

**INTERVIEW BETWEEN JEAN-PIERRE SERGENT ARTIST & NICOLAS
SURLAPIERRE, DIRECTOR OF THE MUSEE DES BEAUX-ARTS ET
D'ARCHEOLOGIE DE BESANÇON | JUNE 24, 2020**

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SURLAPIERRE, DIRECTOR OF THE CENTRE'S MUSEUMS AT THE MUSÉE DES
BEAUX-ARTS ET D'ARCHEOLOGIE DE BESANÇON ON 24 JUNE 2020 | 4 PARTS
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Jean-Pierre Sargent talks with Nicolas Surlapierre about his current mural installation: The Four Pillars of the Sky (80 m2) at the MBAA, as well as about twenty images from different cultures (Mexican, Japanese, Oceanian etc.) chosen by the artist.

PART 1

Nicolas Surlapierre (NS): Hello Jean-Pierre.

Jean-Pierre Sargent (JPS) : Hello Nicolas.

NS: So we're going to spend a few minutes together, even more than minutes to talk about your journey as an artist, one could say of a French-American artist... And I would like to start with a little anecdote. I've been wanting to present Jean-Pierre Sargent's work for a long time, a work that is particularly dear to me because when I arrived in Franche-Comté 12 years ago, I discovered your work and I also discovered its richness. When I say its richness, it's not a flattery, Jean-Pierre, it's simply because for me, it echoed research that was personal to me on the circulation of images, the circulation of images that interest me. Namely, finally, what is a rather learned art history, to call the migration of symbols. How, finally, in civilizations that have nothing to do with either time or practice, we find forms, rituals that respond to each other. You won't be surprised, Jean-Pierre, if I tell you that I was trained at the Marbourg school and at the school of Georges Didi-Huberman where, precisely, there is this great circulation of images and this idea of resonance. And to start immediately in this circulation, this journey and I was even going to say in this dance of images between them and I will come back to this question of dance, especially of course, thinking of cosmic dance, I would like to make you react in a rather informal way, in any case, relaxed, with a lot of sympathy around four works, important somehow, that we have selected and perhaps, to start with, get you to react to this work *La tristesse du roi de Matisse*, which is a large cut-out paper that you can find at the Musée national d'art moderne, so that you can tell us about it. Why, after all, at the beginning, or perhaps during your career as an artist... did this work particularly touch you?

JPS: Yes, it just so happens that all my work is made of stencils. They're like paper cut-outs somewhere, because every time I print an image, it's either yellow, blue or purple, only one colour. And Matisse's work is very close to what I do with the silkscreen technique. But I understood that afterwards, really. I

said to myself after working for several years with the silkscreen medium I realized that I was getting close to Matisse! And also, it's a work that he did, that he did at the end of his life. He was quite handicapped and he was working in his hotel in Nice with his assistants and his assistants were painting the blue and then he was cutting out the shapes with scissors like that. And it's incredibly simple, incredibly spiritual and incredibly exotic. And so it's all there in my work somehow. That's kind of what I'm looking for, the simplicity, the exoticism in quotes and the spirituality and the beauty.

NS: And what we can also see very well in this *Tristesse du roi*, is of course you talk about exoticism, but apart from the cut-outs papers that remind us of Matisse's trip to Tahiti; this way he's going to stick with another form of culture. And also, this way of being able to work on a very large format while he is in a fairly physical situation, even if the term is not very beautiful, quite diminished. And why am I making this remark? Because it will have something to do with when you will discover the great American painting where, precisely, we have a discourse of a painting that would be particularly virile and particularly a painting of dexterity and dexterity of almost physical strength. And that's why it's very touching, because we are on the formats of the American painting, of American abstract expressionism, but with a different protocol, a protocol that clearly shows that the strength of painting is not linked either to virile strength, or to strength, we could say, in a way, physical strength. The other image that I would like you to react to because it's important and perhaps it would help us understand how you are going to discover American painting. Maybe it's this image of Rothko that I finally let you offer a comment.

JPS: Yes, actually, I was living at the time on my farm in the Haut-Doubs and I was breeding horses. Also I studied at the Fine Arts School in Besançon, but I had none whatsoever knowledge of American painters and I happened to buy the book *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein* by French writer Marguerite Duras, which had this painting by Rothko on the cover. And for me, it really have been like a kind of revelation, that is to say that it was a door that opened on something else, a new universe that I didn't know anything about. One can talk about mysticism, cosmic energy or pure poetry. This red is incredibly sensual and one can maybe see the Masculine, the Feminine and the Neutral. One feels these energies that I will discover later on with Indian art from India (Hindu). I think it is of a rather high spiritual level. And what really interests me is to enter into an approach other than just aesthetic in art.

NS: And then, what's interesting with Mark Rothko is that we talked a lot about abstraction, but he didn't consider himself as an abstract painter. Precisely, he talked about reality, he always used the artist's reality and not realism, which is not quite the same thing, simply because he opened onto a space that is a metaphysical space.

JPS: Absolutely yes!

NS: And I think that this metaphysical space sums up in a certain way, a large part of your work.

JPS: Yes, it's a beautiful painting and I had the good fortune, of course, being

in New York, to see a major retrospective at the Whitney Museum in 1998. It was fabulous, but, well, afterwards, it's like all masters, it is necessary to detach oneself from them... Yes, you have to let them go away.

NS: So to continue, in this iconographic introduction, which invites us to discover the universe, or the roots of Jean-Pierre Sergent's universe, I think we can talk about a very beautiful painting, quite complex by the way, by artist Frida Kahlo. Can you tell us a bit more about this painting, what you see in it, what you found in it and when did you discover it? And how did you find out about it?

JPS: I discovered Frida Kahlo in New York museums and of course afterwards while traveling a lot in Mexico. I understood what she wanted to tell us about, about all these strong energies, about the pre-Columbian cultures. Here we see the pyramid, maybe of Teotihuacan? Or an other pyramid, it's a bit of a Manichean picture because on one side, it shows all the Aztec, Mayan, Olmec cultures, all the cooking as well. The food is important too and the dark side of the United States, with the industries, the fumes, the machinization, the industrialization... So, she puts on one side, the joy of life and ancestral cultures and traditions versus the stupidity of our industrialized world. And she, she's there right in the middle with her little Mexican flag. she is a little bit tiny like that in this big setting and it makes me very sad because it's a reality that we encounter more and more every day, that our world is collapsing because of the industrialization of the world. And all these ancient cultures are disappearing little by little, in front of our eyes and so it is an act of rebellion, that she proves with this beautiful painting. It's maybe not my favourite painting of her, but I think she's very politically committed and it makes me feel good.

NS: And also because there is something else. You may not see it on the screen, but it says Ford on factory chimneys. She also shows in this painting the fact that not everything can be linked to a form of rationalization of production. And I think that the works you've done since then show that there is not this hyper-rationalization. On the contrary, even though I know that somehow, you don't like the term magic, there is still a part of magic, or at least metaphysics, and above all the right to a form of incoherence, and in particular an incoherence in a structure, since your works are always very, very structured. It's a very touching painting, perhaps a little Manichean, but very touching, precisely in this opposition between hyper rationalization and finally the poetry of incoherence. To complete this brief introduction on images that could telescope into your universe, I'd like you to tell us a little bit about this horseman.

JPS: Yes, it's the entrance into a city, this beautiful painting is at the Ottawa Museum. I've always said it's the most beautiful painting in the world! I really don't know why? Because it's a bit christic. You could say it's the pinnacle of medieval painting somewhere. There's a kind of victory over something. Maybe victory over death, victory over the enemy. And the colors are really splendid. The pinks and reds are really beautiful. It's a very small painting like this, this big (48 x 43 cm). I've always been... every time I go to Ottawa I go to see this

painting. It fills me up, more even than the Mona Lisa by the way, it fills me up with energy.

NS: And as always with you, there's this ambiguity because is it an entrance? is it an exit in Jerusalem? and finally, is it an entrance or an exit in what may have been medievality. This painting sums it up all together, with at the same time, all the hopes that one might have about the Renaissance and also all the doubts that one might have about this time period.

JPS: Yes, it's both a hello and a goodbye. But it's also very sexual because the horse is a very phallic and very sexual symbol. It's like a man coming out of a bedroom after having sex in quotes. It makes me think about that.

NS: Yes, there's something of the triumph, of the coming out. Something, I triumphed over something and maybe a desire.

JPS: Yes, you are right!

NS: It's very obvious even in this painting that is still quite severe, especially in this architectural and geometrical construction. So these four paintings allow us to better understand a little bit your way of circulating throughout images. So if I was so keen to invite you to the Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie in Besançon for a presentation, it was in relation to a particular installation called The Four Pillars of the Sky, which has been on display at the museum since September 2019. There was even a symbolic celebration, the one year of the reopening of the museum around this large mural installation named The Four Pillars of the Sky. And I would like you to describe a little bit about what it consists of. And then, perhaps, I'll tell you why I was so seduced by this subject on the one hand, but also by this installation.

JPS: Yes, you actually proposed me this beautiful space on the stairwells and we had to deal with a lot of technical issues. It was very complicated to install. The technicians really worked like pros. Everything went well and for me, I have this very ambiguous relationship with architecture. That is to say that somewhere, as I say in my texts, I think that architecture has killed painting because it has locked it up in a kind of "window painting". That is to say that all the paintings that artists have created since the Renaissance are made to be installed in architectures. And what fascinates me is the art that is made on Indians teepees, on nomadic things, that you can carry around with you, with which you can make prayers, you see like the Tibetan Thangkas scrolls, and therefore to install that, these 72 paintings that are put together, what we call The Four Pillars of Heaven. Because I thought it's both to... My painting has to be a construction somewhere, it has to be built like an architecture (healing evil with evil) and therefore to hold and support the sky, to hold a little bit our spirituality that is slipping away endlessly today. So I put all these paintings together in four crates. It's an idea I had in New York to make a very modular work that can be easily and quickly disassembled and reassembled. Today, this installation is in Besançon. I hope that another day it will be in Berlin or in another museum. I like things moving around and it's going very well with the museum. I hope the public is happy with it.

NS: In any case, what we can say about this installation is that it constantly oscillates in its form, anyhow between iconostasis. I had talked about it in a

text that will be published in the catalogue that we will make, because we're very attached to publish this important catalogue on the Four Pillars of Heaven. Iconostasis, which is the way of separating profane space from sacred space in the Orthodox Church. And then, finally, a rediscovery or, in any case, a reuse or reinterpretation of the retable system. The altarpiece, which in the end is not panels that are modulated together, although it is quite present in your installation. But let's not forget the etymology of the altarpiece, that is to say that it's a fold, perhaps we could imagine this great installation as a large sacred cloth that is folded and unfolded along the walls. This is also what we were particularly interested in. And you say in the script we're using for this interview. I really like this idea because at the beginning, when I was looking at your work, I thought that there was this adequacy of your work with architecture, especially because you choose a format. Perhaps we'll come back to it, the square format, which is particularly reassuring in a way, which also refers to a way of representing the world since ever, and the architect's plans at the same time. But you say: I'm also impressed by painting before the arrival of architecture. And this very simple sentence has helped me, at least for me, to circulate better in the way you made the different images interact with each other. And that's one of the qualities, it seems to me, of this great installation The Four Pillars of Heaven. I may have a question: in The Four Pillars of Heaven, we have different formats, all the same. We have images that are quite heterogeneous. And yet, when we look at the installation, globally, we have this impression. I'm not going to say harmony. That wouldn't be exactly the term, but in any case of great homogeneity. On one side, because there are several large panels, we are also included. We are caught in an environment. It is not completely impenetrable, but in any case, we are caught in an environment. I wanted to know how do you choose the images and do the images that are hung next to each other, are connected to each others? do they talk to each other? Or is there a part of chance, between images that are extremely linked to certain cultures, which can be Assyrian, Inca and others, Greek even, and other images that come from popular culture. I would like you to tell us a little bit about how you organize, in a certain way, not this chaos, but somehow, this dance of images between them?

JPS: Yes, you're right, it's a dance, that is to say that I don't ask myself the question, a priori, of knowing which image I'm going to put with another and especially that in my Plexiglas paintings, there are three layers of superimposed images. So I have absolutely no idea how it's going to look like in the end. I'm working backwards too. So what I'm interested in is working with my unconscious, that's somehow a big matter! And also not knowing what I'm realizing. I don't go towards something I know; I go towards something I don't know! And that's what gives strength to my art. It's a bit different on the paper work we see behind us, but with the Plexiglas paintings, it's really every time a discovery. I don't plan what will happen at all, nor for the colours neither... So that's what interests me about working in this fluidity. Fluidity is really essential in my work. One could say it's like an initiatory and shamanic journey. And I try to work without taboos, without morals. If an image appeals to me, I add it in

my computer and I have a data bank of ten thousands or twenty thousands images, or maybe more. And so, when I work, they appear like that. They're in me, that's how they appear. It's a bit like when you go for a walk in the wilderness. Things come to us and then we use them. That's what it's like.

NS: So what's surprising is that it might seem stressful for the artist not to know the result. It's a first thing, the second thing to bounce back on what you, what you say about this installation because it's an installation, *The Four Pillars of Heaven*, it is the relationship to the decorative. There is a relationship to the decorative and I think that is one of the qualities and one of the originalities of your work. It's because your generation and the generation after you have been, in any case, often, in the academic curriculum or at least in the contemporary art world, extremely, we're not going to say, warned, but in any case, extremely dubious with regard to the decorative. But you, I have the feeling that you assume this aspect of the decorative. Perhaps also because it goes against the architecture. So I would have liked to know if you had a position, since these questions were asked in the 80s, at the end of the 80s, 90s, notably through an art historian, a historian of taste in a certain way, called Jacques Solilou, who had written an extremely important work on the decorative, where, precisely, it was a question of a little break between the ornamental, the decorative and finally the architecture. When I say break, that is to say to stop cleavages, perhaps fruitless. But if I had a question to sum up very briefly, what difference would you make between the decorative and finally the ornamental?

JPS: Yes, well for me, nothing is decorative, absolutely nothing. It's a huge mystification. Well there are some contemporary artists (politically corrects) who are working on decoration, one could mention Jeff Koons for example. But when I use a pattern, what's called a motif, I often choose it from the Native American or Oceanic tribes and for them, it has a meaning and a purpose. It has often a genetic meaning, that is, the father and mother. I don't deeply know what that meaning is, but they did. So, it's to try to recover something that made sense at a certain time. For some specific people. Gratuitousness is a view of the mind and does not exist in nature and among these people, even less so. All the tattoos that they did on their bodies, all have a social and symbolic meaning. So, for me, if people think my work is decorative, yes, maybe because it looks like decoration, but it's not. For me, everything is meaningful, even if I've lost the meaning of it. I know that this shaman (or yogi) knew why he used triangles like this or the metaphysical emptiness in Hindu philosophy. Yes, for me everything is really meaningful.

NS: So it would go around the idea that eventually, and I agree with you, of course. That it wouldn't be a decorative work, on the other hand, which could still have a sense of ornamentation and ornament, because in the definition, and this is the difference between the decorative and finally the ornamental, the ornament is finally the version of which one has lost a meaning, but the version of a ritual.

JPS: That's right, it represents (or represented) a ritual.

NS: But of which we've lost, and that's what you're saying in the end. In any

case, part of its meaning. But we feel that this ritual was present. That's why I like the idea of ornamentation or ornament as something, like an ornament that we could use. But we don't know what for yet. And we don't know what it was used for. And I think that's an aspect that, in a way, is constantly present in your work. As well as another aspect and perhaps on this part of the four pillars of heaven we could conclude on this, on what you called in a rather beautiful and erudite way, the *spiritualis axis* and especially the directional *spiritualis axis*. What did you mean by that? And maybe that would bring us back to this pillar question?

JPS: Yes, the *axis mundi*, in fact, in every ancient tribe, for them, there was always a center of the world, with the four directions and whether you go it could be within the Navajo, the Sioux, all the Native Americans or even India, everywhere. For example, the temples are always oriented: North, South, East, West. There is always a cosmic orientation if you want, that is to say that this directional axis allows us to pass from our limited state of human being, to the infra-worlds among the Mayas, or to the celestial worlds. Well, there were 4 or 5 infra-worlds in the Maya and 12 celestial stages. So, this notion of pillar of the sky is a bit like that. This is the place of passage. Boom, we're here! And suddenly we're somewhere else! And that's fascinating. But We may talk about this later. This is what happens during shamanic trances. It's really the place... yes, the *axis mundi*, you have to go through it (it's like the matrix and the vulva)... It's like the revelation. I had the chance to travel to Egypt in a priest's cell, I had a revelation and I really went from a stupid human state (profane) to a cosmic state (sacred). It's a change in state of consciousness, a metamorphosis.

NS: And maybe to conclude on this first part of this interview... Could you come back to a word that you use from time to time and that you've noted, by the way, when you say: The painting object pisses me off, then the term is a bit trivial, but it doesn't really matter. It has a value in itself and more to perhaps conclude on this first part. What do you mean by: Killing the painting? Since it's an expression you use.

JPS: Yes, because our collective mind, well, our European imagination, is full of images that we see in museums. But these images no longer have any energies. For me, they have no energy left. And what interests me is energy and pure energy, sexuality and death. All the other worlds. And when one compare, I know that we shouldn't compare things, but in front of this Aztec Coatlicue statue, one can feel this great energy, we are captivated in front of the violence of life and we will talk afterwards about Artaud. Artaud understood very well, that contemporary art or European art had taken a wrong path. That's what I also think. I don't really enjoy seeing a painting so much anymore. It's because I went elsewhere, afterwards, we can't judge... Everyone has their own tastes. Everyone has his own pleasures. Yes, absolutely, I'm more comfortable in front of a Pollock painting or a shamanic mask than in front of a European painting, yes!

NS: And are you more comfortable because, according to you, in front of a Pollock painting or a shamanic mask, there is a different relationship, different

stories or to history? Or is it for another reason?

JPS: No, the relation to the body, to the body, yes! And also to the cosmic dimension which, in Pollock's works, are quite fascinating, yes!

PART 2

- NS: So Jean-Pierre, I don't know if it was simply related to the installation The Four Pillars of Heaven, but I wrote a text that is going to be published about your work and I was particularly interested in the question of shamanism, and this shamanism which is in a way extremely important for you, as well as the universe of the trance in which you will probably return. So this shamanism, I will summarize very briefly. Of course, there is a literature which is quite complex, which is beautiful, but complex. We can think of Mircea Eliade, of course, and I won't add other references so as not to make it too heavy and to really come back to your work. In any case, often the shaman, in the form of a disorder, as Mircea Eliade says in a very beautiful way, is there, in a certain way, to resolve a conflict. I would like, before we move on to the commentary as we could have done for such and such a reference, that we discuss and that you quote us, you had retained some quotations on shamanism and we will perhaps make a reaction and then we will move on to the commentaries.

- JPS: Yes, with pleasure. So here, I wanted to quote an extract from the Upanishads, which is a very important book for me. It's a book of Hindu wisdom, which is about 3000 years old. And so it's in the Garba paragraph, number 4: "Thousands of times before, I lived in a mother's womb. I enjoyed a great variety of food and was breastfed at so many breasts. I was born and died again and continually, I was reborn again". This is shamanism, that is to say, to enter into what we can call karma or the infinity of things that happen to us through our human peregrinations. And then, somewhere it is this non-death. It is to be conscious of belonging to something that also encompasses us, which is matrix and that makes us belong to humanity. Afterwards, will the entire collective unconscious survive after our death? Well, the Hindus think so, but well. I think that as long as humanity exists, we will have access to this data of our imagination. Exactly, that's why images are so important... And that's why I use a lot of rituals in my work and that's why I'm so fascinated by shamanism.

- NS: You say you use a lot of rituals. Can you tell us what those rituals are? Is it the ritual that we could also call the creation protocol? Or is it, shall we say, a spiritual inspiration? And how do you articulate both?

- JPS: No, it's all connected, really. As I said in a certain text. The big problem for me as an artist today is that you can't be a shaman-artist on your own. There's always a tribe, in a society, and it's kind of an incredible challenge to talk about that, but still, because I did some trance experiences in New York, I think it enriches my work a lot. On the one hand, by the colors and by this gift of ubiquity, since the images are counterbalanced, shock each other and oppose each other somewhere. As you said earlier, I use and mix pornographic images with sacred images, in quotation marks. I like that, I like to create that chaos. It's like bumper cars, It is to create a chaos somehow! Everything

happens at the same time and that way I get to another level of energy and consciousness. That's what it's like.

- NS: So in Paris a while ago, there was an exhibition at the Quai Branly called *Les Maîtres du désordre*, which was an exhibition on the relationship between shamanism and contemporary art. And indeed, there were many aspects that might interest you. And precisely, a term that I would like us to remember. Because I think it's enlightening in relation to your work. As we were talking about dance earlier, it's this idea of circulation, this idea of almost free circulation, and in any case in the form of almost free association between images. And yet, in a coherent universe, also, because the shaman holds a knowledge. Is it true? Is it false? That is not what is important. In any case, it is not important to answer it now. And it doesn't really matter, in any case, a knowledge or knowledges and an ability to put the images beside each other. You have chosen a certain number of photos, and I'd like us to discuss these photos and tell us a little bit about why you chose them, where they come from, what they obviously represent?

- JPS: Well there, I think it's in the North, probably among the Inuit, and we see two shamans who are in a trance and every time we see the image of a shaman, he always wears a mask on him. That is to say that it is necessary to know that when we enter into a trance, we practically, systematically meet what we call an animal spirit, that is to say a spiritual guide. So there, the two shamans are transformed into walruses. Often, they are transformed into eagle and they carry on them clothes which undoubtedly come from a walrus. This one can be ermines... What is interesting within shamanism practices is this induced and fusional relationship with Nature. They are part of Nature, they are not like us, westerners, out of Nature, rootless and ungrounded and for them, all this interconnection is very important because it would not exist anymore without Nature at whole. And that's what we've definitely lost! And that's kind of what I try to say in my work. Here, we see the shamanic songs with the drums and it's very impressive of course to see trance-like sounds, I've never seen one, but I've done some. So well... Already entering into a trance, it's really an experience that we can perhaps live in birth or death, or in sexuality. Or even throughout sexual ecstasies. But it has to happen very, very well. And there, we see for example this woman shaman, I think it's in Siberia and so she has her drum, she is on a totem pole and shamans are people who take risks. She climbed on her tree, like this, and she sings and invokes the spirits. And because they are protected by spirits, they can take all the risks they want. They are always facing death, illness. They are really very brave people. They have incredible strength. Well, I don't think that in Europe, there are still shamans. Before, there were the druids and the people who painted Lascaux, probably had hallucinatory and visionary mental capacities. Because to go and paint the scene of the Lascaux well at the bottom of the cave, for example, you had to really strongly want to do it, yes! These images are very beautiful. And here we see: The Four Pillars of the Sky, it is in the sky, it travels in the cosmos.

- NS: And then there's also... I think she's manipulating a drum, which is an

important element of shamanism. This is one of the main attributes of shamanism, just as we talked about the pillar, just as we talked about the mask or other attributes that we could mention.

- JPS: Excuse me, I'm cutting you off, because during the shamanic sessions I did in New York, my psychologist played the drum, in fact. I think it's to bring the body into a different rhythm. That is to say, maybe the heartbeats and the brain waves are calming down or accelerating? They now do electroencephalograms to see what happens during trances into the brain. Well they find some pretty amazing things! Well, that's good news. I think you can access it in meditation state as well. It's really a state of ecstasy like that, yes.

- NS: And how, finally... but maybe I don't know you well enough. But how can we finally link... because shamanism is a form of...? at the same time you're chosen, you have a message, there's a form of dispossession too... How is it reconcilable with your universe which is, I find, something very structured, very organized? One can see it in the photos or in the reports on your workshop, there is something that doesn't leave room, I'm not going to say at random, but the protocol is particularly well mastered. So how does it work? Does it intervene, shamanism I mean like motives? Or does it intervene in a form of unconsciousness? Who could, like that, nimbly or nourish the iconography?

- JPS: No, I know chaos and disorder and I know that for my production as an artist, I have to work in absolute order. Yes, it's an imperative, otherwise I wouldn't exist. It's like the monks or the shamans who go to shamanic school for 20 years as within the Kogis people in Colombia. You have to have discipline, otherwise you go into a tailspin and end up homeless on the street, that's all. No, I do think you need incredible discipline and then a strong will, because it is necessary to go and see, it's an hard way.

- NS: Can we maybe look at this other picture?

- JPS: This feels like it's in Tibet. But I don't know the exact source. What I like is this deer mask which is completely marvelous. I saw some Tibetan masks in New York that I wanted to buy, but unfortunately, I couldn't afford it and the costume is really... you can feel it's in the cosmos that being there. It's really in fusion with nature, as I said before. It's beautiful, perhaps cruel too, it's animality par excellence, animality in spirituality. It's a whole, that's it.

- NS: And would you agree that, in any case, there are certain shamanic figures that are frightening. There is also this idea in the sense of fright, more in the sense that Pascal Quignard gave in *Le sexe et l'effroi*. That is to say that there is something frightening. Do you feel that in this type of photo? Is it something that you are looking for in a certain way?

- JPS: Absolutely not, I don't really like black magic. I'm not on that side. I'm more into white magic. I think we live into a wonderful world. Well, some artists are attracted and fascinated by suffering and desperation, there are many of them, you can see that, there are artists who work on war scenes and everything... As for me, I'm just really attracted by this beautiful side. It's just beautiful. It's here and there, it's present. There's nothing to add. The shaman, he's in his trance and he's not hurting anyone. And maybe he also helps

humanity. And me, I am rather in this caring side... And even in my images of bondage, one can think that it is putting the woman body into a state of submission. Not at all, it's rather a glorification, a liberation, it's freeing oneself from the body (with this body & not with the spirit) in order to enter another world. I don't have this dark side at all. I don't have it at all. I am not at all anxious, but it is my nature.

- NS: So, for example, in this image that may seem quite frightening, on a certain side, you don't see the frightening character, but rather the character of reconciliation between the universes and especially the immanent universe and the transcendent universe.

- JPS: Yes, absolutely!

- NS: Among these images, which are perhaps a little bit of shamanism, in any case, which respond to it, can you comment on this very beautiful woman, in a procession?

- JPS: Yes, I don't know if she is from Africa (no doubt) or Oceania, but well, there are shells and there are all the symbols of fertility. She is incredibly sensual but also incredibly present. Georges Bataille speaks about it very well with all his images in his book's *L'Erotisme*. Eroticism is a presence-absence. Ecstasy is a presence. This woman is present and we can put all the images of top models who are doing fashion shows in Paris, none of them will ever have that presence. Because she does exist, she is a whole full of energy. She knows her identity, she is not ashamed of her body and she symbolizes fertility, she is just beautiful!

- NS: And in any case, what I see in this image is that we have the impression that she holds, I don't know if it's a power, certainly not. But it's knowledge that we don't have.

- JPS: A thousand years old!

- NS: Yes, and that's the beauty of it. It's that it still makes this knowledge alive, knowledge that normally had every chance, not so much of disappearing, but of dying.

- JPS: To die of, yes.

- NS: And then there's a big fresco, a person working on a fresco called *The Snake's Embrace*. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

- JPS: Yes, well, now I'm going to come back to the scale of external dimensions. It so happens that I, as a child, suffered from asthma, and I'm going to quote a sentence by Antonin Artaud who says: "Who has not suffered in the essence of his being, ignores the difficulty of life, because it's not enough to learn to think, one must first exist". That is to say that this man is, he does exist. So I come back to my story as a child. I was in Briançon and when I see pictures of myself in front of the mountains, I am really tiny in front of the mountains and I was in the high school for asthmatics with other children who came from all over France. And we had to create our own imaginary world somewhere in order to survive. Because having asthma attacks is to think of dying every time. You don't know if you're going to survive the next day, or even the next hour... And so this anguish can be transformed into creation. And then, for the shamans it is often that. They were often sick. They have been

healed. And they can transmit their knowledges and their experiences to others. And this is an image from a Colombian director's film called *The Snake's Embrace*. I discovered it on TV, and took a screenshot of this big wall. And this metaphysical reality... we see this little man doing his gigantic fresco on this huge wall, engraving a lot of things, symbols, *axis mundi*s, animals, geometric symbols. And that's exactly what I do in my work. That's me somewhere, I'm that shaman painting this wall!

- NS: Then, to react on my side, I think a lot about this ritual, this Snake Ritual. Which is a text and a lecture by Aby Warburg, precisely, on this way he puts into circulation different rituals around the snake and these rituals that, each time, are always there to exorcise a fear, and also linked to fertility, that is to say that Warburg's theory is that the snake allows both fear and its antidote. This is what he wanted to show and this is what I feel in any case in this immense fresco, indeed, which reacts and bounces off to *The Four Pillars of Heaven*. Next, an image that you already had, in a previous lecture with commentary, but which is quite impressive and somewhat reminiscent of a snake, but which is not. I'll let you present it.

- JPS: Yes, well I had the great chance to visit the Museum of Anthropological Art in Mexico City and you come across statues like that one. And this is a statue that's quite large, I think it's maybe 10 feet high, which is a granite monolith. So it's really impressive. And so, it's wearing skulls of death, it's wearing snakes, it's wearing pulled out sacrificed hearts too. We know that the Aztecs made human sacrifices. So it's really the mother goddess who regenerates the world, by any means. On the side of beauty, we can say that she is ugly as a louse, but she is magnificent, but she is so magnificent, because she is *The Vital Energy*! In front of all the Aztec, Olmec, Mayan statues... I still have this energy shock if you want! As it happened to me also a few times in my life to meet people who have this superhuman energy. Once in New York, I met a girl who was Master Yogi. I went to see her and told her: but you have an incredible energy. She replied me very accurately that it takes two people to be able to feel this energy, and that's it. In fact, shamans or Yogi Masters may have this energy or what we also call old souls, and so there, when one see that and we can understand it, we can feel that we belong to an "old soul", to something common to all humanity in quotes.

- NS: Does it also mean that to create the energy that we feel in your installation, in your installations, but particularly the one we're currently presenting at the Museum of Fine Arts and Archaeology, it takes two people? Do you perceive this energy and is this energy conscious? At the same time when you realize the piece, when you present it, do you also present it, not just because it's your goal to be an artist and to be exposed, but it's also to activate something. Can we say that the piece, in the same way that there is a ritual, can we say that the piece is activated by the relationship that the visitor could have and what would be the benefit of that?

- JPS: It's a bit complicated. The deep relationship of the viewer in front of the artwork. Does the viewer have to be initiated to feel the energy? Perhaps? I realise that the only people like my friend Marie-Madeleine Varet, who

experience my work in a really fusional way, are people who have had a cosmic revelation somewhere. Anyhow, you have to be sharp. Yes, the relationship to the work is complicated. But on the other hand, I am not aware of this energy. I do things like that because maybe it's a gift, I've learned so much. I've met so many interesting people that it's fluid, it's like that. Maybe afterwards one day, it will stop. We don't know. It doesn't really matter. But in order for people to feel this energy, as I told you, you need to be initiated to the deep meaning of art. Something really has to have happened to them, something has to have happened to them. I think, a trigger. I think a guy who lives in Besançon and went to school in Besançon, if once he hasn't stumble, he has little chance of entering into my art work, but that's artist's life! Maybe he can like the colors, the images or something else, it doesn't really matter.

- NS: In any case it would be a great thing because that's kind of what we try to do in museums, to connect an audience and remind them that something happened, that something might have happened. This idea of stumbling I think it's very beautiful, because it's precisely from this stumbling that we finally create a relationship with the work, because that's our goal. And we're going to conclude this second part of the interview with this photo that's a little scary, I must say, but you don't see it as scary, do you?

- JPS: No, quite the opposite. Because they're actually two Asmats friends. I must say that in New York, I've always been fascinated by the poles of the Asmats people that speak of life in its pure materiality. It's the grandfather, the father, the generations, that pile up and stack up like this, until that a new baby arrives. And the baby is necessarily born from an ejaculation. It's really more interesting to show this than to show nothing in museums. And here we see two Asmats buddies, and they are carrying their ancestors around with their belts. And for them, death is not a metaphysical problem at all. It's a daily problem. They were close to their ancestors so they wear them as totems because they helped them. They are alive thanks to them, they pay tribute to them and to this life and I find that in France or in the West, we no longer have any recognition of our ancestors. We treat them like dogs. It is absolutely incredible. I lost my dad not long ago, my grandfather too and my mom is still alive... but I am always grateful to them for giving birth to me and spending so much time with me. Because, you know, creating an artist is not something you can do with a snap of your fingers. If you want to be an artist, you have to read thousands of books and you have to go to hundreds of museums. You need a little bit of money. And these people (these Asmats), you can feel that they have been well fed. Or it can be their family or their enemies that they carry with them, because they are proud to have killed their enemies. It's totemic. And we no longer have a totem pole. We don't have any more intra-human connections. Somewhere, our connections are loosening up more and more, and that's what scares me the most, deep down inside. It's something that upsets me and saddens me deeply, it gives me great emotion. And when I see this image, they are the ones who are right, it's not us. It's not the West.

- NS: In any case, described in this way, it allows me to conclude perhaps on this idea that in the end, whether it's in the Asmats or in The Four Pillars of

Heaven, there is something that I feel very fundamentally, it's this idea of protection. We are under a form of protection, in any case, perhaps a guardian goddess, a tutelary god and into a fundamental relationship to the circulation of symbols.

PART 3

- NS: So, Jean-Pierre, what's interesting about your work is that it obliges us, well, it forced me to look back and it will be on the last part of this interview, on two aspects, even several aspects, but notably two authors, an author that I like very much who is Georges Bataille. Obviously, I plunged back a little into what he had done in the journal Documents, because it's not unrelated to the way you put images together, but of course, with the work he published in 1957 called *L'érotisme*, which is really going to revolutionize, or I don't know if it did, but it will contribute something to the relationship between eroticism and knowledge, and especially for an art historian like me, to the knowledge of art. We are trying to understand how images, do not copulate together, but in a manner of speaking, get married and get along sometimes, have attractions or on the contrary repulsions. And it is this aspect that I would like us to evoke, always looking at a few images on the same very simple principle, also recalling this beautiful formula of Bataille that I like very much and that I feel in your work, I don't know if it is assumed, this idea that, finally, he says that in his 1957 essay on eroticism: Erotic is the paradox. Pleasure is the paradox, that's well said. I'd like to give this first quote and perhaps try to start with either a quote that I think you had also selected for this interview and then some comments on the images.

- JPS: Of course, yes. I wrote once: The sacred work is necessarily erotic. That is to say that it is consubstantial (Bataille speaks about it very well!) the sacred work is necessarily erotic because it always speaks of the moment of ecstasy, that is to say, of entrance into an other world, in some way, the worlds of creation and of regeneration. These two aspects of things are important. One could also add pleasure, but then again, pleasure may not be that important somewhere. I think the most important thing is ecstasy. It's the way out of this world and out of our body somehow and to enter, for the body to enter into its dimension, full and whole (in its wholeness).

- NS: So we could retain from this quotation this aspect that we haven't talked about, well, we've talked about it in an induced way, which is simply the sacredness. There is an interest in you for what I called, following the example of the great exhibition at Beaubourg, which was quite remarkable, Les traces du sacré (The traces of the sacred). What remains of the sacred and the sacred would not be something that would simply be religious. But I like to recall Yannick Haenel's definition, which is: The sacred is the contact point between the living and the dead. I think it's quite beautiful, a place where finally, the character of a relationship to each other, of a relationship to each other with a capital A, that is to say with transcendence, one can in a certain way relive in that precise place, the sacred. And then the other thing, what your quotation says and also what you say about it, refers to the idea through

eroticism of embracing in a certain way the totality. This is the theory of Bataille in his 1957 essay. Eroticism has two functions: firstly, to embrace the totality, totality of postures, totality of relationships, totality of psyches and totality of stories. And finally, another thing also to go beyond the impossible, because, strangely enough, Bataille, in his 1957 essay, does not like to talk much about this notion of the forbidden. To illustrate this passage from Bataille, in any case from your interpretation of the reading of it's books, and then from its application into your work, even if it is not a school application, I would like us to comment on a few images. In particular, we could start with this prehistoric fresco that you could comment on.

- JPS: Yes, of course. Bataille talks about it very well, he wrote a whole book about Lascaux. So what we see here is a bison with a bird on a pole. We make the hypothesis that it would be a shaman who would be in a trance because this shaman is ithyphallic. So, we can say that it is the bison that killed the hunter, but for me, it represents someone who is in a trance. We can see that he is completely like that, tetanized and that he communicates with his animal spirit that we talked about earlier, which is on a pole again, and the buffalo is wounded, he is going to die. And it's this whole relationship between animals and men, the sexuality, because necessarily, in order to have sex in quotation marks, you have to recall your animality again, otherwise you don't really fuck. It's a bit crude what I say but Bataille talks about it very well and he says that he goes to dinners where he sees women sumptuously dressed and he finds it hard to imagine them in ecstasy, having orgasm like bitches. And inevitably, there is this ambiguity, the absolute confrontation, between the dressed man and the naked man... It's something else. It is another world and no one never reveals the sexual ecstasy. What I want to do in my work is to unveil enjoyment. Well, like that, maybe by play too. Yes, I think all this is very important because at the end, in art history, there are quite a few erotic images and in museums, practically none. So eroticism is often phantasmed through myths and symbols, but copulation scenes? It must be understood that the West has practically no copulation scenes.

- NS : But it's above all that Bataille had a connection, I'm going to say to extreme nudity, when I say extreme nudity, it's not the naked body but it's what you could say or what Bataille finally says very well, this idea of animality, notably of the animality of the sexual act and you justly quote Bataille and you are right to quote his essay on Lascaux where precisely, for him, even if after the great prehistorians may now going to tell us that he was wrong, that he was wrong historically, but it is not because he was wrong historically that he was wrong, he sees in the frescoes of Lascaux ; in front of our eyes, the appearance of the human in the animal and the animal in the human. I like this idea very much, in this way that animality is not inferior to the human. Finally, it is this kind of related relationship that he tries to discover, that he tries to follow and also all that we don't know about the animal. And this is what he is going to develop in his essay, which is quite brief, on the caves of Lascaux. And also how (because he asks himself this question), how were these famous Lascaux frescos completed and under which spiritual state. And there, in the

image you have chosen, we would have a clue, it would really be in a trance state and it is thanks to the trance.

- JPS: Yes, yes, I think so. And I think those shamans were in a trance state when they painted, obviously. It's a well that's I don't really know how many meters long, you have to go deep to the very bottom of the cave, so you have to have supernatural powers to go down there. Otherwise...? It's like the Amerindian shamans, who can travel with their spirit, otherwise you're going to get stuck and lose your soul.

- NS: So the second image that brings us closer to the essay, in a certain way to the notion of eroticism in Georges Bataille's work, is this illustration, this small miniature to be more exact, that I'll let you comment on.

- JPS: Well, these are Indian miniatures that date from the 18th and 19th centuries, and where we can see, it's always very symbolic, it is the goddess Kali (the feminine energy *Shakti*) with skulls of the dead, a little like the goddess Coatlicue that we had seen before, with a sword that decapitates the god Shiva, it's a little like accessing knowledge, satori, you have to decapitate the self to enter into the self, to enter into an elsewhere, a wisdom. And this is the god Shiva who is also ithyphallic, that is to say that they copulate and during this copulation, as I said previously, they are entering into the whole Nature, in this wholeness of Nature. It's really fabulous, it's magnificent. All Hindu paintings fascinate me by their beauty. One could also say that it's a little bit of naive art, but not at all, because what it says is very, very strong, very violent. Just as real life is exactly: BOOM!

- NS: And then there's a great deal of sophistication. It's very sophisticated in terms of the representation technique, in terms of miniaturization, but also in terms of the information that we can glean, especially since there are dogs that devour corpses and also birds of prey that I couldn't recognize, and that's another aspect. That is to say that this relationship, which is a poncif, but which was important, in any case for Georges Bataille, between Eros and Thanatos and this proximity, or more exactly this impossibility of Eros without Thanatos, that is to say this impossibility of pleasure without finally a symbolic death or a real death...

- JPS: Inescapable!

- NS: Or in any case, inescapable, you're absolutely right. Another image that runs through your erotic pantheon, if I may say so?

- JPS: Well, this is an Aztec flaying, so obviously the Aztecs made a lot of human sacrifices. And here we see this sacrificed man, it's a statue from which they removed the heart and we see the organs hanging like this. I saw this statue at the Guggenheim museum where they had a very beautiful exhibition on the Aztecs (*The Aztec Empire*, 2004) and these statues are really fascinating. Maybe for you or for some people they could be scary, but for me, they don't scare me at all. Because it's really like a hunter who would go and skin an animal. Well, that's the reality of things. We see the organs, we see death as it is.

- NS: No, it doesn't scare me. It's as if we've flayed what could be both desire and a form of eroticism at the same time. It's almost a kind of diagnosis of

what violence can be, not there of the sacred, but the violence of eroticism. And finally, before moving on to some of your images, I would like you to also comment on this very beautiful goddess.

- JPS: Well, yes, she's a goddess, and she's probably at the Metropolitan Museum. And almost every Sunday, I used to go there in that museum. And to see these Indian goddesses, who are still absolutely fabulously sensual... The clothes are made of, it's not lace, but they're objects that are sewn on the costume. Her breasts, rond, generous and full are really beautiful! It's incredible! Her face! Her eyes! One feels that it is a benevolent goddess and who knew sex. It is not the Virgin Mary. It is important to say it. We cannot live always with iconography of the Virgin Mary. It is terrible. Or of Christ crucified on the cross. These images soothe me and they make me love life. Yes, they are marvellous!

- NS: And especially in this extremely important chiasmus and this wiggle of the hips, which is very, very beautiful, and at the same time, I'm not going to say provocative, but of a sensuality... terrible.

- JPS: She has a sex, she is sexed. She's enjoying it, she had experienced sexual trances. Nowadays, people don't know climaxing anymore, they're are completely trapped, deserotized ; it's terrible. It's very sad. Well, too bad for them!

- NS: Especially since jouissance, to remain in a Bataille note, is a means of access to knowledge. It's through jouissance that we know, not the limits, but certain forms. To conclude on this aspect of the relation to eroticism, can you perhaps evoke some of your images, especially those behind us?

- JPS: Yes, I made a full series entitled: Bones, Flowers & Ropes, about Japanese bondage. Because, once again and contrary to what one might think, it's not an humiliation of the woman, it's not a submission. In Japan, they have what we call spirits, the *Kamis*, that is to say they live in a universe, well not all Japanese, but the traditional Japanese people who have kept their traditions. For example, they're going to knot ropes around a tree and put small objects in order to define it as sacred one. It can be a stone, it can be, I don't know a toy... To define that this space is sacred, it is a sanctuary. And that's where one can communicate with the spirits that lives there. So, they copied those practices to bondage out women, and it's a little bit the same thing. That is, it's very aesthetic, and all the sexual places of the woman's body, the sexual places of the woman's body, are notified and and excited, like for example sex... they put a knot on the sex so that it triggers the pleasure. Except that the woman is tied up. It's a fact that in our brain, our human brain, suffering goes through the same nervous channels as pleasure. So, somehow, it's up to us to say whether it's suffering or pleasure (the free will of the relationship to the body). All persons who have been imprisoned, who have lived through atrocious moments, know that at some point you can switch and change the impulse. Well, Art it's a bit like that! It's switching the switch. We all are suffering but somewhere, we can say to ourselves: I'm in positive switch mode Well, then, I'm enjoying life, that's as simple as that!

- NS: And maybe we could say that in some of your images, where there is this

relation to bondage, or in any case, there is this difference are making between a bondage that could be a humiliation in certain sexual practices and, on the contrary, what you just said, that is to say a bondage that would be a sacralization of certain aspects of the body. What you also explained very well, in this idea that we attach objects in order to make it sacred, we tie it as a totem, we tie a tree, a rock... to give it a particular strength.

PART 4

- NS: As I said in a part of this interview, Jean-Pierre, you force us, and this is rather a quality, to reread, I don't know if these are classics, in any case, to read again important texts, to review images that also constitute our history and our relationship to images. We recently came out of a particularly difficult period, and we had the idea, perhaps, in this interview, of evoking a text which, among the texts that had been cited, had not been quoted so much. And perhaps we will have some explanations to give about this text. I mean, during the Covid-19 pandemic, we talked about the Diary of the Year of the Plague, of course we talked about Jean-Giono, but strangely enough, no one cited, in my opinion, perhaps it exists, *Le théâtre et la peste*, this important text by Antonin Artaud, which was later included in his complete writings. It's a text he wrote in 1935 and I'm not going to be too long, but it seems to me that it's a reasoning in relation to our current events, but it also resonates with your work. And it makes the link, especially in Artaud's work, between plague, sexuality and finally eroticism. Basically, Artaud's theory in his Theatre of the Plague, if we summarize his text, is that the plague expresses the dark character of the person, of the people, of the contaminated people, but by expressing the dark character of the contaminated people, it also reveals their desires, their sexuality and also, at times, often a few moments, alas, before their death, it frees them from something and it's a form of liberation. I recall this text, because I think it's very topical and accurate, but above all because it has marked you, as generally all Artaud's texts.

- JPS: Yes, you're the one who suggested that we talk about Antonin Artaud, who is really an author that I adore. In fact, I had to read *Le théâtre et son double* a long time ago, which I've been re-reading recently these days, and I find that he speaks not only of theater but of course, you have to understand that he speaks about Art, in a generic way. It can be music, painting, opera... That's all that makes man creative. And I like Artaud very much because he says, for example, in Theater and its Double, he says... because I had a bit of the same revelation as him in Mexico. Were he had his mystical revelation. You can talk about mysticism in Mexico. So he says: "In Mexico, since it is Mexico, there is no art, and all things are useful." It's a very important sentence. It serves, the art here in Europe it's useless somehow, it has disappeared. "And the world is in perpetual exaltation." That's fabulous to want to live in this exaltation, and we feel it in his works, we can feel it in his writings. So, to come back to Covid, he says in *Le théâtre et la peste*: "Above all, it is important to admit that, like the plague, theatrical play is a delirium and that it is communicative". That is to say that we didn't talk so much about delirium in

this rather crazy thing. We stayed very quietly home and the imaginary did not arise and creativity did not spring up as we might have thought or expected somewhere.

- NS: In any case, for the moment, by all the measures that had been taken, it was precisely measures that in a certain way prohibited this delirium. And I like very much in his text *Theater and the Plague*, this idea, not because it kills people, I'm deeply sorry about that, but quite simply this idea of contagion, that is to say, this contagion of desire of which he speaks. Basically, he has several sentences about this idea of contagion and he also explains them, and I can feel that also through your images, even if it is not voluntary on your part. He explains, when he says, of course, "there is something victorious and vengeful in the theater, as in the plague," I also feel something in some of the images you propose of victorious and vengeful. Not because you seeking revenge, but because sometimes you confront us with images that place us, not in a discomfort, but at least in a different relationship to the image, as some people would not be comfortable into the image. That's what's quite amazing, with a very careful treatment, very careful silkscreen prints, with bright or sometimes very soft colors. And yet the image has a kind of fury and a kind of victory over finally something that would be almost reassuring, as I said at the beginning, as impenetrable in which one would be installed. And it's this aspect or these fertile paradoxes that interests me particularly in your installation. So, indeed, there is this *Theater of the plague* ; Artaud, when you say he's talking about the theater, he's obviously talking about the arts. Perhaps I wanted to make you react to two of Artaud's works that you chose, especially the first one. We see it very damaged in a certain way, and perhaps we can try to understand why you chose this work, but also what is the very nature of this medium, so damaged, so terrible, in a way.

- JPS: Yes, it's a black magic drawing, that is, it sends a spell, it sends an invocation (a spell) to someone to die. It's a magical object and it's burned just to make the magic take effect. He was well into this term magic, and one can see crosses and probably stars. It is a cosmic manifestation, perhaps with blood, rust or sperm. I don't know exactly what materials he used. He wants revenge on someone, something or life itself that may have made him locked up in the asylum. Everybody knows where he was locked up and it's a bit like Van Gogh, they absolutely want to create something, to exist. As you said earlier, my works are victories over life. Yes, I am alive and I want to bear witness to that. That's it. And then, I wanted to quote Artaud, precisely, at that moment, because we come back to this Covid and to the completely obvious situation. Because this virus has spread out also thanks to or because of our way of life and globalization. And he says in *The Theater and the Plague*: "And the question now is whether, in this world that is slipping, committing suicide, without realizing it, there will be a core of men capable of imposing this superior notion of the theater, which will return to us all the natural and magical equivalent of the dogmas in which we no longer believe". It obvious, the world we have known disappears, and it is perhaps the role of artists to make the world reappear, to re-enchant the world.

- NS: So that's not the least of the paradoxes, because there is a world in which we no longer believe, and in this drawing, in this kind of ex-voto that has a magical virtue, in any case there is a magical desire, there are a lot of beliefs. And at the same time, it's not simply a question of the sacred, but we feel in your work, let's also come back to your work, this interest in religions, in beliefs and in the circulation of religions among themselves. Can you tell us a little about it? Why in a certain way, in your work, it becomes coalescent between different modes of beliefs or practices, also because for you the belief is never as such, it seems to me very, very much linked to a practice and a practice that is obviously with the integration of the body?

- JPS: It's a huge question. I think that man recognizes himself in the first rituals we know of since prehistoric times, which was to bury the dead. It was not to throw them away today as we did in the within the nursing homes now. No, but it is very important, this relationship to the human, the meaning is that here, we are discussing together, we are in front. There has to be a communication. Imagine one second that our parents had died from Covid and that we were not able to attend the funeral. It is the disappearance of the ritual. It is also the disappearance of the human being as such, somewhere. And that makes me really... sad. And all religions have tried to develop this spiritual side, which has been completely erased, totally annihilated, especially in the monotheistic religions where sexuality has been completely buried. But, we know exactly why: it's because often religions were promulgated by men and feminine pleasure always scared them somewhere. It's true that seeing a woman climaxing is something else than just walking down the street quietly. Bataille speaks well of it. It's a fury. It's indescribable the feminine pleasure with the screams and everything... Somewhere, it can be frightening. You were talking about fear, well, it's true that the feminine pleasure is eminently feared by certain men, so they invented a lot of rational systems so that women could not enjoy sex anymore. That's their thing. But into matriarchal societies during prehistoric times advocated this enjoyment and fertility, women were well gendered. The breasts and the sexes were generous. So now we're back to that with pornography. But it's sexuality where there's none of the fertile side anylonger. It's just pleasure for immediate pleasure, which doesn't have much interest anyhow.

- NS: And the difference is that pornography is also linked to what we could call, as well as the sociologists who have worked on pornography, I was going to say to the myth of performance, to the idea of performance, whereas there, in eroticism, in the very hyper-erotic image, there is no real desire for performance. It's another way, through the pleasure of knowledge, of access to a mode of knowledge, and a mode of knowledge that can be, not buried, but which would be distant, disappeared. And how, perhaps, in a certain form of sexuality, or in any case of pleasure, one could bring back to life throughout resurgences, certain images, certain customs. Perhaps even some knowledge. I feel this in your representations and also in the representations that we have been commenting on for almost an hour. That's what interests me deeply and that's also why we wanted to install these Four Pillars of the Sky. To simply get

out of the iconological analysis. That is to bring these images back to life, with an aspect that interests me enormously, that interests me enormously, as I took part a few years ago at colloquium named: So that the images never die, that's exactly what it is. I have the feeling that somewhere, thanks to certain relationships between the images in your installations, in particular *The Four Pillars of the Sky*, you bring back images in a way that we could, in a way, but you probably won't like the term, you bring back repressed images or things that we have voluntarily forgotten or that society, of course, to take a term that Artaud has discredited, has made us forget. In any case, there is something too, almost of a desistment of the artist's hand in Artaud, since he write under the influence of spirits or chance and that gives a particular strength to this drawing, sketch, I really don't know how to name it, *ex-voto*, perhaps too.

- JPS: I just wanted to come back just briefly to what you're saying. It's totally true because we are the last living witnesses of the first peoples. And all their knowledges, their wisdoms are disappearing. And Jean Malaurie, who runs the *Terre humaine* collection and whose books are all eminently interesting, says that faculties should be created to teach those knowledges. And the Aztecs, of course, no longer make human sacrifices, human sacrifices are not a good thing, but beyond that, once a month they would have a feast for flowers, a feast for salt, a feast for water. And when we see how we mistreat nature today, these sacrifices seemed to be interesting (to teach respect for Nature). And here we see a body of Artaud, we almost see a human sacrifice... He also beheads himself. Blood spurts out. Yes, yes, it's quite strong too.

- NS: And then he beheads himself, but we must also remember that Artaud is also linked to his practice of theater, of the body of the actor in the theater. And it is also his knowledge of surrealist movements. And, of course, of the review *Acéphale*. We talked about Bataille, in which Bataille participated enormously, and therefore about this desire to understand certain functions and certain psychic functions that are extremely buried. You had selected one last quotation and I would like you to read it because I find it particularly beautiful. It is still accurate this essay from 1935, *Le théâtre et la peste*, from this rather short text, and we may come back and comment on it.

- JPS: This one, "And that's when the theater settles in. The theater, that is to say, the immediate gratuitousness that pushes us to useless acts and without any benefit for the present day". It's perfect, it's art, it's the very definition of art. And then the following quotation: "We can now say that all true freedom is black and is inevitably confused with the freedom of sex, which is also black, without us knowing very well why". (We have just discussed this). "For it is a long time since the Platonic Eros, the the genesic sense, the freedom of life, disappeared under the dark coating of the libido, which we identify with all that is dirty, abject, infamous, in the fact of living, of rushing with natural and impure vigor, with an ever-renewed force towards life". So there we are! One must project oneself constantly towards life. It is an immense flow. You have to be in the flow. That's it, that's so perfectly said!

- NS: So it would bring us back, I suppose, to this idea that you feel in your work, especially if you look at *The Four Pillars of the Sky* and other large

installations you've done, this idea of moving from one image to another and from one silkscreen square, if I may say so, to another. There's another thing that strikes me. I hadn't thought about that sentence you read earlier, especially about useless acts. Would you, if I asked you a little bit about this quote, I would remember "useless act without benefit for the present day". Could you explain a little bit what you mean, simply of course?

- JPS: Artaud said that. It's true that being an artist in a society where art no longer has any value or importance, as he says so well, except commercially, that is to say that my works have an interest, and thanks to you I'm exhibiting here. So my works have a value because they are presented. But if the works are not presented and if they remain in the studio they have absolutely no value, they don't even exist. And nowadays a work has value because it is worth two million dollars. If it's not worth two million, if it's worth 10 euros, nobody look at it and it has no value. So we artists are working somewhere for free. It's very difficult to sell works of art. Yes, it's an other deal. It's a bit of a priesthood. Well, where I find that the problem here is that French society has practically no recognition for its artists and creators. There is not much support. There is not much interest. When you listen to the radio, it's very, very rare for visual artists to talk about their work. Or maybe on France Culture, but, well, all intellectuals will say the same thing, except for those we continually see and hear in the media. But I don't think there's much echo. That's why I am pushing hard myself to work enormously and continuously, like 24/7: to make videos, to do interviews like we do today and to present my work. Because I think that thanks to the internet now, we maybe can get a slightly higher audience.

- NS: Yes, and I think what's important is that there is work of art completed and that we shouldn't be discouraged by the difficulty of critical recognition. And if Artaud had asked himself the question of critical recognition, perhaps he would have become even crazier than he was. It is not entirely by chance that he wrote Van Gogh or the suicide of society, that is, even if it was part of a myth, where, precisely, there was this difficulty of recognition. And it is this difficulty of recognition that I would also hear differently, that is to say, recognition of signs, and especially of signs that can perhaps feed our imagination. In any case, I didn't think you were going to quote that. But I look at two things I look at these useless acts. I find this expression very beautiful, because I believe that the artist is also there to put us in relation to useless acts, and also you who produces images and who loves images, because it is the very nature of your creation, without benefit for the present day.

It is this idea that we could also imagine, that we produce even if we don't have a return, whether it be financial or immediate media return, that there is no return from the news, from the image that we would find on the Internet. On the contrary. It is going to look for something deeper and because it is going to look for something deeper more meanfull. Perhaps it is going to look for something that will remain in time.

- JPS: Yes, I hope so, I really hope so, yes.

CONCLUSION

- NS: So, Jean-Pierre, I didn't see the time go by... We're coming to the end of this interview, which I found very rich. I would like to make you react on two things. Firstly, about a work that you have chosen and I would like you to tell us about it because it is a little bit enigmatic. And secondly, I would like you to read a quotation that you have also chosen and that we can in any case leave each other on these words and on this reflection, or on these reflections.

- JPS: Well listen, it's a little Indian miniature from the 18th century titled: Pure Consciousness or the Meta Cosmic Void, and I believe every artist dreams of doing that. It's fabulous because in the middle it's a gouache wash, very simple. You could think of the works of Morris Louis, working on emptiness, or Yves Klein working on emptiness as well. And it's decorated with little blue flowers. We evoked earlier decoration, but it's not decoration. We also talked about being framed. And here, the emptiness must be framed because we cannot live in absolute emptiness or void. It's too hard for us. And Hindus have 19 life forms of it, the Buddhists as well. While us westerners, we only have the nothingness, we have Being and nothingness, it is sadly very poor. And I am fascinated by the metaphysical power of the Hindus. And it's a work that transfers me towards a beautiful idea of humanity. To be able to talk about the void is to have already reflected thousands of years, because prehistoric man may not have had an idea of the void, but these Hindus, with their limited technical knowledge, because they didn't have the technical knowledge of the West, in a sort, they knew a lot of things and they developed their metaphysics much more deeply. And every time I read books by these people (like the Upanishads), I am fascinated. It can be the same for the aborigines of Australia. Except that, they wrote very little and there are quite a few works of art that have survived. Maybe their cave art and so that's fascinating. And I wanted to finish on something that came out of Alexandra David-Neel's Journey and Adventure of the Mind, which says: "So many voices have been raised in the lonely forests, feeding the pantheistic reveries of India in the past! Today, crossed by roads with trucks, overflowed by planes carrying their profane passengers over the Himalayan peaks where the Indians placed the residences of their Gods, these voices have fallen silent, where perhaps there are no longer any ears capable of hearing them". This is the relation to art that we have been talking about. And then finally, I would like to finish on Art and Death, which is a text from Beasts, Men and Gods, by Ferdynand Ossendowski, who is a Russian who had to flee the Russian Revolution and who peregrinated, he traveled from Tibet to Mongolia, he spent years like that traveling practically alone and at the end of his book he talks about nature and he says the following: "Nature knows only life. Death is only an episode for her. It erases the traces of it under the sand or under the snow, makes them disappear under a luxuriant vegetation of greenery or flowers". And further on, he says: "There is greatness in this indifference of nature towards death, in its eagerness to know only life". And I would like my art to know only life!

- NS: I think this is a magnificent conclusion and I thank you once again for this interview and for the richness of our exchanges.

- JPS: Thank you dear Nicolas. It was a real pleasure to talk with you. And thank you to Lionel and all the friends who helped us for this beautiful interview.