

## Michel Sima (1912-1987) – Artists in their Studio

Michel Sima's work with photographic portraits of artists began essentially in 1946. That year Sima followed the creative process for Pablo Picasso's *La joie de vivre*. In doing so he not only documented the various stages in the artistic execution (as was his original intention), but also considered his work from the very outset as a holistic, personal representation of the artist and his oeuvre. In the following years, he portrayed nearly all the artists at the *École de Paris*, artists such as Henri Matisse, François Picabia, Ossip Zadkine, Alberto Giacometti, Jean Cocteau, Tal Coat, Jean Arp, Marie Laurencin, Fernand Léger, Max Ernst, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, André Derain, Kees van Dongen, Le Corbusier, Marc Chagall, Joan Miró, and Alexander Calder. Sima's underlying affinity towards, and friendship with, those portrayed shone through in all of these artists' portraits, not just in the photographs of Picasso. It expressed itself by capturing most sensitively the personality and work of each particular artist. The relationship established with both the work and the studio as part of his setup is also cleverly used to allow the portrayed artist to express himself, as it were. The result is an idiosyncratic style of (artist) portraiture using the medium of photography, a unique documentation of the artists at the *École de Paris*, unequalled by any other photographer in its cohesiveness and sensitivity.

In 1948 he published *Picasso in Antibes*, followed soon thereafter, in 1954, by *21 visages d'artistes*, whose publication also marked the end of his photographic oeuvre, which by then had extended over more than ten years. The reason was that the print quality failed to live up to Sima's expectations. Indeed, a comparison with the art publications of the day and the fact that photographs had been reproduced in remarkable quality already prior to 1940 clearly show, from today's point of view, that the publication fell short of even an average standard of book printing.

It is only in the very recent past that Sima's portraits of artists have attracted interest from informed circles. A number of photographs belonging to the collection of François Meyer were shown as part of the *Art Faces* exhibition at the Kunsthalle Würth (Schwäbisch Hall) in 2003. The portraits of Picasso, which alongside the portraits of Matisse and other artists represent a discrete group of works in Sima's oeuvre, were also a separate element of the touring exhibition *La joie de vivre*, which was shown at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice in 2006/2007 in co-operation with the Musée Picasso in Antibes.

It is a great honour and pleasure for me and my staff to be able to offer Michel Sima, twenty years after his death, the one thing which presumably he wished for so dearly during his life,

namely a publication of the very highest quality featuring his artists' portraits; I do so thanks to the closest co-operation with Erika Billeter, Till Schaap and of course Odette and Pierre Sima as well as Jean-Luc Meyssonier. The book is also designed to familiarise readers with Sima's distinct, groundbreaking photographic portraiture, which goes far beyond mere reproduction by giving the onlooker an insight, in the subtlest of ways, into the portrayed artist's personality. To coincide with the presentation of the book, a sales exhibition is scheduled to open on our premises in Lucerne. We very much believe that the more than 100 works in medium and large formats, together with the many contemporary documents, will contribute towards making Sima's life and work better known. As the oldest Fine Art Auction House in Switzerland and one of Europe's leading auction houses it is our ambition, during this anniversary year marking our centenary, to continue our series of sales exhibitions with this largest ever presentation of Sima's works. We hope that friends and customers of Galerie Fischer will embark on a journey, in the company of Michel Sima, through the beginnings of modern art as it was shaped by the artists of the École de Paris.

And yet this publication together with the exhibition on our premises would have been inconceivable without the support of Odette and Pierre Sima. I am greatly indebted to them for the open and rewarding discussions, and for the trust you have shown me. The stories, accounts and anecdotes from Michel Sima's life conveyed a vivid picture of the photographer among the artists of the École de Paris. I would also like to thank Jean-Luc Meyssonier for his efforts in connection with Sima's estate and for his outstanding photographic prints. This monograph enjoyed the financial support of the Estate of Daniel Barr, and I would like to take this opportunity to express my thanks for this contribution, without which the publication could not have been realised. I would also like to thank my friend Till Schaap, from Benteli Verlag, for his commitment, and the fact that he was always there with help and advice whenever I needed it. Most of all I am indebted to Erika Billeter. The many conversations we had about art were most stimulating. It was she who introduced me to Sima's photographic work, knowing full well at the time, I suspect, that I would be completely in thrall to the man and his work. Many thanks!

*Kuno Fischer*