

Interview with Maestro Jorge Riveros
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How did you become an artist? At what age did you know this was going to be your life's vocation? How did you arrive in Bogotá and finally, how did you begin studying art at the Escuela de Bellas Artes [School of Fine Arts], where you graduated in 1956?

I had a brother that used to work in advertising making billboards for the highways and for different brands. So, I took some of the pencils and colors that he used for his job, and I started drawing the buses that drove in front of our house. When they stopped to get gas, I went and offered the drawings to the drivers and they gave me a few cents, saying that the bus “looked identical.” Today I think that the only thing that seemed similar was the plate number (laughs). It was at that moment that I started to create things—but also because the people who came to visit our home always praised my brother's talent to draw, and I felt that I was capable of doing that, too. From that moment, at age ten, I wanted to draw and paint. When I started to express that intention, someone told me that the best painters in the world were in Bogotá, and I knew that I had to go there if I wanted to pursue my dream. In 1947, at age thirteen, I asked a family friend who drove a truck to take me to the capital. I climbed over the empty gas tanks that he was transporting, and rode on top of them until I reached downtown Bogotá at about ten at night wearing warm-weather clothes. From then on, I survived making drawings of the animals I saw on the streets, the people who visited the bars, or people I saw passing by. I sold them for a couple of cents.

A few years later, in 1953, I received a scholarship to the Escuela de Bellas Artes and began taking evening classes. Then I started to study during the day and I graduated in three years—not five—with a degree as *Maestro en Pintura y Profesor de dibujo* [degree in painting and drawing instruction].

During the 1950s, you made a living working as an illustrator for newspapers: *El liberal*, *Diario gráfico*, *Cromos*. What kind of illustrations did you make? Did this experience stimulate your later work?

Yes, I started making illustrations for newspapers of bulls, portraits, cartoons, and any kind of drawing that would enable me to remain—practice and survive—in the art field. At the same time, I completed the drawing assignments that the teachers at school requested. For example, the engraving teacher would ask students to submit three hundred drawings each month of anything that we wanted: I was the only one from the entire class who did it. These experiences were what kept me in the profession; they allowed me to improve as a draftsman and I was able to buy the materials I needed to continue working and fulfilling not only the school's requirements, but most importantly, my own as well.

In 1960 you had your first exhibition, and it was figurative painting. In an interview with Leopoldo Pinzón M. from the same year, “My Painting is Honest and Sincere,”

in *El espectador*, you say that you are solely a figurative artist, and that until you totally master that language you won't begin anything else. [You also stated that] you do not know if you will move towards abstraction. What can you tell us about that time and your figurative work?

At that time, the ones [artists] who did not make modern paintings were not taken seriously. My artworks for the exhibition were figurative, influenced by Impressionism, without being Impressionist. Before the exhibition, I had made a lot of copies of Vincent Van Gogh, Edgar Degas, Paul Gauguin, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, among others. As a student I made my first attempts towards [experiments with] geometry, and it almost got me expelled from school. The dean at the time threatened me, saying that if I ever painted anything geometric again, he would dismiss me and revoke my scholarship. So, I worked with figurative art at that time and—although I did not know which path I was going to take [artistically]—I was sure I had to have a solid artistic foundation and tools before moving into any other method of painting.

You could say that I was, and still am, a figurative painter—not in the traditional meaning of the word, but in using other forms. Here, the word “figurative” does not make reference to what imitative artists paint, but to the forms that can be known.

At what point did you become an abstract artist? Was it before or after you went to Europe? Was this a gradual process or a more immediate shift? How would you define the abstract impulse in your work? In the 1950s, '60s and '70s in Latin America, there was a great tendency towards abstraction. Do you think you were part of that impulse, the *Zeitgeist* of the moment? What interested you in abstraction that you could not do with figuration?

Before I went to Europe I had already begun experimenting with abstract art but without using geometry. It was not until I arrived in Germany in 1965 that I started to work with geometric forms in white/black, white/black/grey, white/black/blue, and white/black/green before complementing this palette with other colors during the '70s. It all arose from the idea to paint without using *colorines* [too many colors], taking the experience I had up to that moment, and arranging my paintings based on my knowledge about color in order to develop an abstraction that was more concrete in its forms. For this reason, the process of venturing into abstraction was progressive, since it meant going back to ideas that I had as a student and connecting them with the desire to work with geometry.

The circumstances of the '50s, '60s, and '70s did not influence my decision to work in abstraction; though I must clarify that my work was done alone, because I had no support from artistic institutions, colleagues, representatives, critics, or the media. In Colombia I could not participate in the exhibitions of the great masters because I did not belong to this group, nor could I participate in the shows of new, vanguard artists because I didn't belong there either. The motivation to work in abstraction arose when I understood that painting was not limited to what I was taught in the *Escuela de Bellas Artes*, but that there were other ways of painting, which I started to study and research in more depth in Europe. During my stay on that continent, I received little information about art from Latin America, so I relied on the geometric art that I saw in the museums; Peruvian indigenous textiles, which I came to learn about from books and documentaries that were shown in Germany and that I had already seen in Colombia; and the book *Constructive Universalism* [*El universalismo constructivo*] by

[Joaquín] Torres-García that I read as a student. This book in particular was an important tool on the path that I chose in abstraction. After working in, and [conducting] researching on, [abstraction], I could agree with the majority of the statements and concepts that are described in [the book]. There is a quote that says: “Dark night for these lands...! You have to wake up! [You have] to be mistreated, to be disciplined for so much artistic sin, and with stone beat the chest and crack the skull, if appropriate, for the idea to enter. Carnival of art, in which everything is loud! That is why the sweet sound of harmony is not perceived: gray. The dear gray for the big ones! And the white, and the black, and the earth...and the tone...and the qualities: all absolute values, essential, because without them there is no painting!” And then continues: “And the form? Show them what it is, you who are in the abstract. Show them what the geometrical plane is, and that art is to find that and not imitate it. Show them what the value of linear design is. And tell them that art will return to that.”¹

When I started with abstraction, I felt that I had worked enough in the figurative mode and that I was no longer interested in painting more academic or veristic works. I wanted, instead, to experiment with something different, with new motivations and demands. I got interested in the idea of seeking the bidimensionality of the surface and not the tridimensionality through color gradation

My attention is drawn to the fact that as an artist from South America you did not stay in Madrid or Paris, but rather went to establish yourself in Germany in 1965. What led you to this decision?

In 1964 I won an eight-month scholarship to visit the museums in Europe. I arrived in Madrid by boat and took the opportunity to enroll in a mural painting course at the school of San Fernando during that period. At the end of the eight months I decided to go live in Germany, given that I had the opportunity [at San Fernando] to take drawing and mural painting classes with a German Salvatorian father, Ivo Schaible, whom I deeply admired for his artistic abilities, his demeanor and incredible discipline. The latter caught my attention because I was convinced—and still am—that to be a good painter a lot of order and discipline is needed. I felt that in Germany I was going to be able to strengthen these attributes and I wanted to expose myself to an environment that would challenge me as a person and as an artist. I decided to settle initially in Bremen, since it was sufficiently far away from Spain, France, and Italy—where all of my colleagues were—and prevented the temptation to go back. From the entire group in Spain, I was the only one who went to Germany. I also wanted to learn about the museums, the culture, and I wanted to learn some of the language to be able to one day speak with Father Ivo Schaible in his own language.

What were your great artistic influences, especially in relation to abstraction? During your formative period, I understand Obregón was very important—could you tell us why? Has the Bauhaus been another important influence?

My greatest influences with respect to abstraction were without a doubt Joaquín Torres-García, Paul Klee, Vasily Kandinsky, and Piet Mondrian. When I was a student at the Escuela de Bellas Artes, what I had always heard of Alejandro Obregón was that he was the best artist in Colombia. I admired his work and never thought to speak with him at the time. Nevertheless, I once had the opportunity to show Maestro Obregón a small painting that I was making for a contest. He stared at it, smiled a bit and said,

¹ Joaquín Torres-García, “Lección 4 Cambio de Plano,” in *El universalismo constructivo*, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Poseidon, 1944), p.60. The quotation above is translated from the original Spanish.

“*Donde uno menos piensa, salta la liebre.*² This little painting [*vaina*] is divided in four parts, and they are four well-painted squares!” In 1961 I saw him again at the Santander Park in Bogotá. He greeted me by my name—which surprised me—and he asked me if I had exhibited yet, to which I responded that I was still *verde* [not ready]. “*Verde* is the one at the Biblioteca Nacional and *verde* is the one at the Leo Matiz Gallery,” he answered. I asked: “Maestro, I have not exhibited yet, but tell me something—what is the secret to being a good painter?” He replied: “Order forty canvases and when you finish painting thirty-nine, look for a gallery and show twenty of them. When they are praising you and saying you are a genius, you won’t pay attention to them but instead you will already be thinking about your next exhibition. Then go home and order another forty canvases and repeat the process again and again. The time will come when you will be like a lion in a corner. Whoever reaches their hand towards you will have it ripped from them.” Then he left and I went straight to the carpenter to get forty stretchers made. In Germany I learned about the Bauhaus and I was fascinated with this movement. I admired Paul Klee, Vasily Kandinsky and Josef Albers a lot. I even made some work as a tribute to Piet Mondrian.

Could you tell us about the groups—Semikolon and Konstruktives Gestalten—that you belonged to [in Germany]? Which years were you a part of them? What kind of artists were they? Were there any Latin American artists? What kind of art did they do? I’m intrigued by the work of the Gestalten group, because of the reference to Gestalt psychology. Does it [the group’s name] refer to the idea of universal forms, or is it a specific reference to the Berlin School of psychology?

I joined the Semikolon group in 1966, then in 1967 I joined the Konstruktives Gestalten [Gestalt Constructivists] in Bonn, the capital of Germany at the time. We were a group of artists that supported each other in working and finding exhibition spaces but none of them really influenced my work. Semikolon in particular sought to revive art within everyday life; to expand the reach of cultural activities into different areas of Germany; and to avoid isolating art, because it brings with it the artist’s seclusion. We had our own space, and we invited people to visit our studio where we worked on anything we wanted: some made drawings, others worked in sculpture; some made figurative art, and a few others [made] abstract art. Sometimes we would exhibit at winter salons or we would participate in collective exhibitions. I was the only person from Latin America.

In a 1967 article by Amparo Hurtado in *El espectador* titled, “German Critics Praise Riveros’s Artworks,” Hurtado wrote; “Riveros cultivates a dramatic abstraction of Parisian origin, with vehement conflicts between opposing energies of light and shape, discharging energy in the center of the canvas.” In the same article she mentioned that your paintings have a “South American” character to them because of their color and vitality. I want to ask you if you believe this description is accurate for your work. Would you say that your abstraction of the time is “Parisian” rather than “German constructivist”? Is the idea of a South American character to your work valid? In what sense? How would you compare your work to those of other German abstract artists of the time? Were your colors more vivid, greater in contrast, than theirs? What characterized you then?

² Equivalent English idiom: “Opportunity knocks when you least expect it.”

German constructivism would be a better fit to describe my work, given that I only knew about Paris from the small books on Impressionism I found in libraries. The technical and formal construction of my work, as well as the motivation, will, and discipline were under the German influence.

The South American character has always lived within me. It's reflected in my work through the shapes, the colors, the symbols, and even the titles. The South American character flows effortlessly, because it's always there. To me, the years that I lived in Germany were a great learning experience, but the works I made came to life because of the ancestral legends; I was distant geographically, but through painting I was still connected to my roots. The symbols, color, and geometry [in my work] offer the inner values of the language that is born within, rooted to the land of origin, and are combined with the seriousness, discipline, and the surroundings that I breathed in from Germany at the time.

What's funny is that, when I returned to my country, the public in general didn't understand that the type of abstract geometric art [I was making] is linked historically to pre-Colombian art. I think that in general, the memory of these innate patterns has been lost—the language and communication of past civilizations. The union of this imagery with European, modern conscience, is eventually what my work is about, and where I try to bring to life a renovated language that encourages looking at both the unknown and the mysterious of something forgotten. If through painting we are able to incite something inside of us, we will be able to find a connection to origins and awaken the collective unconscious.

With regard to the painters I met in Germany, I worked for many years using fewer colors than they did. I did not think that this made the work less valuable, but instead made it stronger and more serious. My work is characterized by constantly finding possibilities, paths, shapes, contrasts, tensions, musicality, etc. I did many sketches before making a painting, and I still have a handful of those that I made during my time in Germany. Unfortunately, before coming back, I got rid of a lot of works, sketches, drawings, engravings, etc.

I don't know if there was any reaction on your part to the use of aggressive colors after 1967, because the works that I have seen from '68 and '69 have a very sober color palette—basically grays, whites, and blacks, sometimes blue. What led you to reduce your palette in such a way as to concentrate primarily on geometrical compositions where the circle plays a leading role? For example, *in Serie fundamentos #2 (1969-2006)* and *Serie conductas internas #8 (1969-2010)*, as well as in compositions with geometric lines that refer to archeological structures, such as *Serie laberinto #1 (2) (1968)*? Could you tell us about these works and what you were specifically seeking in creating them?

Indeed, from 1967 until about 1970 I worked mainly with white, black, and gray scales. Later I started adding blue and green, and in 1970 I started making works with more colors. When I arrived in Germany, I limited my use of color and looked to express more with less. Later, however, I began to explore more possibilities of form and color as a way of inner expression.

The circle is, without a doubt, the beginning and the end: it not only brings equilibrium and symmetry, but order and extraordinary harmony to space. The circle, according to the feelings and emotions of the viewer, can trigger storms or bring peace and quiet. It's the main character and occasionally plays the role of loyal companion to the other elements. Primarily, it's placed between the center and top [of the canvas], evoking ascension, the rising of the spirit. For me, the circle represents

vitality, the central energy in which all tensions are summed up. The majority of my work includes a circle or a half circle.

In terms of the sketch *Serie laberinto #1*, which actually does not include a circular form, I was trying to work through an idea I had in the moment. Ideas appear and those ideas make you add or remove shapes and colors. It is all part of my research on geometric abstraction.

I am very interested in the fact that your work was described as “aggressive constructivism” in a 1973 article by Astrid Holzamer in *Bonner Generalanzeiger*, or, as Hurtado understood them—“vehement conflicts.” While Hurtado examines the concentration of tension at the center of your canvases, Holzamer talks about the bright and aggressive colors that contrast with your earlier works, described as “conservative constructivist.” Do you think this is an accurate description? What kind of work were you doing?

The work from 1967 to 1970 could be considered more conservative, if one had to say, since I worked mainly in black, white, blue, and gray scales. I later complemented them with other colors, and the work could then be read as brighter. I interpret this “aggressiveness” as the potential of forms and colors to represent geometry without reservations, to express both its essence and the inner force of its figures in all their integrity. The placement of the shapes in space, with the contrast of color, produces its own vibrations and tensions. They’re all built under a normative framework, within the order of a thoughtful and disciplined composition. The shapes express their individuality through their inherent symbolic load, while at the same time they call out to each other through their color. The forms are apparent to the viewer but in the context of the canvas they write their own story with artistic and symbolic meaning.

I want to ask you about the titles of your work. In some cases you use titles that are completely abstract, such as *Vertical violeta* (*Vertical Purple*, 1977); *Construcción en rojo* (*Construction in Red*, 1976); or *Triángulo blanco* (*White Triangle*, 1973). It seems that [the titles] indicate the compositional elements that govern the painting. Which color and structural form is important to you? Here [the titles] seem to situate the work from the point of view of its geometry and use of color. Could you elaborate on these paintings and give us an example of how the titles guide us through your work?

The titles of my works are born in different ways. In the examples you mentioned, indeed the title comes from the forms and the main color—the one that catches your attention when looking at the work. Other titles relate to memories, such as *Serie luz de pasado* (1970s) and *Azul de ayer* (1968-2007);³ feelings, like in *Afirmación* (1977), *Romance* (1977-1997), and *Serie conductas internas* (1960s, '70s);⁴ or emotions, in titles like *Máscara* (1970), *Por dentro* (1973), and *Vigilia* (1975-2001).⁵ The titles reference the universe in *Cósmico* (1976), *Luz sobre el espacio* (1978), and *Luna azul* (1976);⁶ or nature, in *Amanecer*

³ English translation of titles listed here follow the order of their appearance in the text above: “Lights of the Past” series; *Blue From Yesterday*

⁴ *Affirmation*; *Romance*; “Inner Conduct” series

⁵ *Masks*; *Inside*; *Vigil*

⁶ *Cosmic*; *Light Over Space*; *Blue Moon*

(1976), and *Serie horizontal de mar* (1970s);⁷ to my roots, like in *Chibcha* (1970),⁸ *Indio Negro Gris* (1970), *Serie raíces* (1970s), and *Serie tejidos* (1960);⁹ or some, to my own creative process, such as *Serie fundamentos* (1960s,'70s), *Serie evocación constructiva* (1960s,'70s), *Desarrollo de una idea* (1960s), and *Composición* (1970s).¹⁰

In our meeting in March of this year you explained that your abstraction seeks a certain kind of order, an ethical sense of control, not only in the composition, but in the use of color to go beyond reality and its conflicts. Nevertheless, a lot of your titles, despite the inevitable abstraction in your paintings, make important references to the real world, like the ones that refer to landscapes: *Luna azul* and *Amanecer*. In other [titles] the reference seems to be mainly to an existential order, like in *Grito* (*Scream*, 1972) or *Serie conductas internas*. Finally, there are a lot of titles that speak about a sense of temporality like in *Cósmico I* (1976); *Dimensión eterna* (*Eternal Dimension*) (1975); and *Serie Tiempo* [*Time series*] (1968). Could you explain how these titles come to be, and how you feel they establish a relationship to a reality that escapes the pictorial plane, which, despite its inability to recognize narrative content, perhaps still communicates symbolic content?

I always try to avoid titles that evoke dry, concise figurative forms, so that the viewer is not encouraged to find more shapes than are presented in the work. The titles refer to feelings, emotions, memories, the universe, nature, my roots or the development of my creative process. They make reference to the intangible, and in the end, they complement the piece in a way; but they are not what gives a voice to the work, nor what expresses its intentions.

I would like to hear about your color theory, about how it is used in your work as the main element to create both tension and structure. In several cases your use of color is bright, contrasted and rich, while in other cases it is very sober.

My general rule is to work with a lot of grays, either in oil or acrylic. I also try to use a limited amount of pure colors. What I do is I take the color out of the tube and I mix it to get different tones. In general, I look for a range of colors that go well with each other. For example, if I use a muted green, I can put it together with a blue or a yellowish green. If I use blue, I can use black and surround both with white and gray. When I use a pure color, I always try to put it on top of a gray. When I seek to create three-dimensional forms, I do it through the brightness of color, putting cold and neutral colors next to warm colors. When creating gradation, I start with black and move towards the lighter tones; meaning, I add white to the black. Then I add more and more white until I get, for example, twenty different tones of gray; I put them together in four groups of five grays. Then I take one from the first group and one from the last and put them next to each other or next to any other color. The selection of grays from each group depends on the contrast and harmony I want to achieve. Here is where the painter shows his sensibility. If we spoke of this as if it were music, we would put a cello with a violin. The most

⁷ *Sunrise*; “Horizontal Sea” series

⁸ *Chibcha* refers to an indigenous culture from Colombia

⁹ *Black and Gray Indian*; “Roots” series; “Weave” series

¹⁰ “Foundations” series; “Constructive Evocation” series; *Developing an Idea*; *Composition*

aggressive is the contrast between the darkest and brightest [colors], which would be white and black. With oil you can work better with shapes and textures, given that the structure of the medium allows for a wider range of treatment. With acrylic I am more worried about the clarity of forms.

Could you tell us about the use of the circle in your work? In several of your paintings, like *Círculos* (Circles, 1972) or *Cósmico I* (Cosmic I, 1976), the circle—or circles together with the colors—are the main elements on the [picture] plane. Even though the circle is without a doubt a geometric form, it is not the easiest to structure within the plane, especially in relation to the straight lines, squares, and rectangles you so often incorporate. What is the meaning of the circle to you? What does it allow you to do?

In geometric abstraction, generally, it is not usual for the circle to intervene in the spaces constructed by lines, squares, and rectangles. I decided to break with the circle's isolation, to work with it as a form that is always ascending, moving towards the top of the canvas, and occasionally coming out and leaving a half-circle. It is the shape that allows me to elevate, to refer to the superior. It is the figure of infinitude for some cultures and has always been charged with symbolic meaning, from the solar wheels of cave painting to the polychromatic circles of Robert Delaunay.

Why did you decided to return to Colombia in 1974?

I got married to my wife, Inge Beeck de Riveros, in Bonn. We had our first son in 1972 in the city of Essen. After six years of being together, my wife wanted to go to Colombia; she wanted me to be close to my family after being in Europe for ten years. We decided to go back and settle in Bogotá. I also thought that because of my experience living and working in Europe I was going to have better opportunities in Colombia, but I was wrong.

Despite the fact that you were an abstract artist when you returned to Bogotá, you taught art in traditional areas such as still life, portraiture, nudes, landscape, and drawing at the Universidad Nacional [National University] and the Tadeo Lozano University. Why didn't you dedicate yourself to teaching modern or abstract art? You devoted two decades of your life to teaching; what kind of impact did that have in your life?

It was my desired to teach modern or abstract art. However, neither the country nor the universities were prepared for the kind of art I did, which was more recognized in Europe. The school directors and students didn't understand or appreciated it, so the only classes available for teaching were the traditional ones. I initially started to give classes part-time, and after a month they offered me a full-time position. They asked that I teach first-year classes, and then, by request of the students, I started working with them through their later coursework and into their final years of study.

The abstract art that I had been doing did not generate any interest in the country; students were looking to paint [academically], and most of the time they didn't understand that these [abstract] teachings and tools were the foundation to being able to do something different. I had to adapt to give those classes in school, but I took every opportunity to teach my students to go beyond what they were

taught. I encouraged them to paint freely, motivating and stimulating them to go and seek the infinity of possibilities they had to work with.

How did returning to the country affect you given the fact that geometric abstraction wasn't the major language of interest? In which direction did your work move? Did the circumstances limit your geometric investigation after 1975?

When I returned to Colombia I found myself with a reality that was difficult to face, since the art situation was very different to the one in Europe. When I left Colombia I was working figuratively and here [Europe] I was working in abstraction. When I returned, I was abstract and here [Colombia] figurative art was the craze. I did an exhibition with the works I exhibited in Germany and others that I had created after my return. The people's reaction was one of shock—they didn't understand my work. In Germany I had made a name for myself and I could live off of my work; in Colombia I had to reinvent myself. I started teaching at the Universidad Nacional while I kept working on my paintings and exhibiting, so much so that other artists would ask me where I found my strength and the time to both teach classes and paint for shows. I transitioned to constructivism in the 1980s and worked on it through the end of the '90s. The circumstances of Colombian art, along with a desire to experiment and conduct research on constructivism, were my incentives during this period. While in Germany they knew me for geometric abstraction, in Colombia they knew me for constructivism.

I would like you to explain what constructivism means to you. From the perspective, for example, of Russian constructivism, this movement represents a form of radical geometric abstraction. Because of this, it is not clear to me how you differentiate [constructivism] from geometric abstraction. Does it refer to the "constructive universalism" of Torres-Garcia? Does it refer to pre-Colombian origins? Was there still a wish for abstraction? Do the symbols you use in these paintings have any connotation in terms of content? How did people from Colombia receive this phase of your work?

I have always painted from within, without thinking about which artistic trend would fit. It has been the critics or [art] historians who put my works into a movement through their writings and articles, and that's how I have referred to them [the works]. What I can surely affirm is that the works from the 1980s and '90s are heavier in the use of forms and designs. There is more paint and layering in them, and I used a greater variety of techniques to make the paintings in comparison to the pieces made in the 1960s and '70s. They share, nonetheless, the same core in terms of the geometric forms, symbols, inner discourse, and the search for a spiritual elevation and the memory of pre-Colombian roots. Both [techniques] are daring—the first because of its forms and its arrangements within the frame, and the second because of its use of colors and how they combine.

In Colombia, different exhibitions were mounted with the works from the 1980s and 90s and they were well received. My impression is that Colombia knows me more for this period than for any other, given that the works from the 1960s and '70s were presented after my return [to Colombia] and they were not shown again until later in 2010.

Regardless of the abstract geometric impulse of your works from the 1960s, in the '80s and '90s you experimented with other forms of painting that, although predominantly abstract now contained expressionist elements. Their compositions are looser and eclectic; the brush strokes are visible and they even have different qualities within the same work. Because of the way in which the geometric elements float in the picture plane, it seems that there is a will to break with the restrictions of geometry. Could you talk about this other side of your creative process, which is less visible and less known in spite of the fact that it was more popular [in Colombia] during the 1980s and '90s? It caught my attention that even though there are different painters inside Maestro Riveros, you have chosen to make only one of them public—the abstract geometric painter.

I feel the works made in the 1980's and '90s are a combination of the spiritual and the earthy—nature—not only because of the colors but also because of the forms. The circle is still the main shape of the painting, but while [my] geometric abstractions have only one color [in the circles], these [later circles] burst with more colors in them. The paintings also include diamond shapes, triangles, patterns, and lines, with a considerable amount of indigenous symbology. These works [from the '80s and '90s] allowed me to continue my interest in the correct handling of color and to seek through it the forms and magic of ancient civilizations, to translate these forms on the canvas in a contemporary language.

My work has always been public: I have exhibited it as I have painted it. However, the public today seems to be more interested in knowing my “unknown works” [geometric abstraction] because time has passed since I've painted [them], and I didn't show them until recently. Also, the abstract geometric work had a different understanding and acceptance overseas than it did in Colombia when I returned, so now I have the opportunity to show it again. The reaction of the public made me have doubts about the work, but at this point I have no doubts. I move forward and don't look backwards.

I read that since 1999—when you left teaching—you have dedicated yourself to realizing the work you conceived as drafts and sketches before returning to Colombia. What made you want to paint this work that was left unfinished at that moment?

I felt a deep necessity to restart the work I had made in Germany—a great need to take out the sketches and work on them again. I feel there is still a lot to study and try. Many sketches did not make it to the canvas and others were left unfinished. I don't want to leave them incomplete, because [the sketches] are part of the precision with which I work. I also feel that it was an opportunity for the public to see [them], and above all, for them to know that I have been constantly working without interruption since the day I decided to be a painter, from when I was a boy. To reconnect with [these works] has made me remember and feel great emotion and inner motivation.

Could you tell me about the influence of the pre-Colombian on your work—the textile aesthetics, the architecture, not only of Colombia, but of Mexico and Peru? You told me earlier that you were not interested in copying them, but in understanding their sophisticated aesthetic and their constructivist principles in depth. There were also other artist in Colombia that looked to the pre-Colombian, like [Édgar] Negret, [Eduardo Ramírez] Villamizar, and [Omar] Rayo. Do you think that you all have been part of a common trend in Colombia? Was there any contact or exchange of ideas between you?

I have always felt a deep admiration for pre-Colombian art and its structure. These countries, such as Mexico, Peru and Colombia, among others, have the fortune of having a valuable heritage, which artists have the responsibility to recover, or at least refer to through our work. It is our essence and our roots. In my work in particular, I reference it [pre-Colombian art] in the composition, the color, the forms, and even the titles. Peruvian textiles are extraordinary and of an incredibly rich aesthetic. I was friends with Ramírez Villamizar and Rayo, but I only had the opportunity to say hello to Negret at an exhibition. In terms of the pre-Columbian influence in our works, I personally had no exchange with them. However, it could be said that the individuals of this group worked [with the pre-Colombian] towards making paintings to evoke something more important than what was common in the country at the time.

In your curriculum vitae I read that in the 1980s you developed an interest in the pre-Colombian. However, in the '60s, this seems to be evident both in the works [you produced at that time] and in their titles, such as *Serie tejidos (1960s)*; *Serie raices (1970s)*; *Indio negro gris (1970)*; *Indígena (1970)*; *Máscara (1970)*; *Vestigio Ancestral (1970)*;¹¹ and many others. Could we talk about how these titles relate to the works, for example, in *Tejidos #1 (1967-1998)*? Could this be read—from the way you compose the work— as a deconstruction of pre-Colombian symbols and their reinvention on a white and black abstract plane, where there are certain concentric rhythms that are both in dialogue and in tension with each other? Is it directly related to a specific textile? It is very interesting to me to think that even in Germany you were still working with these American cultural references.

My painting is the expression of the American blood that runs through my veins—I have said it before and I say it now. My work has always been influenced in one way or another by the pre-Colombian, the indigenist. However, since the 1980s, it became a more conscious feeling, more intense, and maybe it was because I had returned to my country and I hadn't found something concrete to represent that intention. In my geometric abstraction, that influence is also evident—the memory of history and culture, our legacy.

In many of my works I try to conjure the vibration of pre-Colombian forms and invite them to speak in a modern context, and it is there, where tension or musicality is created. The colors or the forms transit through the canvas and give their entire essence to the work. The sketches made in Germany are greatly charged with American culture.

¹¹ *Ancestral Vestige*

Could you tell us about your vision for the future? Would you be interested in exploring new things or do you want to remain focused on making the work from the 1960s and '70s that was left unfinished?

I want to finish the incomplete works of the 1960s and '70s, but I would definitely have to live two hundred more years to be able to make everything I want. My wish is to be healthy and to keep expressing myself, because I feel that I still have endless ideas to work on and emotions to express.