



'Real Life is absent' - Arthur Rimbaud 1854 - 1891

*by Hervé Constant
Text edited by Madelyn Freeman*

Here are 3 questions I would like you, please, to consider prior to our meeting ...:-

1. Can you identify the transitional stage in Rimbaud's life, when the vibrancy and energy of his youthful 'genius' begins to fade?

In his late teenage years, Arthur Rimbaud apparently ceased writing, and changes direction to forge a future life abroad. No more words ... no more poetry was to ever emerge. He wanted to start a whole new life in a different direction. He began to save money, as he wanted to raise a family and provide the best possible education for his, as yet, unborn child.

I believe Arthur Rimbaud was a very talented and promising poet, since the commencement of his student days in Charleville. He had been 'welcomed' into venerated artistic circles by Paul Verlaine, a highly respected and influential poet of his time. Rimbaud felt that that he had thus been 'discovered'.

His behaviour whilst in Paris, I believe, was due in part to an attitude of nonchalance, but mostly he revealed his arrogance, an attitude that had been strengthened, perhaps, as a result of the many prizes he had won, and all the ensuing glory and congratulations he had received, whilst at the college. Rimbaud also knew well, that his talent was supported by his mental facilities, his outstanding memory and his superior knowledge of literature.

After several years, however, no further success came his way, nor come to fruition. Bouts of heavy drinking and arguments were recorded, with Paul Verlaine and a final argument occurred when Verlaine left London and Rimbaud returned to see his mother at Roche, in Northern France.



Rimbaud had continued to write, in a separate private room, on his mother's farm. He isolated himself in this way and never participated in any of the household chores, nor in family life. I think it was a very big disappointment to him that no appreciation was forthcoming from the art circle he was once a part of in Paris, and therefore no success followed. Bitterness was encrusted into his psyche. He decided that the next step would be for him to move far away and discover new horizons but he chose a very dangerous area in an undiscovered land to start afresh.

Often, Rimbaud would mention that due to the hot weather, and extreme temperatures, a few of his comrades had died. This proved to be a real hardship for him, since most people - and anyone coming from Europe - at some stage of their travels during their stay in Harare, would either become seriously ill or even pass away. It was due not only to the sheer physical fatigue, brought about by constant extremes in the ever-changing weather - cold rains followed by extreme heat - but also the continual alienation and mistrust shown toward Rimbaud, and all foreigners, by the indigenous people which certainly did not help. Rimbaud constantly kept to himself and he could not trust anyone around him. He suspiciously protected all his savings, and could never relax nor ever feel safe or secure.

"... I have no idea where I will be, in one month ..." he wrote *"... I have on me between 12,000 and 13,000 francs and since no one here can be trusted, I have to keep all of my savings on me and keep a constant eye on it. What a miserable existence I am leading, in this absurd climate and under these disagreeable conditions! With my savings, I would have had a small, assured income and I could have rested a bit, after long years of suffering."*

"...so my life here is a real nightmare. Don't go thinking I am having a fine time. I am not. I have always considered that it is impossible to live more painfully than I do .."

"... such is life, and solitude is a bad thing, in France. Personally, I regret not being married and having a family. I could disappear, in the midst of these tribes, without news of me ever getting out."

'You write to me about political news. If you knew how indifferent I am to all that. For more than two years I haven't touched a newspaper. All those debates are for the present without meaning for me. Like the Moslems, I know that what happens happens, and that is all.'

He wrote to his family:

'... I am tormented these days by rheumatism in the back which makes me miserable. It is also in the left thigh which paralyses me from time to time, an arthritic pain in the left knee, and rheumatism (I've had for some time). I am not well at this moment. You see,



varicose veins in my right leg are very painful. This is what you get by working hard in these sad regions! Bad food, poor lodging, too light clothing, worries of all kind, boredom, continual anger over Negroes who are both stupid and dishonest-all this has a deep influence on one's disposition and health, in a very short time. One year here is equal to five elsewhere.'

Aden, 30 April 1891

To Isabelle and his mother

" ... I received your letter and your two stockings, but I received them under sad circumstances. Since the swelling of my right knee continued getting worse, and the pain in the joints, and unable to find a remedy or advice, because in Harare we are in a Negro colony and there are no doctors, I decided to go down to Aden. For twenty days I was in bed in Harare, unable to move, suffering atrocious pain and never sleeping. I hired sixteen Negro porters, for the distance between Harare and Zeilah. I had a canvas-covered litter built, and it was in that that I have just covered in twelve days the 300 kilometres of desert separating the mountains of Harare from the harbour of Zeilah. No need to tell you the suffering I underwent on the way.

3. Can you identify the objective awareness of his impending death amongst his kin and associates and friends, the wider public..

None, apart his family and I mean simply his sister Isabelle and his mother whom he called 'La Bouche d'Ombre' were aware, from the beginning, that Rimbaud started to have some pain in one leg. In his letters, he quite often mentions this pain and the worry to live without a family and friends, in this part of the world (Harare). He started fairly soon to ask for some medicine and bandages, to cover his knee, and an elastic to hold the tissue. He could still walk, he says, but only with a great deal of pain and disagreement.

The public, strangely enough, didn't know nor care about Rimbaud's whereabouts'. Apparently, many thought he was already dead and his poetry didn't have any real impact, at that time. It was only later, through the efforts of the poet, Paul Verlaine, after the publication of several of Rimbaud's poems, in different publications, that the public and the poets of Paris became aware of his talent. However, everyone and especially Paul Verlaine had the feeling that Rimbaud was already dead. Before he died a French journalist, travelling to Harare to cover an article about the area, and upon hearing the name of Rimbaud, mentioned to the poet that his poetry, in Paris, was being appreciated and published, due to a serious interest in his work, and that most people needed to be persuaded that he was no longer living.



When asking Rimbaud if he was still writing poetry, the answer given to the journalist by Rimbaud was that "... [he] didn't believe in those things anymore ... that was during the silly time of my youth ...".

Death and the Body of the Artist / art as funeral rite



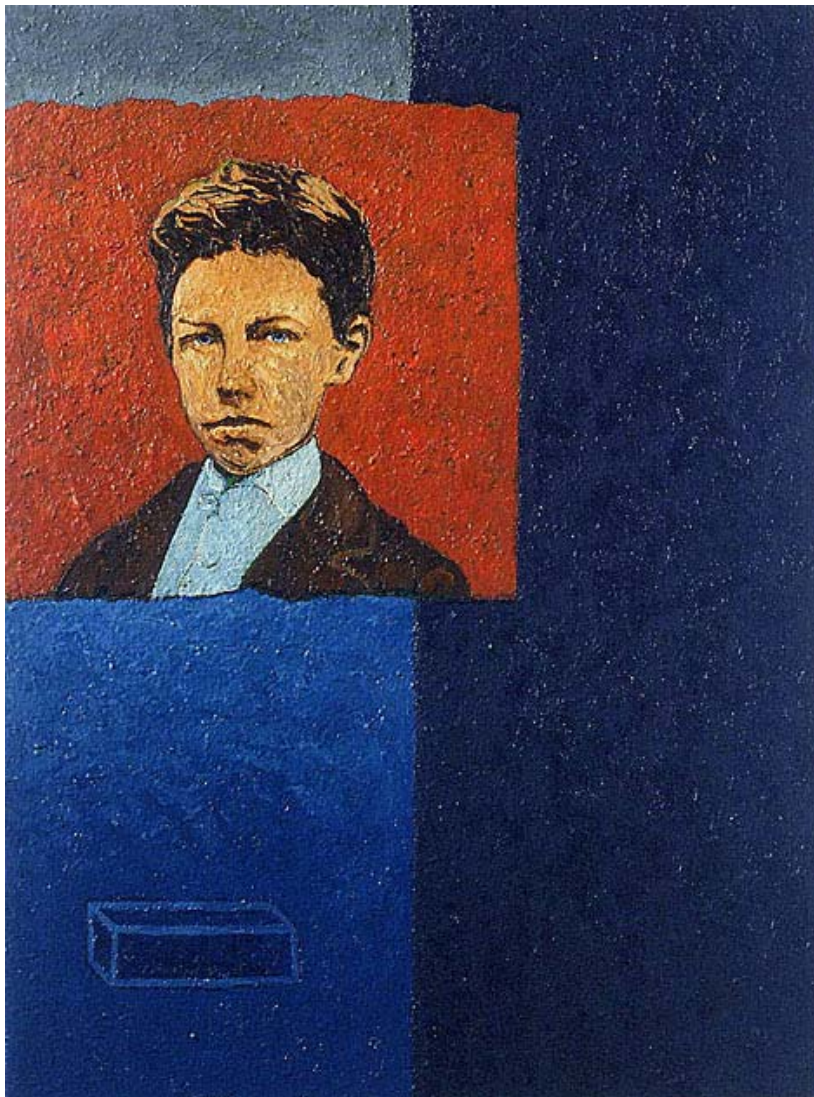
The Real Life is absent, digital photo by Hervé Constant

The Rhizome

"And from then on I bathed in the Poem
Of the sea, infused with stars and lactescent,
Devouring the green azure where, like a pale elated
Piece of flotsam, a pensive drowned figure sometimes sinks;"



But, in truth, I have wept too much! Dawns are heartbreaking.
Every moon is atrocious and every sun bitter.
Acrid love has swollen me with intoxicating torpor.
O let my keel burst! O let me go into the sea!



Arthur Rimbaud oil on canvas 60x40in by Hervé Constant
Collection of the Arthur Rimbaud Museum France



No More Words oil on canvas by Hervé Constant
Collection of the Arthur Rimbaud Museum France



Arthur Rimbaud oil on canvas 65x46in by Hervé Constant

Based on a drawing made by his sister Isabelle on the his death-bed in Marseille aged 37

‘All I do is weep day and night. I have no idea what to do. All these worries are driving me mad. I can’t sleep for one minute.

Yes, our life is a misery, an endless misery! Why do we exist? Send me the news. Best wishes,’



Rimbaud, Hospital of the Conception, Marseilles

Venus Anadyomene

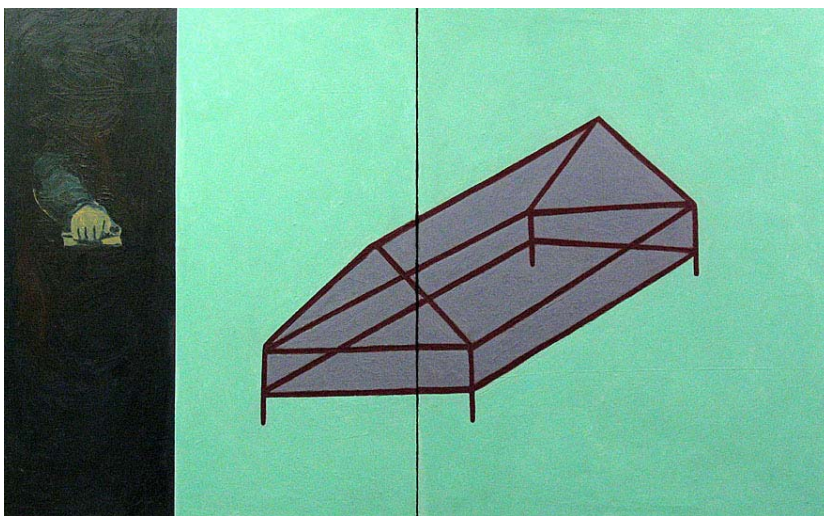
As from a green zinc coffin, a woman's
Head with brown hair heavily pomaded
Emerges slowly and stupidly from an old bathtub,
With bald patches rather badly hidden;

Then the fat gray neck, broad shoulder-blades
Sticking out; a short back which curves in and bulges;
Then the roundness of the buttocks seems to take off;
The fat under the skin appears in slabs:

The spine is a bit red; and the whole thing has a smell
Strangely horrible; you notice especially
Odd details you'd have to see with a magnifying glass...

The buttocks bear two engraved words: CLARA VENUS;
—And that whole body moves and extends its broad rump
Hideously beautiful with an ulcer on the anus.

The Impossible



Hand and Stretcher oil on canvas by Hervé Constant



Ah! My life as a child, the open road in every weather; I was unnaturally abstinent; more detached than the best of beggars, proud to have no country, no friends, what stupidity that was. - And only now I realize it!

- I was right to distrust old men who never lost a chance for a caress, parasites on the health and cleanliness of our women, today when women are so much a race apart from us.

I was right in everything I distrusted: because I am running away!
I am running away!

Arthur Rimbaud

Death (1891)



Rimbaud's grave in Charleville. The inscription reads simply *Priez pour lui* ("Pray for him").

In February 1891, Rimbaud developed what he initially thought was arthritis in his right knee. It failed to respond to treatment and became agonisingly painful, and by March the state of his health forced him to prepare to return to France for treatment. In Aden, Rimbaud consulted a British doctor who mistakenly diagnosed tubercular synovitis and recommended immediate amputation. Rimbaud delayed until 9 May to set his financial affairs in order before catching the boat back to France. On arrival, he was admitted to



hospital in Marseille, where his right leg was amputated on 27 May. The post-operative diagnosis was cancer.

After a short stay at his family home in Charleville, he attempted to travel back to Africa, but on the way his health deteriorated and he was readmitted to the same hospital in Marseille where his surgery had been carried out, and spent some time there in great pain, attended by his sister Isabelle. Rimbaud died in Marseille on 10 November 1891, at the age of 37, and he was interred in Charleville.

Hervé Constant is a London-based French artist.

Hervé's work is a mixture of different interests, social and cultural influences. Recent projects involve video, photos and sounds and Artist's Books. Hervé Constant's most recent exhibitions were at: 7 Encuentro International Poesia Visual Sonora Experimental, Buenos Aires Argentina. His book 'Killing' was part of a show displayed at Kaleid Editions London Plasto-Baader-Books Exhibition of Unique Artists' Books 2009. His work is shown and in the collection of MONA, Museum of New Art, Detroit USA. PI-Five video/short films festival, National Museum in Szczecin Poland. A sound recording of his was included in 'Sound Fetish' WPS1 at the Venice Biennale 05 and is now part of the Archive of MOMA New York. Project 59, 59 Seconds Video Festival, touring to Brooklyn NY, Alfred University NY, and at the Academia Internacional de Cinema, Sao Paulo, Brazil; curated by Irina Danilova, March 2007. Most recently the video called 'Run' was selected by the Hayward Gallery London as part of the 60 second Surreal; the projection took place at the National Film Theatre. Recent projections have taken place in Roma, Studio Ra, FEST'AFILM FESTIVAL AMADIS DU FILM Montpellier and 'Visions in New York City' Gallery Macy NY in 2009.

His film called 'Between Two Worlds' 8mn was shown at the Barbican Film Festival, Cinema 1 the 2 July 2007 6pm. In October 07 the same film won the competition 'I LOVE LONDON' organised by Filmaka and sponsored by LOVEFILM.

From a selection of 59 International audiences Hervé's video 'Dance in 59 Seconds' was selected amongst the 59 top videos in the 59 Seconds Videos Festival 2009.

A series of his paintings were shown last April at Kings Place, London during the event organised by Poet in the City "Rimbaud & Verlaine".

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