

VENUS OVER MANHATTAN

Obrist, Hans Ulrich, "Questions from Hans Ulrich Obrist: Do Artists Live Longer?," *Das Magazin: Tages-Anzeiger*, No. 38, September 21, 2024, illustrated, p. 31.

Questions from Hans Ulrich Obrist

DO ARTISTS LIVE LONGER?

In recent years, I have conducted over thirty interviews with artists who have lived to a very old age. The oldest artist, and the oldest person I have ever met, was the pianist Alice Herz-Sommer. When I met her, she was 104 (she lived to be 110), and she told me brightly about Franz Kafka, with whom she was close friends in her native Prague. I noticed two things about her, as well as the other elderly artists: Firstly, they were in a very positive mood. And secondly, they all still pursued their art every day. I've never been concerned with the question of how to live as long as possible, but I do find it interesting how these two things—passion for work and positivity—can be found in people who reach a biblical age. Recently I had another encounter with a centenarian.

Richard Mayhew is an American landscape painter born in 1924 who, as the child of African American and indigenous parents, certainly did not only experience pleasant things in the racist America of the 1950s and 1960s. He had joined the civil rights movement and the Spiral Group, a group of African American artists who, then and now, never received the recognition they deserved. But he was never bitter or hopeless. He followed his mentor James Baldwin, who told him to imagine a multicultural society, even though it was unimaginable at the time.

Optimism saved him during this difficult time, but above all, so did his painting. Mayhew began as a landscape painter and was influenced by the plein air painting of the Hudson River School, especially by George Inness (1825-1894), whose landscapes in the style of French realism shaped the image of the vast American land of opportunity. But over the years, although his subject matter has not changed, his interest in what he wants to depict has changed.

It is still the landscape through which he expresses himself. But what he communicates with them is no longer the vastness of the land, but his inner, emotional states. Fear, love, and hope are expressed in his pictures of fields, valleys, and trees, painted in ever more vibrant colors. His art, he told me, was a lifelong healing process for him. And when he said that, he laughed.

Hans Ulrich Obrist is artistic director of the Serpentine Galleries in London.