



## mono30, *Around Manifesta* A conversation between Errol Sari and Fabrizio Meris

Barcelona 28-08-2024

### **What do you remember about your formative years? What was the social and cultural atmosphere like?**

Growing up in London in the 70s and 80s was a mix of both positive and negative experiences. At that time, we, as children, were still allowed to roam more freely than today. Although we didn't have a garden, we were fortunate to have a huge local park, which I considered my garden. My parents were not wealthy. In fact, I was born in a house without a bathroom, something unimaginable today in modern society. We had a tin bath that would be set up in the kitchen. It almost sounds Dickensian, but the housing stock in inner London was in a terrible state. I experienced the three-day week—a period with rolling power cuts due to a lack of electricity. This is unforgettable as a child: imposed darkness. The best aspect was attending a school that was incredibly diverse, where dozens of languages were spoken. The richness of this was wonderful to me. However, this came at a price. As a well-known school that was very diverse, we were often visited by fascist groups. It was on the streets of London that I learned how to run and sometimes fight. The sound of skinheads' boots chasing you is unforgettable, especially in the tunnels of the Tube. Violence was pervasive. If you went out on a Friday or Saturday night, you had to be ready for "bovver," which invariably came. The recent troubles in the UK are, alas, nothing new, but they made me feel sad, as in some ways it felt like a huge step back.

Then, of course, there was The Grocer's Daughter (Thatcher), where I cut my political teeth. I attended my first demonstration at 14 "a troublemaker," as my mother would call me. I became very involved in the anti-apartheid movement, CND, Latin American solidarity, and the Labour Party.

### **Name three cultural figures who have influenced you over the years and explain why.**

#### **Goya**

One of the greats. The last great master and the first modern artist. I have always been drawn to his work. Formally, his technique inspires me, and his choice of subject matter is radical. As a court painter, he could have just continued painting royalty, which was lucrative and prestigious. However, his greatest works are those of ordinary people, and he had a keen interest in social issues. His bravery stood out—he wouldn't flatter his sitters, not even the king. Yet, when he wanted to, he could paint great beauty, as seen in Doña Isa-

bel de Porcel or The Milkmaid of Bordeaux. Goya's 3 de Mayo was the first work of art that provoked a visceral reaction in me. The first time I saw it at 16, my stomach churned, and I noticed my hands trembling. I have never tired of seeing it. He broke away from the Rococo style and splashed into expressionistic style.

#### **Jo Spence**

A British photographer. I came across Spence's work while at art college and instantly loved it. Like Goya, she was an artist willing to take great risks for her work. Her work dealt with the mundane, the everyday, disturbing, political, radical, and confrontational themes. She was willing to take on the establishment—the medical, political, military, and pharmaceutical industries, to name a few. I was particularly influenced by her willingness to use herself as subject and canvas, literally. This was something I explored extensively in my early practice as a performance artist. Her bravery has always earned my admiration and respect.

#### **James Hampton**

As a student, I was fortunate enough to go to the USA as part of my degree on an exchange program—a fantastic experience. I took a course in American folk art and had an opportunity to visit the Smithsonian in Washington, where I was allowed to go into the vaults and even handle some of the objects. What truly blew me away was seeing *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*. Not much is known about Hampton, and I suspect I would have disagreed with many of his beliefs. However, what struck me was again that visceral reaction to his work. Humble yet exquisite, naive yet powerful. As an outsider, he worked alone, and I was impacted by his dedication to his art-making (he may not have even considered it art), holding down a cleaning job and working at night on his project in a lock-up garage. Again, he took everyday objects and repurposed them into something new—an act of beautifying the found and abandoned.

### **How have you re-approached art more recently?**

I guess with the passage of time, and honestly just getting older, I've mellowed. I was, for all intents and purposes, an angry young man. Social injustice made me angry, racism and inequality burned me. However, the great defining struggle of my younger years was AIDS. Losing so many people can only have a profound effect on anyone. Now, I see



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my work, which still holds social commentary, as somehow a bit more subtle. I was once told, “Wow, Errol, even when you paint flowers, they look scary and angry.” Some people even say my work is beautiful, and I say thanks—something I wouldn’t have heard a few years ago. Now, my work is important to me, but I approach it with a different attitude. I enjoy the process more and find myself more in the zone. I can work for five hours and not notice the passage of time.

## Can you briefly describe your artistic practice?

My work is about taking the discarded, abandoned, and disposed of and repurposing them into something of worth—worth to me. I take materials—lately aluminum and plastic—and work with them to make something new, not necessarily hiding or disguising the original object or function.

## Can you describe your recycled plastic-covered glass vessels in more depth?

The recent production of the vases came about from one of my many visits to second-hand shops. There was an abundance of extremely ugly objects that I thought no one would ever buy. So, I collected some, guided only by their silhouettes—Greek, Chinese, and Roman. The work itself is long and slow. One cannot work too fast, as there’s a good chance the vase will crack or explode. I look at the shape of the vessels and see if it communicates anything in particular—a feeling, a perceived history, humor, tragedy, and the like. Using a relatively limited palette of colors, I set about decorating them. I particularly enjoy the process of trying to make the vessels look like they are in a state of flux, as though in liquid movement, giving the impression that if you look away and back again, they might have moved. They are, of course, also made of a discarded yet precious material, which should be repurposed and redeemed.

## What message are you trying to convey?

Very succinctly, that materials and life are ephemeral and should be valued. Take the discarded, abandoned, and disposed of—repurpose them, and where possible, love and cherish them.

## What does resilience mean to you?

Surviving and thriving, if possible, in an ever-changing world.

## Do colors hold significance for you? If you were a color, which one would you be?

Given a choice, my home is white, allowing me to apply colors according to my mood and state of mind. At the moment, green and its various shades are holding my attention. This may be because I’m working on green vases right now. Colors are a visual representation of language, expression, and feeling—a palette that some artists manipulate into poetry in their work.

I am yellow—that’s easy. “Sari” means yellow in Turkish, and fortunately, I like it as a color.

As a cosmopolitan individual with roots in Iberian, Turkish, and Anglo-Saxon cultures, living between London, Barcelona, and Andalusia, do you think people today are more closed-minded compared to 20 years ago? Do you think art, in its many forms, can help keep the dialogue open?

I guess yes and no. Some young people are quite conservative, while others are out there struggling to get the environmental catastrophe on the agenda of everything. Social media, like all human tools, can be used for good or bad. I do think it allows us to move into smaller (ironically) groups of like-minded individuals, which, if negative, can become dangerous, as recently seen in the UK.

I not only think art can keep the dialogue open—it has a duty to do so. Artists occupy a privileged position in society, and they have a role to play. I enjoy quoting Bertolt Brecht:

“Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.”

With age, I might be tempted to swap the hammer for a velvet glove.