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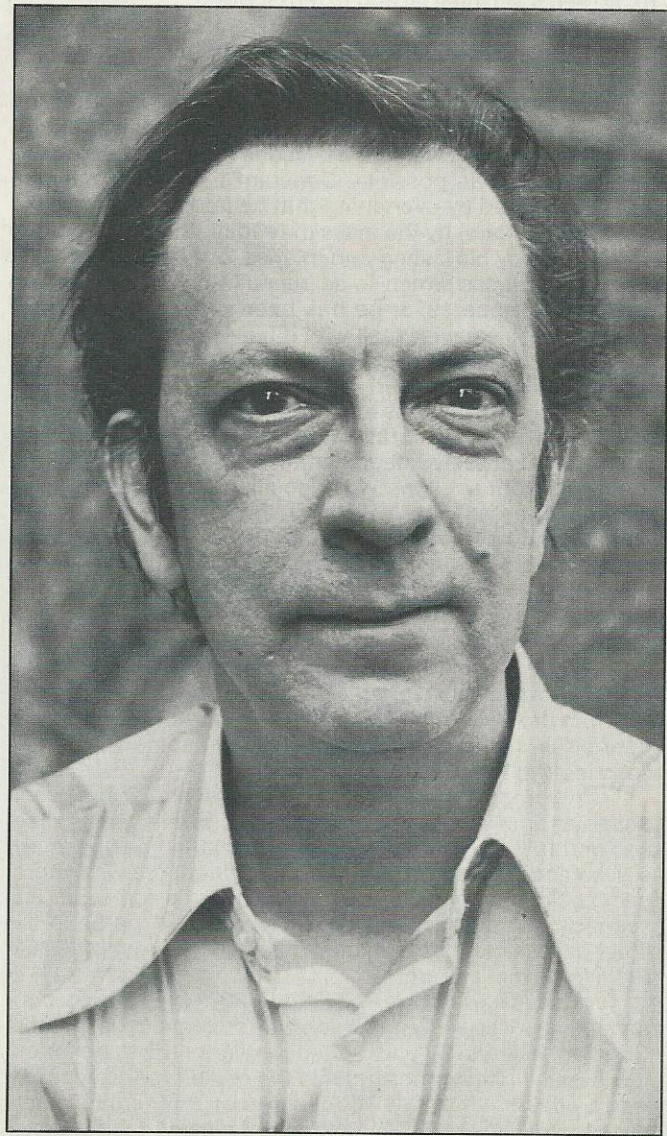
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## Constant the artist: Beyond New Babylon

by Fanny Kelk

Cobra, the tri-national group of artists, was founded in 1948 on the terrace of a Paris café by a few young painters who had been drawn together as kindred spirits and by their ideas on the future of painting. The contact sprang chiefly from the friendship between Constant Nieuwenhuys and Asger Jorn, and the name Cobra was formed from the initial letters of the painters' home cities: Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam. Copenhagen was represented by Jorn, Brussels by Christian Dotremont, and Amsterdam by Constant, Corneille and Karel Appel. The members of Cobra were opposed to aesthetics in painting, to bourgeois art in general, and to the insularity of Paris as reflected in the veneration and over-valuation of the post-war Paris school. Constant had already published a manifesto in which these new ideas were formulated, and which contained his now-famous remark: "A painting is not a structure of colours and lines, but an animal, a night, a cry, a man, or all of these together."

Although Constant's paintings of this period are unusually vehement and fiery they are extremely spacious. That became particularly clear when the Amsterdam Municipal Museum recently exhibited its collection of Cobra works, as did the fact that the differences between the Cobra members are greater than the similarities, and that Constant's work, at any rate, was never decorative or aes-



*Constant Nieuwenhuys*



thetic, and that he always employed figurative elements to express his ideas.

When the group dissolved after a few years Appel and Corneille remained in France to pursue their development as painters. Constant returned to the Netherlands and abandoned painting altogether, since he no longer saw any point in it. He had lost his faith in the future of painting, which he declared to be dead. Working on his own he developed the New Babylon project, in which he used drawings, models and the written word to set down his ideas on a new vision of the future. New Babylon is a mental and physical environment in which the structures have a graphic, spatial effect. Much of this project is now in the possession of the Municipal Museum in The Hague, which also houses the large Mondrian collection.

When Constant returned to painting after 10 years of "silence" his works were at first devoted to the New Babylon theme and to the new vision he had gained from the project. But already one could detect a remarkable process of stylistic renewal at work. It is only seldom that an important artist unintentionally develops a totally new style later in life, but this is what has happened in the case of Constant. In these later paintings the viewer looks upon broader perspectives, on spaces which can be altered using movable partitions, which contain no permanent structures or walls, and which present no unequivocal vision of nature, no separate internal and external world.

Human shapes — sketchy, spectral, and all with a strong erotic content — move amorphously within this decor.

It turned out that Constant's work on New Babylon had erected an enormous barrier between him and the earlier paintings, but it was this that made his development of a late, second style possible. Constant's return to painting was determined by everything that he had absorbed in the intervening years, by the mass of reading that he had done and, finally, by his lasting and intense love of painting. And it is the newness which is so remarkable. For some two years now, since 1975, he has been producing a sort of cycle of large canvases, all with different titles but all dealing with the conflict between society and morality, with morality being interpreted in the widest sense — social and erotic — as Constant has encountered it in his reading. The cycle as a whole is enthralling, and each individual painting is unprecedentedly magnificent, although they are all totally different as regards composition, colour and atmosphere. Whereas the paintings from the "preliminary period" still have the characteristics, more or less, of the New Babylon etchings, drawings and plans, and although they contain recurring Cobra traits, such as drawing directly in colour with the brush, the accentuation of a detail, the use of a figurative element as a sign, a symbol, generally in a striking and pure colour, the cycle of large paintings which have been emerging since 1975 have broken with the style of the past. Only the careful observer, the connoisseur or the art lover will detect, somewhat to his surprise, the hand of Constant.

All of these paintings portray a definite scene, composed of figurative elements, but none of the events, scenes or figures is painted from life. Everything has been observed and processed, much as a ruminant chews the cud over and over again until the desired effect is achieved. The scene is set on several vertical levels, and perhaps the most accessible of the paintings is the most recent: *Plaisir et tristesse de l'amour*.

This large canvas, measuring 237 x 187 cm, is contained in a massive frame which was covered in gold leaf in Constant's studio by one of the few gilders still to be found. It is a frame which goes against the current trend (epitomised by the minimal, flat wooden frame) and heralds a new style for this important component of a painting. It is a museum frame for a museum painting whose baroque

approach is reminiscent of such masters (much admired by Constant) as Velazquez, Rubens and Delacroix. Despite its size there is so much taking place in the painting that worlds are created which appear to spill over the edges of the canvas. The theme is taken from Titian's *Sacred and profane love* of 1515, which Constant has depicted against the tapering walls of the upper "storey". This space is the setting for a sexual orgy, or perhaps it is a satire on an orgy, involving nothing more than washed-pink amorphous shapes. There is no pure colour in this painting (or in the others in the cycle). All the shades are mixed, and are built up by painting numerous thin layers one on top of the other, some of which are partly removed again. In this way Constant has created a rich palette from a small number of colours — chiefly the earth colours. He has always been particularly fascinated by the contrast of reds and greens. Blue, though, is a colour he rarely uses, and when he does it is generally as an undertone, which sometimes turns out to have been built up of shades of grey which appear blue as a result of contrast with the surrounding colours.

At bottom right in this work stands the dejected figure of Cyrano de Bergerac, the syphilitic poet, who declares on a piece of paper which is propped up against a glass of wine: "Je pars pour décrocher l'étoile et je m'arrête, par peur du ridicule, à cueillir la fleurette", a passage which the French writer, Edmond Rostand, gives to Cyrano de Bergerac in the play of the same name. Cyrano in Constant's painting is shown turning his back on the scene of profane love and is looking sadly to one side. There is, however, a diagonal but invisible line which connects him with the dog on the other side of the painting, which is gazing up at him with a look of devotion and loyalty.

This scene, which is permeated with a totally different kind of love, takes place in the foreground, on the lowest storey of the painting, and although it is quite separate it still has a strong and tense relationship with the scene at the top. The theme is elaborated in each scene with all the naturalistic details painted from memory, and not from a model. On the one hand it is a continuation of traditional painting using the classical techniques, and on the other it displays a totally original approach. Constant has aimed at an absolute freedom between form and colour in order to depict a social, moral and sexual lack of freedom. This pictorial freedom also confronts us with the duality of the figurative scenes. For, in addition to the recognisable elements from the figurative world, the paintings are full of fairly angular forms, all of differing shapes and dimensions, which together make up an abstract painting. It is as if two paintings, one figurative and the other abstract, have been fused into one, superimposed to form a whole, rather like a photographic negative exposed twice, but in this case harmoniously.

Those abstract forms, then, also transcend the perspective spaces which they are sometimes forced to delineate. They reveal and conceal at the same time. They are visible, they engender emotion, and yet they appear abstract. Two worlds in one. That duality is also present in the completely original approach to the subject and in the continuation of the great tradition in painting using classical techniques. But it is a duality which can point to mysteries between people which cannot be expressed exclusively in the one form or the other.

A wide range of conflicting and varied emotions have been behind the birth of each of Constant's latest paintings (five in all) which have been created in the past two years. The most recent, *Plaisir et tristesse de l'amour*, is the clearest and purest expression of Constant's new, late style.

The first, *Ubu rencontre Justine* (1975), is in the Amsterdam Municipal Museum, and it is to be hoped that the later works will also find their way into the collections of important museums, since their presence will enrich a large, international museum public.





*Je pourrais dire  
et je n'en ai rien dit  
à cause de la  
et c'est la fin*

Constant 90