

# COUNTER AND ENCOUNTER

Lionel Ducos was born in 1954, in Nantes, France.

He qualified from Fine Arts School and was awarded a residence at the Villa Medici. In the midst of the winds of change blowing through the seventies, the artist travelled across the Atlantic and the Sahara desert, following many humanitarian trails, keeping books by Nicolas Bouvier and Claude Lévi-Strauss for company.

'I hate travelling and explorers' reads the opening sentence of *Tristes Tropiques*. Lionel Ducos has felt the same ambiguous inclination throughout his life towards art, refusing the self-centered approach of 'art for art's sake.'

After several years in the teaching profession, Lionel Ducos became a set designer for the theatre. Over twenty years, he worked regularly as a scenographer for Rennes's performing arts festival *Les Tombées de la nuit*, taking part in La Rochelle's *Francfolies* festival every year and getting involved in Saint-Nazaire's *Escales* festival; he has spoken at Dinard's *Festival du Film Britannique* and designed exhibitions for the National Museum of Natural History of Paris. Lionel Ducos is a man who comes and goes, always seeking to serve his fellow men.

In Essaouira, Alain Ducos's life reaches a crucial point when he meets writer, humanist and abiding adventurer Alain Billy. From this moment onwards, he allows himself to become a fully-fledged artist. In 2010 he imagines a reconciliation with the artistic world, from which he had until then accidentally estranged himself. The 'The Lands of Men' project is born.

Today his body of work brings together sculpture and humanism, two arenas he has sought and embraced on his journeys around the world.

His artistic project 'The Lands of Men' offers a new vision of the world, where exotic folklores and nostalgia are consigned to oblivion. We are invited to pause, observe and engage in a sociological reflection on the extravagant behaviour of humankind.



*As far as artistic questions are concerned, I deal with them in my studio in Nantes, away from the art market. Friends of mine, painters or sculptors, stop by to have a chat and share their impressions. Praxiteles and Michelangelo sometimes pop in to discuss questions of anatomy.*

# HIMBA

How reasonable is this new adventure ? With nothing more than a vague notion of aim and outcome, here I am, headed for unknown territories, still unsure if clay will turn out to be my travelling companion.

I have just discovered a deeply moving picture in Sylvie Bergerot and Eric Robert's publication, Himbas.

What is the story behind the pagan beauty, the lean bodies, the barren land ?

I'm discovering a people of stunning beauty, still very much alive - yet for how long ?

To my eye, a Himba woman is like a living sculpture, an earthly work of art, culturally quintessential. Would it be enough if I simply created a representation of her ?

I set off to work, fully aware that with her features, so palpably noble, half of my job has already been done for me.

A full month of labour goes by - then two, then three... My hands have hardened, yet cannot help but shake as figures of fathomless beauty gradually come to life.

On my journey I come across ethnographic publications for the general public.

Now everyone knows who they are and where they live.

Pouring out of four-wheel drive vehicles or even helicopters, tourists turn up to take pictures of the Himbas and to film them, alongside celebrities. Coaches full of holiday-makers leave a handful of dollars behind them, slowly turning the outskirts of the village into a place for vagabonds and outcasts.

This Himba people, so full of dignity, used to live on a barren land, where the subsoil is extremely poor. Yet, somehow, this environment used to protect them.

It would seem that our 'overstimulated civilisation of the plentiful' (as per Lévi-Strauss), seeking a notion of the picturesque at the best of times, for the sake of pretty pictures or supposedly concerned with Fair Trade tourism, is now going to... MESS IT ALL UP !

You barbarian monsters... Savages !

I must apologize, I'm getting carried away.

From Lionel Ducos's monograph *Les Terres de l'Homme* (The Lands of Men)

# I USE ART

I may become a great sculptor one day, yet in the meantime I am happy to work hard as a fine craftsman.

As far as I'm concerned, this particular debate is closed - or 'byzantine' I may even add, considering my current concerns.

Far from being obsessed by how history will eventually remember me, I'd rather talk about something else, acutely aware as I am that it requires an exceptional talent to present one's fellowmen with the manifold definitions of art for art's sake.

The inherent beauty of the people I am dealing with constitutes, in itself, three quarters of my work. I simply magnify them in my representations, thereby acknowledging my responsibility in the artistic initiatives taken, modest and too sensible as they may be.

In fact I am more concerned with how I could use my skills to serve a different purpose : no lesson ever seems to be learned from these wise people.

Contempt towards them seems to prevail as soon as it is revealed that the sacred land their bare feet tread on abounds with some natural resource that could be exploited

And the same applies to the Earth, from Tchernobyl to Fukushima, to the vastated oceans.

I am talking about the excesses of humankind !

From Lionel Ducos's monograph *Les Terres de l'Homme* (The Lands of Men)

# CLAY DECIDES

Clay is tolerant, of course. She can go by on very little, shrink and contract up to a certain extent. She can also snap and split !

The two of us have spent so much time together at work that I have now learnt to deal with her gentle character, obliging yet irritable and touchy at times.

In the process I've learnt to be attentive and disciplined. I remain cautious and fearful (it is now over 7-feet tall). I keep her moistened throughout the modelling stage.

When I finally leave her alone, she will do as she pleases, shrinking of an inch or two where she sees fit, shortened in one arm, contorting a couple of fingers, growing hollow cheeks.

My hands have toiled away and finally stop when I consider the work completed. And now, it's out of my control. Clay is taking over, for better or worse.

A faint sneer or grin may be revealed, a cheek might turn hollow.

It's too late to interfere. I will let the earth take over.

Just before 'the handover' period starts, a crucial phase is reached : for thousands of years sculptors have cast moulds of their clay figures at this particular stage of the process, immortalizing the exact chosen size of their artwork.

A great many plaster casts (or 'artist proofs') have thus been created.

Made of a lowly material, these plaster casts usually remain dormant, left unappreciated by museums.

More so than with bronze statues, plaster statues are a reminder of this specific technique.

Except for the head of my Papuan man, I've never had the time to make a cast and capture this moment. I wish I had.

From Lionel Ducos's monograph *Les Terres de l'Homme* (The Lands of Men)

## ON THE CHOICE OF-

Imagine an artist's studio in ancient times, under the Italian Renaissance or, closer to us in time, one of Rodin's studios, swarming with people, sometimes sixty of them, sometimes up to two hundred.

The master has modelled a clay figure. An enlarged replica will then be created by professional craftsmen and their apprentices; then casters, plasterers, stone carvers, sculptors and polishers will set to work under the master's skilful eye - who will only interfere when appropriate.

Things are done very differently now - hence this brief historical reminder.

Today masters could not afford even a couple of apprentices.

Michelangelo may have been worshipped, but his being 4'10" did not help when he was facing a block of solid marble over 15-feet high. Twenty years of tedious labour would not have been enough for his statue of David to take shape, nor would it have been for Praxiteles's Hermes to be erected.

Unlike wood or stone, clay is an accessible, permissive and malleable raw material for an artist who works on his own on large-scale sculptures.

Clay is both your pencil and your eraser : substance can be added, then removed, then added again if necessary.

Eventually, I alone will decide how satisfied I am with the work at this stage. Once baked, the sculpture will have the same life expectancy as the Xi'an warriors from China.

Clay may well be a poor man's marble or bronze, but if you look at it closer, it is the only medium that will bear fingerprints.

From Lionel Ducos's monograph *Les Terres de l'Homme* (The Lands of Men)

# DOUBTS, OBSERVATIONS AND HOPES

Until the very end I was unsure I could make it through - and I'm glad it was so.

I have requested of myself to abide by a number of rules :

Twelve emblematic figures representing the Earth,  
Emotion devoid of silliness,  
Simple yet evocative body language,  
No room for condescension,  
No room for the naïve and the blessed,  
No pathos, no chains,  
No folklore, no feathers,  
No dubious nostalgia,  
No muddled guilt.

Additionally,

One 'overwhelming' size : 7-feet high. Weight is inherent.

Format should fit within 7'x 2'x 2' for technical reasons and logistics.

Must be transportable.

Finally, dealing with people : 'calling attention'

Soon I will find out enough about these issues.

Morphology, emotions, architecture of the bodies.

Hand-over.

Let them fly away now, I myself am retiring, staying put on the ground.

When shall I get away from the drudgery of the industrious monk and move on to more freedom of movement, away from the constraints that have taught me everything ?

I mean, becoming a creator !

How I look forward to pretending I can be heedless with my work and just focus on what is essential, a clever cheat hoping to create of masterpiece, not giving a damn about anything else.

At my age, I believe it's feasible. If no time is wasted, if I work hard with clay and Earth, if in the midst of powdery particles my production continues and survives.

From Lionel Ducos's monograph *Les Terres de l'Homme* (The Lands of Men)

# MY FINGERS

Over the past few weeks my fingertips have been growing numb.  
Granulated clay dehydrates my hands, the skin breaks, cuts and cracks, my nails shrivel up.  
These hands could almost belong to a sculptor !

I don't care, I'll work away at my statues until I'm maimed if necessary, until blood is shed if it means getting some pleasure out of it.  
Day after day I bask in clay, somehow managing not to get bogged down. I feel close to Friday - the one from The Other Island.

When I was eight, I went to my father to show him my first blister : with a mischievous look in his eye, he told me about a 'shameful disease' supposedly running in our family - a family of made-up ancestors.  
He was a colourful and jolly character who successfully managed to hide his paternal negligence.  
If the reader will allow me, I'll go as far as claiming that at least I owe him my sense of humour...

From Lionel Ducos's monograph Les Terres de l'Homme (The Lands of Men)

# MOÏS

From Laos to the Mekong river

Dazzled by extraordinary lights,  
With her pious smile full of humility,  
With pleading hands,  
I meant to say : ' What more do you want ?'

Actually, she reminds me of the little Vietnamese  
girl in flames, Phan Thi Kim Phuc  
A younger sister to her, from across the border.

My thoughts go to the native population of the Marshall  
Islands, today an irradiated people of tramps in the  
Pacific ocean.



# THE END OF THE DEBATE ON ACADEMICISM

The Aborigine I'm trying to create is a pretext to a last headlong rush forward. A different ambition.

I am facing the sculptural frame of a body, working on anatomy in its purest version.

It's a risky great leap forward, unconcerned with how ridiculous and antiquated the statue may look with no veins, no wrinkles, no pleasing multi-colour effects.

Let's call it 'Greek style', with no marble, no bronze. All hand-made, like in the old days, with clay as my faithful companion.

It will probably end up being the least attractive in the series of twelve statues. Que sera, sera !

I've been very ambitious, considering the size of my body and my skills. Come what may, I might as well go for the conventional and the naff, I've nothing to lose.

I am less concerned with this hackneyed subject than with my masters' judgement.

Not to mention my own.

I bet Rodin and his mates will come over and visit me tonight...



From Lionel Ducos's monograph *Les Terres de l'Homme* (The Lands of Men)

# TAKE MY WORK AROUND THE WORLD !

I can't believe this family might end up ripped apart.  
Separated by the money changers.

I imagine them in their transcendental transhumance, free as travellers are. I wish them united for a long time.

Tomorrow, without me, they are meant to pass on universal values across the planet.  
The mischievous craftsman Geppetto that I am will simply disappear.

I dream they would invite each other to visit their native land.  
Entering villages, a voice would then be heard : ' Look, we're not on our own !'

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# 100KG IS SHEER MADNESS !



A friend of mine, a master ceramist who for years advised the Musée de Sèvres, once said to me :  
'To raise a 100-kg figure, over 7-feet high,  
and stabilise it on two thin ankles, one has to be either a magician or a fool !'

I'll go for magician !

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# ANGST-FREE

I must confess that I have a companion, a sort of discreet mistress, both domineering yet willing to share : she's called Angst.

Without her, nothing would be possible. When I signed on to enter the world of art, I was fully aware of the terms of the contract.

Nothing was going to be made easy for me. I was not to be left in peace and would have to face conflicts, perhaps even flirt with this scythe-holder.

On a bad bay, the harpy will follow me into bed and keep me company through the night. Naturally we have a neurotic relationship, based on some sort of understanding, yet far from affectionate ! I toss and turn in bed...  
A persistent mosquito would struggle to survive under normal circumstances, but not today.

I have to wait until daybreak to go to the studio. If I want a good night sleep the following night, all day I'll have to face yet another tug-of-war.

Win the battle, but certainly not the war...

Picasso is meant to have claimed : 'I do not seek, I find'. How lucky the man was !

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# ON SCALE

As a painter or a sculptor, I have often worked on monumental scales. Not out of megalomaniac impulse, but simply for the artwork to physically dominate us straight away. The figure should be striking on a account of its size, rather than its plastic quality. That's my way of concealing a number of flaws, and the use of other artistic shortcuts. The bigger, the less visible...

You'd have to be Rodin to create a masterpiece a couple of feet high, or Turner to produce a disconcerting 10-inch watercolour.

I like to think that the sheer size of these clay men and women commands, more or less consciously, respect. We are immediately overwhelmed by their supremacy.

They are not on the scale of Greek statues who had to fit in the surrounding architecture - as well as being symbols of divination. With their 7 feet in height and their looking-glass eyes, they feel closer to us. They question our vision of the modern world.

They are not slaves but masters of the land and its coveted soil beneath.

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# ON LUCKY DRIPS

Looking towards the sky, the Sadhu figure suggests the vividness of safron, the brightness of ashes, and a great many colours to come.

Once the Sadhu is raised and I'm ready to give it a patina, a serendipitous event takes place amongst paintbrushes and mineral pigments - more likely 'an unworldly yet timely encounter' : hastily I apply the first layer of a tinted concoction. In other words, I daub the Sadhu all over with a sort of messy underlayer.

Suddenly the paint starts trickling down face and torso, both pointing towards to the heavens.

As I'm contemplating the consequence of this obviously slack and unfortunate artistic gesture, this botched up underlayer, a revelation comes to me - could it be a divine light I can see there, a holy reflection in her shimmering glass eyes ? Suddenly colour is everywhere ; Spanish clay ochre, Lebanese purple, Afghani blue. I wonder if the Bordeaux wine I had at lunchtime may have fuelled this chromatic feast... Red has become the complementary colour, which is logical after all - but you only believe it when you drink it - I mean, when you see it.

I make a note of this refreshing image, which photographic pictures will not convey properly. Once again, I start from scratch, fully conscious of the sacrilege.



I will not allow myself to prematurely delve into this potential treasure of colours and vividness. My priority goes to the overall coherence of my work. Yet this apparition has prompted a new insight into my work, one that will insiduously give my dusty and brownish production fit for a very academic museum a new lease of life.

Colour will now be part and parcel of my artwork... yet I'll remain cautious. Not everyone can be Turner, Van Gogh or Kandinsky. Artistic opportunities keep cropping up and I can't wait to complete the series of figures. I will only allow myself to indulge some time in the future, in due course !

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# ON AGEING

My interest in anatomy has materialised in the way I seek to elevate my naked figures.

At first sight, they may come across as mature and pleasant shapes, yet they might not stir strong emotions. They are simply life sculptures, nothing more - however unflattering this may sound.

I would then feel contented if the impressive framework thus elevated proved a masterpiece in itself. But of course, it never does.

Let's not pretend to be prudish ; clothes can sometimes prove a salutary option !

When the time comes to bring them to life, the figures may age by 10 or 20 years, sometimes more.

Necks may wither, arms dry out, buttocks shaped like frozen drops of water might sag a little. Such is the damage that time leaves behind.

Is there anything more evocative than a wrinkle around an eye, anything more moving than a pair of worn hands ?

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# LIVING EARTH

Today I understand that clay has to be ready for work.

Sometimes she is soft and malleable, sometimes dry and ready to give structure. She alone decides what she can do for you and how much of an ally she will be to you. Treat her badly and she may turn surly and resentful (like Moby Dick she has a compelling memory). When the Papuan figure collapsed I heard its scattered remains speak to me in a cetacean whisper : 'Enough wailing !' Clay is a living material full of mischief, both delicate and brutal at times. She enjoys a good game with the surrounding elements, with temperature or with a hygrometer, taking sides with Zeus or Gaia according to her mood. She will not be rushed into anything - which leaves me, impatient as I am, with no choice but to abide by her rules.

One must observe her, listen to her sometimes. But never, never let her slip out of sight ! Once raised to 7 feet in height, no error is permitted. To preserve the existing and future bond between us, I always make sure she gives me the go-ahead.

Humility, complicity and respect.

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# EARTHQUAKE

Too much haste, probably a bit of negligence, too : my Papuan figure has collapsed. I can't understand why such catastrophe has befallen me - nor can I then imagine where it will lead me, later on... I'll probably learn something from the incident.

If it looks like I'm going to be walking with the blind for a while, yet today I am blessed with an unworldly sign : the figure collapsed just at the right moment. Suddenly it all makes sense. Nothing too dramatic has happened after all, blood wasn't shed, leaving no bitterness, no hatred behind. I'll take it as a timely warning, that's all.

In fact I unexpectedly give out a nervous chuckle as I walk around in the studio - four steps this way, four steps that way and I've walked the whole length of the studio. My Papuan figure lies on the floor and I here am, standing, yet feeling so small - and breaking into a fit of laughter.

Where did I go wrong ? To this day, I still can't work it out.

It seems that the slightest flaw brings about an immediate sanction.

Naturally, had the elder been here, they would have warned me. But they're dead.

I like to think that they are watching me now, laughing their irresponsible heads off !

They learnt from masters who were technicians and spiritual guides. I didn't.

For lack of advice from them, I must remain cautious and learn from present and future misfortunes.

I shall mull over the following quote from Buddha :  
'Anything composed is perishable... You must work at your own salvation'

It turns out in the end that this awe-inspiring quote triggers a new development... that I will pursue two years later.

From Lionel Ducos's monograph *Les Terres de l'Homme* (The Lands of Men)



# ON DISCIPLINE

Throughout the modelling stages of her face, I've often felt I should leave things as they were, just outlined. 'In one movement' !

The face had a chiselled strength to it, in fact it looked more sculptural than it does now. One could call it 'spirited'. I couldn't help erasing parts of it, reworking it, thinning it down, softening it a little - too much. What a pity !

A choice was made somewhere between a relatively moderate approach and anthropological realism.

I have experienced this dilemma before, yet the graphic coherence of my series of figures as a whole, of my 'magical circle', is a question I've often mulled over. And I've decided that I will remain reasonable and see it through !

I would like to slowly and carefully steer clear of the constraints of representation, away from this dangerous flirt with hyperrealism, which I find so restrictive.



I struggle to hold myself back when my hands work away freely, when I indulge in easy beautifying tricks. Dexterity is a tempting gift !

Then again, am I really this spirited and frisky horse that needs to be held back ? I believe it'll take a lot of hard work before I can jump over hurdles !

Aim for the beau geste leading to a beautiful sight, but do not rush into it, be humble about it. My artwork must not be conventional - or worse, decorative.

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