

Revolutionary modern or old master? Probably the contrast implied by these two expressions is not wholly appropriate when trying to characterize the work of the artist Constant. In one way, his rebellious and engaged paintings from the 'Cobra period' or the later 'Homo Ludens utopias' fit into a long tradition in which art is seen as the idealistic cry for freedom. On the other hand his return to figurative painting and the use of the easel can be seen as an act of recalcitrance in an age when, asserts Constant, a great deal of art has dwindled into meaningless formalism. Constant has always taken up a stand against this. As a theoretician, he once radically foreswore the art of painting and went in search of a new form of collective creativity in which people could develop unfettered, lighthearted and in balance to become contented citizens of the 'New Babylon'. This goal may have suggested social commitment but at this point it was no more than a dream for the future, found only in the detailed models and maquettes made of this utopian world.

However, we notice in his paintings that Constant never shirks the challenge of defining himself in terms of the world around him. In doing so he is always searching for freedom and critical of the established norms and authorities. As an expression of his rage over social injustice and human weakness he painted an intimidating court hearing, a dubious trial, a gruesome bloodbath and a cold-blooded execution. These works are both gripping and challenging and show humanity in all its brutishness.

While his commitment has remained unchanged, Constant's painting has developed over the years from uncontrived expressions into rich and subtle representations of form and colour. And he no longer only looks towards the future, but now at the artistic tradition in which he welcomes as early colleagues such artists as Titian, Rubens or Delacroix – painters who showed human life and suffering through their brilliant use of colour. For Constant, too, it is people who form the most important themes. He paints them in their problematic relationships and inescapable predicaments, imprisoned in dramatic and labyrinthine landscapes.

His work could be called traditional in the sense that it reflects the influence of and pondering over a painterly tradition, yet without our being able to call his art dated or shrug it off as outmoded. On the contrary, his unceasing search into the possibilities of all painterly methods betrays an inquiring attitude that is both modern and in keeping with the traditions of contemporary art. Nor does it betray his own past in the Cobra movement, rather enhances it. Constant always draws on the undefined and the unconscious: he takes a blob or a streak on his canvas, an unexpected colour, an unsuspected shape and cautiously allows them to lead an independent life, to become an autonomous picture. The picture for Constant forms the face of the art work. Content is shaped with colour. The exuberant use of colour of the Cobra days is now a restrained but glowing nuance of tones. At the same time the nature of the work has altered; it is no longer the rebellious cry of the idealistic alternative – it is a silent accusation. Constant is a classical revolutionary and a modern old master.

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