

*Interview with Anthony Lenoir, from the exhibition «The Last Man», Flaine Art center, January 2017*

**Anthony Lenoir (A.L.):** The exhibition begins with the display case, with images of one pile of burning instruments. The image was inspired by photographs that appeared in the media showing hooded, armed men standing around the flames. These images of jihadists celebrating a kind of victory over Western culture are not easily forgotten. Here, the group is destroying one of the symbols of its enemy by burning instruments likely to produce non-traditional music. Why did you choose to begin this exhibition, called “Le dernier homme” (“The last man”) in this manner?

**Johann Rivat (J.R.):** First of all, it seems to me that it was not the cultural notion of music that was targeted—traditional or otherwise—but more the notion of musical activity itself. Music is an activity without utility, and thus something that makes us feel human. At the risk of sounding snobbish, I'll quote Malraux, because even with the passage of time, he will always say it better than I do: “*Culture... what has made man something more than an accident of the universe*”.<sup>1</sup>

It seems to me that this iconoclastic act was motivated much more by this reason than by a simple rejection of the West and its dominant culture.

Then, to respond to your question on why I chose to begin this exhibition in this manner, the answer is simple: the space lent itself to displaying this painting here rather than elsewhere. The narrow wall was too small to display a larger piece. So by process of elimination, the work found its place in this transitional area. Snug in this setting, the encased painting becomes a point of interface between the exterior and the interior. I should add that this painting is a unique piece in the collection presented here, and in my work in general, in that it is the only still life that I've painted for the moment. No landscape, no human figures. Just a pile of objects, a pile of objects on fire.

This striking event was only a fleeting television image: a half a second during which the absurdity of the world and of humanity burst forth in its most unspeakable, and thus most revolting form.

The drawing was born in this half a second: a composition of snare drums, bass drums, and tom-toms that I sketched based on the drums of the band that I belong to and what I found in musical instrument magazines. I started with this jumble of images before creating the rhythmic crackling of the flames.

**A.L.:** Reading your ideas, it seems to me that for you, painting is a way to freeze an image in time. It brings out certain elements that would normally escape us as quickly as they appear. Perhaps painting is a kind of anchor point in the continuous cascade of images we experience.

**J.R.:** Yes, definitely. Because a painting is a lasting image. But it seems to me that this is the case for photography, too. The very nature of a photograph is to fix an image in time, in an instant, while a painting is lasting because of its nature as an object. On the other hand, a painting is a constructed image in which the elements appear or disappear according to the intentions, intuition, and position of the painter.

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<sup>1</sup> « *Speech, on May the 30th 1952 during an ending congress session about “The freedom of culture”* », in MALRAUX (A.), *La politique, la culture : discours, articles, entretiens (1925-1975)*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p. 218

So a painted image is more than something instantaneous, and if it is the product of a committed activity, it is thus something real. Painting is about creating something genuine, giving substance to a perspective, shape to a thought, and matter to an idea. Only it never has the value of truth.

Even so, let's suppose that the painted image functions as a sort of anchor point in the continuous cascade of images, while at the same time, and more importantly, it acts as a break in this cascade of images.

**A.L.:** The exhibition gets its title from its central or pivotal painting, *Le dernier homme* ("The Last Man"). The painting depicts the profile of a man on horseback. The rider turns his head slightly to look at us unblinkingly. In a certain way, he appears to be inviting us into the painting. I say "in a certain way", because his gaze freezes us more than it invites us. His contemptuous expression almost seems to hold us responsible for his destiny: he is the last man. Why does the rider represent what must survive of our humanity?

**J.R.:** I don't know if he truly represents what will survive of our humanity. It is an intuition that gives substance to my intent, but that is indeed the intent. It is a bit paradoxical, but I wanted to make disappearance appear; I wanted to show the elimination of the human being and the slow decay of the individual.

The cowboy figure seemed to me to be the perfect symbol of this disappearance. The cowboy is the quintessential romantic figure, testing himself against nature, a wild man in the wilderness, roaming in an environment where anything seems possible. But the cowboy figure has rapidly become obsolete in a society in which the individual must be sacrificed at the altar of technology and progress.

This is what may make us responsible for his destiny and make him the "last man".

**A.L.:** There appear to be two different time periods that correspond to two different types of subjects. On the one hand, there are several paintings and drawings that show scenes of revolt. On the other hand, there are these four horsemen, to which I would add *Bel zébu*. The first group of work depicts scenes from the present day. The second group of paintings are portraits that seem to come from another era or universe. In your mind, is there an element of anticipation here? Is this a prediction of a possible future?

**J.R.:** I often get this question about the eclecticism of my subjects, which seems to baffle or even bother viewers. I can understand that this might be disconcerting. It might be difficult to pinpoint and define formally, but I nonetheless feel like I'm pursuing a line of thought and have a position that is fairly consistent and coherent for these different subjects. I'm going to answer in two parts in order to provide a clear response.

The first reason for this eclecticism is that I would have trouble painting just one type of subject. I think I would get bored. I wouldn't want to become a specialist of one particular subject and be labelled as the "revolt painter", or the "playground painter". I try new approaches so as not to repeat a composition that functions well. The subject would tend to grow empty over time. In a couple of years I may change my mind, but we'll see. As I say this, the counter example of Mark Rothko's paintings immediately comes to mind. The repetition of the composition allowed him to make

incredibly rich and generous use of colour. But Rothko's talent was unique, and I am not so arrogant as to believe that I might one day equal him.

The second reason for this eclecticism goes back to the idea I mentioned earlier regarding the real nature of painting. Whether the subjects appear to be taken from recent current events, an unknown bit of private life, or some fantastical myths, they are all reduced to paint on canvas. It is the viewer's gaze that gives life and meaning to these "painted decorations". So what is interesting is to show a collection of paintings with subjects that appear to have little in common upon first glance, and to see how they interact and can bring forth an intent, an idea, or a sensation. I do not think that a body of work can be the product of a multitude of different intentions, unless perhaps the artist is insane. There are simply different perspectives and convergences that emerge, which feed each other and endlessly enlarge the scope of possibilities. And that is what is exciting; it is what makes life worth living, and what makes life *"more interesting than art"*<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, this allows me to respond to your question about anticipation. Once again beginning with the same hypothesis—or analysis—of painting as real, I consider the subjects that I paint as perspectives, as ranges of possibility, but also as images engendered by a History of the world and its daily order. So yes, these are anticipatory images, but definitely not predictions. Of course I feel close to and inspired by futuristic science fiction, like the work of George Orwell, Cormac McCarthy, Robert Kirkman, and René Barjavel, but I'm also inspired by the introspective work of historians like Henri Guillemin and Bernard Charbonneau, as well as the anthropological work of philosophers like Jacques Ellul and René Girard. This is not an exhaustive list, and I regret not naming all of the courageous people working for humanity who deserve to be mentioned, and without whom I would sometimes feel quite lonely.

**A.L.:** With this idea in mind, can the horsemen and related images like Bel zébu be considered as scapegoats, as per René Girard? Let me explain. When anthropologist and philosopher René Girard developed his theory of "mimetic violence", he explained that conflicts stem from the notion of desire. Desiring something that another individual desires as well is perhaps at the origin of all contentious relationships. Societies have thus perhaps created the principle of the scapegoat to calm the masses and strengthen the community.

Taking this theory into consideration, rather than being survivors, could your horsemen be considered as scapegoats?

**J.R.:** This is a difficult question. While I'm much more familiar with the work of Girard, I don't feel knowledgeable enough to base my answer on his theories.

But you summarise the basis of his mimetic desire theory very clearly. What intrigues me is the violence that emerges from this desire, for the simple reason that I get the feeling that I am part of a world that is increasingly violent. When I discovered *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning and Violence and the Sacred*, I was blown away by the truth of his analysis. But then it is a theory, and one should always be cautious of theories that explain everything and offer the keys to open every door. Nonetheless, his work is exemplary, in my opinion.

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<sup>2</sup> The speaker is referring to a quote from the artist Robert Filliou: "Art is what makes life more interesting than art".

My horsemen are monsters: one is a zombie, another has the glowing eyes of the Terminator, the third is a kind of man-beast, and finally there is the spectral figure of Le dernier homme. There is nothing attractive about them, nothing we would like to hold on to. So from this point of view, yes, we could consider them as scapegoats, in the sense that these nightmarish visions focus on our doubts, our fears, and our weaknesses, and that we transfer them outward in order to be rid of them.

It is this intuition that inspired the names of the polyptych “La brute, la brute et la brute”, “Cerbère, Charon et Nessos”. These are the three monsters that Virgil and Dante met during their journey through hell. In these paintings there is a particular effort, a desire to linger on what we don’t want to see about ourselves and what this refusal to see brings about as we live together as a society.

**A.L.:** Is this what explains their texture? Let me elaborate. In these semi-recognisable characters (we can identify some of their attributes, like the glowing eyes of Charon described by Virgil, the skull of Cerberus who was supposed to terrorise the dead, and Nessus the centaur, who is one with his mount), there is one shared characteristic: they all seem translucent<sup>3</sup>. This way of making them appear through a play of light accentuates their weak presence. Does this impression of a tenuous apparition come from the fact that they are what we don’t want to see?

**J.R.:** Yes, your observation is correct. The pictorial treatment goes along with—consciously or unconsciously—my desire to reveal things that we hide from ourselves. Furthermore, I am reminded of another work by René Girard: *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. But this “texture” is even more strongly present in the last painting, *Le dernier homme*, for which the exhibition is named.

The painting *Le dernier homme* came together very quickly. In four days it was done, but it took me some time to accept it, so I could look at the painting and be convinced that I didn’t need to push the light any further or pinpoint additional details, which would have destabilised the painting as a whole. This period of time required to accept a work can be long and is always tricky, because by adding too many elements you risk drowning out the intent of the painting and the gesture behind the layers of colours. You risk ruining it. At the same time there is a feeling of guilt for not trying to take the work a step further. I feel like I’m being lazy. But you have to get past these qualms, which are unrelated to the activity and the image that emerges.

As Philip Guston said so well: *“I think that the one mandatory question in painting is ‘when is it finished?’”*<sup>4</sup>. The more I progress in my painting, the more I’m convinced of this.

With time, I’ve accepted this painting, and I’m very happy with it. It became clear to me that this paradox of making disappearance appear was much richer than I had imagined. The antiquated figure of the cowboy is laden with meaning. The cowboy is as much a symbol of romanticism as he is of the conquest of the West, the conquest of oneself, and the individual confronted with the immensity of nature. To echo the words of Pascal: “What is man in nature? A nothing in relation to infinity, an all in relation to

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<sup>3</sup> In 2013, in his text *Poltergeist*, Judicaël Lavrador very rightly speaks of the texture of several of the characters that punctuate the landscape of Johann Rivat’s work. in *Picturodrome*, Lyon, edition 205, 2013 p5

<sup>4</sup> GUSTON Philip : *“A life Lived”* movie by Michael Blackwood, 1982.

nothing, a midpoint between nothing and everything ". Here, the figure absorbed by this dark background fades away as if in a slow decantation of the image. It is the embodiment of a transformation from a world in which the individual is defined by his activity, to a world of technology, machines, industrial revolutions and lifesaving advancements, in which individuals are stripped of their capacity to act and to be active. The activity of an individual is now judged only by the profit and monetary gain that it produces.

**A.L.:** To conclude, I would like to get back to your response to the first question. For you, tradition and musical culture were not what was being targeted, but musical activity itself, an activity that is futile but necessary to mankind because it defines us. What role does human activity play in your work and more generally in your relationship with the world?

**J.R.:** I'm thrilled that you bring up this subject because at the moment the question of human activity is ubiquitous, both in my work and in my relationship with the world. When I was a student, I often used to say that painting, and being an artist in general, was not a profession but a condition. Today I believe that this idea applies not only to artistic activity, but also to all activity. Moreover, we are constantly having to define and agree on what qualifies as artistic activity.

I am increasingly convinced that the identity of an individual is deeply rooted in the activity he or she engages in, and the self-actualisation that results from it. Similarly, our activity defines us as individuals because it allows us to position ourselves in the world. But of course, nothing is definitive.

To conclude, I'd like to cite a passage that is essential to me from André Malraux's work, *Man's Fate*: "*Man is the sum of his acts, of what he does, of what he can do. Nothing else .*"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> MALRAUX André, *La Condition Humaine*, Paris, Gallimard, 1933.