



the alchemy of desire

Although the artist Jean-Pierre Sergent lives and works out of France for the moment, his artworks are unequivocally international.

Highly sophisticated and intellectually coherent abstracts, Mayan imagery, silk-screen technique, Plexiglas and stage sets for opera. French artist Jean-Pierre Sergent is nothing if not diverse.

And this applies to his background as well as to his art. Born in the small town of Morteau in the northeast of France, Sergent studied architecture in Strasbourg and then painting at the L'ecole des Beaux-Arts in Besançon before moving to settle in Montreal, set up a studio in New York, and then returning home to his native France again. He has exhibited in France, Canada, the US, Switzerland, England and Austria.

But what is it that drew him to art? "I first became interested in expressing myself through drawing and gouache painting while I was just a child," explains the artist in his atelier in Besançon. "Art was, and still is for me, a safe and pleasurable place for my body-spirit to thrive, live, breathe and communicate with my inner self, mankind and the universe."

Upon graduating, Sergent raised and trained horses in the Jura Mountains and later completed his first monochrome abstractions of hardboard (massonite) polystyrene panels. However, he soon moved to Montreal to devote himself fully to painting. It was in Canada that he started creating works using Plexiglas as well as incorporating industrial materials, newspaper clippings and photos into his art. It was also around this period that he began experimenting with silk-screen techniques. "In 1995 I decided to use silk-screen and frames only, and to use squeegees as my tools. Acrylic is the medium

I most favour and Plexiglas and paper are the supports which challenge me the most," says Sergent.

While plenty of contemporary art comes under flak for being intellectually unrewarding or abstract in its definition, Sergent revels in work that is tangible yet moves beyond the framework of structure and mind. "I admire traditional artists such as Fra Angelico and other Italian masters for their colours and purity; their marvellous spiritual content and their concept of 'painting' as an art object doesn't really interest me. I personally prefer prehistoric and 'primitive' art as it is more alive."

When asked which contemporary artists he admires, Sergent cites Jackson Pollock who worked with his body on canvas in order to access the universal; Joseph Beuys "for his reference to shamanism and his trying to heal social conflicts"; Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and the American Abstract Expressionists "for their large paintings to get away from the idea of the traditional narrow European bourgeois painting and for reintegrating the canvas to wall size"; Picasso "for his courage to use primitive forces"; Giorgio Morandi "for his subtle sense of colour and his metaphysical approach to still life; and Matisse "for the freedom in his drawings, colours and sensuality...". As for his own work, he identifies it simply as "fusion painting", referring to free association of jazz and John Cage, music with improvisation, hazard, chance, coincidence, chaos and popular references.

It is not surprising then, that Sergent's work is hard to classify. He takes his inspiration from many sources: Mayan mysticism, cosmology,

shamanism and more, but underlying his oeuvre is a deconstructivism of the very language of painting. Sergent laughs when I put this to him. "Sure, it is true that I am de-structuring from the past because it is mostly obsolete," he admits, "but what I am doing is layering and compressing several images coming from different cultures and time periods to get a mix of energy as in an alchemical crucible."

From his extensive travels, Sergent has gleaned a great awareness and appreciation of pre-Industrial cultures and their iconography. "These are a great inspiration to me," he says. "They radiate a serenity, beauty and energy in connection to the social, sexual, mythological and ritual context. Art at that time had a sense and a function that is unfortunately totally lost and forgotten nowadays. We live in a highly complex world run by money, media and monotheist fanatics. Our world has been so turned upside down by wars, colonisation, industrialisation, religion, pollution, globalisation, dehumanisation, desecration..."

So is it in his art that Sergent seeks to redress the balance? "Primitive energy is still in our body. And the collective unconscious in each of us. It is highly beautiful, sacred and it honours every life form," he insists. "True beauty used to be related to interior time, like an organ, an aura, a cosmic harmony. Our freedom rests in finding our way back to this cosmic time. Man has understood this empirically during thousands and thousands of years because Nature has perfected herself and man seeks to imitate her. It is our only hope of survival in a chaotic and dangerous world: it is a spiritual necessity."

Words: Sooni Shroff-Gander **Images:** Jean-Pierre Sergent



Sergent's philosophical aesthetic translates into his work. It is the essence of what he tries to distill from his life, his soul, his beliefs in a more essential and therefore more honest world of inner purity. Currently, he is continuing his "Mayan Diary" series, which are paintings on Plexiglas. Large works such as "Sky Umbilicus" are inspired by animal spirits guiding the soul into the realm of the after-life and use Egyptian and Mayan animal iconography plus personal shamanic dream-trance memories. Smaller works include "Red Jaguar Dreaming" and as Sergent says, "all my current works integrate the timeless encounters of life: birth, love, sexuality, pleasure, violence, spirituality, wholeness, life cycles and world cultures in my painting process."

Sergent's work has been bought by collectors and gallery owners, and has been commissioned to hang in banks as well as featured for the sets of Verdi's "La Traviata". The latter saw a monumental mural installation of 18 paintings on Plexiglas, a continuation of his Mayan Diary theme of "fusion paintings".

"I have been working with digital imagery for over 10 years," says Sergent, "and I find that design programmes give me the freedom to work as much as I want on repetitive geometrical patterns, changing the scale or the outline to reach the purity of design of an image." This would appear to be the natural progression for an artist who has always been fascinated by art that pushes the boundaries of its medium and the confines of artistic language to leap beyond what confines it. Indeed, Sergent is deeply interested "in paintings done on cave walls, on Greek, Mayan and Moche vases, paintings in Egyptian tombs and sarcophagi, Islamic ceramics, prehistoric Chinese pottery, manuscripts of the Middle Ages, Tibetan mandalas, graffiti scrawled on city walls, Indian miniatures, mola blouses of the Kuna Indians of Panama, finger imprints on the mud of cave ceilings in Pech Merle, Siberian and American shaman drums, painted loincloths on bark strips of the Mbuti and Mangbetu pygmies, Japanese shunga on

rice paper, magic paintings on Sioux teepees, Australian aboriginal dream maps on bark, sandpaintings of the Navajo medicine men, and paintings on wooden shields made by the Asmat people of New Guinea."

A reflection of the world like it visually appears is not enough for an artist like Jean-Pierre Sergent. It is the mysteries of the unconscious, the earth's telluric energies, cosmologies, the connections of womb-dwelling mythologies, communal social structures dreams and the entire directional spiritual axis that he wishes to encompass in his work. And don't categorise it as "painting", for Sergent insists that "painting as pictures gets me bored. It alienates me because it remains a narrow, representational, European and religious way of picturing the world." Fortunately, neither Jean-Pierre Sergent nor his art will ever be described as such. www.jpsergent.com