

Mario Benjamin is a stubborn and complex character. He was born in a country where his experience of the absurd forced him into conflict with madness and he was obliged to recreate himself. He fashioned himself alone, far from a world in which he was unable to decently recognize himself. Self-taught, like many fellow-countrymen, Benjamin began a shining career as a portrait artist. As an excellent draughtsman, he found that the wealthy families of Haiti would commission him to paint family portraits, daughters, wives and great-grandparents. He made money and many would have liked to see him imprisoned in this career as court painter. One day, however, he decided to throw it all in. Driven by a strange rage and desperation he began to destroy the beautiful images which had brought him fame. He began to cut up his canvasses in order to break their too easy symmetry, their too settled harmony. He added objects he had found, pieces of cloth and wood. His pictures no longer had their original form. They had to become twisted, "ugly" in order to demonstrate the depth of his rebellion. Nobody could understand anything, no one could appreciate the artist's demands, his desire to desanctify, to reach another form of sanctification. On an island where the domestic market is controlled by a few who have forever renounced their sight for an illusion of quality, Benjamin's choice was considered to be a form of suicide. It has been said that he is mad. As if Van Gogh hadn't already died a thousand times. The intention was to incite him to suicide, for he had dared to do the unthinkable. He, the favourite son of the establishment following a legend fuelled by such as Breton and Malraux, had dared to question the deceptive legitimacy of Haitian painting. Nevertheless, Mario Benjamin persevered, despite the insurrections and coup d'états, the puppet presidents, the ghost presidents, and continued to search from that time on, for the direction his life was to take. That violence, that very organized apparent chaos of his canvasses reflects that of his island's deepest soul. His sculptures, likewise, remind one of so many pieces of meteorite which have fallen from some improbable planet. Here again we are concerned with exile; that of Benjamin being his rebellion against fatality. He expresses the desire of determining alone his fate, to the indignation of everyone, to affirm a truth which couldn't be understood. Haitian art is not the art which is too often displayed to us. There is no deterministic force from which we cannot escape, be it at the risk of paying dearly. This desperate cry must be heard. Not only the life of an artist depends on it, but the fate of a whole people. But Van Gogh is dead. They won't be able to kill him a second time.