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Nature and *Misterium* towards Culture: César Manrique on the idea of artistic creativity

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Abstract

The article refers to the issues surrounding ideas of art and the creativity in arts. I intend to illustrate such concerns by drawing on the example of the works of César Manrique. The following samples of his work show that the relationship between man and nature can reveal the problem of artistic creativity in a new cultural perspective. This article was written in scientific cooperation with the César Manrique Foundation (Lanzarote, Canary Islands) and is part of a research project conducted by the author and Mr. Wojciech Rubiś.

Keywords: *aesthetics, culture, César Manrique, art, painting*

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*However you behold it,
when a person is incapable of loving,
of fulfilling himself creatively,
he is under the aegis of destruction.¹*

César Manrique (1919–92) has grown in the Canary Islands to the stature of an art legend, a Spanish painter, architect, sculptor, and complete artist who combined art with life and nature. In this article a consideration will be presented on the ideas regarding artistic creation and art that emerge from Manrique's writings and creative work. The illustrations presented in the article derive from a publication issued by The César Manrique Foundation (<http://www.fcmanrique.org/>).² This article does not deal with the issue of the relation between Manrique and the history and architecture of Lanzarote. This is an important matter, but it has already been repeatedly explored in many valuable publications³. This text focuses on examples of Manrique's painting, because the philosophical idea of artistic creation in the fullest possible way is most visible in his painting.

Many of the important publications devoted to the work and life of César Manrique emphasise his strong ties to the island of Lanzarote, which cannot be overestimated. On Lanzarote there are a large number of works (sculptures, installations, etc.) in public places, as well as many paintings in the private collections of the island's residents. This article – for formal reasons – changes the way we look at Manrique's painting slightly, without undermining his ties to Lanzarote. The analysis applied here revolves around the construction of the image; here, the area of interest is not the setting from which the work emerged but the the colouristic or formal composition enclosed within the frame. From the image, patches of colour, structure, texture, and methods of applying paint emerge, which remove it from its historical and cultural context, enabling a purely artistic, formal analysis. Nevertheless,

¹ F. G. Aguilera, *César Manrique en sus palabras* [*César Manrique in his own words*], p. 41.

² It is very important to thank the César Manrique Foundation and its director, Mr Fernando Gómez Aguilera, for their kind permission to publish the photos reproduced here and for substantive assistance in the research project "César Manrique: transcultural art and fusion in art" funded by the Department of Philosophy at the Jagiellonian University.

³ See: J. Maderuelo, *Jameos del Agua*; L. Santana, *Timanfaya. Restaurante El Diablo*; F. Galante, *Mirador del Río*; J. Dembosz, *Fenomen César Manrique. Życie w harmonii z tradycją i naturą*, "Wiadomości ASP" 71, 2015, pp. 36–51.



we will return to culture when we speak of the arts and of what art, by its very nature, should express. In other words, we show that the essence and content of a work of art, and thus its cultural sense, may derive not only from its culture and historical background per se (which, after all, traps us in a vicious circle) but also from a purely formal analysis of its content.

César Manrique is remembered as a secretive individual, one who, especially in his younger years, commented only sporadically on his creative work. His personality was shaped against the background of his war experience,⁴ among others. However, in his later years, his written thoughts and observations became free and expressive. Of course, it was not only the Spanish abstractionists, from whom Manrique originates, who reacted to the upheavals of war – the canvas on which trends such as *Art Informel*, tachisme, abstract expressionism, lyrical abstractionism, new figurativism, and others also developed. In all of these currents there are works whose imagistic vocabulary refers to the tragedy of the Second World War.⁵ Surely a very significant part was played by individual artistic inspirations; Mariano Navarro, an expert on Manrique's oeuvre, cites the work of Mondrian, Picasso, Braque, Modigliani and Matisse, as well as that of the lesser-known artist Pancho Lasso. It was while studying art in Madrid in the years 1945-50, and during subsequent trips to Paris and New York, that Manrique encountered their work.

César Manrique's writings, diaries and letters are of great poetic and philosophical value. In all of these reflections, Manrique takes the reader into the world of nature and art which, together, create and refine the human spirit. He also encourages the abandonment of the academic form, surrendering to the delights of reflection, its source being the beauty of the world of the senses.⁶ The language of the artist is filled with desire and eagerness to get to the essence of things, guided by the idea of truth. Here, reflection and art are food for thought – for thoughtful people. Fernando Gómez Aguilera, Director of Fundación César Manrique and known expert on the works of Manrique, comments on Manrique's overall attitude:

Manrique saw and breathed in the inner music of his sense, the

⁴ Manrique served as a volunteer in General Franco's army during the Spanish Civil War. He returned to Lanzarote in 1939.

⁵ Cf. D. Ashton, *À Rebours: La rebellón informalista*; see also: F. R. Gordillo, *César Manrique*, pp. 8-15.

⁶ Cf. F. G. Aguilera, *César Manrique en sus palabras*, p. 18.



resonance of fulfilled life experience, incommunicable, as is often the case. [...] When we consult them, we retrace the verbal itinerary of an artist who, in words, as a complement to his creative activity and to his attitudes, wanted to share with us some of the fire which warmed his blood and became, in his oeuvre, the incarnation of light.⁷

Manrique is sincere in touch with objective, this sincere has nothing to do with *confessio*, i.e. personal confession, but which expresses itself in openness to the truth, which can be expressed and realised in works of art. Thus, in his interpretations Aguilera also invokes the symbolism of light, which expresses the sincerity and truthfulness of the content, regardless of whether it flows from the artist or from nature or whether its source is some kind of religiosity. This light is clarity and non-secretiveness, *aletheia*. The invocation of music also made by Aguilera is a reference to a state of silence and meditation into which the artist enters, striving to hear the inner music of the world. This, then, is Pythagorean harmony, whence it is only a step away from *misterium*. These trends can be observed in the work of Manrique from his early years; in 1959, when he was forty years old, he created the *Pintura* cycles of numbered paintings. One may cite here *Pintura* no. 34 (Fig. 1) and *Pintura* no. 28 (Fig. 2).

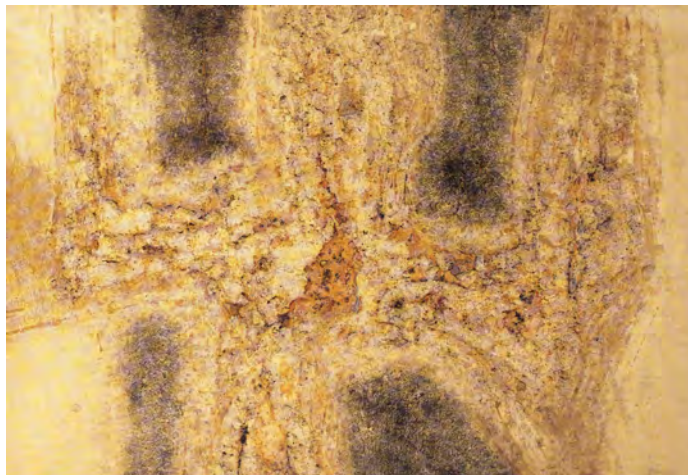


Figure 1: *Pintura* no. 34 (1959, mixed techniques on canvas, 81 × 116 cm, Collection of the César Manrique Foundation)

⁷ Ibidem, p. 20.



Figure 2: *Pintura* no 28 (1959, mixed techniques on canvas, 95 × 82 cm, private collection, Madrid)

The general trend in Manrique's *oeuvre* falls somewhere between optimism stemming from the idea of art and the great objectives defining it, and the consciousness of the finite nature of human life, which brings a note of nostalgia and tragedy to this concept. An example might be the work *Torso posible* (Fig. 3), in which a figure, splayed as if crucified, is depicted within a horizontal composition. It is transected from above with a bright vertical strip, which merely suggests widely extended male arms. The vertical strip may symbolise the spinal column or part of the cross. In this work, as in many other paintings by Manrique, his method of applying paint merits special attention. The artist repeatedly experimented with this technique (particularly recognisable in his works in cycles, beginning in the fifties); the density of the thickly applied paint actually resembles petrified or still-molten lava, or, at times, the structure of volcanic or fossilised rock. The weight of the paint

on the painting is perceptible; its substance completely fills the canvas; yet this does not translate into heaviness of the image itself – Manrique introduces contrasts with white and yellow flashes, “partitions” the image, and uses shades of red, blue and golden brown that are typical of his work. The images are always perfectly balanced compositionally and the weight of the paint is relieved as well by his contoured technique.



Figure 3: *Torso posible* (1975, mixed techniques on canvas, 85 × 100 cm, private collection, Gran Canaria)

Another example is *Solo en arena negra* (Fig. 4), maintaining a similar dark colour scheme, with no elements of red. Thus, it refers somehow to the symbolism of earth, rather than that of blood as life. This is suggested by the title, which translates as “only black sand”, with the “black” referring to the background of the image; a depiction suggesting a skull, spine, ribs and pelvis is placed in the central part. Thus arranged, the composition is based on two areas of sandy yellow closing off the image from the left and right (perhaps representing the wall of a coffin or some kind of sarcophagus). This is a clear representation of man’s belonging to nature, in life and after death: “[...] I had a sense of belonging”, writes Manrique, “of being absolutely one with Nature. That sensation marked me for the rest of my life”.⁸

⁸ César Manrique, in: “Diario de Avisos”, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 2 December 1979.



Figure 4: *Solo en arena negra* (1976, mixed techniques on canvas, 200 × 165 cm, private collection, Huesca)

In Manrique's work, limitations arising from consciousness of the finite nature of life are transformed into strength, since they enable a call for haste. It seems that Manrique reiterates his plea for a conscious, intense and sensual life; he writes in one of his notes "[T]he awareness of the miracle of life and its brevity have made me see clearly that we are impoverished by the tragic sentiment of our existence".⁹ Although explicit tragedy can be seen in Manrique's work, it does not assume the character of, for example, typical twentieth-century European existentialism. The extremely powerful fusion with nature that represents and reproduces the very order of things enables him to distance himself from individual experience of the twists and turns

⁹ F. G. Aguilera, *César Manrique en sus palabras*, p. 41.

of life, which would then bear the stigma of subjectivity and perhaps trivialise the philosophical message of his art. Existence and death are the experience of the order of the world rather than individual tragedy: "Death seems a marvel to me; to know that I am going to die enables me to create the moment. It is like a pastime because I abandon the responsibility of carrying on with existence, knowing that, at any given moment, I will vanish".¹⁰ This approach to the questions of life and individuality brings aesthetic relief to his art and serves as a source of joyful contemplation and exaltation of the order of the world; it gives the impression of being anchored in the world, along with a sense of security.

One can rightly emphasise that Manrique, in presenting a new aesthetic, creates at the same time a moral concept, since beauty, in his opinion, finds its justification in the good, which results from human nature; accordingly, correct, reformed aesthetics will be engaged with nature, thus enabling art to become a metaphor for nature.¹¹ Manrique says simply: do good – which means: give happiness.

Nature

The art of César Manrique plays a symbolic role that portrays the rhythm of nature; this rhythm can be read from his art. It is filled with enthusiasm, but also with fluidity and etherealness. Nature was undoubtedly the artist's major object of interest for years; it might be said that it was not from himself but from nature that he learned who he was. Deepening his relationship and bond with nature was the aim of his creative activity. Nature also suggested the ultimate principles of beauty, form and harmony, which become known along the path of transcendence toward the universe and universality. As an example of the implementation of these principles, the works (not shown in this article) *Fósil no 3* and *Fósil no 5* (both 1987, mixed techniques on canvas) may serve. Both works are composed around a horizontal axis; the colours black and grey, with a golden-bronze skeleton, perhaps that of a fish (*fósil* = fossil), come into play here. In the latter work, the colour scheme is enriched with blue that brightens the whole painting (this blue is typical of Manrique's work; it can be encountered in another work presented in this article). The image *Calor de la Tierra* (1992, mixed techniques on canvas) is

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 66.

¹¹ Cf. F. Galante, *Mirador Del Río*, p. 26.



also worthy of note, a late work of Manrique's in which he returns to the previously greatly beloved and frequently deployed shades of hot, intense red. The title translates as "Heat of the earth" and, in fact, the composition, into which elements of purple and pink have been incorporated, creates an impression of a pulsating, living space. The surface of the painting is coarse, rough and uneven, reminiscent of volcanic rock, or in some places sand or stones. In Manrique's abstract painting, the colour scheme, texture and surface of his paintings almost always refer to the nature characteristic of the Canary Islands.

Like many transcendentalists, César Manrique treated nature as a source of mystical experience.¹² The artist wrote, for example: "[...] the Atlantic, my true master, a supreme, constant source of enthusiasm, passion and freedom",¹³ and to many of his works he gave titles referring to characteristic places on Lanzarote.¹⁴ It seems that the mystical experience referred to here takes as its subject a pantheistic god which manifests itself in human existence, in animistic forms of life, in the world's flora and fauna. This appears particularly in painting, whose meaning differs, in terms of religious and emotional involvement, from the other art forms practiced by Manrique, i.e. murals (often created for restaurants, hotels, etc.), sculpture (in which the strong influence of modernism was preserved, and which never completely made the transition to abstractionism, as occurred with his painting), and architecture. Canvas and paint were for Manrique the medium for the most intimate, metaphysical and personal expression. Here Manrique also appears as an absolutely mature artist, conscious of his goals and intentions.

Without a doubt, Manrique is a philosophical objectivist; perhaps it is even his departure from subjectivism and relativism that enables the artist to embrace the role of interpreter of nature and, in relation to people, of a guide and therapist: "Art today is an anthropological-human issue. APPLY ART TO LIFE. I have repeated this time and time again".¹⁵ For Manrique, to follow the right path means to proceed according to his own nature, which has many facets and aspects. One can see in his paintings numerous references not only to the amazing natural beauty of the Canary Islands, but also to sensuality and human nature: passionate figures, phallic shapes, ex-

¹² Ibidem, p. 17.

¹³ F. G. Aguilera, *César Manrique en sus palabras*, p. 45.

¹⁴ Cf. M. Navarro, *César Manrique*, p. 191.

¹⁵ F. G. Aguilera, *César Manrique en sus palabras*, p. 71.



uberant and expressive brush strokes, abstract compositions referring to the symbolism of physical love, sexuality and fertility. Manrique comments on this himself, writing: “On Lanzarote, we have worked with utter devotion, in close contact with its geology, understanding its composition and its volcanic essence, achieving the miracle of a new aesthetics, to create a greater capacity for art and integrate all its facets into an all-embracing symbiosis, which I have described as: LIFE-MAN-ART”.¹⁶

Misterium

In the beginning there was fire, from which everything that exists derives – these famous words of the pre-Socratic natural philosophers can also be attributed to Manrique.¹⁷ They offer a good clue to the interpretation of the artist’s works, since here we also find ourselves in a natural, fiery element, in geology, and hidden in the rocky cover of terrestrial volcanic lava, the real texture of his painting. Such an interest in geology is also confirmed very clearly by Manrique when he says, “All my painting is, essentially, volcanology and geology”.¹⁸

Let us consider the work *Gabarro* (Fig. 5), which depicts, in distinctive dark colours, a crab. Here again, Manrique divides the plane of the image into two parts by means of a horizontal axis, the upper part filled with red which darkens near the animal’s head. This is the red of, not a warm sun, but the hot sun of the desert, intense and fiery, a light orange shade of red. In this presentation there are no cold colours, such as white or blue, which would neutralise this red. The image is hot and inflamed. The lower half maintains a tone of warm dark brown, possibly volcanic rock, but not damp ground, while the red of the sky appears in opposition to this. The animal, depicted in lighter colours, stands between heaven and earth fending off, on both sides, weight, hardness, roughness and heat – the very elements that create it, but which also threaten its existence, elements which it must fight against. In the upper part of the image the fragmented carapace of the crab obscures the red of the sky with pale spots. Here and there the colours yellow and green shine around the animal’s body, a sign of biological life. The impression

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 114

¹⁷ Cited by Fernando Castro Borrego in: F. C. Borrego, *Preformational stages in César Manrique’s latter production* [in:] *César Manrique. Pintura*, p. 195.

¹⁸ Cf. F. G. Aguilera, *César Manrique en sus palabras*, No. 78, p. 88.



evoked by this work is also illustrated Manrique's words: "On my canvases, I am always interested in abstraction as a process of recreation of the soil we tread, its texture, its strength, its somber chromatism. I then lose myself in the revelation of life embedded in the earth, its decomposition, and its death, concluding the earthly cycle".¹⁹



Figure 5: *Gabarro* (1979, mixed techniques on canvas, 98 × 130 cm, private collection, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria)

Let us experience the harmony of the world in the material unity of animate and inanimate things. Let us consider the work *Dumetorum* (Fig. 6). In it, as in the previous image, three basic warm shades are mixed – a dark burgundy transgressing into a somewhat rusty brown; a lightened ochre and a honey-golden hue associated with an animistic figure. On the edges of the composition play uniform, reciprocally contrasting colours; the centre is crossed by the animal's body and joints (seen at a well-defined abdomen, extremities and a head with eyes). As in many of Manrique's paintings, here too the animal's body is painted with the same clarity and expression as the earth, but it can be seen that its form was composed by means of explicit fragmentation, whereby the artist was able to specify parts of the body.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 70.



Figure 6: *Dumetorum* (1980, mixed techniques on canvas, 64 × 80 cm, private collection, Tenerife)

However, maintenance of the same technique gives a similar roughness and texture to the painting's surface. This indicates the unity of matter and the common origin of all elements. The background of the painting – that is, the inanimate world – is determined by the origin of the animal. This is confirmed by the composition of the form of the animal with the colours of the background – metaphorically, taking material from inanimate nature. In other words, evolution produces complex organisms, but it uses the same matter and elements that build the inanimate world “in the background”. This statement is enriched and confirmed by the words of Manrique, who writes:

I want to be absolutely clear about my way of feeling and how I proceed with my life, because I think it could help all who work within a dimension of freedom, a healthy and constructive concept of existence; and also defend this planet which Fortune has seen fit to make our abode. I hope that my work may be instructive, showing my respect for every part of the earth, with its own materials and tradition, while adding only the best part of progress, without breaking the harmony of the place; applying all sensitivity and talent to every possible area where art can intervene, in all that art can conjure as a dream.²⁰

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 94.

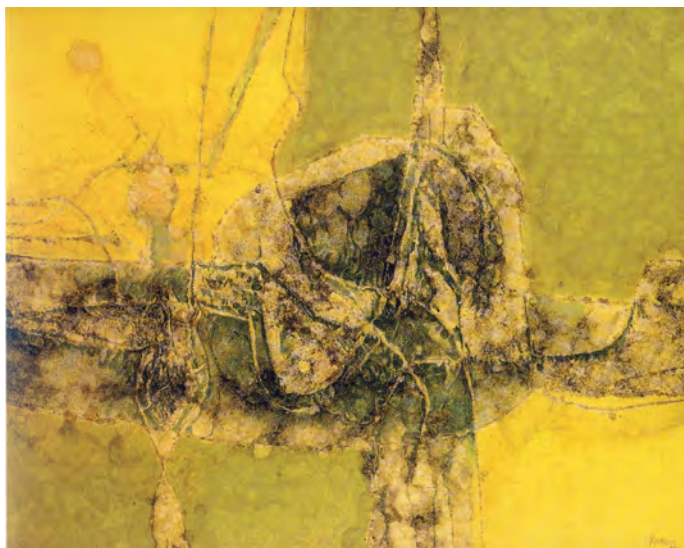


Figure 7: *Mojado* (1980, mixed techniques on canvas, 100 × 81 cm, Colección Testimoni, Obra Social de la Caixa de Pensiones)

It is possible to draw harmony from the world, harmony which can become a source of joy and peace. The aesthetic contemplation of works in which the artist managed to penetrate the spirit of nature, to somehow disrupt the rhythm of the world, provokes aesthetic delight and can serve as an object of philosophical satisfaction. Philosophy is meant to be a source of joy, joy that gives us an awareness of who we are. To a great extent precisely such a philosophy and such art are necessary as “a cure for the soul”. The desires, needs and destiny of man are combined here in the act of creation, and acceptance of them ought to be a source of joy and happiness. Manrique writes, “I want to extract harmony from the earth to unify it with my feeling of art”.²¹

Such a creation is the work *Mojado* (Fig. 7) (*mojado* means “wet”). Our interpretive path is confirmed here – greens, juicy yellows, fawn browns, combined with moisture, offer a symbol of biological life. In the picture there are no clear animal forms; perhaps plants or some kind of growth are represented; but this is lively, deliquescent nature. Manrique applies his typical complication of forms in the central part of the work, leaving pure colours at the edges of the painting. The image is luscious, energetic, lively and fresh.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 105.

In it, water is the source of fertile, life-giving forces; it is the grace to which the living creatures of Nature adhere.

Creation – the end

Manrique wrote in one of his notes: “My paintings and constant work at my studio, envisaging possible Utopia, satisfy my soul [...]”.²² Creativity, creation, painting, art, all constitute a space of freedom of the spirit. Among palettes, paints and canvases, the artist attains harmony, which turns out to be identical with the order of the world. Manrique does not write about God, but about man and nature, and his art concerns them. Tradition, culture and spirit constitute value. Renewal, giving birth, breathing, life, death, the dynamics of fauna and flora – these constitute value. Beyond them, there is love, trust, solidarity, good ...

The sense of these words recalls the epigram at the head of this article, where Manrique writes that if one cannot love and create, he will destroy. In nature there is no stillness, and if our moral laws are to derive from its principles, in the moral space of humans there can be no neutral attitudes. All people are called to this: to do good, to evoke joy, to create and participate in the axiological community of thinking people. Yet, in this system of ethics there is no need to call on God – there is human face to face with human, and duty, which results from their co-existence.

There is no need for God to exist; it is Nature, a force whose creative power calls forth life and art in their mutual persistence. There is also the human being face to face with Nature, the human being like a grain of sand in the cosmos. “I also feel”, writes Manrique “that very often, I do not actually do anything, that it is dictated to me, that there is something mysterious. At times, I cannot imagine how I was able to resolve that colour, that manner of distributing form. There is a magic message which is dictating what I have to do and which then I forget; it is not me, it is a different energy”.²³

²² Ibidem, p. 69.

²³ Ibidem, p. 74.



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