

JARIK JONGMAN

CHAOS AND UNCERTAINTY

28 APRIL 2018 – 23 JUNE 2018

Jarik Jongman was born in 1962 in Amsterdam in the Netherlands. He lives and works in Amsterdam. The artists who inspire him are Adriaan Ghenie, Anselm Kiefer and Peter Doig. He is a graduate of the Arnhem Academy of Art in the Netherlands.

Jarik Jongman was the laureate of the Luxembourg Art Prize in 2017.

Chaos And Uncertainty is his first exhibition in the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg.

*And here rises the day of wrath,
which will reduce the Century to dust (...)*

Anatole France¹

Looking at Jarik Jongman's paintings, one may wonder about the origin of the devouring flames: are they the flames of hell which consume the world, or those of the artist's own anger about his era?

Modernity: reason, science and progress

*Have the courage to rely on your own reasoning.
This is the motto of Enlightenment²*

Emmanuel Kant

The majority of buildings depicted by Jarik Jongman are prime examples of modernist architecture; the *Villa Savoye* by Corbusier, the *Kaufmann Desert House* by Richard Neutra, and other typical Californian Case Study Houses associated, more or less closely, with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Perhaps the reason for this choice is the painter's fondness for the aesthetics of these architectural works.

Or, more broadly, perhaps they symbolise a certain spirit that is very dear to him: modernity. The vagueness of this notion - denoting an era, a civilisation and a concept of humanity inherent in European culture and thinking - does not preclude three major philosophical aspects: in addition to defending tolerance, freedom and equality, one must not overlook modern rationalism, positivism and optimism.

¹ Anatole France, *Les Contes de Jacques Tournebroche*, 1908, p. 67.

² Emmanuel Kant, *Response to the question: "What is Enlightenment?"*.

Firstly, inspired by René Descartes' philosophy, the "modern" man yearns to be independent and totally free i.e. master of himself thanks to the use of reason, and master of the world thanks to the use of technique. It is important for him to free himself from the tutelage of the king, army or church. "Dare to know," commands Kant, for whom the latter must fit in "the limits of reason alone". The Age of Enlightenment promotes rational "natural light" as opposed to the "supernatural light" of faith in exposed truths. Secondly, science must enable the "enlightened" man to discover all mysteries thus increasing his knowledge and power. Thinkers defend the primacy of the scientific mind through intellectual exchanges. Finally, the role of faith in progress concerns both the advancement of knowledge, civilisation and morality; assuming the perfectibility of man.

As in the new spaces where the Enlightenment once shone - literary, artistic and physics salons; theatres, operas and cabinets of curiosity; popular cafes and political clubs - Jarik Jongman interprets the modernist architectural style notably focusing on Corbusier's celebrated works, which promote free movement and interaction between the inhabitants rather like an incarnation of the great principles of this rationalist, positivist, optimistic and humanist spirit.

Destruction and disillusionment

*If I renounce reason, I no longer have a guide [...].
Lost in an immense forest during the night,
I only have a small light to guide me.³*

Diderot, *Addition aux pensées*

Yet the villas painted by Jarik Jongman, like his motel rooms, are empty - or almost. There are no philosophers, scientists, artists or patrons.

However, two paintings show human female figures dancing. Who are these women in flowing traditional robes - seemingly performing a folk dance - in this unexpected architectural context where the artist has placed them? Given the painter's interest in modernism, these dancers are, at first glance, reminiscent of Matisse's famous painting *La Danse* (1909), which is exhibited at the MOMA in New York. It could be a nod to or another reference to modern art - pictorial this time.

Yet doesn't this notion risk being overshadowed by the chilling memory of propaganda images of totalitarian regimes at a time when popular festivals were held to exalt national historical traditions, and when the merits of gymnastics were extolled - a healthy body...? The folk dance depicted by the artist, as well as the grimacing duo who remind us of Francis Bacon's tortured faces of models, are less the dances of living breathing people but rather disturbing ghosts prancing in nightmarish scenes worthy of David Lynch's *Lost Highway* or *Mulholland Drive*, films whose strange, cold and violent atmospheres undoubtedly inspired Jarik Jongman. In Lynch's films, as in Jongman's paintings, it is difficult to distinguish between the reality, the madness, the dream, the illusion and the fantasy. The blurred faces of these dancers, who haunt these modernist villas, only reinforce the ghostly aspect of this supernatural image making it all the more disturbing because it combines the joy of dancing with the dim presence of the spectres.

Not only are these buildings and rooms seemingly uninhabited for the most part but they are on fire. The main power does not emanate from the enlightened man who builds and grows but from the fire which devours all. The flames do not belong to candles, which were once lit in windows to announce and share news. What became known as a symbol of the sharing of knowledge, piercing the darkness of ignorance with the light of reason, seems to be destroyed in a kind of terrifying public book burning. How can we not evoke the writings which helped to demystify Corbusier by the radical reinterpretation of his architecture as the expression of fascist ideas? ⁴ A fire actually occurred on 9 February 2012 in the architect's *Cité Radieuse* (re-built in 1952) in Marseilles. But Jarik Jongman's fire burns the *Villa Savoye* and far from being accidental or meaningless, it could be seen as a strong, angry, even disillusioned and cynical message i.e. a painter overwhelmed by the disenchantment of the post-modern world, and perhaps disappointed at having been deceived by a so-called "humanist, poet and visionary desirous of the happiness of men" who, in reality cultivated profane ideas.

³ Diderot, *Addition aux pensées*

⁴ http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/05/14/le-corbusier-ou-le-corps-ecrase_4633491_3232.html, last consultation on 21 April 2018.

Ontological instability

*"This was a prelude only, wherever they burn books,
they will also, in the end, burn human beings."*

Heinrich Heine

Nothing that exists lasts forever as the painter reminds us with these flames; symbols of transformation. The inevitable change, the ephemeral nature of all things, the fleetingness of our very existence, could be accepted with wisdom if humanity was not heading for disaster. Every day, we are told of the coming apocalypse. The fire in these paintings reminds us of the state of emergency that has become our daily routine: we generally believe that we must react immediately at the international level to prevent the death of migrants, halt the melting of glaciers and the dizzying disappearance of flora and fauna, the development of physical and mental diseases related to the environment, and the omnipresence of screens, etc.

What happens to independent the free thought so cherished by modern rationalists in this process of global disruption that continuously feeds the excesses of the "infobesity" and that subjugates, worries and paralyzes the user who has become so dependent on the media and social networks? Powerless in the face of these overwhelming problems, recipients of such contradictory information, onlookers of such a tragedy may very lose their minds. The question of progress to which he is trying to connect takes on troubling techno-scientific and transhumanist accents; augmented man, potentially immortal cyborgs, sophisticated robots. The fire of technology threatens to immolate ethics and morals; by attempting to excel and improve himself, man forgets the need to respect the limits of his nature and his imperfect being. The insatiable desire to become superhuman or "more than a man" results in dehumanisation and its subsequent loss. The disappearance of the natural world, the depletion of resources would be effects proportional to *hubris* rather like the human excess that led Icarus to burn his wings.

Jarik Jongman seems to respond to this destructive, anxiety-provoking and seemingly inescapable madness by expressing his negative emotions and thoughts through a pictorial technique that he himself describes as more aggressive and brutal than any he has used before.

Post-modernity: chaos and uncertainty

*Bullshit is a greater enemy of truth
than lies are*

Harry Frankfurt

It is difficult to express, other than the artist does in his paintings, the distress experienced in dealing with certain aspects of the post-modern world. In this "post-truth" era, it can feel like we are living in a David Lynch film; each day, becoming a more senseless and disturbing version of Disneyland.

But what is this chaos? Humankind has been plunged into darkness; the media only speak of crisis, terrorism, global warming, increasing pollution, toxic food, wars and desperate mass migrations of people. Everything is larger than life: our over-populated world over-consumes and over-exploits the planet. Everything is mixed up, absurd: a former reality TV star is now the president of the USA. Social networks seem to exacerbate and obscure this madness. Information mis-informs and fake news abounds. Between Donald Trump's "tweets" and the "no-go zones" for Parisians following the terrorist attacks in Paris dreamed up by Fox News - the US "rolling news" TV channel - the general confusion between fiction and reality, politics and the media, which are shared and commented upon for better and for the worse by social networks, has taken on such dimensions that we no longer know who or where to turn to in order to make sense of the world, or even if we have still want to make sense of all this hot air.

Fortunately, mistrust of the media and social networks exists - recalling how Jean-Jacques Rousseau criticised the pointless discussions of the Salons, these mundane places of entertainment and *dissemination* rather than the *production of ideas*. Among the philosophers who are still responsible for keeping the light of reason alive, the American Harry J. Frankfurt, in his now famous article "On Bullshit" (1986), makes a distinction between lies and bullshit. While the former still takes into account the truth, although deliberately distorting or denying it, the latter is purely self-serving i.e. it has no interest in what is true or false.

Overall, the contempt for truth, the denial of certain realities tosses altruistic and human values into oblivion. The spectacle, the scandal and the emotions relativize the facts drowning the very notion of objectivity in obscurantism. It is the triumph of unconsciousness, assumed ignorance, total stupidity and perfect irresponsibility.

This world of politico-media tyranny may result in a dangerous loss of critical thinking. Not only is the use of disturbing, alarming and distressing words provoking more or less strong and lasting emotions, but deceptive and misleading terms introduce uncertainties, misconceptions and prejudices into the minds of citizens. Public opinion is subject to manipulation, persuasion and alteration of one's freedom of conscience. Hence the feeling of disorientation and confusion expressed by Hannah Arendt in *La Crise de la Culture*: "The result of a coherent and total substitution of lies in the place of truth is not that lies will now be accepted as truth, nor that the truth will be seen as slander but that *the meaning by which we are guided* in the real world (...) *is destroyed.*"⁵ How should we to react to this loss of meaning and direction?

Anger can be black, white, blue or red just like the colours in Jarik Jongman's paintings. Sometimes anger can be blind but here it is the just emotion of an artist whose are eyes are wide open and whose painting deserves to be properly contemplated and meditated.

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⁵ Hannah Arendt, "Vérité et Politique" in *La Crise de la Culture*, Folio Poche pp. 327-328