

# The Amsterdam Studio

A conversation between Constant and Jean-Clarence Lambert

*This conversation took place in 1999. But it really began in 1971–72 when, for the first time, I visited Constant's studio in Amsterdam, then the European capital of permissiveness, the melting-pot of morals. Should we mention that? It was in Amsterdam during those years that everything that we take for granted today was joyfully unveiled. Constant had just broken off from his New Babylon project, and his studio was still full of all sorts of materials which he and his assistants had used to make his beautiful transparent models: milling machines, hammer drills, boxes of nails, sheets of plastic, pots of synthetic resin, paints, glues... benches, drawing boards.*

*The iguana's huge vivarium. One or more guitars leaning against the wall. As for the artist's easels, they were almost buried in all this clutter. Wittenburg, the neighbourhood around the studio, appeared almost abandoned, with its dilapidated warehouses and wastelands [terrains vagues]. Small cargo boats came to line up their masts along the quay, sometimes right under Constant's windows: along one side, the studio, the former gymnasium of a disused school,*

*looked straight on to the canal.*

*Today, urbanism has transformed everything; an intelligent urbanism, it's true, as is the tradition in Holland. The neighbourhood has become spacious and residential, the canal system has been redesigned. But Constant's building is preserved, an island that already seems anachronistic. The entrance through a courtyard has the feel of a farm, with its free-range hens and ducks, kept by Constant's neighbours and not to his disliking. Upstairs, his studio has changed as much as has his painting over these years. Completely cleared out, with the walls bare, it is now a tall space, light and resonant, where the eye listens and the ear sees. Two or three canvases that Constant is still working on, or which he has recently finished, are standing on their sturdy wooden easels. Watery light filters through slatted blinds; rain and gusts of wind beat now and again against the tall picture windows. One can hear the fog-horns of boats: hidden from view by the railway embankment is the IJ, with its vast shipyards. Constant's studio: a place of solitude, but open to the world. The scene is set.*

*Jean-Clarence Lambert* Three successive periods mark your work: COBRA, New Babylon, then a final return to painting. The duration of these periods has been very unequal: four years for the libertarian flight of COBRA; eleven years for the theory of unitary urbanism and New Babylon, its visualization. Then, from 1969, the confrontation with the dark mirror, the blank mirror of the canvas. It continues today. Such an evolution has its surprises: nothing can be more anti-COBRA than New Babylon; nothing more anti-New Babylon than your current work...

*Constant* Over the years, I've constantly shifted and enlarged my field of action. I don't think one can speak of ruptures. Painting

has always remained an indispensable tool for me. I have never ceased to be a painter, and an active painter, even if I hid it a little during the New Babylon period, when I announced the disappearance of individual art in the cause of a collective drive, a condition of this 'unitary urbanism' that Debord and I defined in the Amsterdam Declaration<sup>1</sup> in 1958.

*J-C L* It was a very fertile moment for ideas: the big game with the city! The invention of what Mark Wigley now calls 'The Hyper-Architecture of Desire'<sup>2</sup>... But you quickly distanced yourself from the Situationist International and from Debord.

*C* Debord was a difficult character, but not as disagreeable as

Terrain Vague I, 1972. Oil on canvas, 120 x 130 cm.  
Private collection.





Mekong River, 1970. Watercolour, 118 x 131,5 cm.



Labyrinthe, 1972. Oil on canvas, 190 x 200 cm.

people sometimes say. He was genial too. In the International Situationist movement, paradoxically, I found that there were too many painters around Debord! That hindered me in the development of my project, New Babylon. I didn't want to continue to work in these conditions. But today it seems that I've succeeded better in visualizing New Babylon in my paintings than in my models...

*J-C L* The models that museums now covet! You know, for me these are more than models: they are sculptural objects. As for your paintings from that time, they mark a progressive reconquest of the image.

*C* While ceasing to be an illustration of New Babylon, my painting has become a testimony to criticism and protest against an inhuman world, marked by destruction and massacre – far removed from the world of *Homo ludens*!

*J-C L* The end of the adventure and a return to individual art.

*C* Not at all! All my work is individual, including New Babylon, and there is no creation without adventure. It doesn't prevent one from imagining a totally different culture, based on a collective activity, such as I've tried to describe and present in my New Babylon project. However, I fully realized that we were still far from doing this, and I took up my paintbrush again, which I had never completely discarded.

*J-C L* You're not afraid of contradictions.

*C* It's more a dialectic of experience: creative activities are reactions against former creations. I explained this in a text published in 1965, in the catalogue of my retrospective at the museum in The Hague. This process, which normally unfurls over a whole generation, was speeded up in my case because of

the rapid changes in society. Besides, it was you who pointed out three phases in my work leading on from each other in an organic, living unity: my life.

*J-C L* It's true that in the course of the New Babylon years, the 1960s, we witnessed a real mutation of the ends and the means of artistic activity, bringing with it an increasingly open discredit for true painting. With a sort of grudge, a resentment of the pleasure it can give, and with a masochistic taste for ennui. That's how anti-art came into being, an international, growing movement... There are also those who make use of technological developments and play with electronically generated virtual images...

*C* For me, anti-art is merely the modern version of iconoclasm. As for electronic techniques, that's something completely different. But how could video replace painting? That's a fashion – a passing fad...

*J-C L* A general degradation of artistic ambition. With the support of the international museum world, leading the market.

*C* Too bad if I'm on my own again today. When I was working on New Babylon, people who took an interest in it, or who made an effort to understand my work, were few, to say the least... The exceptions were sociologists like Henri Lefebvre and Jean Duvignaud, critics like Michel Ragon, as well as some forward-thinking architects. I had constantly to defend myself against accusations of Utopianism or technocracy – according to whether my critics came from the right or the left... And now, 30 years later, at the museum in The Hague, Hans Locher has brought most of the pieces together. The archives, like my correspondence with Debord, are in the National Centre for the Documentation of the History of Art in The Hague. New

Der Blaue Draufgänger, 1969, Oil on canvas, 190 x 200 cm.  
State Collection, The Hague.





Happening, 1973. Oil on canvas, 140 x 130 cm.

Babylon is the subject of retrospectives here and there. It's studied in architecture schools, university symposia are dedicated to it... Whereas for me, it was finished 30 years ago! I'm in my studio now, painting.

*J-C L* The dogs bark, the caravan moves on, as you like to say...

*C* I painted *Ode à L'Odéon* in 1969, when my studio in Amsterdam was still cluttered by all the things I used for New Babylon. In *Ode*, the silvery colour dominates because I had a leftover spray-can of car paint... And some perforated metal sheets. Of course, *Ode* is still a vision of New Babylon. So is *Blaue Draufgänger*, which came after. But there the first daubs of colour appear, and they will gain importance until they completely replace drawing. That's how my new pictorial style began to establish itself.

*J-C L* *Ode à l'Odéon*, it should be recalled, represents the events of May 1968 in Paris. At the same time, in Amsterdam, the Provos<sup>3</sup> were inspired by New Babylon. They wanted to establish a society for play, not work...

*C* I have observed that all collective experiences of behaviour lead infallibly to individual creation. Even if one has lost faith in the continuity of culture, as is the case with so many artists today.

*J-C L* An artist has to find the right distance from his epoch, and maintain it. Nothing is more difficult, as we can see so clearly with all those artists who, to the detriment of their 'interior needs', have let themselves be dominated by their 'exterior needs', the current tastes of the day, the political short-term.

*C* For me, since 1969, it's painting and only painting that interests me. I am a painter, and a painter is someone gifted with an exceptional sensitivity to colour. Just as a poet is gifted

with an exceptional sensitivity to words and a musician with an exceptional sensitivity to sounds. That's it. It's as simple as that. Painting is the creation of images with colour.

*J-C L* After the theory of COBRA – which you formulated in some memorable manifestos – then that of New Babylon – so elaborate – do you feel the need for a theory of painting?

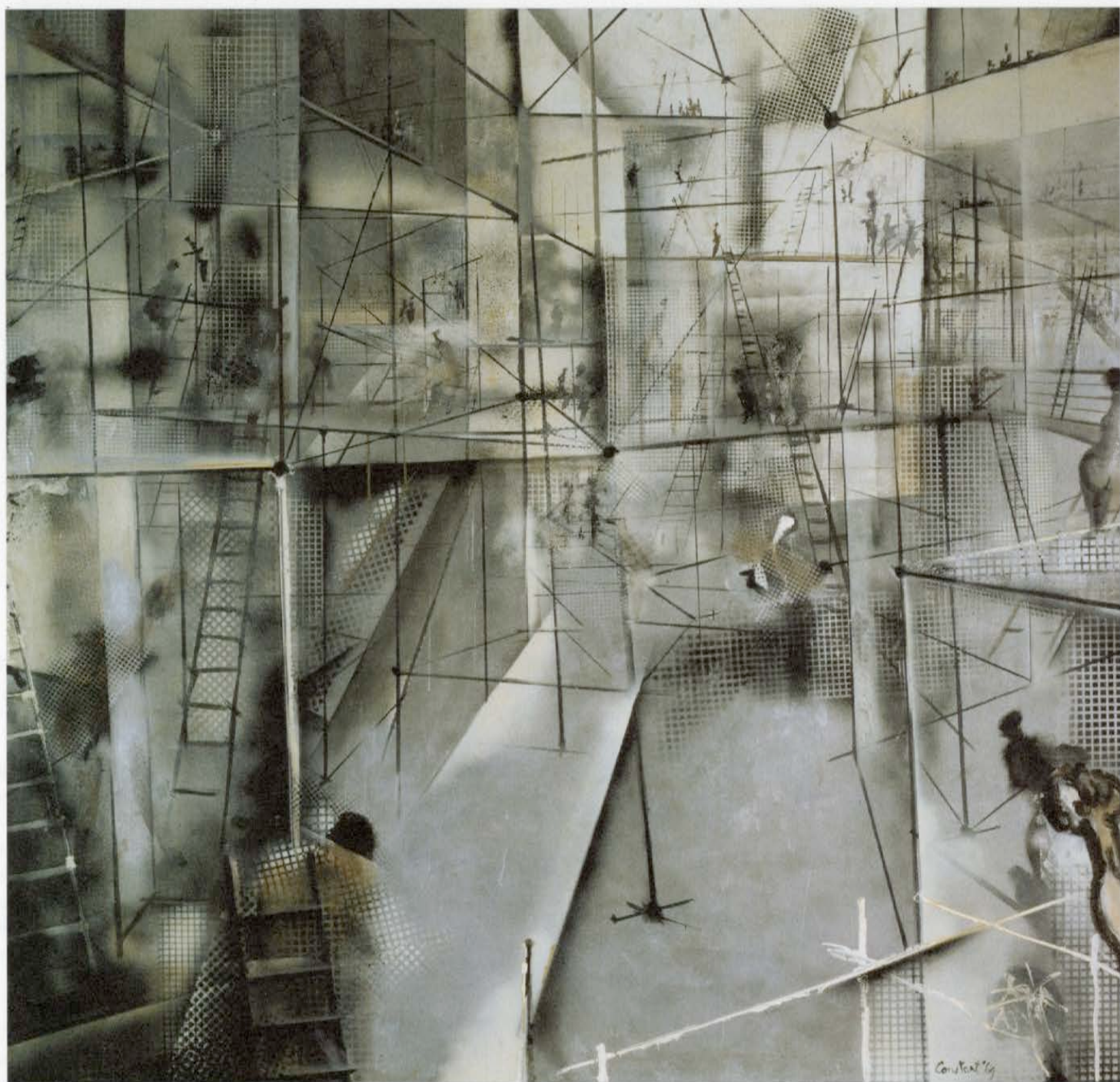
*C* No, no more theory, nothing but practice! What's more, I'm trying to understand how the great colourists worked, those whom I admire the most, Titian, Delacroix, Cézanne... I don't want to imitate them in any way, as in the past painters would make copies of the Old Masters. They are inimitable, out of our reach. Let's say that, from them, I have elaborated, for my own use, a certain conception of colour, a spatial concept. Space is born from colour, not from line.

*J-C L* Colour/line, this duality, this duel, can be found in every epoch. We all know Diderot's exclamation about Chardin: 'It's he who is a painter, he who is a colourist!' Or Baudelaire opposing Ingres and Delacroix.

*C* Baudelaire is one of my favourite authors, I read him again and again. Last summer, on holiday, I had the two volumes in the new Pléiade edition... As for Delacroix, he has inspired me since my youth. I had just started at the École des Beaux-Arts; I discovered him through reproductions. I can see them now, two colour volumes that I borrowed from the Beaux-Arts library. Delacroix was practically unknown in Holland – that's how I managed to keep the books for nearly a year without anyone asking for them back.

*J-C L* A naïve question – which one scarcely dares to ask nowadays – how did you know that you were a painter?

Ode à l'Odéon, 1969. Oil on canvas, 190 x 200 cm.  
Private collection.





Cyranô Déclare *son Amour*, 1976. Oil on canvas, 140 x 150 cm.  
Private collection.

*C* I never doubted that I was born to paint! At primary school, already, I always had crayons in my hand. My friends asked for my drawings and that pleased me. Then at secondary school, I had an art teacher who encouraged me a lot. He didn't hide the fact that he was impressed by my precocity... Years later, when he saw my pictures in a COBRA exhibition, he exclaimed: 'What a shame! A boy who had such talent. To waste it like this!'

*J-C L* What has stayed with you from the teachings of the Beaux-Arts? COBRA was against it all, of course.

*C* It's certain that my two years at the Beaux-Arts taught me a lot, I still benefit from it today. I learnt to use my natural ability better, I drew from life, I studied anatomy, not only human but also that of animals. I have a strong affection for animals, you know.

*J-C L* Which works particularly struck you during those formative years?

*C* Those of the Flemish painter Constant Permeke first. Above all his snowy landscapes and his fields of wheat in the sun – his golden landscapes, as he called them.

*J-C L* A painter of the land, the soil, the human, of the humble heroism of the everyday, he is generally classed with the Expressionists...

*C* Expressionism is a word that doesn't have a lot of meaning for me. Expressionism cannot be a particular period of art history. All painting is expressionist because it expresses the feelings of the artist. The true artist escapes classifications and labels. They are useful no doubt for historians, but without interest for artists.

*J-C L* Were there others besides Permeke?

*C* Yes, Chagall, who was quite well represented in the Stedelijk Museum, thanks to the loan of a private collection.

*J-C L* At opposite ends to Permeke...

*C* What attracted me to Chagall was the quality and harmony of the colours, not the subject of the pictures. Besides this I remember very clearly, still, a superb portrait of the Countess of Noailles by Van Dongen. One of the rare successes of this painter, who I often find superficial and unsympathetic... At my then father-in-law's, the composer Jacob van Domselaer, I saw several of Mondrian's paintings, who had been a friend of his. In fact I like no artist in his or her entirety, only certain works.

*J-C L* Van Gogh?

*C* Frankly, he doesn't attract me, despite his COBRA spontaneity, which was more like rapidity... I admire his originality, but not his style. I prefer Cézanne, the anti-virtuoso... Cézanne worked so hard. Shortly before his death, he wrote to his son: 'I've made some progress in my studies'...

*J-C L* You've built up a vast library in your house in Amsterdam, you're a great reader.

*C* I've read a lot of the poets. The Dutch poet, Leopold, who is unknown outside the Netherlands. He has translated the Greeks brilliantly: Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides and Epicurus. And, of course, Baudelaire, then Lautréamont, Verlaine, Rimbaud. I read them at 20, as I still do now, and my taste for them has always remained as strong. I did some illustrations for *Les fleurs du mal* in my youth. As far back as I can remember, I've always loved the French language and culture. Later, I read a lot of the libertines like Cyrano, or Casanova. And de Sade, you could find his books in Amsterdam when they were forbidden in

Plaisir et Indesence de l'Amour, 1976. Oil on canvas, 237 x 187 cm.



L'Insurrection, 1985. Watercolour.



France. I painted two pictures on the subject of Justine, and I painted a 'Casanova joins forces with morality'...

I've also got a lot of documents on the Paris Commune, a whole archive that I saved recently from being dispersed in a public sale. I've read a lot of political theorists and sociologists, particularly Marx. And the historian Huizinga, the author of *Homo ludens*, the model for the New Babylonian.

*J-C L* Music is very present in your life. In your house at Kromme Waal, there's a music room that looks like a Dutch interior from the seventeenth century. You collect ancient or rare instruments...

*C* I love music, above all music which evokes images, like Schubert's *Winterreise*... I've played several instruments. I began with my mother's mandolin, then I had violin lessons and played the violin until a hand injury prevented me. I moved on to the guitar, with my gypsy friends... Now I play the cimbalon<sup>4</sup> more than anything, which was taught to me by the Hungarian cymbalist Jenő Horvath.

*J-C L* Painting, poetry, music, do you think there are universal aesthetic values?

*C* Yes, certainly. Beauty, for example. Beauty is simply the power of the work to move us, it resides in the emotion which the artist arouses in the spectator.

*J-C L* How do you work today?

*C* When I stand in front of a new canvas – I paint one or two pictures a year, hardly ever any more than that – I contemplate it for a long time before daring to make the first mark. A new canvas is a terrible, menacing thing, and, at the beginning, I don't know what I want to do... It's what appears after the first

mark that will guide me. Soon the marks multiply until the moment I've been hoping for, when inspiration crystallizes. This can take several days or even several weeks. Sometimes it's quicker. I place the brushstrokes very carefully, so as not to hinder the nascent harmony of the colours. Until I can finally distinguish – more or less vaguely – an image. It's at that moment that I leave abstraction and enter a figurative style, imprecise at first.

*J-C L* To make order out of chaos? To make an alliance with chance?

*C* It is not chance that guides me. More the subconscious. For several days, the colours remain very light. I keep the accents, that is the darkest, strongest colours, in reserve for as long as possible. It's what Titian called 'making the bed for the painting'. But he had his painting in his head. For me that's not the case. After several days, the ideas take shape and I can reflect on what I'm going to paint. I take my time. I worked on *Orphée* for more than a year... In '91, on the other hand, I did four paintings, that was exceptional, as was '98. But my work consists of a small number of pictures. I'm well aware that I'm unusual in that too. Today it seems normal for a painter to leave thousands of paintings. Not me, I paint pictures which cannot be repeated in a series.

*J-C L* After the *fa presto* of COBRA, you've become a *lento* artist who works patiently.

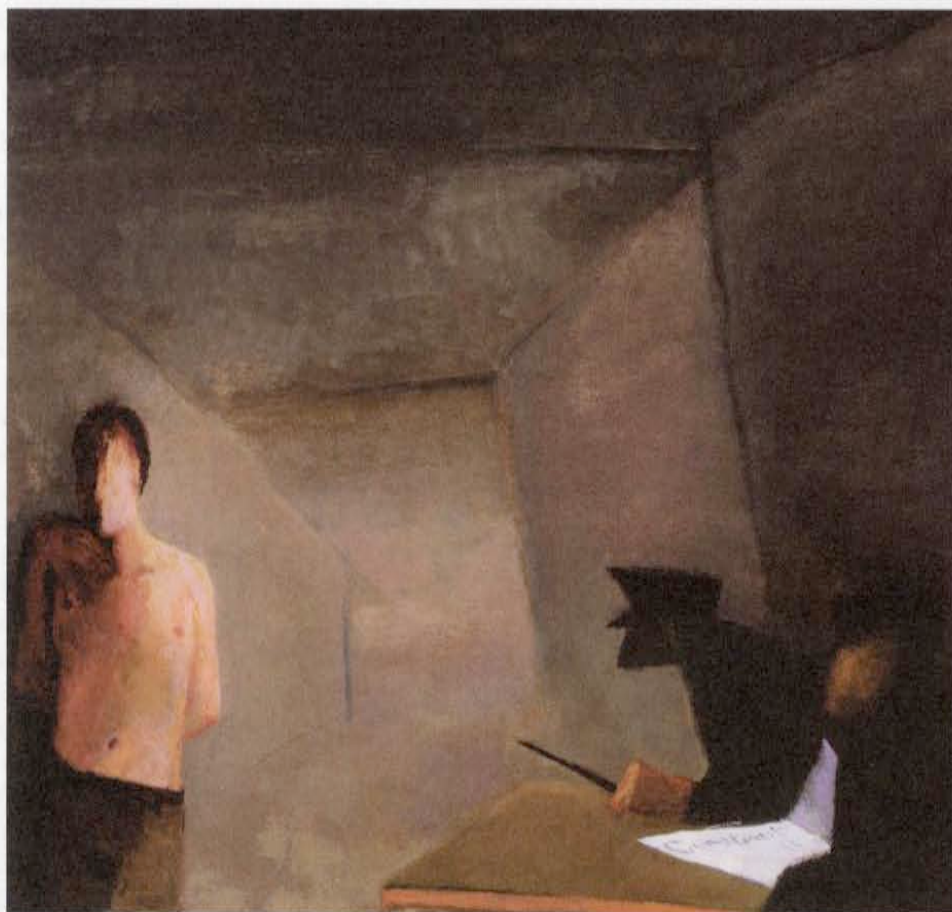
*C* Less out of choice, in fact, than by necessity. I am only quick at drawing. It's true that the richness of colour that I want to achieve in painting demands time and patience.

*J-C L* These last years, you've made several trips around Europe to study certain works close-up, those of Titian in particular.

*L'Insurrection*, 1983-84, oil on canvas, 167 x 217 cm.  
Private collection.



*L'interrogatoire*, 1983, Oil on canvas, 131 x 141 cm.  
Private collection.





Autoportrait, 1991-94. Oil on canvas, 194 x 185 cm.

*C* To understand something of their technique... For, in fact, isn't it strange that in music, the study of the masters, of musical theory, of composition, is taken for granted... Whereas in painting, such studies have been completely abandoned, it even seems ridiculous to be interested in them... For me it's the old Titian whom I find fascinating – when he was the age I am now. He had 10 years left to live and it was then that he painted his most important pictures, which can be considered as the beginning of modern art. I saw *The Flaying of Marsyas* in an exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris, *Tarquin and Lucretia* at the Fine Art Academy in Vienna and his last painting, unfinished, the *Pietà* at the Academy in Venice. Three works which, for me, are major, three compositions without contours, without delineated forms. When you compare the *Crown of Thorns* in the Art Gallery in Munich with that in the Louvre, painted long before, you understand how this non-linear style unveils a new feeling of space in depth and also a new feeling of light. Colourism is the absolute goal in painting, the conquest of the world through colour. It has been pursued by Rubens, Rembrandt, Delacroix... Up until Cézanne who said – according to Emile Bernard – 'Drawing and colour are not distinct. As one paints, one draws. The more the colours harmonize, the more the drawing becomes precise. When the colour is at its richest, the form is at its fullest.' Cézanne shows, too, how one can create a form by modulating colour: 'Not by modelling, but by modulating', he would say.

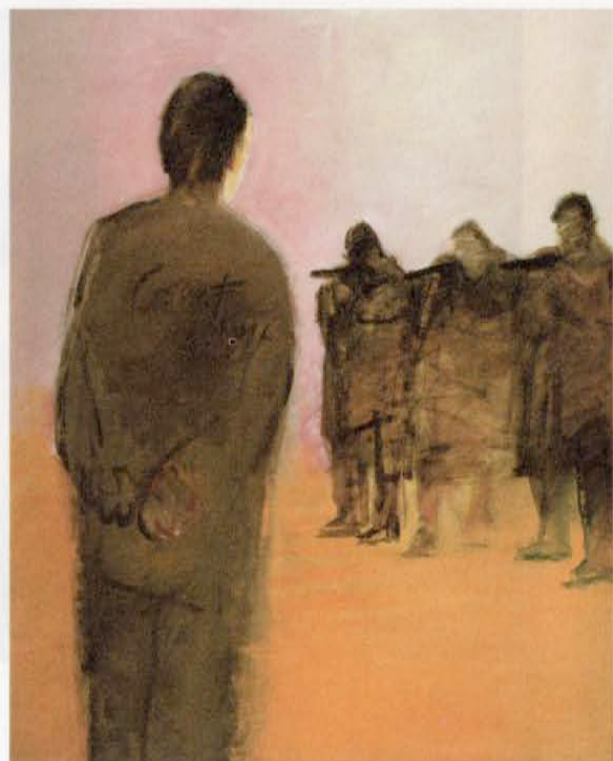
*J-C L* How do you know when you've finished a painting?

*C* A picture is never finished! You stop painting because you cannot continue anymore... Rembrandt's paintings are all unfinished. Nothing is worse than being finished. It kills the vitality of the picture! You can finish a piece of furniture but not a work of art.

*J-C L* How do you see the future of painting? Is it a lost cause as some people say, and as they're not afraid to repeat in certain art schools.

*C* The art of painting has a long history. The paintings of the caves of Chauvet which have just been discovered in the Ardèche go back 30,000 years, we're told. To announce the end of an art which has persisted for so long, seems, at the very least, to be unwise... We should not be afraid of the past. To be afraid of the past is to be afraid of the present... I've made my point of view clear for a long time. At the time of a seminar organized by the Cercle d'Art, I said that the history of art is also the history of attacks against art, destruction, vandalism, iconoclastic fury, persecutions. In our time, in particular, and by more insidious means. Under the dictatorships of Hitler and Stalin, our century has known the most enormous offensives against art. Suppressing all creative activity, making the very lives of artists unbearable, the totalitarian state proclaimed itself the creator. By decree, it established a pseudo-art, and the free artist was condemned to exile. But, exiled or clandestine, art always finds an audience, some partisans and adherents. To annihilate art completely, therefore, it's necessary to attack these groups. To manipulate the public, indeed to eliminate it, is even more effective than imprisoning or exiling the artists. This last method, without apparent violence, is that of economic power, which has at its disposal today a powerful propaganda machine with a network of museums, etc. Thus have we witnessed the institutional and commercial promotion of anti-art, and its setting up as the official art throughout the world. The falsification of elementary knowledge is also part of this strategy. In fact, what does this anti-art consist of? Principally in an attitude of rupture with regard to artistic traditions. Only novelty is sacred, and

L'Otage, 1992. Oil on canvas, 99 x 80.5 cm.  
Private collection, Amsterdam.

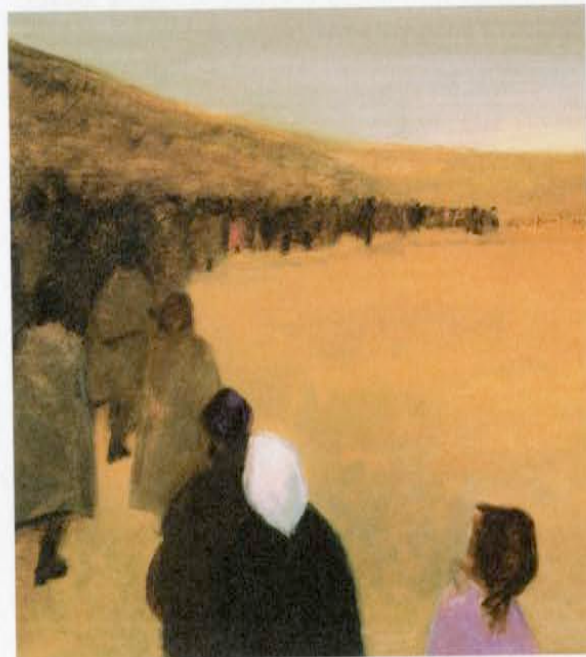


La Foule I, 1993. Oil on canvas, 97 x 130 cm.





Junkies, 1994. Oil on canvas, 185 x 194 cm.



Les Expulsés, 1999. Oil on canvas, 149 x 143 cm.

tradition is a sort of guilty disease. Everything should be ephemeral like novelty, and disappear with time. Painting is denigrated as something that doesn't concern our present world.

If you visit the museums of contemporary art today you can easily convince yourself that the destruction of art is a *fait accompli*. The inevitable consequence: artists become demoralized. What's the use in persisting in painting when the museums only exhibit its negation? With a public that is increasingly scarce, indoctrinated by anti-artistic propaganda...

There are some signs today that iconoclastic fury – the terrorism of anti-art – is losing some ground. Despite the

megalomaniacal events which are devoted to it, like the Dokumentas at Kassel – just one example amongst several others – where painting is almost completely absent. Far from official parades, the '*règne imaginal*' as you call it, the world of images, becomes visible again. Artists are in the process of overtaking anti-art, as Christian Dotremont<sup>5</sup> wished it. The moment has come to denounce iconoclasm and speak out loudly in favour of art. Artists have to reclaim their avant-garde position. The avant-garde has never wanted the destruction, but rather, the blossoming of art. Its enrichment rather than its negation. Let's work for a renaissance of art in a liberated world!

#### Notes

1. See Jean-Clarence Lambert (ed.), *Constant: New Babylon, art et utopie* (Paris, 1997), p.35.
2. Mark Wigley's *Constant's New Babylon, The Hyper-Architecture of Desire* (Rotterdam, 1998) was reviewed in *AA Files* 41. The book was accompanied by an exhibition in Rotterdam, followed by a further exhibition at the Drawing Centre in New York, and then by a symposium at the Technical University in Delft in January 2000.
3. The Provos (short for provocatie – provocation) were a New Left movement that operated in Amsterdam during the 1960s. The group had no coherent structure or membership, but aimed to bring points of political or social conflict to public attention by spectacular means. Many of the actions or happenings described in their journal had a ludic element. Constant adds 'The leading members of the Provo movement (Roel van Duyn and L. Schimmelpennink) got in touch with me around 1966. They interviewed me and I wrote an article in their review, *PROVO*. They considered my New Babylon project as

an example for their ideas about the 'white' city.'

4. The cimbalon (zimbalon) is a member of the cordophone family of musical instruments. A developed descendent of the dulcimer it is a popular instrument in Hungary, and in the eastern and southern provinces of Romania.
5. Christian Dotremont was a founder member of COBRA (1948). He had previously been one of the founder members of the Belgian *Bureau International de Surréalisme Révolutionnaire* (1947). Constant adds 'He is a great poet of the French language. He invented the name 'COBRA' and was the chief secretary of the movement. He stayed faithful to 'l'esprit COBRA' for the rest of his life.'

Translation by Clare Barrett

Photography by Tom Haartsen

This interview is an excerpt from the book *Constant, L'Atelier d'Amsterdam*

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