

Enrico Magnani

# Interview with myself

*A short conversation about art*

Karlsruhe, Germany, 2010

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## Introduction

During my artistic career I met people of every race, age, and social status, coming from every country. The questions I was asked did not change too much from person to person. This is the summary of the most frequently asked questions and the answers, in the form of an interview.

*Enrico Magnani, Karlsruhe, 2010*

# Interview

(Karlsruhe, 2010)

*I: How could you define yourself?*

**EM:** An artist? (smiles)

*I: How did you start to feel you are an artist?*

**EM:** If you are an artist, you are born as an artist; then it's up to you to follow your nature or to refuse it. You feel it and also other people around you feel it. You know, I made scientific studies because this was "the right thing to do" for my family and, for a certain time, also for me, but I have to admit that my mother was right when she said: "You could have four degrees in science, but you will always be an artist". I don't want to be romantic, I could use many well known sayings about being an artist, I will keep it simple: for me when you seek beauty everywhere, when you need to live surrounded by beauty, when you seek freedom from ordinary way of life and routine, when you need to create and to express yourself not only for you, but also for the others, and when you try to be everyday better for you and for the others, then you are an artist. You see, at the end I have given a romantic definition! (smiles)... About being an artist I would suggest a remarkable passage in the "Letters to a young poet" by Rilke, everyone that has doubts about being an artist or not should read it, there you can find a good answer.

*I: Can you say something about your artistic path?*

**EM:** I started painting very young, I found oil colors at home, my father was also a painter, an amateur, but talented I think; he gave up painting when I was born, maybe he already smelt the competition and preferred to stay aside (smiles). I was seven I think, something like that, when I painted my first masterpiece (smiles); I still have it, it's not that bad... but also my mother used to take artistic pictures with her camera and I have some other examples if we go back in my family tree... an old aunt won a drawing competition award, my mother likes to remind me of it, I think she is very proud of it... just to say that art was in the air...

*I: You don't have a classic artistic path isn't it?*

**EM:** If with “classic” you mean art academy, you are right, I have not a classic artistic path, but I am quite proud of it. The institutions are crystallized in their convictions and it is out of doubt that if you stay inside an institution for many years you start thinking like it, you are obliged... if you don't say to your teacher what he likes to hear, you will not pass your exam... it is a matter of fact. They will say that first you learn and then you are free to do whatever you like, but then it's too late; your mind is already forged! If you enter inside a traditional institution you have to make double effort to be yourself, to find your identity and your purpose; it is difficult enough without any additional constraint. But allow me to say that history has many remarkable examples in which the classical artistic path was absolutely not followed. I like to mention Francis Bacon, the greatest painter of the 20th century after Picasso, he hadn't an academic background at all, but also Picasso left the art academy during the first year: can you imagine?!

*I: You spent many years painting human bodies, how did you come to archetypical symbols?*

**EM:** When I started painting, I mean seriously, with a real intent, I believed that the human being was the beginning, the center and the end: everything. Without the human being there is nothing around, at least we cannot perceive what is around. We are all that we have. For me it was important to investigate the human nature, to dig inside it... a tree, a flower, a cloud were not so relevant for me as the human being. First of all I needed to understand how I work, how people work, how the mankind works... so I painted bodies and faces... to focus on the human nature. I tried many techniques, but mainly I used to make a collage on canvas that I covered with sand and then I painted on it: it was like painting on a rough wall of a cave: like primitive graffiti, but the subject was very contemporary... there was a lot of sex, of rage, of technology... I couldn't accept that the society was going in the wrong direction and I tried to highlight this fact: "shocking by amplifying". I didn't realize that in my artworks the solution was not included! You see the point? I highlighted the problem, but I didn't suggest the solution!

*I: What happened, how did you realize this fact?*

**EM:** I didn't realize this fact immediately, but I stopped making exhibitions. It was unconscious. Today I see the reason: I could not say something to the audience that was only the problem, my purpose was not complete. Realizing this fact was for me a silent shock, like being lost in the desert. At that time I was living in Paris, but I was in the desert, I rarely went out of my flat, I spent my days painting in my room. I stopped exhibitions, but I never stopped painting... it has been a very intimate process... The subjects of my paintings changed, and so the technique. I started

painting with oil on wood... always bodies and faces, but I left the rage and the sex away. The subjects became more and more religious, or mythical I would say, mythical. Little by little some symbols appeared together with these mythological characters: a sphere, a moon, a cross... When I arrived in Germany, I finally achieved the transition from figurative to abstract painting: at that stage I just removed the bodies and what was left were the symbols. Archetypical symbols. It was quite easy, if I look at it from above. The bodies were not enough: they could not be the solution. In the bodies there was the problem, the solution could not dwell in the physical body, because it is not physical! I think it's quite natural to land on abstract paintings when you are looking for answers that go beyond the body and life in matter.

*I: And the symbols where the solution?*

**EM:** I cannot say that symbols are “the solution”, but they are one solution; they are a great help. You know, to point out the problems is not a solution, and to solve our problems we have to focus more on our inner world. Money, sex, violence... we are enough aware that they exist and that they are a problem... but repeating and repeating this concept will not give us the solution. On the contrary, if the human being starts questioning himself from the inside, maybe he will change, he will not give so much importance to these corrupted qualities of society. The symbols are a catalyst for the inner questioning; they are related to our most intimate part that we have mostly forgotten. They act more on the unconscious part of the man, the mind has no power on them, and you cannot be dishonest with yourself in front of the symbols.

*I: You say that your artworks are a sort of alchemical process; can you explain this for those who are not familiar with alchemy?*

**EM:** Well, about alchemy everything has already been said, but if I have to simplify, the best known goal of alchemy is the transmutation of common metals into gold. This process is achieved after a long manipulation of the rough substances, hundreds or thousands of times... I take this principle and I use it in my artworks. The work starts with matter in its original state: stones, sands, earths... then I work on them, they become a tool to realize my creation. This rough matter is disposed on the canvas following sacred geometries and creating archetypical symbols. Matter is very low on the path of evolution, symbols are very high. Matter is very impure, symbols and geometries are very pure. When I start a painting the way in which I work is very rough: I use my hands, big brushes, big spatulas, and the work is very roughly done... then come the colors, the definition of the geometries... at this stage the work becomes more refined. In the final stage, in some cases, I even use tweezers to dispose small stones exactly where I want, or very small brushes to obtain the details I need. Also in my technique there is a sort of evolution: from rough to sublime.

*I: How did this interest for symbols come?*

**EM:** It is not an interest for symbols; it is an interest in ancient traditions, and symbols are a tool, a part of them. It is more than twenty years that I study ancient traditions: philosophies, religions, myths from all around the world. In general, I would say, traditions are just different ways with the same purpose: the development of the human kind. Art is my way to contribute.

*I: You have lived in Reggio Emilia, Milan, St. Tropez, and Paris; now you live in Karlsruhe. Is there an influence of the place on your paintings?*

**EM:** Well, who can say that? I mean, who knows what I would have painted if instead of living in Paris I would have lived in Berlin. What I can say is that each city, each place, has its own particular energy and I feel it, but I don't know how much this can influence my artworks.

*I: But the light is different!*

**EM:** Yes, each place has a different light. If you go to the south the light is warmer, and more plastic: personally this is what I like the most; in the north, the light is more white and flat, like neon. Anyway, to paint I do not use natural light so often; I prefer to paint at night so that I often use electric light. Electric light is also good because you can always have the same direction and this is important if you want to reproduce in a gallery the same atmosphere that you had when you created your paintings. I feel more independent with electric light.

*I: So we have to look at your paintings with electric light?*

**EM:** I strongly recommend it. If you want to see them as I created them, you have to use soft warm lights that cut the painting in one direction; usually from above. In this way the materical side of my paintings comes out. And most likely the colors are respected. This is what I recommend. If you see them with a cold light like neon or during the day, I am not responsible of what you will see, but maybe they will look better for you! (smiles)

*I: What is art for you?*

**EM:** Good question... What is art? If I should use only one word I would say that art is "evolution". For me if there is no evolution everything is useless. Maybe I am too much pragmatic and too few

poetic, but it is like this. The goal of humanity should be being better, everyday better, and also every human being should try to die better than he was born. We learn many things during our lifetime, but most of the time it is just information, our souls do not evolve, on the contrary they devolve, we become cynic, greedy, egoistic and so on... art should push people on the right way and I still believe it this is a powerful way to do it.

*I: Could we say that art is creation?*

**EM:** Art can be many things; it depends on the point of view. Art for me should be about all evolution, but of course if you don't create you cannot communicate principles of evolution: everything is related. We have been created, this is why we have to create. But of course there are many forms of creation. You can create cars, babies, paintings, food... every creation has a reason to be, nevertheless some creations are more important than others and some creations cannot be done by everyone.

*I: Could you give me an example?*

**EM:** Let's consider a car factory. If Mr. Smith quits his position as design engineer, Mr. Jones will take his position and the consumer will not remark any difference in the final product: it will always be a Mercedes or a Ferrari or whatever you like... In art it's different: if you change Picasso with Matisse you will immediately recognize the difference (smiles). Every artist is unique and this is what counts for me: the feeling to do something unique. I like to think that there are things that only I am able to do, things that are fulfilled by my essence.

*I: Is this the reason why you paint?*

**EM:** I paint for myself and for the audience. I think it would be very dishonest to say that an artist is painting only for himself. I mean, even if the artist is closed in a jail or lost on a desert island, inside him, in the deepest region of his soul, there is always the belief that one day someone will see what he has done. I am pretty sure that if an artist would be the last man on earth, being aware of this fact, he would never find the force or the motivation to create.

*I: Maybe for an extraterrestrial civilisation?*

**EM:** If we admit that an extraterrestrial civilisation can exist, yes, this could be a good reason, a great reason I would say! What I want to say is that the purpose, in the creative act, is outside the artist, is in the audience, human or extraterrestrial... whatever you like... without audience, an artist has no role.

*I: So the artist should be grateful to the audience?*

**EM:** Absolutely, the audience is the sparkle that lights the fire of creation, the artist has the fuel. Even if artists are often unfair with the audience, the audience has a basic role in the path of creation and should not be blamed even if it doesn't appreciate, even if it doesn't understand...

*I: The feedback from the audience is important for you?*

**EM:** It is difficult to answer this question. I really would like to have the possibility to modify my artworks in order to be more communicative for the audience, but I paint with archetypal symbols and these symbols do not need to be understood with the mind, and they cannot be entirely understood with it. They just

activate what Jung called the collective mind or collective consciousness, like the images you perceive in your dreams. You may forget your dreams the day after, but they are living inside you and your actions and your decisions may be influenced by your forgotten dreams. Maybe some dreams will come up in your mind some months later, but it could be too late. With symbols it is the same: the audience can look at my paintings and have every kind of reaction: they may like or dislike them, in any case there is an unconscious effect taking place inside them. The feedback they can give to me is irrelevant because they can give me feedbacks coming only from their intellectual part. It is very rare that a person gives me a feedback based on the consciousness of the feeling activated by the collective mind; this person should be very conscious of himself and also aware of ancient traditions.

*I: Which is your message?*

**EM:** I do not know if we can call it a message, I try to detour the attention of the audience from the outer world to the inner world and to push them to investigate some parts of their being that they have forgotten. The archetypal symbols have this power; they awake the lost consciousness. When the consciousness is activated, then every one finds the message he needs to find. My paintings are like a catalyst for inner questioning.

*I: Which is your creative process?*

**EM:** I am proud to say that I don't wake up in the morning shouting that I had a dream or that a smart idea came up in my mind and that I will make a painting on it. It doesn't work like this... My work is based on a well defined purpose and I cannot leave my imagination free to go wherever it likes. I decide to work

on a certain theme and to do this I must work with some specific symbols, colors, and materials; there is always a project behind it.

*I: So nothing is left to chance...*

**EM:** Not really. Once the structure of the painting is completed, at least in my mind, I allow myself to put inside the painting the emotional part or the unconscious part. For example, when I make a dripping, this is foreseen, but not regulated: I could not decide where all the drops of colour will fall; I can only decide to make a dripping, this is where the intellectual part stops. During the dripping there is only emotion, chance, chaos... I would say...

*I: What is more important: the technique or the content?*

**EM:** Technique is like style in literature, take for example Joyce, he created the stream of consciousness because he had a specific purpose: he wanted to express the mechanism of the inner dialogue. He wanted to go there and to go there he needed this particular style; it was not just a funny idea to do something different or to change the tradition. The style was subordinate to the purpose and to the content. It was not just an empty idea. In art it should be the same: an empty idea doesn't go anywhere and it is useless. It can only wake up the curiosity for a while, but it will be quickly forgotten.

*I: When come up in your mind the best ideas?*

**EM:** As I told you, my creative process is quite slow and there is not much left to chance. I do not wake up in the morning saying "Oh! What a nice sunny day! Let's make a painting!" I never make a painting because I have a flash in my mind. I mean, it can happen to have a flashy idea, but this is only the first step, then I leave this

idea working inside me, I keep it inside, I think about, it can stay inside me many days or weeks, sometimes months... I like to see it like a gestation: the baby stays inside his mother's belly nine months and you cannot see him, but after a certain time in few hours he's out (smiles); for me it is like this: a gestation.

*I: It is a gestation, but you said that this gestation comes from an idea... so when this idea comes up?*

**EM:** You are right, at the beginning there is always an idea, but I couldn't tell you when and in which circumstances it comes up, I never thought about it... I will pay more attention in the future. (smiles)

*I: What do you think of contemporary art?*

**EM:** Well... nowadays quite the whole contemporary art is just a smart or a nice idea come up in the mind of a person, I don't want to call him "an artist", and repeated several times in different variants. Repeated hundreds, thousands of times, during an entire lifetime: there is no evolution! There is no language enough flexible to express different concepts, to communicate with the audience! Most of the artworks do not force you to investigate and to question yourself, because only with self questioning there is evolution, without answer there is no evolution: we remain what we are. Most of the art today is more like TV programmes. When you watch TV you are completely absorbed by a huge quantity of astonishing images, violence, sex... but also nice documentaries about nature, crime stories, love stories... but at the end we forget everything and we are just tired and bored, looking for something new... TV is done not to encourage thinking, but to stop the thinking process, to relax and have streams of emotions, fake emotions... it is a sleeping effect hidden behind a chaotic mix of

astonishing images. There is a big difference between knowledge and information. Nowadays we are over-informed, but the knowledge is going abruptly down. This kind of art teaches nothing.

*I: Why do you think that this is happening?*

**EM:** Mainly for two different reasons. First, if you don't have a style, people do not recognize you and most of the time artists are scared to do something new for this reason. Who said that style is born when an artist is died? Picasso? Well, this should be a fact, but things are not like this. Anyway, this is not the main point. I could accept that an artist keeps his own style during his entire life, but what counts is that this style should be the expression of a concept with a well defined purpose. Today, if you visit an art fair, or most of the galleries, you will see artworks that are just a nice idea, as I said... It is very difficult to find an artist with a real goal. Sometimes the artworks come first and then a complaisant critic finds out a meaning that is very far from the intention of the artist, also because most of the time the artist has no intention at all! But it works... (Smiles). I was in Paris some time ago visiting one of the most important art fair in the world. I asked a gallerist some information about a strange red elastic object that cost 4000 euros. I wanted to know something about its meaning. The gallerist saw a client in me and told me with a smile on his face that there was no meaning, that today art works like this: "or you like it or not". And it works! And when I asked information about the artistic path of this artist, the answer was: "Well... he has always done this kind of things... he changes the colors sometimes and the shapes..." do you see what I mean? It's tragic! This kind of artists and this kind of gallerists are spoiling the world of art, and the world itself. What will be the future of art if these are the bases?! Which lesson can we learn from these people?! Which is the difference between a

printed painting that I buy from IKEA and this kind of elastic object? That IKEA, for the moment, has no complaisant critics and gallerists!

*I: You often speak about nice or smart idea in a negative way; can you better explain your position?*

**EM:** Yes, actually I am a bit bored by this trend in which everyday we assist to the promotion of a young artist that comes up with a nice or a smart idea. I could invent hundreds of nice ideas to be repeated in series to astonish the audience. Quite everyone is able to do this if he only thinks a little bit in that direction. I do not want to be vulgar; with vulgarity it would be even easier to give you some examples... well... this kind of art is based only on one idea, only one, and repeated and repeated... It is not a language with which you can communicate. This is the big difference! Imagine if the Bible was composed by two thousand pages in which it is written: “First God made heaven and earth, first God made heaven and earth, first God made heaven and earth...” It can be a good idea, it is very important to know that “First God made heaven and earth”, but where is evolution?! Once, I think, is enough! (smiles)

*I: And in art, can you provide an example?*

**EM:** Well... you can simply paint everything in grey during your entire life... you take all the objects that comes to you and you paint them in grey, also canvas in different sizes... you think that this is a joke, there is an artist that did this and is very famous and his paintings cost thousands of dollars. But you can also paint it in pink, nowadays pink is very popular... you can collect garbage; you can take teddy bears and paint them in gold or to put a knife in their hands, you can make close-ups of pubic hairs of the people around the world and print them on huge canvas of 2 or 3 meters.

You can paint with the blood of the snakes of the Sahara desert, you can make totems with the stones of the Himalaya, or collect the water of all the lakes of Sweden, or cut small pieces of sacred lands and hang them on the wall of a gallery... you will find an audience for sure!

And I am also sure that some “nice and smart” artists that will read these tips will do it and will become famous and will find complaisant gallerists, critics, and audience! This is how it works most of the time...

*I: Why do you think that many artists behave like that?*

**EM:** There is no reason except simplicity. We are going toward simplicity for a very simple reason: the simplest the concept, the more the audience can understand it. Pushing this concept to the limit we can say that if there is no meaning at all, everyone is welcome; in this case the audience is made by the totality of the population except maybe people like me that refuse to accept a kind of art made of emptiness; but these are few units compared to the millions of potential client of a nonsense art. People prefer the easy way, they do not want and they do not have time to loose. They want to shock, to make money in the easiest and simplest way, this is business, nothing to see with art. But they continue to call it like this, it's a marketing strategy. You impose the name “art” on something that is not. Who can debate? Who wants debate? Things are running by themselves... To do something unique is very easy, every human being is a unique piece in the entire universe, so there is nothing special in doing something unique. The goal should not be uniqueness, everything is unique. The goal of art should be evolution. Art should give us a key to evolve, like religion, philosophy, poetry, science... The problem is that if you are not honest in your intent you can justify everything and find a good reason to say that everything is a key for evolution.

Nowadays artists are trying to stimulate curiosity in the audience, pure curiosity. There is absolutely no desire to help the audience in their life path, just to create unusual events, shocking, nice events... Often the technique, a very good and beautiful technique, is the core of the artworks; but when the technique overcomes the meaning of an artwork, art becomes decoration. If you spend more time on the technique to refine your artworks you will have no time and no energy to go inside the meaning, no time for your research. Imagine a scientist that is writing an article trying to make rhymes and poetry with it... It will take too much time. He will have no time to dedicate to his research, and only with research there is improvement. Art is like science from a certain point of view... we are trying to move the border more and more beyond to the unknown. Unfortunately science is limited to this material world, and cannot, and does not even want to enter the domain of the soul, of what is beyond. Art can penetrate the domain of soul and emotions, of everything that is not material, nevertheless real.

*I: Which artist do you admire the most?*

**EM:** Guess?

*I: Picasso?*

EM: Right. How people cannot like Picasso? It's like religion: if you believe in god there is only one God (smiles), but seriously speaking, I admire Picasso more for the person than for the artist. Maybe he was only lucky, we will never know... but it is out of question that he imposed his style to the entire world; and for a human being this is a lot. For a painter it is even more. Today with TV and hyper-efficient media it's easy to become worldwide known if you are a singer or an actor, more difficult if you are a

writer, even more if you are a painter, but it is still possible. Picasso became Picasso, a myth, in a period where the media were not so powerful and for me this is a titanic enterprise for a single man.

*I: Would you like to become a worldwide known artist?*

**EM:** Well, if I had the certitude that what I do deserves to be world wide known, with pleasure. I do not want to give a message that doesn't go in the sense of evolution. This is one of the milestones of my artwork.

*I: Any other artist to mention?*

**EM:** Yes many... in my carrier, as you can see, I passed through many different styles and techniques, and it is a matter of fact that all my works are very referred to the history of art. I believe in the continuation of the red line in the history of art and on the fact that all we can produce today is a merit of our predecessors... but if I have to list some names related to my actual phase, I would say Paul Klee, Mark Rothko, Alberto Burri, and Antoni Tapies. From them I take inspiration about the technique, the colors, and the harmony... their research went very far and they are a continuous source of inspiration... the technique for me is a tool to express the meaning I need; I take what better helps me to reach my purpose. About the content, I feel very different from all of them, I am very different...

*I: Do you have a dream?*

**EM:** well, fortunately in my life I still have many dreams, maybe they are not dreams, but simply things I would like to do, but it will take too much time to talk about them. This is what pushes me

to wake up in the morning, without them I will sleep all the day!  
(smiles)

*I: And in art?*

EM: I dream to make huge paintings. You know, the size of an artwork is always a problem: if you make them too big you have big problems to transport, to install, to stock, and even to paint. Unfortunately art has often to cope with very practical matters...My house is not that big; I cannot paint canvas of three or four meters... and what about you? Would you buy a 3 by 3 meter painting? Do you have enough space at home? I think that many artists would like to be in the situation to have no limits imposed by price or dimensions; this usually happens when you receive an order from a public institution or from a very rich person.

*I: Do we buy the painting or the artist?*

EM: When it's a matter of little money, most likely we buy the painting, if it is not too big. When the amount of money starts to become important, then we buy the artist; we see it as an investment, of course, a certain feeling with the painting must always exist, you do not put money on something you really dislike unless you are masochist. Buying a new artist is always a risk. With the same amount of money you can buy lithography of a well known artist, or a canvas of a young artist. Most people prefer to stay on the safe side, but they have to be aware that the price of the lithography will never rise up as the painting if the young artist starts to become famous. Anyway, I do not like to talk too much about these financial matters; they exist, of course, they are important, but don't give them too much place...

*To be continued...*