

A young artist in the forefront of the artistic community

By Virgil Hammock (Canada)

Every once in a while a young artist rises quickly to the forefront of the artistic community.

The Belgian artist Claude Dubois, known as Juan Kiti is such a person. He has done so with pure vigour combined with considerable talent. He has only been in the « *business* » for a few years, yet his works are already in a number of important public and private collections. In the summer of 1994, I visited his former home and studio in Bousval, Belgium, to get some idea of both his life and work.

Kiti is a person who clearly loves life and wants to live it to its fullest. You can sense that in the way that he lives surrounded by his art, his family, and a small, but rich collection of other artists' work. His own work revolves around colour and energy. You can clearly see the influence of the Cobra movement. Kiti is a latter day Abstract Expressionist in an era of the Post-Modern; perhaps this explains his popularity, because his paintings are attractive objects.

Kiti attacks the canvas with explosive force, wielding his brush – when he uses one – like a broad sword.

His « first » real painting, a *Self-portrait* of 1989 (80cm x 70 cm), is an amazing tour de force for a first effort. It shows an immense amount of anguish as if Kiti found release in the act of making this picture.

Some critics mistakenly assume the role of psychoanalyst or psychiatrist and offer an analysis of an artist's work in a way that sometimes reveals more about their own « problems » than anything important about either the artist or his work. But I know, from talking to Kiti, that his work is strongly autobiographic and is about personal anguish.

The Abstract Expressionists and their European counterparts, Such as the Cobra Group, strongly believed in using their art as a means of personal expression that would delve into the realm of the unconscious. The American artist Jackson Pollock is a shining example of this idea. He wore his heart on his sleeve. His tortured life passes before our eyes in his canvases. I am not suggesting that Kiti's life is as troubled as Pollock's was. Far from it; and Juan Kiti is a happy man. He has a beautiful wife and daughter, he lives in a beautiful home surrounded by objects he loves and he is very successful for an artist of his age. I spent a wonderful afternoon talking with him in his garden while his daughter and her friends, played happily in the family swimming pool. We talked not only about art, but also about food and wine – subjects both of us have more than a passing interest in. (If Kiti had not turned out to be an artist, he very well could have become a chef.)

Most of us, including Kiti, have our own personal devils. Some of us may be lucky enough to find a way of purging them, and art has provided a tried and true method of doing so. Purge is a word carefully picked. Some artists – such as Pollock – had a pool of sorrow so deep that they never could find bottom and always brought up more and more anguish. Others, like Kiti, can kick out the devils and through art find joy and meaning in life. Expressionism in art need not always be equated with torment and angst; it can equally be about joy. We need our Pollocks, they tell us much about the depths of the human condition. But we also need our Kiti's to tell us about the ecstasy of life.

A wonderful painting of his from 1990, *Le Chat (The Cat)* 120cm x 100 cm, cannot help but bring a smile from the viewer. The cat (actually cats) appear out of the colourful abstract painting like so many chameleons.

The painting reminds me of the story of Leonardo finding images in the stains on a wall. Were Kiti's cats accidental to the act of painting or did Kiti set out to paint the family cat in a variety of poses? In the final analysis it does not really matter anymore than the question of the chicken and the egg. The chicken is the final result, and, in the case of *Le Chat*, the painting is the final result. It is a kind of joke about abstract painting and a world away from the self-portrait of the year before.

Abstract Expressionism was, and is, mainly about the act of painting. The American critic Harold Rosenberg called it *Action Painting*. I like to think of it as *Whole Body Painting*. This type of painting is aggressive - dare I use the sexist term, manly. I spoke of Kiti Attacking the canvas and this is typical of the artists of the Abstract Expressionist or Cobra schools such as: in America, Pollock, Kline or de Kooning; in Canada, Riopelle; in Europe, Appel, Alechinsky, Corneille and Jorn. Kiti is a throw-back to these giants of Modernism. In fact, a 1991 canvas of his is titled *Naissance Cobra* (120 cm x 100 cm) or the Birth of Cobra. A better translation might be the rebirth of Cobra. This painting illustrates the raw energy in the best of the Cobra ideals. This is an art of action rather than of words. So much of today's Post Modern art is lost in a torrent of meaningless words that are in the place of the art object.

Harold Rosenberg's seminal 1964 book on the subject of Abstract Expressionism was titled *The Anxious Object*. Anxiety is a good metaphor for much of Kiti's work. It contains a high level of anxiety right on the edge; he is willing to bare all in his art and take a chance at failure as well as success. His mixed media paintings are not unlike watercolours, because one false move can ruin a work, but moving - many movements - are essential to his process. This is about as far removed from high realist art as you can get. Kiti's art is an art of chance, of gambling, but he is a master player and the results are worth the gamble.

I tell my students that earth worms dipped in paint and left to move across a blank canvas or a donkey with a paint brush attached to its tail and dipped in paint can create a masterpiece, but, they can't do it all the time. This idea is akin to the thousand monkeys typing out the complete works of Shakespeare. It can be done theoretically, but it might take a very, very long time. Kiti's job, on the other hand, is to create art every day and the more that he does, the better are his chances for success. Unlike the earth worms, donkeys, or monkeys, he has the ability to think: he knows when he is successful. What is not successful does not see the light of day. Witness the title he has given one of his paintings, *Poubelle d'artiste*, (1992, 120cm x 100cm), literally the garbage can of the artist. This painting is not a failure nor the leftovers from other works, it is rather a very nice painting, and another demonstration of his sense of humour.

The failure of Abstract Expressionism was that, in the final analysis, it took itself too seriously and ended up in the early 1960's being upstaged by Pop Art. Kiti is certainly not going to fall into that trap. He knows that there is a duality to all things, painting included, that seriousness needs to be matched by playfulness and that both are necessary if one is to have a complete life. His early picture such as *Crack-LSD*, 1989 (120 cm x 120 cm), illustrates the dark side of his imagination and is quite the reverse of *Le Chat*. The sombre ground of *Crack-LSD* along with its reds and oranges that cover the surface combine with a powerful effect that speaks volumes about a tortured soul. ***Is the picture fictional or purely autobiographical?*** The answer does not really matter. It is the painting that matters and, to my mind, it is a commanding image. For example, Hemingway's novels can be read as an autobiography, but that is a stretch; they are the products of his imagination, as are Kiti's paintings. Of course, Hemingway had a rich and exciting life that gave him ample material to work with. Kiti, like any other good artist, must draw, one way or another, from his own experience. Sometimes this experience comes from learning about it - in a book, a film, something - in the end all artists are storytellers.

Kiti loves jazz and classical music. They are part of his life. He is very proud of his friendship with the American born, British violinist, Lord Yehudi Menuhin. Ten of the 1993 special editions, containing additional original works, of the *Kiti Box* are named after the musician.

He showed me a construction in his home, a kind of sculpture, that concealed speakers. The work was very effective. I had been in the room some time by myself and never did know until Kiti pointed it out to me, the source of the music I was hearing. What a perfect combination of media. One did not overpower the other. If you can pardon the pun, they were working in concert. Kiti likes jazz because of its

use of improvisation and he likes classical music because of its rigor. Both of these qualities are echoed in his own work as a visual artist. Abstraction requires improvisation - it means going with the « *flow* »; taking advantage of the accidental; and recognising when a work is going the right way and when it isn't. Rigor means working every day, even when you don't want to, it means understanding the medium or media that you are working with; creating art, while it may be enjoyable, it is still a job-work.

Which direction Kiti will take in the future ? He has certainly already accomplished much more than most artists of his age. He has come out of nowhere, a self-trained *enfant terrible* who I am sure has scared the pants off his more traditional contemporaries with his rapid success. I am sure some people think he is a "flash in the pan", but they are wrong. His current work is very strong indeed. The most recent are contemporary versions of triptychs - a large centre panel flanked by two smaller panels. Triptychs are, of course, a tradition that goes back many centuries in Flemish art, but Kiti's pieces are far removed from van Eyck or Memling. They are more akin to Joan Miró than the ancient Flemish masters.

He recently created four very large triptychs named after the four seasons for the Flanders Expo in 1994 that are stunning. He has learned to use effectively the white space of the ground, particularly in *l'Automne*, *L'Hiver* and *Le Printemps*. *L'Été* is different, for it is really a polyptych, in four parts, on a blue rather than white ground, but no less effective. Kiti's *Les 4 Saisons* are happy works whose coloured abstract figures dance musically on their monochromatic grounds, reminding me of their namesake by Vivaldi, in fact, one could read them as a musical notation.

Juan Kiti, and his art, are refreshing in this period of Post Modern angst. Everywhere I look I find artists whining about what they are owed by the world rather than figuring out what it is that they can give. The art magazines, the art columns in the papers, are filled with articles about Gay Art, Women's Art, Ethnic Art and various other "marginalized" groupings. They want to be shown. No problem there, if they can find a venue, but they want to be liked because of their historic misunderstood past, not because of the "quality" in their art. To question this "political correct" art is to risk being labelled a racist, a sexist or worse. The problem with all of this is that the public is just not buying. Often the public does not like what it sees in much contemporary art of this ilk, so it just doesn't look, and, of course, doesn't buy. Kiti would be labelled by some as commercial - because his works sells and he knows how to market it - and because he is white, and middle-class, irrelevant. Relevance is a big question. Who is to say what is and isn't relevant? The appreciation of art should not be based on collective guilt. Perhaps, there is a place in the appreciation of art for simple enjoyment. Kiti gives us enjoyment. It is a gift of beauty that is there for people who are willing to look.

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