

# THE CALL OF THE SEA

French contemporary artist Pierre Marie Brisson exhibits new works produced in his Cebu studio.

**T**agore said that you can't cross the sea by merely by standing and staring at the water. The world's waterways have long fascinated artists because of the mysteries they contain. The seas and oceans can signify many things to different artists, but for one artist, the seas hold stories of meaning and love.

French contemporary artist Pierre Marie Brisson (b. 1955) will be drawing from four decades of experience in an exhibit of new works that reflect his intense love affair with the seas and oceans. Entitled *Vue de La Mer* (View from the Sea) and opening on February 20, 2019 at Manila House, the exhibition is marked by his affinity for the colors, flora and fauna of the tropics. It also distinguishes the differing characteristics of tropical waters as the outcome of Brisson having established a studio in the south of Cebu, where he intends to spend half of each year. The works for *Vue de La Mer* were produced by Brisson in his Cebu studio.

## Following in the Tradition of Abstraction

Brisson grew up in Orléans in France, which, by his own admission, is far from the sea. A historic medieval city, Orléans is nevertheless bisected by the Loire river, which empties into the Atlantic.

"Along the Loire, there are many castles," recalls Brisson of the picturesque

landscapes he was surrounded by in his youth. "They certainly helped to attract authors such as Jean de La Fontaine, Chateaubriand, Descartes, Balzac, Voltaire, Marcel Proust, George Sand, Victor Hugo. Growing up, we all read at least one of these authors' classic. They all wrote at least one work on the Loire, its riches, its stories, and its hopes. That's where I was born, grew up."

The artist came of age during an exciting period in French visual art. Post-war tendencies gravitated toward the abstractions of the Art Informel and Tachisme movements. Sharing many characteristics with the American Abstract Expressionist movement, the abstractions were described by critic Michel Tapié as an homage to randomness and organic spontaneity.

(BELOW) Pierre Marie Brisson. (OPPOSITE PAGE)



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This environment informed Brisson's burgeoning practice. Eschewing formal training, Brisson nevertheless held his first exhibition at the Musée Charles Tigny in 1975. He soon established himself within the art circles of Orléans and the wider French circuit. At a critical juncture, he attended an engraving workshop in Paris in 1979, honing techniques that would eventually become an aspect of his practice.

What follows is a blossoming career that saw Brisson exhibit across Europe

and the United States, including a memorable exhibition at the prestigious Franklin Bowles Gallery in New York in 1987. Brisson, with his passion for color and gesturalism, was likened to post-Impressionist artist Henri Matisse. "His gouache papers, cut and mounted on canvas, often in large format, are a tribute to classical style painting where the colors of the south are a central feature," wrote critic Gilles Bastianelli. "His long maturation has led to an exceptionally rich and diverse variety of genres: por-

traits, life drawings, still lifes, landscapes with an omnipresent style reminiscent of Matisse works, a style characteristic of the Corinthian order and Roman art, and acanthus."

"Brisson's paintings reveal the ephemeral quality of being human and the fragile language through which humans claim to document their experience as human," wrote art historian Malbeit Borgen of Brisson's practice. "His work chronicles the underlying pulse of art through life—its ability to recall our past, reflect our present, and envision our future."

(BELOW) Pierre Brisson in his studio in Aigues-Mortes. (OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) "Shama Beach III", 41 x 30 cm, mixed media on paper; "Shama Beach IV", 41 x 30 cm, mixed media on paper; "Shama Beach V", 41 x 30 cm, mixed media on paper; "Shama Beach VI", 41 x 30 cm, mixed media on paper.



### The Sea Beckons

Brisson's career is a journey across the waves. Aside from being an artist, he is also a captain who has devoted his life to sailing and cruising. In many ways, he equates his art practice to maritime traditions: "I reconstruct past landscapes, by stratum, by accumulating samples. It's a seafaring principle. Take only the necessary and essential. Do not overload your boat at the risk of capsizing."

In 1994, Brisson established a studio in Aigues-Mortes, Camargue in the south of France by the Mediterranean coast, fulfilling a life-long affiliation with the sea. "The Mediterranean basin is the cradle of many civilizations...It is a sea vast enough to remind man of the culture of peace," he says.

It is telling that Brisson refers to the sea as characters in his narrative. Each sea and ocean, after all, has different physiognomies and temperaments that artists liken to personalities.

"The Mediterranean and Asia-Pacific do not have the same scales or the same stories," says Brisson. "I never venture into the Pacific. He is too big for me. But Cebu is a love story. It was in Cebu that the woman I love was born. Cebu is also different from the Mediterranean because of its intense light and vegetation."

Brisson's studio in Cebu reflects the artist's courage in staking out new possibilities in his practice. "Cebu has a maritime dimension that suits me," he says. "The workshop is a place of creation. I have three workshops. One in Aigues-







(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) "Autumnal House", 73 x 60 cm; "Fish Market", 130 x 130 cm, mixed media on canvas; "Zambales", OPPOSITE PAGE; "Chimera", 200 x 200 cm.

Mortes in the South of France, in a small industrial building near the sea. The other is my boat in the Mediterranean. The last is a bamboo hut on a beach in Cebu."

"They are all three different, but I find myself there. These are the environments that move around me. It is not a story of decoration, nor of geography, but of freedom. Freedom to think, freedom to observe the invisible, freedom to feel where the wind comes from, the sea wind."

The location of his studio in Cebu has been dubbed "Shama Beach" by Brisson, after the endangered aniniho (black whistler bird) found in the hinterlands of Alcoy, behind the studio.

#### New works and techniques from old inspirations

While retaining Brisson's allegiance to his

colorist background, there are elements in his work that recall Juvenal Sanso's textile design for Balenciaga in the Modernist era.

"It brings me back to Orléans, a royal city, to the Loire, to the castles of the Loire and their ornaments, their tapestries, their hangings," explains Brisson. "What you call 'printed element' is a damask—a monochrome silk fabric characterized by a brightness contrasted between the background and the pattern formed by weaving."

"They are in my childhood memory and have been an element in my painting for a long time. I put the damask at the back of the composition, under layers of time, punctuated by the salty winds. When I place the damask at the front of the composition, it is to invert the

scale of the subject as a detail magnified a thousand times. This is to show the real bottom, [which to me is] the sea.

"Another graphic element that recurs in my paintings is the leaves and flowers of the acanthus, omnipresent in the ornamentation of all the French royal heritage. The acanthus adorns the capitals of all the columns, appears on all the gates of castle. Acanthus is a nymph in mythology and a love of art in the language of flowers."

Bastianelli further elaborates on Brisson's technique with the acanthus: "Brisson's acanthus is superimposed onto a matter painting background which, magnified a thousand times, would reveal an eocofact backdrop with fossils, eyewitnesses of evolution; conserved traces set into sedimentary rock."

The underlying authority of Brisson's practice lies in his remarkable usage of aesthetic to convey emotion. It thus

becomes unnecessary to provide a message, or statement—it is simply enough to view a painting and let emotion wash over you.

This is in keeping with the approach of the Impressionism, who did away with the studious pretensions of academic art in favor of emotive, spontaneous, and gestural practices. Pierre Marie Brisson builds upon that inheritance with an unbridled affair with the sea. ●

