



Rik Lina working on BIRDSONG - studio Bellamystraat, Amsterdam 1998 (photo: Jan Giliam)

## BIRDSONG 1999

EXCERPTS OF MY DIARY - October 1998 - May 1999

It is striking how often I have been dreaming of birds lately. Good omens! But they also keep appearing in my automatic drawings; a signal that I should do something with them in my paintings. That's going to happen -- because I'm going to start working with oil paint again: ten canvases at a time. I am still busy stretching and preparing, semi-chalk ground on linen in all kinds of sizes, from 30x40 to a large canvas of 190x250 centimeters.

But first I have to finish another painting: "*Fish Fiesta*",

which I have been working on for more than a year, with its near fish curtain, stained glass atmosphere. I used to want to study stained glass, but training no longer exists... fortunately... because it seems a bit too kitschy for my way of working, just like enamel painting does.



FISH FIESTA 1998 - oil paint on linen - 110x100cm. (private collection Amsterdam)

I'm going back into the jungles, reviving memories of the rainforest of the Saban Elfin Forest, and of the island of Dominica where we were last! But over the past six months I have been mentally in China again, also because of a book about Gordon Onslow Ford that the Granell Foundation in Santiago de Compostela sent me. I do like his work very much, it has a direct approach to much Eastern art -- and this encouraged me to work again as I started to in the late 1950s: with ink, brushes and brushes, Chinese-style automatism. Every so often I feel the need to test my hand with oriental calligraphy again.



Rik Lina in the rainforest of Saba 1997 (photo: Jan Giliam)



RAINFOREST SABA 1998 - ink and wash on paper - 45x32cm.

Onslow Ford's statements about this, but especially those of the art historians who describe his work, seem rather vague to me. Years back, I was also working on calligraphy in the De

Kosmos meditation center; a striking way of expressing an essence that can also become quite superficial, as in: “OK - now another hundred” ...

Truthfully, though, I hadn't worked through it [calligraphy] enough, and those old Chinese masters such as Chu-Ta are unsurpassable. The vague side of things I mentioned became so distasteful to me at the time that I broke away from it for good. Standing with both feet on the ground is the attitude of the true Zen Buddhist. My meditation teacher Bruno Mertens also understood this and let me follow my own way, which brought me to the sea and its depths.



Gordon Onslow Ford with one of his paintings

Gordon Onslow Ford, friend of Roberto Matta, paints a spiritual starry sky evoked in a universal way. His signs resemble prehistoric icons or those of Pigmies or the Aborigines of Australia. How many times have I wished for and tried to achieve this simplicity? But that is over now. If I

want to achieve this kind of simplicity and direct spontaneity, it must arise naturally, as a tree grows. My path is much more complex than that of Ford's. The world he invented while searching was innate to me. There I left to create a universe of my own, which I then populated with everything I experienced during my adventures in wild nature before returning to the big complex world of the modern city. Yet nature remains my one and only great teacher.

Every time I roam around on a coral reef or in a rainforest I learn to see again. I am a viewer, a seer, but in a completely different way than theosophy, for instance, depicts it. I have no pretension to expressing the "truth" and I am not interested in whether my work is spiritual. I remain closer to Nescio's "little painter", who also had his theosophical reservations. I feel related to the Zen poets and painters, but in the way that Bert Schierbeek was talking about. I will never forget his lessons in 1964 at the academy: that our world, the cosmos, literature, creation, human endeavor, is a sphere in which all lines, points and circles touch each other, once and nowhere and everywhere. As Lao-Tze so aptly says: "The perfect square seems to be corner-less".



After writing down these reflections, I get to work.

1: Preparing the paint for the under-paintings: red earth, cadmium yellow and violet - driven with linseed oil and diluted with turpentine.



sketch with charcoal

2: A quick sketch of a leaf of the Elephant Ear plant, and a framework of intersecting diagonals.

3: A number of dried plants and cut-out shapes are placed over the canvas lying on the ground. Some I throw on haphazardly, others I place exactly at a certain place on the intersection of the diagonals. This diagram is a magic square; in this case, the Vèvè of the Vodou Spirit Ayizan.



plants and stencils

4: I spray the paint over it with the fixing syringe to create an all- over light/dark distribution. This is the starting point. A partly coincidental, partly consciously manipulated performance quickly came about automatically.

5: The canvas, placed upright, is treated with a cloth soaked in turpentine. I am guided by the performance and sudden insights that give it more shape. The canvas already “dictates” to me what it wants to look like.



underpainting

The first draft is now ready and I put the canvas away to let it dry for a few days. It has become very alive with all kinds of shapes and forms, dancing and jumping in a stream of light and dark spots, firmly held together by the framework and the diagram. A kind of mountain ridge formed along the upper edge, so it becomes a transparent mountain, populated with a multitude of organic shapes. A title suggests itself: “Mont Analogue” after the book by René Daumal. Just when I'm done, Elizé comes by and is surprised by this new large canvas. I should make more in this size... unfortunately I don't have the money for a roll of linen.

November - a few weeks later. The most important work: pulling the drawing out of the plan, all short lines extended, the necessary intersections of the diagram reinforced and immediately hidden, because diagonals often work better if



they remain barely visible and work so firmly within the drawing. In this way, all kinds of leaf structures and birds appear because their shapes are similar. The holes in the larger leaves become whizzing ovals. On the left a tree covered by foliage appears against the mountain ridge; on the right all kinds of abstract insect-like stripes. I can feel the rays from a large branch of leaves in the center of the canvas envelope the entire canvas: an essentially placed beam of rays, exactly over the golden section line, that holds the whole thing firmly together.

This drawing in paint, red earth, violet and zinc white is finished. With a little correction it would make a good drawing-painting on its own. But I'm not satisfied with that. It clearly calls for color. Looking at the work I notice that countless bird heads appear – and disappear - it's as if I know I am drawing in the Elfin Forest! Or perhaps under the influence of Messian's music on the radio? A new title presents itself: “*Birdsong*” – a much better title than the rather solemn “Mont Analogue”...



AYIZAN(Mantis) 1998 -oil paint on linen - 30x40cm.(private collection Figueira da Foz, Portugal)



THE SECRET LIFE OF PLANTS 1998 - oil paint on linen - 116x89cm.  
PALM BIRDS 1998 - oil paint on linen - 85x65cm.

One Month later. After a full week of work, the new canvas is drying and in between I continue working on the smaller studies, all at the same time. No preliminary studies, rather side studies or post-studies. I also create many automatic drawings, marginal sketches, which help to evoke and direct the right energy into the right channels within the paintings. All canvases help define each other. Three of the other canvases are already finished: *“Palm Birds”*, *“Ayizan”* and *“The Secret Life of Plants”*, the title of the last I also gave to the series of drawings I mentioned. Here all the swinging lines and paint spots seem to be in the right place. A rotating spatial vegetable tangle. This is how the other large canvas also should look: a chaotic whole that has grown just like that and only like that -- exactly how the real jungle grows; complicated, but natural.



SERPENT SUN TRIPTYCH 1994 - Dawn 200x160cm. - The Feeding 200x200cm. - Twilight 200x160cm.

The large canvas is drying, it is “waiting” and I have to wait, too, I can't continue working on it because it doesn't give me the right signs yet. I don't see an entrance yet to penetrate. In the past, impatiently, I would have continued with it in an automatic way, like with a machete! I don't do that anymore and focus my energy on the other canvases. I taught myself this way of working in 1993 with the large triptych “*Serpent Sun*”. That was the first time I worked with a number of small canvases next to it. Not searching in the large work, but in the smaller ones together with countless drawings in the margins. In this way I was able to complete a large work quickly and reliably. I did what I wanted in the small canvases and the large canvas then dictated to me what it would look like. Then I worked on it for more than a year, slowly over long intervals, also because of the technique: tempera under-paintings finish with many layers of oil paint.

This time I want to work faster: a design with thinned layers of oil paint on the semi-chalk ground and later finished with many glazes of oil paint. In this way I force myself to limit automatism by working more systematically, although

important decisions still arise automatically - intuitively - on behalf of the canvas itself. The smaller work occasionally becomes very detailed as if finely rendered; a kind of painting I hate... This is a new way of working for me, a challenge that I am doing wonderfully well. A few months on, spring has come, *“Birdsong”* is finished and is drying. It feels like summer and all the windows are wide open. The two Red Banded Parakeets that live in the gutter fly in to inspect the painting, make a circle along the canvas and fly away. Disappointed? In this jungle of paint? I certainly am not.

(translation Allan Graubard)



BIRDSONG 1999 - oil paint on linen - 190x250cm.

DRAWINGS 1989:



RAINFOREST 1989 - ink on paper - 45x60cm.



CARIB GHOST ROCK 1989 - ink and wash on Tyvek - 65x50cm.



CLOUD ROOTS 1989 - ink and wash on paper - 30x45cm.



CLOUD MOUNTAIN 1989 - ink on Tibetan Loktha paper - 56x78cm,.



JUNGLE SONG 1989 - ink on Tibetan Loktha paper - 225x155cm.



CANOPY 1989 - ink and graphite frottage on paper - 45x32cm.