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‘Ernest Mancoba’

By Barry Schwabsky



The first North American solo exhibition of Ernest Mancoba included four small paintings ranging in date from 1958 to 1985 (one is undated) and some twenty works on paper (many of them likewise undated, but the others are mostly from the early 1990s), giving art lovers on this side of the Atlantic at least a nodding acquaintance with an oeuvre I suspect we are going to get to know much better in coming years: The artist’s work is included in this year’s Documenta 14. Mancoba, who was born in Johannesburg in 1904, began training as a wood-carver in 1925; his academically styled 1929 Bantu Madonna nonetheless aroused controversy because he dared to depict her with the features of a black woman. Mancoba traveled to Paris for further study in 1938—not exactly a happy time to be in Europe. When the Nazis occupied France, he was interned as an enemy alien. After the war, living in Copenhagen—where he was associated with the Cobra artists—and later in Paris again, he switched his focus to painting, with which he had already started experimenting as early as 1940.

Given the nearly thirty years that separate the earliest from the most recent of the four paintings in this show, the works were remarkably similar in style. In each, delicate touches of subdued, translucent color—predominantly earth tones—gather toward the center of the canvas to form what does not quiet declare itself an abstracted figure amid a richly spatial surround. If it is a figure, it’s not exactly a human one: The bifurcated head evokes the massive compound eyes of a fly. At times, as in a painting dated 1963, the indications of this central set of forms are so discreet that they can almost be read as mere abstract compositional divisions. In the undated canvas, which was also the most richly colored, the number of forms crystallizing around this central core have increased to the point where the “figure” seems to have turned into something more massive and plural: a multifaced rock outcropping, for instance, or the huddled-together dwellings of a village.

Mancoba himself opined that “it is difficult to say whether the central form is abstract or not. What I am concerned with, is whether the form can bring to life and transmit, with the strongest effect and by the lightest means possible, the being which has been in me.” In other words, what gives form to these canvases is not the image of a body so much as a structure that conveys a sense of life traversed by memories. In many of the drawings, by contrast, the figural element is much stronger. The undated *Untitled (Figures)*, in pastel and ink, for instance, is clearly a father, mother, and child. One sees in these drawings the sculptor that this painter who sought to express himself with “the lightest means possible” once was; the works could almost be sketches for monuments to be constructed on a grand scale. Other drawings break up these figurative forms into letter-like configurations spread in rows like writing across the page; one thinks of Henri Michaux, but Mancoba’s calligraphic forms are more declarative than those of his Belgian-born contemporary.

These few works showed Mancoba to be a painter of the first order, albeit one of those ho, as Matisse said of Monet and Sisley, “had delicate sensations, quite close to each other,” therefore tending toward variation within a quite limited range. But is that the whole story? It’s impossible to tell. One can only be grateful that an artist of this quality has finally been revealed to us, but it’s a shame that a larger presentation could not be made. How representative of Mancoba’s long career as a painter—he died in 2002—was this small selection? We’ll be waiting eagerly to find out.