

TEMPLON



HERVÉ DI ROSA

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A Riveting Conversation with Hervé Di Rosa

Written By uzomah ugwu

Born in 1959, Hervé Di Rosa lives and works between Lisbon, Paris and Sète. A student at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, Hervé Di Rosa began selling his paintings in 1979. At just 20 years old, he had already exhibited in Paris, Amsterdam, and New York. In 1981, he co-founded the art movement Figuration Libre, named by the artist Ben. This group, which included Robert Combas, Rémi Blanchard, and François Boisrond, echoed other marginalized forms of international expressions, from Neo-expressionism and New Fauves in Germany to the Transavantgarde in Italy and even Bad Painting in the United States.

Since 1981, his work has appeared in over 200 solo exhibitions and is included in significant public and private collections in Europe, the USA, and Asia. Recent solo and group exhibitions in France include shows at La Maison Rouge, Paris (2016), La Piscine - Musée d'Art et d'Industrie André-Diligent, Roubaix (2018), Musée de Valence (2022) and Musée National d'Art Moderne - Centre Pompidou, Paris (2024). The Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée in Marseilles (MUCEM) will hold a solo exhibition in March 2025.

A pioneer and champion of the concept of "Modest Art," Di Rosa founded the Musée International des Arts Modestes (MIAM) in 2000 in Sète. The museum exhibits a wide range of artists from all over the world and creates shows that question the boundaries of contemporary art. Hervé Di Rosa has been a member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts since 2022.

I had the honor and pleasure of asking Hervé how his work has evolved, what his dream project would be, what art movement greatly influenced him, and so much more.

UZOMAH: How do you, as an artist, create change in a society that refuses to change, and what motivated you to take part in the movement "Figuration Libre"?

HERVÉ: In June of 81, the art critic Bernard Lamarche-Vadel organized a show in Paris with eight young painters: Robert Combas, François Boisrond, Rémi Blanchard, Hervé Di Rosa, Catherine Violette, Jean-Charles Blais, Jean-Michel Alberolla. At this time, contemporary art in France had totally excluded all the images and was dominated by conceptual art. The term « Figuration Libre » was invented a few months later by the artist Ben Vautier to define my work and the work of Robert Combas when he exhibited our paintings in his personal museum in Nice in the summer of 1981. At this time, we were 21 years old.

We were all painters, and our main influences were popular culture (Bande dessinée, punk culture, rock culture, B movies), which was totally despised by the art world at this time. Like punk musicians, we thought that we did not have to know how to paint to create artwork. Also, we used to work with poor raw materials: cardboard, bed sheets, paper, or jute bags were our main supports for paintings.

Figuration Libre (which originally included Rémi Blanchard, François Boisrond, Robert Combas, and me) lasted only a few years (until 1984), but the collective approach allowed us to be stronger to enter the art world. I think it was the last art collective in France. After that, each of us took his own path until now.

U: Since you first started creating art, how has your work evolved? In what ways have your skills and ideologies changed, and how has this evolution kept you engaged in your art?

H: After 45 years of work, I suppose there were several great changes in my work. Maybe I'm not the best judge to describe these changes.

The first important change in my approach happened at the end of the 80's. At that time, contemporary art was only in Europe and the USA - New York, where I had lived in 1983 and 1984. I felt the necessity to go out of my studio and visit other countries in order to study how they make images elsewhere. That is how I began my project « Around the World, » which led me to 18 different countries where I collaborated with the best artisans and discovered remarkable techniques. In this project, I made lacquers in Vietnam, Icones in Sofia, telephone cables weaving in Durban, South Africa, applied fabrics in Benin, fresco paintings in Corsica, life trees in Mexico, etc.

For me, the main interest of this process is the encounter and collaboration with other artists/artisans to produce mixed and hybrid artworks. Having a common project is the best way to communicate and learn about each other's cultures. Also, I brought all these techniques back to my studio in Paris; they fed me and my work.

I'm now in the 19th stage of this project, « Around the World, » working with ceramics in Lisbon, Portugal. Ceramics is so interesting, and it makes the junction between occidental and oriental cultures.

The present stage is Lisbon with the work on ceramics, a fascinating technique we share between Occident and Orient.

U: Having such a storied and remarkable career, what would be a dream project that you have not done and why?

H: Since I've been an artist, I always tried to make my dreams come true and did not wait for them to happen. That is how I created the Musée International des arts modestes in 2000 in the city of Sète, a little harbour on the Mediterranean Sea. It is the only museum in France which is directed by an artist. It has the support of the city of Sète, the Occitanie Region, and the Ministry of Culture. I created this museum in order to create the shows I could not see in other museums and show the artists I love that were not shown in other museums. I invite other artists to be curators, or I also curate shows, like the one which is on view now: « BEAUBADUGLY; the other story of painting .»

My dream right now is to seek and discover new techniques and be surprised by the human ability to create useless artifacts and beauty out of necessity.

U: Popular culture, animated films, and comic books have inspired your artistic path. How do you use these themes to address societal, cultural, and even political issues?

H: I don't use these techniques and culture directly in my work, but they are part of my educational background and are inherent in my visual culture. I come from a modest background, and I was influenced by comic books and encyclopedias long before I was able to see actual paintings and art in museums. I'm still interested and very much informed about popular culture. It is my natural language.

However I must say I'm the only contemporary artist who made a series of 26 animated films of 26 minutes. It is called « The René » and was produced by Canal Plus, JC Carrière, and released on French TV in 2000.

Things have changed a lot since my debut in art at the beginning of the 80s. It was then very difficult to talk about comics (bande dessinée) or rock culture, which were very much despised by the art world. With the Museum of Modest Art, which I founded in 2000, I tend to create exhibitions that rehabilitate marginal forms of art, including objects that come from modest and popular cultures.



HERVÉ DI ROSA TOTAL GOLD SHOW, 2024 Acrylique sur toile | Acrylic on canvas 170 x 207 cm – 67 x 81 1/2 in Courtoisie de l'artiste et Templon, Paris – Bruxelles – New York | Courtesy of the artist and Templon, Paris – Brussels – New York Photo © Tanguy Beurdeley

U: What, in your opinion, is an artist's most significant responsibility regarding their art's impact on society?

H: It is a very difficult question. I'm not an art historian, and I don't have the necessary perspective to judge this responsibility in our society and in the history of the XXth century where I come from.

For my part, I always felt that my responsibility was to allow people like my parents to enjoy art, even if they come from a modest origin and had not the chance to study at all. That is what I try to do with the exhibitions we create at the MIAM in Sète. I think contemporary art is accessible for novices but it depends very much on how it is presented and exhibited.

U: What is the importance of using art as a means of expressing oneself? How has art helped you find your authentic voice?

H: I cannot remember a time when I was not drawing. Since very young, I've been spending hours drawing and painting. When I was a young boy, I hated the boy's bands in my street who were playing football. My room was my refuge, and all I wanted to do was draw. Fifty-five years later, I paint every day. It is very rare, but if I travel for a project or other reason and if I spend too many days without painting, I'm beginning to be sick. Painting is actually helping me to solve any other problems in my life.

U: Can you describe some traits that make a great artist? Can you give examples of living and dead artists with those traits and how they have profoundly influenced you and your work?

H: Great artists are characterized by their obstinacy, stubbornness, and persistence. They are always very humble people and show a permanent curiosity about the world and the arts in general.

U: Could you name an artistic movement or period that has greatly influenced you?

H: The main influence comes from Matisse first, then the expressionist Soutine and Beckmann. Then it was Jean Dubuffet and the « art brut », but also the English Pop art with David Hockney and Peter Blake. But today, the strongest influences on me are 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries painters like Jerome Bosch Paolo Uccello or Jan Van Eyck. Actually, all the images and painters, even the bad paintings and bad pictures, are influencing me.

U: "Idols and Treasures" is your most recent exhibition that explores your journey as a painter over the past five years; what drove your inspiration for this exhibition in terms of theme, selection of art, and what you wanted to present as a whole?

H: It is a special moment in my work when I brought back to my studio all the experiences I got in my nomad ateliers in the project « Around the World ». It is a synthesis and, at the same time, a mix of everything. At least, that's what I'm trying to do!

U: In this exhibition, you seem to be working with several different worlds at once. How do you juggle these different worlds, stories, and characters?

H: I always created worlds and mythologies since I began to paint. I create universes and even multiverses where my characters travel and evolve. Each painting is a window towards these universes. My characters are always curious and naive; they are, at the same time, marveled and intrigued by the worlds they explore.



HERVÉ DI ROSA *SÉJOUR ARCHÉOLOGIQUE*, 2024 Acrylique sur toile | Acrylic on canvas 153.5 × 130 cm — 60 1/2 × 51 1/4 in. Courtoisie de l'artiste et Templon, Paris – Bruxelles – New York | Courtesy of the artist and Templon, Paris – Brussels – New York Photo © Tanguy Beurdeley

U: How have travel and exploration shaped your own artistic identity?

H: My travels allowed me to meet the other ones and discover different manners of painting and sculpting. I enjoyed the geographic travel and discoveries, but I'm also passionate about time travels through art history. Nowadays, my favorite travel is to the Museum of Louvre.