

# AFRICAN PERCEPTIONS OF AN ARGENTINE MASTER

by Annick Sanjurjo Casciero

Translated by Kathy A. Ogle

For more than forty years, Argentine artist Eduardo Mac Entyre has been creating a universe of curved lines, circles, and circumferences. On a solid—usually dark—background, they meet and separate, open and close, overlap, and move away from each other, or crash together with a sudden impact that produces its own movement and luminous energy. The lines might grow in volume or acquire more curves, but they still glide over the solid background, cross each other, and weave together, carrying a dynamic all their own. Each composition is a universe whose energy needs are supplied by its own orderly geometry. It is also a self-sufficient universe in terms of content, since it doesn't attempt to imitate external reality, tell a story, or reproduce a scene from real life. It is a reflection of a kind of intellectual contemplation that evokes and leads the way to spirituality.

Art conceived in this way is intelligent action complemented by the sensitivity of the artist. It is the search for beauty for beauty's sake, the search for a new reality with its own forms and colors. It "leaves the observer free to work actively with these elements using his own imagination," says Mac Entyre, co-founder in 1960 of the Arte Generativo movement. "That's when art, which is shaped with the beautiful power of human freedom, together with our sensitivity and our intelligence, can—with a power that is similar to that of nature itself—give birth to manifestations of life, vibration, beauty and harmony, power and energy, simply by combining the most simple—and therefore the purest—forms."

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Fertilidad marka, 1999, acrylic on canvas, right, captures the spiritual essence of the Marka marionette, a nonarticulated wooden female torso from Mali, below, that is adhered to a stick and manipulated by puppeteers during rituals



Adhering to these basic artistic principles, Mac Entyre has responded to a challenge to enter a world very different from his own, the world of black African ancestral culture. He does this by transferring to his paintings the images that flow from pieces of his rich collection of African art—masks, ritual statuettes, male and female figures, fetishes, doors, and other objects. "What interested me was their form," says Mac Entyre, who has managed to capture their most essential elements. But it wasn't just a matter of extracting forms; he also had to penetrate their mystery and understand their reason for being, their essence.



In this way he began to build a world that was different, but intimately connected to, that of the figures before him. Faithful to his style of pure and simple abstract geometry, he didn't reproduce the figure—a fetish, mask, or statuette—just as it was; he gave it another dimension. He didn't create the visible; he created the invisible—the spell, the magic that was symbolically attributed to it in its original culture.





*Fertilidad marka* (Marka Fertility), for example, is made with those same generative curves that are now the artist's trademark. Sometimes they are fine lines and sometimes they are thick ones. Located symmetrically in the upper center of the picture, the lines extend asymmetrically both to the right and to left at the bottom of the canvas. Naturally, this composition can be interpreted in different ways, but one explanation could be that energy is emanating from a swaying object. The actual marionette from Mali's Marka people is a woman's torso on a stick. Puppeteers make her move from right to left in ritual ceremonies or theater scenes. Mac Entyre has made an abstraction of the form, giving it the dynamic that is generated when the marionette is used in dances or tribal representations. In this way, he creates another dimension as he represents the motionless statue. He also infuses her with red and sensual forms that stand out over the dark brown background. Fine light-bluish-greenish curving lines are placed as if to indicate that the nourishing gift of the torso's full and rounded breasts, heavy with the seeds of fertility, is falling upon the earth. No matter how the work is interpreted, it is clear that the artist has been able to capture the hidden symbolism of the marionette. He has done so in his own language, but he has also adopted a color he hasn't used before—a deep dark brown that is clearly African.

Mac Entyre goes even further into his representation of the invisible when he gives expression to the spiritual symbolism

*In Imagenes urbanas Ndebele, acrylic on canvas, 2000, the artist demonstrates his ability to transmit the essence of ancient tribal objects to the geometric patterns of today's urban world*

of a mask, as he did with *Hechizos femeninos igbo* (Igbo Feminine Spells). The funeral masks of this Nigerian group depict the face of a young woman who has died. They are decorated with elaborate headdresses—antelope horns in this particular case—that highlight the physical beauty of the young woman while also containing a profound spiritual meaning. For Mac Entyre, the most relevant part of the mask is its spiritual message, and it is precisely this that he manages to capture once again through movement and color. The face of the mask is a large inverted triangle, drawn with slightly rounded lines, in the lower center of the canvas. From there, oval forms impelled by the soft suggestion of an ascending spiral move upwards until they disappear. It's as if a spiritual halo were wrapped around, and interwoven with, the horns of the headdress. The forms are maintained, but they have lost their rigidity, becoming ethereal forms that create their own space.

*With its ascending purple spirals, Hechizos femeninos igbo, far right, reflects the language of ancestral spirits that is captured in this maiden spirit mask of the Igbo in Nigeria, right. The elegant white mask symbolizes the physical and mental beauty of the deceased*

Mac Entyre communicates this to us in another color that is new for him: violet, whose softened tones contrast with the brightness of the canvas, forming shapes that suggest great serenity or a profound spiritual state as they rise in different planes.

The apparent ease with which Mac Entyre manages to transmit the essence of these ancient tribal objects to the modern and rapidly changing world of geometric suggestions should not deceive us. To make this transposition, he had to reinvent himself and reinvent the profoundly religious force behind the beliefs that operated in generally agricultural societies. And he had to make sure that neither the artist nor those societies lost their identity along the way. He had to look at each object with an analytical eye, suppress the superfluous, and pull out its hidden meaning.





"I had to clean all of the objects," he confesses. "I had to remove the nails and other such things and leave just the essential. . . . I would be looking at these images and suddenly I

would understand what one of them was telling me. . . . It's not about showing reality as it is, but rather to capture, for example, some lines, a color, a texture, and to start from there to create a new work." Since this meant he had to reinvent himself as a painter, he started to rummage through old drawers and files to rediscover techniques that he had used in his early years as an artist.

This is, for example, how *Magia del fetiche congo* (Magic of the Congo Fetish) came to be. The actual *nkisi nkondi* fetish that was the inspiration for this acrylic was ritually pierced with nails and other metals in order to release a magic substance that could be used to bring about reconciliation and other good things. In *Magia del fetiche congo*, Mac Entyre does not use thin curved lines or rounded forms that "generate power and energy." On the contrary, to preserve the meaning inherent in the fetish, he resorted to the straight line, which is more aggressive than the curve and creates the tension necessary to release the beneficent power con-

tained in the statuette. In the acrylic, the items that pierce are represented by small, fine, white triangles that are sharp like darts. The darts do not pierce, mutilate, or penetrate, but they are charged with a velocity and energy that—like a magic wand—breaks a body or a substance into multiple rectangles that are then set free and are able to realize their conciliatory or healing action. These dark red rectangles, distributed apparently at random over a dark background, create different planes, moved by the impact of the long white triangles. The painting suggests the precise moment in which the magic substance is activated to produce the desired change. For this work, Mac Entyre's palette also went through some changes. His colors, which before were light, brilliant, and lumi-

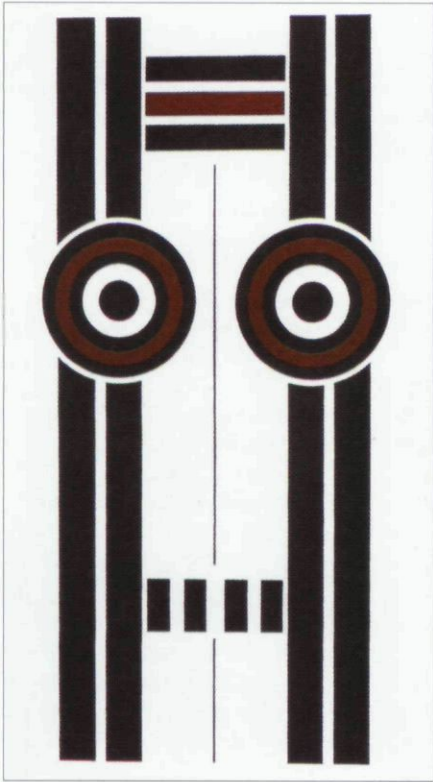
*Inspired by the nkisi nkondi from the Congo, far left, the artist uses sharp white triangular darts to release the magic substance that brings about change in Magia del fetiche congo, acrylic on canvas, 2001, left*

nous, were deepened to more intensely dark tones with a rich texture. Mac Entyre has used a new compositional element, the straight line, and colors that are new for him as well, but he has still given his work an inner power capable of transforming the stillness of the fetish into energy. And while the "action" develops within a harmonic cadence, this does not negate the incisive force that has brought it about.

"It is all generative art," the artist explains. "Art generates, just like life generates. My work hasn't changed; I continue to generate things, situations, questions; I continue to generate moods. Art, like life, is not static; it generates new forms, new considerations, new colors, and everything you do enriches the language of art."

During this entire process of re-creation, Mac Entyre did everything he could to surround himself with things related to black Africa. "I was looking at other work, consulting books," he says, "and I found interesting things there: a new spectrum, darker, more intense things. I added a blue or a violet to some, even when it wasn't there at first. I let myself be moved by what I was seeing, and at the same time I was creating. . . . These pieces interested me. I liked them a lot, so I got in deeper. I was even listening to African music. . . . I got into everything; African images, with their colors. The palette was a whole new range of colors for me. It was beautiful! So I started to use that palette, colors I hadn't used before."

Mac Entyre's various studies of the Bwa mask from Burkina Faso show once again how he successfully combines African patterns with his own creativity. The actual mask is a buffalo head with prominent eyes painted in black, white, and red concentric circles. His *Máscara Bwa* (Bwa Mask) serigraph depicts those eyes with a very simple geometric abstraction of the same form and color, but it highlights them even further by connecting them to thick black vertical lines that frame the face on each side over a completely white background. In this serigraph, the eyes appear to be ever-alert guardians of an entire culture. At other times, however—as in *Mirada Bwa* (Bwa Portrait) and *Abstracción Bwa*



(Bwa Abstraction)—they are blended into a strictly geometric pattern of straight lines and a few curves, which produce a strong kinetic effect when they meet at close angles. Merged in this way, they suggest constantly vigilant, but hidden, eyes that lie in wait for the presence of any threat that might endanger the ones that they protect. The placement of these lines creates a self-contained movement that both grows and dies within. It suggests intensity, a constant state of alert.

*Bwa masks like this head of a buffalo, top left, were traditionally carved by masters in remote villages of the Upper Volta and used in fertility rituals. In Máscara Bwa, 1999, serigraph, above left, Mac Entyre captures the power of the mask's eyes in geometric abstraction; in Abstracción Bwa, 2000, serigraph, above, and Mirada Bwa, 2001, acrylic and oil, top, straight lines and curves blend with kinetic force*

If we don't recognize the "generative" Mac Entyre in some of these works, the artist will be quick to correct us: "In my African work, I go from the figurative, which is what attracted me, to the abstract. I'm quite happy to cross that line. I don't have limits. I have discovered new colors, and I have rediscovered a number of techniques I used when I was twenty years old. It was very natural to take them up again and put them to use in these works."

It is evident that Mac Entyre's experience with African culture didn't mean renouncing his own principles. On the contrary,

each new pictorial experience seems to reaffirm his deep-seated confidence in generative art: "We started from this little spot, or this small straight line and we gave it movement. . . . We have generated movement. . . . We have made them move from one place to another, vibrate, spin. . . . We have identified them more with the present and the future. . . . They take on a new kind of life and a new identity in space."

For Mac Entyre, the word *style* means much more than the adoption of a certain kind of expression, whatever that may be. "Style is not a calligraphic affectation. It's a spiritual state. It is the human being and everything the human being does. What interests me is to be constantly in a state of fermentation. Everything I do is going to wear my personal seal, because this thing called style is in the spirit, in the ideas, in the feelings, and in all the senses. Everything one does

enriches the language of art, but one has to be sufficiently perceptive to be able to grasp what reality is offering us."

In this case, reality is a modern world that may be forgetting magic and the spell of its own mystery and spirituality. Eduardo Mac Entyre is recovering the meaning of things. He is infusing them with new life without distorting them. In fact, he has used existing elements to create a new world. ■

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