

BEAUX LIVRES

- LYDIA HARAMBOURG, JEAN-MICHEL COULON, 1920-2014, ÉD. GOURCUFF GRADENIGO, 2018, 45€ .
 - JEAN-MICHEL COULON, LETTRES D'AMÉRIQUE – LETTRES D'ITALIE, ÉD. GOURCUFF GRADENIGO, 2019, 2 VOL., 68€ .
 - ALINE STALLA-BOURDILLON, JEAN-MICHEL COULON, CATALOGUE RAISONNÉ, ÉD. GOURCUFF GRADENIGO, 2022, 3 VOL., 140€ .
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A HUMAN AND PICTURAL ENIGMA

After having exhibited alongside the great names of the post-war period, the painter Jean-Michel Coulon, without ceasing to create, chooses the absolute withdrawal. Return on an ignored Protestant artist while the catalogs of his works are published.

A secret painter, who refuses to reveal his works, even to those who live in his intimate sphere, such seems at first sight Jean-Michel Coulon, who died in Paris in 2014, at the age of 94. But is it true? This long life, if we examine it, seems to be split in two, because it is only in the early beginning of the 1970's that he completely leaves the public scene, at least as a painter, to lock himself up in his studio and never leave it.

Secret, yes; but neither surly nor unsociable. According to his only daughter Aline Stalla-Bourdillon, who today, with much love, takes hold of this hidden work to promote it, the usual behavior of the painter leaned towards smiling peace. Even if one cannot prevent oneself from glimpsing, under this posed appearance, a splitting, a "being for oneself" and a "being for others" which fight incessantly in duel.

Picasso's curiosity

Very early turned towards art, Jean-Michel Coulon does not ask himself the question of the vocation, it goes without saying. *"My father started to paint as a child, tells his daughter. I have in my possession the underside of forests whose brushstrokes are premonitory. At seven years old, he painted Sainte-Chapelle from memory. A work that he shows then to Picasso but to whom he refuses to offer it despite his request. One finds there is already a quality of staging which testifies to an innate gift as well as the beginning of a subtle research of colors."* In his taste for churches as well as, later, for the buildings of a nocturnal New York or for the Tuscan towers, so "plastic" according to him, one detects the beginnings of a verticality that becomes his signature. Everything, with him, wants to climb, not in one go, but by the staircase of small multicolored milestones. As many steps of escape towards a personal release.

After the war, Jean-Michel Coulon definitively devotes himself to painting. He is not a person living on the margins and is situated in vogue of French abstraction, before the center of modernity moved to New York. His companions along his way are (among others) Nicolas de Staël, André Lansky, Maria Helena Vieira da Silva...

A superficial look may find that his style changes little over time, but this constancy allows him to strengthen a personality recognizable among all. These small rectangles juxtaposed, at the same time well limited and imperfect (because the human hand must find its place there), are more moving than it seems: more or less ascending or approaching, more or less thick or rejuvenated by the color. Sometimes windows closed, well-finished; sometimes the disorder of a painting striated to the bone.

An unexplained withdrawal

Thirty years lived in Belgium (from 1970 to 2000) see, in the painter, the appearance of mini-formats while his return to Paris, in the XXIst century, inaugurates the passion of collages. It seems however that the impulse of the years 1970-1980 was of all the most fertile with, on dark background, these blurred strokes, in

which the ochre, the brown but also the blood red prevail, slightly overflowing their limits and letting a more devastating heartbeat appear.

The painter's wish to withdraw is enigmatic. The death of his two brothers, especially that of the second brother, then the fire of his studio, could have played their part. Undoubtedly also the artistic rivalry with his brother-in-law, the painter Olivier Debré, fortunate to have been helped by the position of his brother, Michel Debré, a prominent politician who grants to him from the start all state commissions. Should we recognize in this discretion, and without falling into the cliché, the Protestant mark? *"I need six hours of solitude a day"*, said Jean-Michel Coulon. Or should we look for the reason of his withdrawal in his extreme perfectionism? Because he goes beyond painting canvases; he goes so far as to make his own frames! Strange paradox of a work at the same time promised to invisibility and ready to be shown...

The family of Jean-Michel Coulon is, indeed, well dedicated to Protestantism. His father, a lawyer, descends from Huguenot forebears, including the pastor of the desert, Jean Jarousseau. As for his German-born mother, *"she was a monument to herself"*, concludes Aline Stalla-Bourdillon. *"Very open, full of humor and charm. No one could have guessed that she too had crossed her desert with the drama of two dead sons. She was proud of her Protestantism, a regular parishioner of the Parisian Temple of the Annunciation, rue Cortambert, then animated by the pastor, Marc Boegner"*.

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ARCHIVES JEAN-MICHEL COULON / ALINE STALLA-BOURDILLON

