison (1970), Ben
Courtesy Eva Vautier Gallery



ART FROM THE SOUTH

In the early 1960s, while Paris gathered nearly all of the cultural offerings, it was in the southeast of France where avant-garde practices began to emerge, overshadowing the capital.

In the autumn of 2023, the Van Gogh Foundation in Arles inaugurated “L’Atelier du Sud”, a showcase of artists in residence. American painter Laura Owens invited 23 artists to create new works within the city walls. The subsequent group exhibition aimed to forge connections between these international creators who had succeeded each other over a three-year period. The title of this exhibition was a nod to Vincent Van Gogh, who settled in Provence with the earnest wish to unite a community of artists. Like Cézanne in Aix, Matisse in Collioure, or Picasso in Vallauris, the history of modern art is dotted by some artists’ journeys to the South which prompted dramatic challenges to official art. In the latter half of the 20th century, escaping a historiography based on the myth of the genius artist, it was the movements and networks in this region that facilitated artistic upheavals.

“Run, Comrade, the old world is behind you!”

For the youth coming of age at the dawn of the “Trente Glorieuses” (named after the post-WWII economic boom), and as the cultural hegemony of the United States became increasingly evident, the French artistic landscape appeared to be a dead end. Paris still mistakenly considered itself the centre of gravity for art, where primarily pictorial abstraction and narrative figuration coexisted.

The vital question then pervading post-war artistic practices could be seen in a brochure published by “The friends of art”: *For or against abstract art?* (1947). At that time, there was no third option. The young creative scene was visible in the Salons, which were becoming institutionalised and

centralised at the onset of the 1960s. Collective exhibitions like “The salon of young painting”, “The salon of new realities”, or “The Paris Biennale”, gradually took place at the Museum of Modern Art. These cyclical events were supposed to reflect the vigour of contemporary French creation. However, in 1964, a shift occurred that outdated the School of Paris. American Robert Rauschenberg won the top prize at the Venice Biennale with his *Combines* paintings, integrating everyday objects into painted canvases. In the West, everything was new. Serge Guilbault would later write about this in *How New York stole the idea of Modern art* (2006).

A few years earlier, Yves Klein, Arman, and Claude Pascal, born in Nice, would hang out and discuss, their eyes set on the Bay of Angels. This was the time of the first pictorial experiments in Arman’s basement: the invention of accumulations for him, cosmogonies for Klein. Another child of the Côte d’Azur, Martial Raysse began his first assemblages in Golfe Juan, inspired by the American model. As the influence of Neo-Dada





La paix (2023), Martial Raysse

Courtesy Musée Paul Valéry – Sète



Photo Adam Berkecz

and Pop Art grew, groups of artists on the coast, free from academicisms, liked to explore everyday life, imagining a novel language, later theorised by Pierre Restany as New Realism. At 19, Yves Klein would declare, “Although we, meaning artists from Nice, are always on holiday, we are not tourists. That is the essential point. Tourists come to us for their holidays, we live on this land of holidays, which gives us this spirit of madness.”

Nice is nice

Ben Vautier, an artist of Neapolitan origin who settled in Nice in the late 1950s, would play a role in extending the influence of Mediterranean artists. As a whimsical intermediary, the opening of his old

record store with its overflowing facade became a pretext for fruitful encounters and poetic liberation. In 1963, Ben welcomed American George Maciunas, the founder of Fluxus, who was on a European tour. To pay tribute to his master, he decided to organise the “World festival of Fluxus and Total art” and rented the Nice casino to produce an exceptional show. Unfortunately, the director learned of the artist’s plans (to dynamite the piano on stage) and cancelled the performance. The festival then relocated to the café Le Provence and then to the streets, becoming the viral starting point for a series of public events that refused to separate art from life. To drive the point home, Ben declared the Nice flea market an “open work of art”.

The New York/Nice axis

In 1964, Ben Vautier made a round trip to the USA to meet George Brecht, who settled the following year just ten kilometres from Nice. George Brecht and Robert Filliou created in Villefranche-sur-Mer an “international centre for permanent creation”, named *La Cédille qui Sourit* (The Smiling Cedilla) after the shape of Villefranche bay. Even though this signalled the dynamism of the region, Robert Lafont, a committed Occitan linguist, criticised the Fluxus concerts as representing an American cultural invasion.

Some journalists were already sensing the impact of what was first called in 1960 the *École de Nice* (School of Nice), a true antidote to the cultural sclerosis gripping the Parisian fringe. In the magazine *Combat*, Claude Rivière penned an article titled “The solar charge of the artist”, recounting this unexpected emergence. In 1965, Otto Hahn spoke in the national press about artists who “divide their time between New York and the Côte d’Azur”, confirming this “diagonal of the fool” that was for the moment emancipating itself from the Parisian Salons. The first group exhibitions were established in Venice, thanks to the impetus of gallery owner Alexandre de la Salle. Three events organised at ten-year intervals reflect the characteristic humour of this creative current: “École de Nice?” (1967), “École de Nice!” (1977), “École de Nice...” (1987). Without a defined aesthetic tendency, advocating freedom and openness as its question mark suggests, this school label should be considered with some distance.

What about heritage preservation?

La Cédille qui Sourit, the workshop-store opened by Brecht and Filliou in 1965, closed its doors in 1968. All that remains is a small metal plaque at 12 rue de Mai, commemorating the presence of the “Non-School of Villefranche”. As for Ben’s store, it was preserved and relocated following its acquisition by the Centre Pompidou in 1972. This symbolic meeting place has been displayed in the museum’s halls since 1977, although entering inside is no longer possible (too many people were taking souvenirs). The Fondation du doute, inaugurated in Blois in 2013, gathers numerous activatable works and allows immersion into the effervescent atmosphere of Nice at the time. This initiative may have been inspired by the creation of the Musée International des Arts Modestes (International Museum of Modest Arts, MIAM), opened by Hervé Di Rosa [see box p.32] and Bernard Belluc in Sète in 2000. Both experiences aim at decentralising the gaze, valuing the backstreets, and redefining the artistic scenes.

Even though the currents of the *École de Nice*, Fluxus, or *Figuration libre* have been largely assimilated by institutions today, some works still exist outside the museum, stemming from the primitive desire not to separate art from life. In 2000, the Paris City Hall commissioned monumental frescoes from Combas, Boisrond, and Di Rosa. Today, one can still admire *La femme, lumière de l’homme* (*The woman, the light of man*), which colours rue des Archives with a tribute to Cervantes. More confidentially, in 1987, the three friends along with Rémi Blanchard stayed in the Lot at Château Lagrezette, invited by Alain-Dominique Perrin. The four artists took over the dovecote to paint a grand mural, incorporating vineyard iconography that surrounds the domain.

Fresh paint

While the mistral of artistic dissent was blowing on the coast, in Paris, the gale of political protest was

increasingly felt. The cultural agenda showed early signs of May 1968, driven by a few determined artists, mirroring the southern scene. This period, full of leaflets and manifestos, led to the occupation of the École des Beaux-Arts. In 1967, the B.M.P.T. group, composed of Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni, staged an artistic demonstration at the Salon de la Jeune Peinture. They hung and unhung their works on the same day, adding in capital letters “DO NOT EXHIBIT” after their displayed names. That same year, Pierre Gaudibert, curator of the Museum of Modern Art, inaugurated France’s first contemporary art department by creating the A.R.C. (Animation, Research, Confrontation). He encouraged and broke down the barriers of experimental practices, replacing the notion of “culture” with that of “cultural action”. Gaudibert’s impulses (later director of Le Magasin in Grenoble) allowed the avant-garde to assert itself.

Coming from the South and driven by a critical view of cultural institutions, a group of friends, artists, and outsiders (or all three at once) was invited by Pierre Gaudibert to exhibit at the A.R.C. in September 1970. The foundation of the Supports/Surfaces movement is often pinpointed to this moment, where Claude Viallat, Daniel Dezeuze, Marc Devade, Patrick Saytour, André Valensi, and Vincent Bioulés explored the possibilities of canvas and frame. However, prior events had already brought together most of the concerned artists, almost all from the south of France. The title of their first exhibition, “La peinture en question” (“Painting in question”) in the summer of 1969, can already be read as a manifesto in which the interrogative aspect is evident. This outdoor

exhibition in the village of Coaraze (again, near Nice!) shunned the *bourgeois* easel to tackle experience, volume, and deliberate collision. This external deployment borrowed elements from Land art and *Arte Povera* and played on theoretical deconstruction. In 1971, the group repeated the feat, this time occupying the Municipal Theatre of Nice, echoing the Fluxus festival. Although the adherents of Support-Surface did not renounce painting (they preferred to strip it down and divert it), the two movements were not in opposition. Coming from the same territory and generation, they both rode on new modes of production and questioned the status of the artwork.

The cohesion of Support-Surface soon dissolved and the artists continued their paths independently. However, some members like Noël Dolla, Patrick Saytour, or Claude Viallat, remained active in the region, and their presence in art schools greatly contributed to the education of subsequent generations.

From this anise

Further along the Occitan coast, other artists also formed a group. Robert Combas and Hervé Di Rosa, born in the late 1950s, met at the Beaux-Arts in Sète. In a context hostile to painting, this rising generation affirmed their attachment to images, colours, folk art, and graffiti. Ben, the true magnet of Nice, invited them in late summer 1981. The duo held their first exhibition, “2 Sétois à Nice” (“Two Sète People in Nice”), at his place on the hill of Saint-Pancrace. This exhibition is considered the primitive manifestation of the movement, which would be named “Figuration libre”. The following year, Marc Sanchez organised a new exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery of Nice, “L’Air du Temps, Figuration Libre en France” (“The Spirit of the Times, Free Figuration in France”), cementing the place of these young artists fresh out of school like Jean-Charles Blais, François Boisrond, Jean-Michel Alberola, Rémi Blanchard, Denis Castellas, Denis Laget, Patrick Lanneau, Georges Rousse, Raymond Denis, Joëlle Gainon, and, of course, Hervé Di Rosa and Robert Combas in the landscape [see p.62]. The Nice Museums acquired thirteen works on this occasion, bringing this new pictorial movement into French collections for the first time.

These avant-garde movements did not aim to create academic schools, and each artist maintained their insubordinate attitude. However, it is important to remember the significance of the creative networks rooted in this azure territory. Undoubtedly, thanks to “cheap” exhibitions, impulsive happenings, and the possibility of spontaneous encounters, these artists, caught in the creative whirlwind, were able to hone their skills. A bit of salt and sun on top, and in two words, that’s how French contemporary art came to the table.

A portrait of Claude Viallat, an elderly man with short, graying hair, looking slightly to the right. He is wearing a dark gray sweater over a white collared shirt. The background is a vibrant, abstract painting with large, irregular shapes in shades of red, orange, and light blue. The overall style is characteristic of the Informel movement.

Claude Viallat
Courtesy Oniris Gallery

NOUVEAU BOISROND



Petite maison dans la prairie (2013), François Boisrond

Courtesy Louis Carré & Cie

FIGURATION LIBRE & CO.

Artists, musicians, friends... Alongside Combas and the Di Rosa brothers, a few individuals gravitated around their sphere and participated in the adventure of *Figuration libre*. At the same time, other personalities from across the Atlantic were renewing Pop Art in a mutual influence game with the artists from Sète. A non-exhaustive overview.

François Boisrond (1959-). The vital need to paint

With Combas, Blanchard, and the Di Rosa brothers, François Boisrond is one of the key figures of the movement. Born on 24 March 1959, in Boulogne Billancourt, he studied at the National School of Decorative Arts in Paris from 1978 to 1981, where he met Hervé Di Rosa. Along with those who would become his fellow travelers, he participated in the first exhibition gathering the “inventors” of *Figuration libre* at Bernard Lamarche-Vadel’s in June 1981 — featuring Combas, the Di Rosa brothers, Boisrond, Blanchard, as well as Alberola, Maurige, Blais, Viollet. He later exhibited at the Espace des Blancs-Manteaux in October of the same year during a second off-exhibition organised by Hervé Perdrille. In his early works, he seamlessly blends elements borrowed from fine arts and applied arts, *art brut*, posters, comics, Pop Art, and television. Teaching at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris from 1999 to 2021, his work kept on evolving, always questioning the place of painting in art, up to his latest series, *Uniforms* and *Lives of Saints*, where he drew from the repertoire of attitudes and compositions left by the Masters. During an event in 2017 that dialogued the work of Hervé Télémaque and François Boisrond, the Centre Pompidou wrote about him: “Flag bearers of two major artistic movements that succeeded each other, *Figuration narrative* and *Figuration libre*, they appear as loners within their respective currents. While their sources are different (surrealism and psychoanalysis for one; rock culture and popular art for the other), they both share a use of comics, compartmentalisation, narration, and their friendship with art critic Bernard Lamarche-Vadel.” In 2022, the Paul Valéry Museum in Sète organised

a retrospective covering forty years of artistic creation, revealing several constants in his work: “The vital need to speak about oneself through painting as well as the belief that it is a long initiation for the painter and that it must be part of life,” as summarised by Stéphane Tarroux, the museum director.

Rémi Blanchard (1958-1993).

A shooting star

He was one of the most touching and atypical characters of the group. Fresh out of the Beaux-Arts of Quimper, Rémi Blanchard contributed to the renewal of figuration with a very personal painting style influenced by masters like Van Gogh, Léger, Matisse, or Chassac. “The vigor of his early lines gradually gave way to the softness of curves, to the tenderness of subjects tinged with childhood nostalgia. His palette of pure and bright colours radiates a great love of life and the joy of painting it,” describes the





La pêche miraculeuse (1991), Rémi Blanchard
Courtesy Musée des beaux-arts de Quimper

Association of Friends of Rémi Blanchard, founded by his family and friends following the shock of his accidental death in May 1993. Born in 1958 in Nantes into a family of ten siblings, Rémi Blanchard's paintings were notably inspired by his childhood memories, his large family, holidays: camping, caravanning, bohemian life. As a student in Quimper, he met critic Bernard-Lamarche-Vadel, who was then teaching at the Beaux-Arts. It was there he also met Catherine Viollet and Hervé Perdrille. In the early 1980s, he moved in with Bernard-Lamarche-Vadel and thus participated in the famous "Finir en beauté" exhibition organised by the critic on Fondary Street in Paris. He was also the first *Figuration libre* artist to exhibit at Yvon Lambert in 1982 and took part in all future exhibitions dedicated to the group in France and across the Atlantic. A recipient of a Villa Médicis Hors Les Murs grant, Rémi Blanchard spent eight months in New York at the PSI workshop, where he created large formats on free canvases. His work was also marked by his travels to San Francisco — the influence of Jack Kerouac is felt — and also to Japan, Korea, and Thailand during a travelling exhibition organised by the Alliance Française.

Jean-Charles Blais (1956-). **King of upcycling**

He was one of the first artists associated with the emergence of *Figuration libre*. Right after graduating from the Beaux-Arts in Rennes, Jean-Charles Blais took part in the famous "Finir en beauté" exhibition at critic Bernard Lamarche-Vadel's in 1981. He already stood out for his use of recycled materials, especially torn posters he transformed into paintings. He asserted at the time: "I am an artist who has no ideas, no subjects in mind for paintings, no projects.

My painting is without intention..." Quickly noticed by institutional circles, the artist had his first solo exhibition at CAPC in Bordeaux in 1982, followed by a *carte blanche* at the National Museum of Modern Art in 1987 on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Centre Pompidou. The Friends of the Museum, enthusiastic about presenting Jean-Charles Blais's work for this celebration, declared: "He is one of the most original figures of the 1980s painting. He is internationally known for his pinheaded figures awkwardly dancing in Petit Prince landscapes. But year after year and work after work, Blais has managed to renew himself while keeping his fundamental principle: he paints directly on torn posters." Leading gallerists of the time defended him: Yvon Lambert in Paris, Leo Castelli in New York, Catherine Issert in Saint-Paul-de-Vence. In the 2000s, Jean-Charles Blais took a new turn in his career by exploring digital imaging and the projection of visual works. He also realised various projects in urban spaces, like with Jean Nouvel in New York or his poster frieze installed at the "Assemblée Nationale" metro station in Paris in 2004. A poetic echo and a logical continuation of his first loves.

Catherine Viollet (1953-). **Alternative journey**

Trained at the Beaux-Arts of Quimper where she met Rémi Blanchard, and at the Arts Décoratifs in Nice, Catherine Viollet emerged on the art scene in 1981 during the "Finir en beauté" exhibition. Since then associated with the *Figuration libre* movement, she later defined her own path between figuration and abstraction. "Every problem is a straitjacket. Besides, I've been wanting to paint differently for some time now... Shouldn't we broaden the range of our possibilities? Why return to more figurative painting? First, it's not about

opposing abstraction/figuration, but perhaps having the flexibility to play with both..." she declared in 1981. Quickly, she developed a very singular style, drawing from the sculpture of Maillol and the bodies of Amazonian Indians, the power of forms, and the energy that emerges from the birth of a broad painting gesture. "Without aiming for the precise representation of the model, Catherine Viollet seeks a rhythm that is both in the sketch of the line and the energy of the colour," writes gallerist Françoise Livinec, who exhibited her work several times in her art space, the École des Filles in Brittany. In her work, which uniquely combines drawing and painting, charcoal and oil, the supports are an integral part of the artwork: cardboard, coloured fabrics, the back of skai, decorated linoleum, canvas coated with very fine pumice stone, PVC from dance carpets retaining the imprint of the dancers. Her refined work is present in many public and private collections and was highlighted in the exhibition "Libres figurations. Années 80", organised at the Fonds Hélène and Édouard Leclerc for culture by Pascale Le Thorel.

Jean-Michel Alberola (1953-).

A protean work

Painter, sculptor, and filmmaker, Jean-Michel Alberola has been a figure, since 1981, of the *Figuration libre*. While he primarily defines himself as a painter, he also creates collages, objects, and sculptures in which writing plays a huge role. His work is protean and interdisciplinary, utilising photographs, films, texts, postcards, and found objects. His influences are as diverse as art history, Africa, and biblical and mythological subjects from which he draws iconographic motifs that he inserts into his works as isolated fragments. In 1984, he published his first artist's book. From 1985, the Centre Pompidou dedicated a first



Untitled (1988), Remi Blanchard
Sold for \$7 500 on 28 September 2022 by Hindman Chicago

Courtesy Hindman





Cachés (detail, 2021), Jean-Charles Blais

© Jean-Charles Blais. Courtesy Yvon Lambert



Untitled (2023), Jean-Michel Albérola

© Jean-Michel Albérola. Courtesy Catherine Issert Gallery

retrospective to his work titled “La Peinture, l’Histoire et la Géographie”, followed a few years later, in 1993, by an exhibition gathering all his graphic works (drawings, notebooks, engravings) around the *Crucifixion*, an obsessive theme for him. “The Crucifixion was for me a mandatory passage in the sense that, what is missing in contemporary art, is the proposition of a healthy body... forced to go through a sick body, a dying body and the great body of Western painting: Christ,” he commented on the occasion of this exhibition. “At the same time, in the *Crucifixion*, there is a simple whole body, it is in front of us in its clarity of image, icon, and sign.”

Ben (1935-). Making life an art

It was he who coined the term “*Figuration libre*” in the summer of 1981, a concept later formalised by Hervé Perdrille. Thanks to him, Marc Sanchez organised the exhibition “L’Air du Temps. *Figuration libre en France*” at the contemporary art gallery in Nice in 1982, in which Combas and others participated, one of the founding events of the movement. An artist related to the Fluxus movement and the “prince of controversy in France” according to Hervé Perdrille, Ben has been a unique figure in the French art landscape since the 1960s and still enjoys incredible popularity today thanks to his “writings”. Close to the ideas of Marcel Duchamp, Ben started from the premise that “everything is art”. Ben, whose real name is Benjamin Vautier, was born on 18 July 1935, in Naples. It all started in 1958 when he opened a small shop in Nice, whose facade he transformed by accumulating a multitude of objects and in which he sold second-hand records. Quickly, his shop became a meeting place and exhibition space for the main members of what would become the

École de Nice: César, Arman, Martial Raysse, etc. The shop, called “Laboratoire 32”, then “Galerie Ben doute de tout”, became the Centre d’Art Total. Ben’s Shop, after being dismantled in 1972, was acquired by the Centre Pompidou and gradually rearranged by the artist to give it a life of its own in this new context. A friend of Yves Klein and captivated by New Realism, he was convinced that “art must be new and bring a shock.” Ben participated in the activities of the Fluxus movement, which since the early 1960s has brought together artists whose common aspiration is to strengthen the link between art and life. Ben, then, signs everything that has not been: “holes, mysterious boxes, kicks, God, chickens, etc.” In the early 1980s, upon returning from a year spent in Berlin thanks to a scholarship, he met young artists (Robert Combas, Hervé Di Rosa, François Boisrond, Rémi Blanchard, etc.), a group to which he would give the name of *Figuration libre*.

Keith Haring (1958-1990). Genius of street art

Who doesn’t have his seemingly simplistic characters bordered by a black line in mind? A New York artist, his playground was initially the subway where he first drew his elongated characters in chalk before dedicating himself to studio practice. Deeply involved in the fight for LGBT rights and against racism, his brightly coloured graffiti conveyed messages to the public. An icon of 1980s pop culture and the East Village alongside Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kenny Scharf, and Jenny Holzer, he participated in 1982 in the “Statements New York 82. Leading contemporary artists from France” exhibition staged by critic Otto Hahn in New York, which for the first time presented American audiences with works by Blanchard, Combas, Di Rosa, and Boisrond. In 1984, he took part in a performance organised by the members of the Art

Provisoire association and by Hervé Perdrille as part of the Le Mans race. He was also present the same year alongside his French counterparts at the “New Attitudes, Paris-New York” exhibition at the Center for the Arts in Pittsburgh. Although not strictly part of the *Figuration libre* movement, he shared with them a number of affinities through his exploration of popular culture and symbols, and a playful approach to art.

Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988).

Absolute icon

A shooting star in the art world, a brilliant and fragile embodiment of the cursed artist, Jean-Michel Basquiat is a link between arts and cultures, neither entirely associated with Pop Art nor completely immersed in *Figuration libre*. An American artist of Haitian descent through his father, Basquiat’s work was noticed early in the 1980s. Leaving school in his youth, Jean-Michel Basquiat made the streets of New York his first workshop. Tagging Manhattan’s walls and the subway with poetic and subversive messages under the SAMO © tag from 1977, he became a friend of Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, and Francesco Clemente in 1980, abandoning the streets to devote himself to painting. Driven by the energy of hip-hop, his practice condenses multiple references: from Picasso to Penck, from Schwitters to Dubuffet and the Cobra movement, from jazz to voodoo. His style is characterised by bold yet economical chromaticism, the repetition of primitive figures, symbols like the crown or the skull, and numbers and scientific formulas. His works layer drawings, erasures, paint, collages of photocopies or objects in complex compositions that showcase his mastery of techniques, from acrylic to screen printing, from markers to sprays. In 1984, his works were part of the “5/5: *Figuration libre*, France-USA” exhibition organised by



être perdu
être - être
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NOTEBOOK

Otto Hahn and Hervé Perdriolle at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, featuring works by Blanchard, Boisrond, Combas, Crash, the Di Rosa brothers, Haring, Jammes, Tseng Kwong Chi, and Scharf. He worked in New York until his death from an overdose on 12 August 1988, at the age of 27. The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York organised the first retrospective of his work from October 1992 to February 1993. In 2016, his painting *Untitled* (1982) sold for 57.3 million dollars, setting an auction record for the artist.

Kenny Scharf (1958-). New York underground

Along with Keith Haring and Basquiat, he is one of the key figures of the downtown New York artistic scene of the 1980s. Sometimes described as Pop Surrealist and associated with the Lowbrow movement, he is the one who came up with the name of the Fun Gallery, which played a significant role for these artists in New York, nodding to the “fun” they developed in their painting, connecting contemporary art and the world of graffiti. Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf met in 1979 at the School of Visual Arts. He developed a cheerful and colourful work, quite close to the concerns of *Figuration libre*, using popular imagery and cartoons. “Part of what I do and what I aspire to do is to bring art into everyday life. Stumbling upon something just by walking down the street can change your day — it can inspire you,” he says. After a first exhibition at the Fun Gallery in 1981, he presented his work in 1984 at Tony Shafrazi and also participated in the famous “5/5: Figuration libre, France-USA” exhibition that same year. In 2023, during the Basquiat × Warhol exhibition at the Fondation Vuitton, he created a collaborative work with Futura 2000, another artist from the New York scene of the 1980s, a sort of reminiscence of the artistic effervescence of that era.





Catherine Viollet

Courtesy Galerie Françoise Livinec

La gonzesse aux gros seins (1995), Robert Combas
Sold for €13,860 on 22 September 2022 by Sotheby's Paris
© Sotheby's Art Digital Studio



DATA

FIGURATION LIBRE

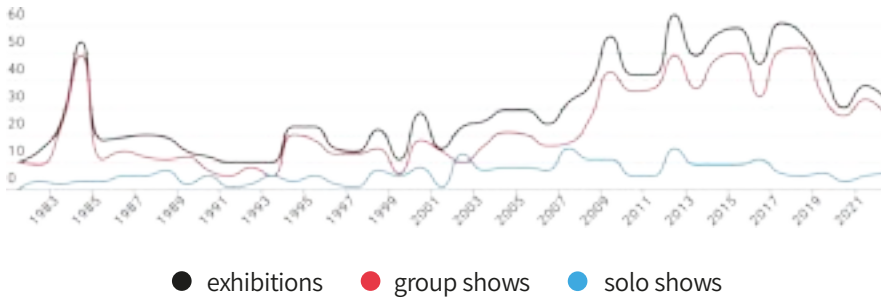
They revolutionised the contemporary landscape. Following their meteoric rise in the 1980s, artists associated with *Figuration libre* now enjoy institutional recognition.

Robert Combas, Hervé Di Rosa, and François Boisrond are central in *Figuration libre*, a sort of movement that emerged in the 1980s; their work echoes that of other emerging artists who followed suit [see p.62]: Richard “Buddy” Di Rosa — Hervé’s brother —, Rémi Blanchard, Jean-Charles Blais, Jean-Michel Alberola, or André Cervera. Through their art, they infused contemporary art with a fresh aesthetic, sweeping away existing conventions. With them came the idea of incorporating new sources of inspiration into artistic creation, such as advertising, comics, African art, and pop culture. In contrast to the minimal and conceptual art popular in the late 1970s, these artists advocated for figurative art and a return to painting. The term “*Figuration libre*” was coined by artist Ben in the summer of 1981 when he invited Robert Combas and Hervé Di Rosa to his gallery in Nice. Both from Sète, they had met years earlier at the drawing course of the city’s municipal school of fine arts. Combas continued his studies at the Beaux-Arts de Montpellier, and Di Rosa at the Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

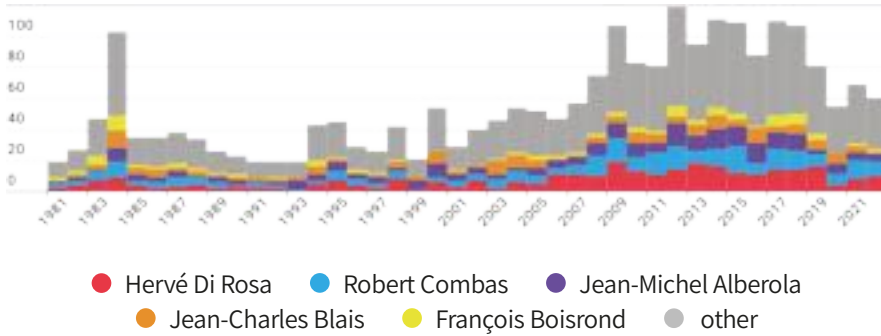
There, Hervé Di Rosa met François Boisrond, with whom he participated in the 1981 exhibition “Finishing in Beauty” organised by art critic Bernard Lamarche-Vadel. Through him, the two young artists met Rémi Blanchard, as well as Jean-Charles Blais, Jean-Michel Alberola, Denis Laget, and Catherine Viollet, who also presented their works. From the Combas-Di Rosa-Boisrond trio, *Figuration libre* was born, drawing new artists into its wake. Later, the concept of “modest art”, conceived by Hervé Di Rosa in the 1980s, would lead to the naming of the Musée International des Arts Modestes, or MIAM [see box p.32], established in Sète in 2000 by Di Rosa and Bernard Belluc, artist and collector.

Over their careers, artists attached to *Figuration libre* have been featured in numerous museums and collections. In total, there have been 706 exhibitions in institutions focused on their work. They predominantly exhibited at the CAPC, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Bordeaux (32 times), each having a solo show: Blais in 1982, Boisrond in 1985, and Combas in 1987. With 28 exhibitions in total showcasing the work of artists from the movement, the Lambert Collection offered a unique solo show dedicated to Blais, while the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris only organised collective events. The Cartier Foundation (18 exhibitions in total) held two solo shows for Boisrond and Alberola; the Pompidou Centre (sixteen exhibitions in total), one solo, again for Alberola, alongside fifteen group exhibitions featuring Combas, Blais, and Alberola. The 94 solo shows in total across all artists in institutions represent 13% against 87% of collective exhibitions. However, while these events showcase the artists’ work, their focus is not necessarily limited to *Figuration libre* alone.

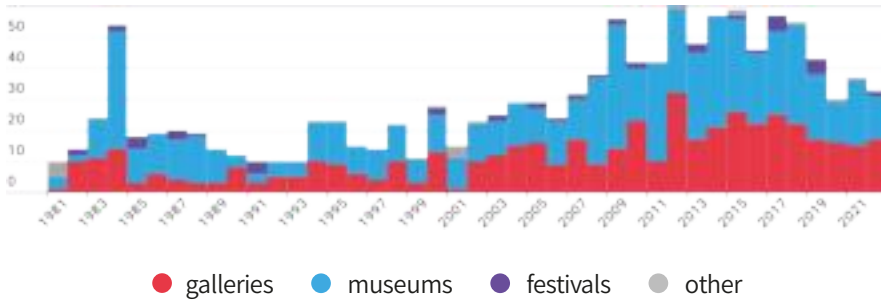
Evolution of the number of exhibitions by type



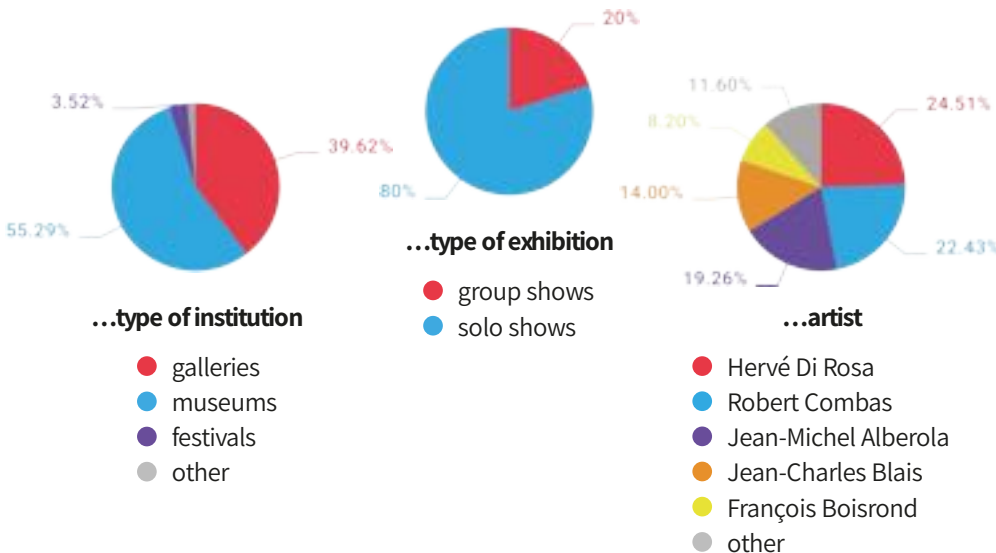
Evolution of the number of exhibitions by artist



Evolution of the number of exhibitions by institution type



Distribution of the number of exhibitions by...



In the gallery scene, Catherine Issert represented artists Jean-Charles Blais — exhibited thirteen times — and Jean-Michel Alberola — nine times. At Louis Carré, Hervé Di Rosa's paintings were regularly shown, fifteen times between 1994 and 2017. Jean-Michel Alberola had the opportunity to exhibit 64 times in galleries throughout his career, including thirteen times each at the Templon gallery and Maïa Muller's. Painter and photographer Louis Jammes had 22 gallery exhibitions, including seven at RX, while Richard "Buddy" Di Rosa was presented seven times at Vallois, including two solos. With 112 gallery exhibitions, Robert Combas is the most represented artist, appearing in 57 different galleries. The Strouk gallery exhibited his work most frequently, thirteen times, almost every year since 2010.

Swift beginnings

The artists quickly gained extensive media coverage, and by 1981, they were already present in museums with their first group exhibition at the MAM (Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris). They would exhibit there again five times from 1984 to 2009. The 1988 exhibition, "Viva Di Rosa", was dedicated to the Di Rosa brothers: Hervé's paintings and Richard's sculptures. Generally, since the 1980s, the artists have been regularly showcased in museums (58%) as well as galleries (41%), attesting to significant institutional recognition.

By February 1982, the movement expanded to the United States, starting with "Statements New York" at the Holly Solomon Gallery, which brought together French contemporary artists from various movements: the Combas trio, Hervé Di Rosa, and Boisrond, alongside Ben, Simon Hantaï, Annette Messager, Martial Raysse, and Christian Boltanski. That same year, Rémi Blanchard participated in a group exhibition at MoMA PS1 — Blais and



Untitled (1985), Robert Combas
Vendu 94.500 € le 4 mai 2023 par Christie's Paris

© Christie's Images



Untitled (1996), Hervé Di Rosa
Sold for €25,000 on 5 December 2021 by Christie's Paris

© Christie's Images



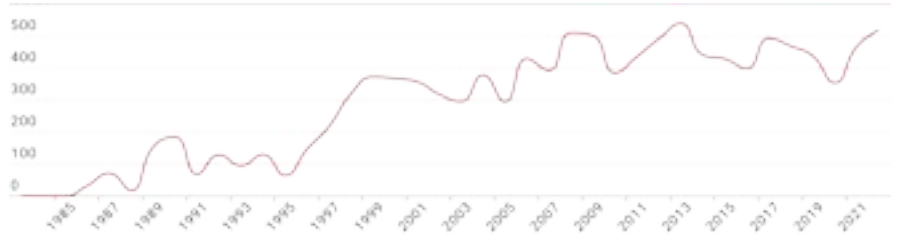
Alberola exhibited at MoMA in 1984. In the following years, links were formed between artists from *Figuration libre* and American artists like Keith Haring, Basquiat, and Kenny Scharf: on one hand, the use of spray paint, and on the other, the brush. Between 1984 and 1987, renowned New York art dealer and gallerist Leo Castelli took a particular interest in Jean-Charles Blais, featuring him in three of his exhibitions, one alongside Hervé Di Rosa. Artists André Cervera and Catherine Viollet were not yet prominent but began exhibiting from the 2000s onwards.

Stabilisation

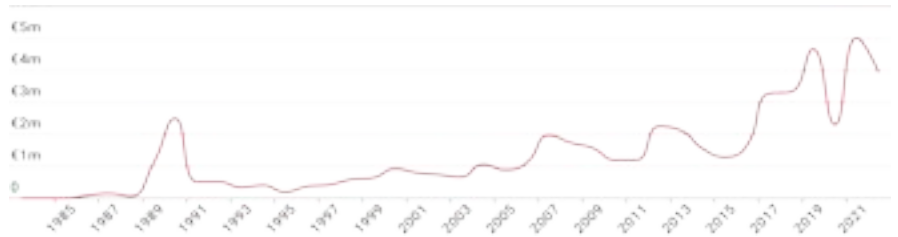
In 1984, the number of exhibitions dedicated to *Figuration libre* artists rapidly increased, from 24 occurrences in 1983 to 54, with eleven exhibitions for Jean-Charles Blais, ten for Boisrond and Combas, and nine each for Alberola and Hervé Di Rosa. After a dazzling start, their presence declined and then stabilised in subsequent years. Robert Combas fared the best, maintaining between three and six exhibitions until 1989. In 1993, Rémi Blanchard died of an overdose, ending a promising career. In 1994, the exhibitions resumed more regularly, increasing from ten to 23. After five years of reduced visibility, the artists again took centre stage, featuring in 64 exhibitions in 2012: except for Pascal Legras and Rémi Blanchard, all the artists had the opportunity to showcase their work. Some, like André Cervera, only truly entered the scene in the 2000s, with his first exhibition in 2005. Cervera notably exhibited four times in 2017, and three times in 2022. Between 2005 and 2022, he exhibited a total of fifteen times, including seven times in museums.

Hervé Di Rosa benefitted the most from solo shows throughout his career (39.90% of the total solo shows among all artists associated with *Figuration libre*), followed by Jean-Michel Alberola (15.11%), Jean-Charles Blais (14.71%), and Robert

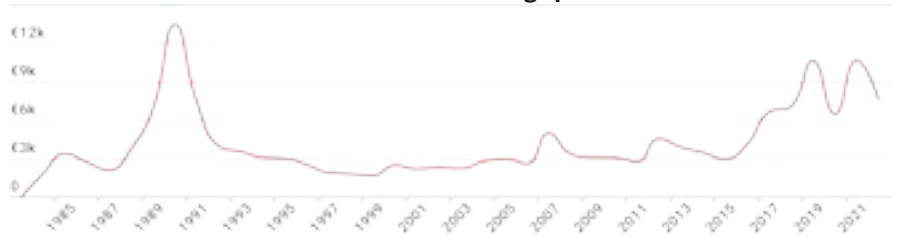
Evolution of the number of lots offered for sale



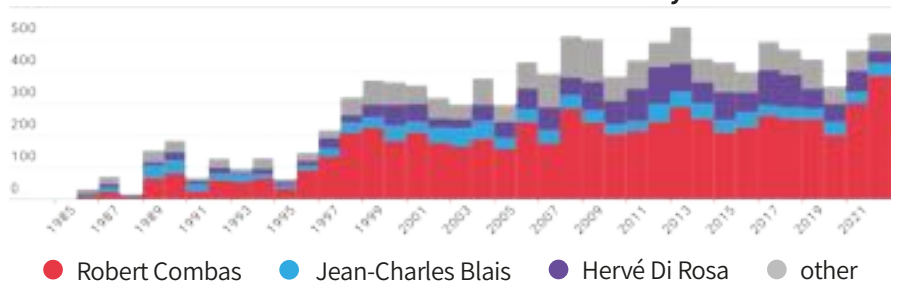
Evolution of the annual turnover



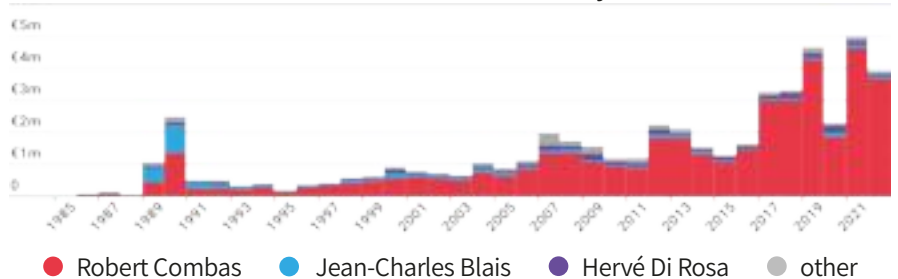
Evolution of the average price



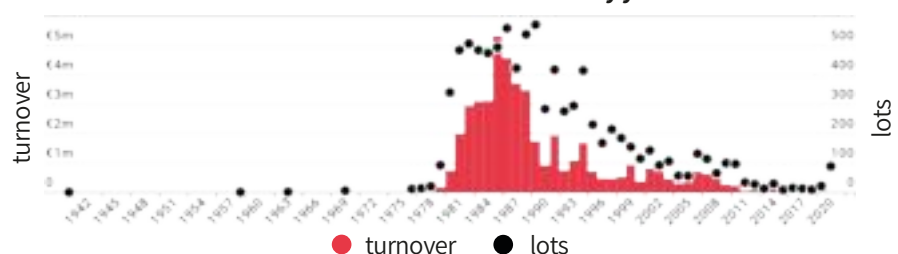
Evolution of the number of lots offered for sale by artist



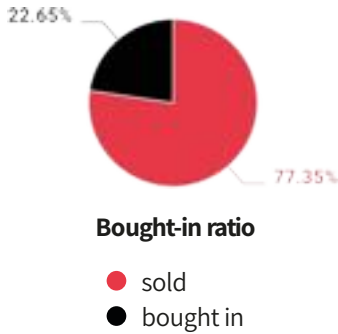
Evolution of the annual turnover by artist



Evolution of the number of lots and turnover by year of creation



Evolution of the bought-in ratio



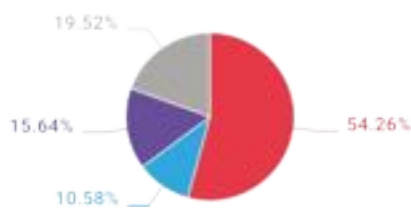
Combas (13.55%). However, Combas is the second most widely exhibited artist with 312 exhibitions, compared to 333 for Hervé Di Rosa. Di Rosa also demonstrates a strong institutional presence with 141 exhibitions throughout his career, from 1981 to 2023, featuring 76% collective exhibitions and 24% solo shows. Combas remains a leading figure in *Figuration libre*, with 9% solo shows and 91% group exhibitions. In total, Jean-Michel Alberola had had the most museum exhibitions, with a number up to 146.

European visibility

Since 1980, *Figuration libre* artists have participated in 1,295 exhibitions. The majority took place in France (66%). The rest of Europe accounts for approximately 17% of their total exhibitions... and the United States, 2.5% with relatively regular exhibitions. In the 1980s and 1990s, fifteen of them were organised in institutions and galleries, including seven solo shows — in galleries only —, three each for Di Rosa and Blais, and one for Combas. Since 2000, there have been sixteen exhibitions, the latest in 2019, including four solo shows: one for Blais, while Di Rosa maintained three

occurrences, including a museum exhibition in 2006 at the Bass Museum of Art in Miami, a form of American recognition for the artist. And, of the sixteen events dedicated to *Figuration libre* artists since the 2000s, ten were devoted to Di Rosa.

The artists are very present in the French market, with two sales in 1983. These sales continued uninterrupted from 1986 onwards. The number of lots offered increased until 1990 and then stabilised. Between 1995 and 1999, they rose from 54 to 349 lots, peaking in 2008 and 2013 with respectively 474 and 485 lots offered. Since then, sales have slightly decreased, but remained steady with 313 lots offered in 2022. In Switzerland, between 2020 and 2022, the number of lots increased from twelve to 100. In the rest of Europe, 1,605 lots were presented. Although the artists' works first appeared for sale in the United Kingdom in the 1980s, their presence gradually became way more pronounced in Belgium (565 lots) and Switzerland (378), although France remains, by far, their primary market. In the United States, 154 lots have been presented, with a more noticeable presence from 2007 onwards.

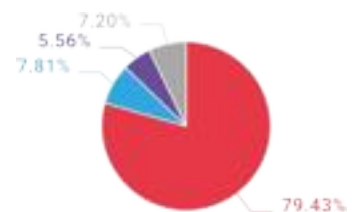


● Robert Combas ● Jean-Charles Blais
● Hervé Di Rosa ● other

Disparities

As pillars of *Figuration libre*, Robert Combas, Hervé Di Rosa, and François Boisrond achieve good auction results. Leading the way, Combas's works totaled over 44 million Euros, with 84% of sales in France, 13% in the rest of Europe, and 1% in the United States (amounting to 451,014 euros). However, Combas also sells the most works: 4,328, compared to 1,114 for Di Rosa, whose works accumulate nearly 3.1 million Euros, 89% of which are sold in France, 8% in Europe, and 3% in the United States. This is less than Jean-Charles Blais, with his 823 works purchased for a total of nearly 4.3 million Euros, 84% of which are in France. Blais also enjoys some success in the United Kingdom, accounting for over 6% of his total sales. Ultimately, Combas leads the market, representing 79% of total sales in France for artists associated with *Figuration libre*, compared to 8% for Blais, 6% for Di Rosa, and 3.4% for Boisrond. The rest, including Blanchard, Alberola, Richard Di Rosa, Jammes, Cervera, and Viollet, share 4% of the French sales.

The years 1989 and 1990 saw the artists' values increase, with auction results exceeding two million euros. However, this growth almost immediately subsided. Since then, their values have been rising more slowly but steadily: in 2021, the turnover for these artists reached five million euros. After the 1990s, the unsold rate of *Figuration libre* artists increased, reaching 40%. This percentage has been decreasing



Turnover by artist

- Robert Combas
- Jean-Charles Blais
- Hervé Di Rosa
- other

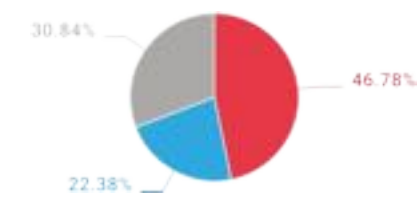


La famille René (1983), Richard "Buddy" Di Rosa
Sold for €18,750 on 6 June 2019 by Sotheby's Paris

since 2017, however, and when their works are sold, the prices achieved are within the initial estimate in 23.03% of cases, and above the estimate in 21.51% of cases.

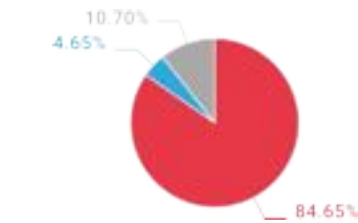
Figuration libre artists quickly benefited from media coverage, gaining significant visibility in France and internationally, supported by a name encompassing a wide range of diverse practices. Among them, the Combas-Di Rosa duo stands out in terms of the number of exhibitions and public recognition of their works. Blais and Alberola also have notable institutional careers. In the market, Robert Combas is distinguished by the number of lots sold at auctions, as well as his value: in 2021, he was the top French artist in the Artprice ranking of the 500 most valued artists worldwide, at 76th place, ahead of Claire Tabouret (94th place) and Nicole Eisenman (109th place).

In total, artists associated with *Figuration libre* have accumulated 7,723 sales, and 514 institutions, museums, foundations, or galleries have hosted their works for one or more exhibitions. Many of these artists are still quite active. While the *Figuration libre* group is tied to the history of contemporary art in France during the 1980s-1990s, the figures associated with it continue to create on their own. Recognised in



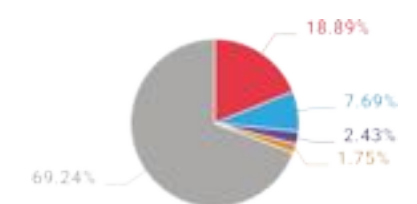
Number of lots by medium

● painting ● drawing ● other



Number of lots by country of sale

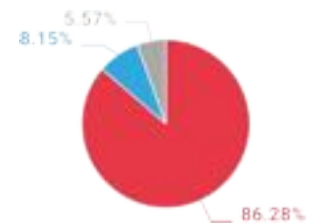
● France ● Belgium ● other



Number of lots by auctioneer

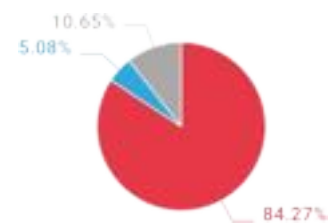
● Cornette de Saint-Cyr ● Artcurial
● Christie's ● Sotheby's ● other

their younger years, these artists have also demonstrated remarkable



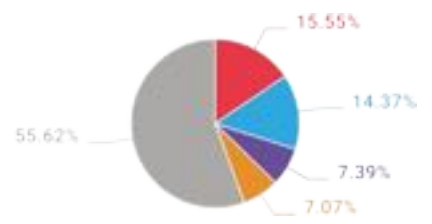
Turnover by medium

● painting ● drawing ● other



Turnover by country of sale

● France ● Belgium ● other



Turnover by auctioneer

● Cornette de Saint-Cyr ● Artcurial
● Christie's ● Sotheby's ● other

longevity, establishing for some of them a stable presence in institutions and on the market, which continues to grow slowly but surely.

“The commercial situation was not ideal. As soon as 1982, artists from the United States started to receive all media attention and we quickly became considered as sub-products from the American culture.”
— Robert Combas

FULL COURT FACILITY



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GREENART: INITIAL GOALS ACHIEVED

It's been more than a year since the GREENART project kicked off! In Naples, on the 14 and 15 December, its members convened to share progress on the development of new restoration products.

Officially launched 15 months ago, GREENART is committed to promoting sustainable conservation and restoration of cultural heritage by developing new, environmentally-friendly tools and seeking alternatives to harmful components in currently marketed products. This involves a complete rethinking of restorers' practices. Engrossed in their tasks, the Works packages — various teams associated with the project, from researchers to museum restorers — gathered to discuss their advancements. Cleaning, protective coatings, consolidation, and packaging materials: every step was meticulously examined.

Cleaning

Dedicated to green cleaning, the first Works package team aims to develop cleaning fluids in the form of microemulsions and gels by July 2025, ensuring safe and controlled cleaning of artworks — that is, the removal of aged, unwanted or deteriorating layers.

As of 30 September 2023, the first phase is complete: developing cleaning fluids with components that can replace today's solvents and market-available surfactants, making them green. These have been selected using a rating scale from 1 to 6, categorising surfactants from “recommended” to “very dangerous”. Currently, at least three surfactants in use fall into this latter category.

However, GREENART is innovating. Among the newly developed products, water and oil-based fluids have been created without traditional surfactants, adding a hydrotrope... an interesting

solution for researchers, as hydrotropes are generally more environmentally sustainable than conventional surfactants. The latter, being synthetic and derived from petrochemistry, cause more allergies and skin reactions. Not very biodegradable, they release chemical compounds that can be even more toxic upon decomposition. Thus, these surfactant-free microemulsions represent a greener alternative, with a broader range of possible applications. So far, experiments seem to prove the interest and effectiveness of this new type of mixture.

Since 1st October, the second phase has commenced and will continue until March 2024, focusing on the study of gels created from biological, natural, or low-toxicity polymers. These gels will confine the cleaning fluids and solvents developed by the research team for controlled cleaning. They must also be synthesised through low-energy consumption processes, including recycling. Several hydrogel solutions have been tested, and the researchers have achieved a relatively effective

positive result after several testing phases. The goal now is to further improve their mechanical and cleaning properties and optimise formulations, particularly by replacing animal-derived polymers with those derived from wheat gluten.

Protection

Regarding the work package dedicated to developing coatings to protect artworks, by 30 June 2025, the team aims to have mastered various key elements: developing passive and active coatings with multifunctional, multilayered, and/or composite protective barriers to prevent various forms of degradation — pollution, humidity, corrosive agents, etc. Naturally, the research is bounded by the use of biological monomers and polymers sourced from sustainable or renewable products and natural waste, as well as by the aspiration to develop solutions enabling the self-repair of artworks.

Currently, researchers involved in the GREENART project face the challenge of the ecological durability of traditional protective products. IPCB and Specific Polymers, two project partners, are working to identify green components that can produce multifunctional coatings. A second group is exploring self-healing capabilities of coatings, while a third is tasked with developing products with anti-corrosion, plasticising, and anti-fouling properties. As of December 2022, the researchers have successfully formulated the base components of new coatings and assessed their durability. Some, though derived from non-biological sources, remain durable in application due to their self-healing

properties. However, the researchers aim to go further by exploring these same possibilities with biological products.

Next steps include enhancing the uniformity and protective effects of coatings, both passive and active, and refining their structure and layers. This involves ensuring multiple functionalities in a single product, such as acting simultaneously as an anti-corrosion protection, a barrier against degrading agents or UV rays, and possessing hydrophobic and antifungal properties. These new products have been tested on various metals after accelerated ageing and they demonstrated efficacy, particularly on silver and bronze alloys.

There are challenges in the testing phases, depending on the chosen material, type of object, and the conditions and location of its conservation. By 31 January 2024, the first phase of research should conclude with the development of new passive coatings. Institutions like the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice have offered objects with specific conservation needs for testing with GREENART products. While passive coatings are nearing completion, active coatings are expected to be ready by 30 September 2024.

Consolidants: strengthening artworks

Consolidants, though less visible, are crucial in art conservation. The team dedicated to consolidants aims to develop tools to support and reinforce fragile artworks, as well as packaging materials and foams for their storage and transport. This

Works package directly influences preventive conservation methods, seeking sustainable solutions aligned with long-term conservation goals. It involves both material consolidation and structural support (frames and panels).

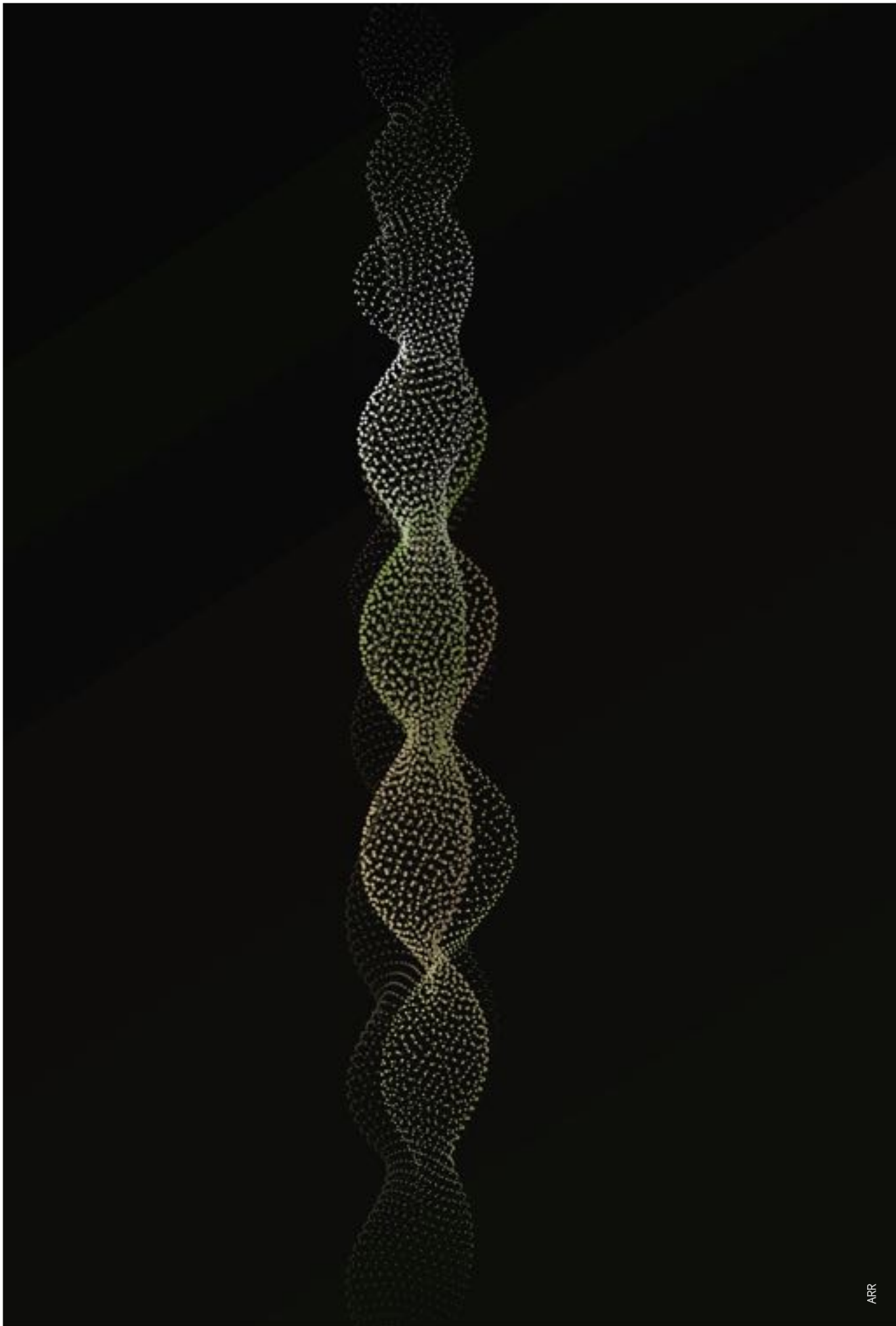
What tools are involved?

Consolidants address issues like fragile paint layers, flaking or crumbling pigments and textiles. These issues arise from industrial paint formulations rich in additives and artistic material experimentation. Improper storage and handling also contribute. Research is also focused on fibre reinforcement in artworks, using biological processes like silk fibroin, a natural protein from silkworms and spiders known for its high mechanical strength. The aim is also to control the gelation and aggregation of products on the artworks.

Regarding the development of consolidating adhesives, researchers are striving to create products that are compatible, sufficiently strong, and avoid potential new deteriorations while making the application as simple and feasible as possible. Currently, they have managed to create dispersions — used in adhesives and as binders in paints — that can consolidate encaustic paint. These will soon be evaluated on test objects.

Consolidants: strengthening structures

When artworks deteriorate, so do their structures. Physical, biological, and environmental factors cause deformations or flaking of paints. Typically, wooden supports or various systems are used to hold the object



in place, but GREENART is looking to propose walls or panels made of custom mechanical properties natural fibres, more resistant to ageing, while optimising their stability. By 30 September, the packaging materials and foams should address issues related to surrounding humidity and pollution, with an appropriate lifespan and usage — or reuse. For instance, paper fibre boxes have been studied for alternatives: by deacidifying them or replacing their components with different materials. Further research on the composition of these solutions will complete the data collected so far.

The current market products for artwork packaging are not at all durable or recyclable. If researchers are addressing these issues, improving these tools will also involve modifying their components to reduce their thermomechanical properties, eliminating risks of shocks or vibrations during transport. GREENART also envisages custom packaging, produced using digitisation of the artwork, followed by 3D printing. For surrounding temperature and humidity, researchers recommend designing a new sensor made of bioplastics and sustainable materials.

Currently developed foams offer significant advantages: they are non-toxic, green, easy to handle, light yet strong, and can be easily produced in desired shapes and sizes. Notably, they change colour when exposed to organic acids or aldehydes, can absorb acids and gases, and resist the growth of fungi, mould, and

bacteria. However, their production is costly and still consumes too much energy for GREENART standards...

Studies have already been conducted on various test objects: papers, paintings, textiles — from aged faux leather handbags to mineralised or non-mineralised archaeological fabrics. The different problems presented by each fabric, wool, cotton, linen are being identified to propose the most adequate treatments possible.

Monitoring technologies

The team dedicated to new green technologies must devise devices made from recycled materials or waste, which will be evaluated by museums and art galleries later. Naturally, these new devices must be as or more efficient than those currently available.

After selecting materials for sensor manufacturing, the challenge was to create compounds that function effectively for real environment testing. The researchers' results are positive but need optimisation, especially in sensor fabrication. Soon, other alternative materials will be studied for their humidity and temperature change detection properties.

Seeking to improve existing tool capabilities, GREENART also proposes reducing the size of some tools, like the transponders used by sensors. While some tests have been positive, others require more research, particularly regarding new natural materials proposed, which still poorly respond to temperature changes and humidity, leading to premature degradation of the object.

In summary, further studies will provide more insights into the limitations of these new green technologies: response time, detection limits, accuracy, etc.

The task of finding the best combinations and the most suitable application for each artwork, object, and material is complex. It requires numerous experiments and research, as well as the development of suitable chemical solutions. So far, the researchers of the GREENART project have met the objectives set for the first year, and some of the Works packages are already able to propose products more effective than those available on the market for art restoration. While some still require optimisation, they will soon enter the testing phase on artworks, in collaboration with conservators and institutions.





GREENART meeting, Naples, December 2023

Courtesy GREENART





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