

## Interview w/ Michael Corbin – the ARTBOOK GUY



Ipê rosa – diptych/detail

MICHAEL: Hey Jose, I feel that while looking at your work, I'm seeing the inner workings of your mind. I also see emotion in those abstracts. Would you say your work is more intellectual, emotional or spiritual? What's the inspiration behind it?

JOSE: Hello Michael! Great to be talking to you. That is a toughie. The quick and simple answer would be that it's more emotional. I've always been more interested in understanding and capturing my feelings when faced with something – or what a particular landscape or event evokes and provokes – rather than replicating in some way the thing itself. But having said that I would like to think that there is a balance of all three. The spiritual element is definitely always there, though not in a religious sense or the preaching of any belief, more in the sense of understanding my/our place within the big picture. The intellectual element was more present in earlier years perhaps, when my insecurity led me to always find a justification – or a story-line – for what I was painting, but more and more I find myself letting go and simply enjoying the process and seeing where it takes me. The inspiration is undeniably my travels, the nomadic life I have led since I was a child, the World as I see it and feel it and my attempts to find my place.

MICHAEL: Nomadic life? That sounds glamorous. Where have you been? How has travel shaped you as a person? What has travel taught you?

JOSE: My father was a diplomat. I guess most people would see it as glamorous and there is some truth to that of course, plus there are many positive qualities you develop when jumping from country to country and from culture to culture. But for a child growing up the other side of the coin can be daunting. Constant change and starting over from scratch just when you reach the point where you're about to bask in the light at the end of the tunnel; unlearning and relearning the dos and don'ts, the languages, the renewed feeling of helplessness and humiliation at each new school; the making of new friends only to lose them. It was actually more striving to stay afloat than fun and games, but somehow you discover you come equipped to deal with what comes your way and you just get on with Life ASAP. You learn resilience, humility, the realization that compromise is not necessarily a bad thing, that you need to shed some of the old to make way

for the new, and for my part, I became hooked on discovering as much of the planet as I possibly can... a very real addiction.

Childhood was scattered all over southern and eastern Africa with an in-between spell in NYC where I first learnt English; adolescence was Europe with a year as an exchange student in the US, again, where I first started to paint at the age of 18; University started out in Brussels and ended in Portugal where I painted more than I studied and dropped out of Law School after being told that a part-time job I had with a Law firm in London would not help my grades. That's when I decided to take the plunge, change the course of my life, review my priorities and try to make it as an artist. I even took care of marrying a girl who had nothing to do with the foreign service and who was happy to stay in Portugal, until one day, in an ironic twist of fate, she was offered a job with the German foreign service and off we went to Berlin followed by a series of Asian postings, before returning to Germany last year. My addiction is pretty much alive.

How did this shape who I am or what has it taught me? I wouldn't even know where to start. For a long time I believed I had learnt nothing useful other than getting on with Life ASAP. And for a long time I didn't even give it much thought; the fulfillment of being able to live from my painting was enough to keep me going. But lately I've been giving it more thought. There's this increasing feeling that I belong nowhere – that I'm a stranger even in my own country where I wasn't even born and lived less than a third of my life – but at the same time I feel at home everywhere... Now Here. That's what I cherish most, I guess, the ability to adapt and to make the most of things no matter what.

MICHAEL: Very interesting. And so, when and how did you become an artist? How has travel influenced and inspired your work?

JOSE: I started to paint around 1976. I was an exchange student in the US at the time and was friends with the Art teacher at school, Ed Nowak. I didn't take art, but he would sometimes ask me to join his class in my free periods and we'd talk philosophy and politics back home where there had been a revolution. That's where I caught the "bug". I painted things from memory, mostly landscapes. I remember doing a desert scene and one of the river Seine with Notre Dame in the background. But it wasn't serious and I never dreamt of becoming an artist. And then there was the exhibition I went to – several times – of René Magritte, in Brussels, that completely set me off the tracks... but the train didn't derail until 1985 when it became clear that neither Law nor Diplomacy were for me and all I had to fall back on were the paintings I had accumulated over the years and everybody seemed to want. I took part in a collective show and sold every single one and thought to myself 'Well, I guess this could work'. I started visiting artists in their studios, attending workshops, picking up a few things here and there... I knew I didn't want an Art degree, I wanted to be self-taught with the advice of artists I looked up to.

I decided early on that landscapes and the things I'd seen on my travels were the main input. I enjoyed creating a sort of "refuge" or "icon" for myself using the information I collected in notebooks. I discovered, too, that these refuges were not exclusively mine, that others were drawn to them and were eager to have them. The 80's and 90's were good years, I was able to make keep my head above the water. Over time the landscapes turned inwards, they stopped being representational or even figurative and became more and more abstract. This inward shift revealed new trails and I traveled often to India and the Tibetan plateau for inspiration and to expose myself to new ideas and possibilities, especially for a better understanding of our inner dimensions and workings.

MICHAEL: It's interesting that you didn't go into diplomacy given all of your travels. However, do you think diplomacy plays a role at all in your work?

JOSE: It was a long struggle with myself and there was some measure of defiance, not so much of my parents who never really pushed me into following in my father's footsteps, but defiance of Fate. I had this uneasy feeling that I wasn't really in control, that things fell into place in life despite myself. What do you do when everything has been given you and you know the path you're on is safe and rewarding but then you discover this other door that leads down another path, unknown and exciting? Many people tried to convince me that it was possible to do both, but in either case I would have never been happy with 50%. Painting was not a hobby, I needed the full 100, I wanted to be an artist even if it meant having to look for a job doing other things at those times when the paintings didn't help pay the bills.

I cut with the path of diplomacy altogether. The last thing I wanted to become was one of those diplomat's children who believe they have a say in things because they'd lived the life. Even now that my wife has joined the foreign service I am reserved and perfectly happy to take the back seat. Obviously, I have opinions and I may voice them now and again privately, but never socially. My work is in the studio, and even when I am not in the studio my life and my mind are completely absorbed in Art; either making it, or researching for it or working to make it seen.

But it is interesting that you should ask if diplomacy plays a role in it at all. I thought not. The method and the process in Art is completely different – there has to be flow and not restraint; rules have to be broken, things pushed beyond their limits; there ought to be no compromise; and the end result should ultimately be of interest and utility to the artist alone. If others see utility and find interest in the work that is an altogether different matter, which should not bother the artist and only reveals that they are both on a similar wavelength. No diplomatic negotiation would ever survive such an approach. But not so long ago a French diplomat told me that diplomats and artists belong together, that we are of the same stock so to speak, that in days

gone by, we frequented the same cafes, the same circles and were keen to be seen mingling at parties. And then there is no escaping the fact that at the end of the day, when trade agreements and balance of payments have had their day, Art and Culture and Science remain a Nation's greatest wealth, a mirror of it's achievements projected unto eternity. So I guess, yes, when I am at an opening of my work a part of me is remotely mindful that I represent my country in some small measure.

MICHAEL: Back to your work. Your paintings really make me think about those Rorschach tests that we're supposed to look at so that psychiatrists can figure out what's in our minds and thoughts. Do you see them this way?

JOSE: If my paintings come across that way, I guess I have achieved something of what I set out to do. My relationship to painting and Art in general has always been one of entering into a dialogue with the object and seeing what it reveals, of itself, about the artist and what he wants to tell us, but also of myself. Call them Rorschachs, mandalas, icons, whatever you will, I like the idea of them being a refuge wherein you can allow yourself to get lost in order to rediscover yourself again. For a long time in the 90's my paintings were unashamedly mandalas and even titled as such... there is no claim to originality here, Klee worked the theme, as did C. G. Jung and many, many others. For me it was an important process I felt I had to go through at the time. I have this romantic notion that when an artist works, he travels to his deepest and sometimes darkest reaches and returns to tell us something about the journey. A painting or work of Art is meaningful and acquires value when the "mapping" of the journey becomes meaningful to others... the rest – the market value – pales in comparison to this.

MICHAEL: Isn't it interesting how much a hold that deceased, famous artists still have on people today? What's it going to take for the general public to realize that there are SO many gifted, living artists like you out there? What needs to be done to inform the public about contemporary art and expand the audience?

JOSE: I think it all boils down to exposure and the kinds of impressions you are exposed to from as early an age as possible. If you think about it the hold the great masters and artists of the past have over us isn't so much due to the mechanisms of the art market but to inherent qualities we naturally respond to and how much exposure we have had to them. In the past such impressions were only (or more readily) accessible to the better off, but things have changed for the better over the past 50 years thanks in great measure to public museums and the availability of affordable prints, and especially in the last 15 with the advent of the internet and smart phone technology. Obviously art isn't meant to be

seen or experienced on a screen but the impression still passes, interest is aroused, curiosity grows, many are led to discover new interests, be it in a passive way and the desire to be in the proximity of such things, or in a more active way and the awakening and acceptance and confidence in their own creativity. Education, schools, should play a much larger role in promoting this exposure from a tender age. I don't know how things stand in the United States but in Europe the focus is exclusively on academic achievement and there is very little or no space for the creative dimension and the possibility of a more harmonious development of children and future responsible elements of society. Culture is something a child feeds on if he is lucky to have a family or friends who open that World up to him. A change won't happen overnight but investing in the promotion of the arts would certainly be a step in the right direction – not everyone will become an artist, but creativity is an asset in any field or endeavour.

And then there is the unfavorable, limiting, crippling action of the investment and fame-driven Art Market, which caters more to investors than to true Art-loving-collectors and promotes only the artists they believe may be the Next Big Thing – a situation that all too often leads to artists losing their connection with their deeper selves and to create things that scream out for attention but have little or no substance. Here too I think the internet is having a beneficial effect. Slowly but surely platforms are appearing that allow the artist to have greater control over what he wishes to create and to make his work visible to a growing audience independently of galleries, curators and critics. I am somehow confident that in the long run this parallel activity, which is enabling many artists to keep their heads above the water, will eventually lead to changes in what we call the Art Market and make it more democratic, lively and rich.

The Art Market mentality, the culture of fame and this fixation that you have to be a part of it – and that only what it shows is of any real value – is something that we have to learn to let go of to be able to look at the richness that you point at, Michael, and in which I am flattered to find myself included.

MICHAEL: Given all of that, how do you think mobile technology is affecting the audience for art? I mean, half the time these days, during my art trips in galleries and museums, I see people looking at their cell phones.

JOSE: It's all in the way you decide to use it, really. Many museums these days offer apps that provide a richer experience, and this, maybe, explains why visitors will check their phones. I believe the more access you have to information you need and want (and can digest) is a good thing. Personally I've only gotten a smart phone recently. At first I found it annoying – too many unnecessary gadgets and distractions, too much

in-touchness, loss of privacy and of the sense of space and time... – but then I learnt how to switch off notifications, delete or hide unwanted applications, mold it to my needs and my rhythm, and I find that it is a very welcome tool. I'm not sure how it affects the audience, but if I meet someone at an Art Fair or gallery, hand them my card and know that they can access my website on the spot and learn more about my work, that alone makes a world of difference. Visibility is key, and it is no longer achieved exclusively through the narrow filter of galleries. It's really up to the artist to make his online presence as appealing, wide-ranging and informative as possible to attract the attention of the public, of collectors and galleries who might be scouting for something new, beyond the beaten track, and create more opportunities for sales and growth.

MICHAEL: Do you see any differences in how Europeans view contemporary art compared to Americans?

JOSE: I have to confess that I am not very familiar with how things are in the US, and I fear that I may have also lost touch with things in Europe having lived the past 15 years mostly in Asia. One of the things that struck me in Europe when I left was how the idea that painting was dead was in everyone's mouth and how there seemed to be a fear and almost shunning of colour. It was, I think, the height of the conceptual era...grey was the norm, as was shock (well beyond awakening), silliness (well beyond humour), and the need for a message more readily acceptable to the establishment rather than meaningful to the audience. It was a time when it was dangerous for your aspirations as an artist to even mention that you busied yourself with, and hoped to achieve, transcendence... something that lifted one up as opposed to enclosing you in an intellectual cycle or dragging things down even further (the deeper and the more cyclic the better). In Asia, especially in Malaysia and Japan, I discovered with great relief that painting was pretty much alive, that it was OK to want to create things that touch others in meaningful ways and not to simply go for the surprise effect regardless of content. Whether this will spill back into the West in the years to come is still to be seen but at least I feel more confident about traveling down that road... I found renewed fearlessness and joy.

MICHAEL: Finally Jose, Most people on the face of the Earth may not even visit an art gallery let alone buy art. Contemporary art isn't curing cancer or ending homelessness so what's the point of it?

JOSE: I believe strongly in a holistic approach to healing, and art does help in the process contrary to current populist beliefs. Terminal and advanced cases of certain diseases may require other, more incisive measures which can never be ruled out, but the effects of art should not be downplayed. Public Hospitals here in Germany have art in all the rooms, in waiting areas and along the corridors, it was a very pleasant surprise. Maybe there haven't been sufficient studies yet to get the message through but I believe that in the developed world (let's face it, it is a luxury only the developed world can afford) we are slowly getting there.

I have no doubt that exposure to art and a greater awakening to (and acceptance of) our creative nature can work wonders. And by this I don't mean that we should all become artists. Creativity manifests itself and is required in all areas of life, but society and the way we are brought up stifles this dimension within us at a very early stage and forces us to conform to rigid models. This is the cause of many tensions and imbalances which eventually trigger the disease but equally stand in the way of recovery.

And so, in answer to the first part of your question, maybe art should be made more public. Galleries and Museums have their function and are necessary but art shouldn't "Live" exclusively within their walls... it should be on people's paths to work, in underground stations like in Moscow, and Brussels and Lisbon, it should be out in the streets, in shopping malls like in Japan and Dubai. In Norway, for instance, all publicly funded buildings are required to incorporate a work by a Norwegian artist. This, and a greater focus on art education and creativity could perhaps help shape a more balanced environment, make people consider how their everyday life is enriched by the abundance of public art, to ask themselves different questions than the one's they usually consume themselves with, or simply escape the quagmire they feel their life has become... and, who knows, to even consider entering a gallery on their way home, or clicking more eagerly on that "send" button to finalize the purchase of a painting they saw online.

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