

# SUPERPOPULISTIC: THE ART OF PHILIP COLBERT

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Philip Colbert has created his own supersaturated hybrid pop world – the elements that contribute to his extra-ordinary paintings are a frenetic interchange of the stimuli that he sees around him. The huge scale and brilliant colours appear to spill out over the edges of his canvas immediately commanding our attention. The artist James Rosenquist in an interview with me suggested that paintings should ‘spill out of the picture frame’, Andy Warhol claimed that once you had ‘got pop you could never see America in the same way again’ – both artists’ legacies can be discerned in Colbert’s meticulously painted layers which take months to construct and cover every inch of the canvas: A vibrant hyperactive clash of art historical cross references intertwined with contemporary cultural symbols from our media saturated age, Colberts hybrid characters, his compositional aesthetic cleverly reminding us of how we multi task and move swiftly from one reality or internet search to another, throwing up random or sometimes surreal connotations.

Warhol said in Popism that ‘Anybody could do anything, so naturally we were all trying to do it all’: In my interviews with Colbert that took place in three sessions over a number of weeks the ghost of Warhol often surfaced and fascinating dialogues ensued. The aim of an interviewer is to capture the essence of the artists voice and since I began recording artists conversations in 1995 I am aware of differences, each interviewee has its own tenor and dynamic. Colbert speaks quickly and decisively, his words mirroring the energy of his paintings, his ideas vividly communicated. Painting is ‘probably much more exciting than advertising, Rosenquist suggested, ‘so why shouldn’t it be done with that power and gusto’ it is that sentiment that propels Colbert’s work.

**Jean: Did you make a conscious decision to become a pop artist?**

Colbert: Art’s been my passion since I was very young and in creative terms, I lodged myself in the realm of a pop brand. Even though I’ve always painted, I was more interested in trying to create a holistic notion of a contemporary crossover brand-slash-an artist... I never showed my paintings: Then I decided that I really wanted to fully engage with a dialogue about painting using pop art as an inspiration. So, I started [painting] because I wanted the freedom to really engage in art history, because I was trying to create a world, but very often it was very much about simplistic forms of directly communicating the effectiveness of the icon. But I would get frustrated, because even though that was great for building my brand, I really wanted to engage more with the art history I was obsessed by; I read about it every evening. I found that the beauty of painting was that I could really delve into my whole world by rifling through images that I’m interested in. I could take the [visual] language I’d been constructing, but extend it and really bring it into this holistic sense of making my world. Painting gives you that opportunity to not only create - because obviously I can do that using computers – but the beauty of actually committing ideas to a canvas so that it falls into the line of the history of painting.

**J: I am always intrigued why artists take the path they do.**

C: In terms of my art, bizarrely it was probably because I grew up in Britain, in Perthshire Scotland, and the art that I was exposed to was either historic and traditional or quite twee. But funnily enough I remember seeing a George Stubbs painting of a horse, when I was around six. It illustrated for me the magic of art that you can create: it was figurative and realistic, in the sense it was obviously a horse, but the way that it was rendered and the artist’s vision of the horse made me read the painting like a treasure, because it glowed in its own dimension. I remember certainly being really struck by that. I include Stubbs and Rubens appropriated horses to my paintings using their poses as they are typically used in statues, triumphant in battle. One is always pushing for one’s voice to really break ground somehow. Art history is a very heavily saturated dialogue, so there’s a lot of people that are like someone, or something else, so the challenge is always how to take your work to a place where it sings on its own. I’m obviously, working a lot with appropriation, but I’m always striving to vibrate it in a way that breaks it out. The challenge is often the composition building, which can be quite long and tedious in terms of reworking, stripping away, reducing, and rebuilding again, but that’s just part of the ebb and flow of the creative process, until one’s actually really happy with something. I am also a ferocious consumer, I’m looking at art and Instagram all the time, it’s like a serious addiction, so therefore I’m trying to honestly paint a reflection of my own pop philosophy hence why I saturate rather than super reduce, because I feel that we are, living in an over saturated time.

**J: Were there particular Pop artists that influenced you?**

C: Yes, I love Lichtenstein, but, for me Rosenquist is the ultimate pop painter, he is such a major force in narrative painting: his spirit was such a big thing for me. Artists such as David Salle tried to pick up the baton to run with an idea of evolving narrative pop painting, but I felt that no one was really fully engaging and had evolved the pop dialogue. So, I began building my own pop world. I am passionate about painting, exploring and engaging with narratives, I started doing enormous canvases because it gave me the freedom to integrate my two worlds, that I have created for real, all the elements, iconography and the lobster character, everything that had come from my past works. I see painting as creating a world, taking people on a journey, and that journey embraces the freedom of narrative, of storytelling, and my own journey as an artist. I am saying we are even more pop now than we were in the sixties.



**J: We're pop in a different way...**

C: Yes, Pop is totally misconstrued – when people talk of Pop Art, they often show examples of it as being really kitsch copies of the sixties, which is sort of irrelevant because the truth of it is that it's not relevant today, and it kills the whole idea of pop being a language which has actually got longevity as a philosophy. So, I still believe that [Pop] philosophy is super relevant but I think there's no question that we have a more complex view of consumerism because we have seen, the darker underbelly of consumer products.

**J: Of course, work such as Richard Hamilton's 'Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?' of 1956 was iconic in terms of pop and consumer imagery, he was looking at the world around him with its cultural references and products.**

C: Quite, he was using collage from magazines, I use the internet, so not only do I try and replicate this idea of contemporary perspective being such a hybrid between digital information streams and our traditional way of looking at paintings, but also the idea that my resource is Google: I've got art history at my fingertips I can enlarge a Van Gogh chair and copy it exactly, replicating the paint texture – take the philosophy of the painting and just plop it into my work and re-contextualise it.

**J: How important is it that people understand and recognise the different references in your paintings and see the interdependency between different genres?**

C: I like the idea that people can get drawn in by the colourful elements of the painting's façade, but 100% for me it's really important that people do stay with the image and investigate it, because they're a bit like snakes and ladders, you can follow them around and you get pulled into sections. They take a while, because there's so much detail, there are so many paintings within each painting, so it does take a while to unravel them. I was wanting to do painting because I wanted to engage that sense of myself that I hadn't been really fully engaging, but now I'm pushing my specific language, my work is larger now, the more work I can put into it, the happier I am. It's not about trying to find a system which is the quickest solution, it's an epic showing, where I can basically scale everything up, so the power will be so much more effective.

**J: I'd like to talk about your alter ego the lobster which is part of your distinctive identity. Where did it come from, surrealism?**

C: Yes surrealism, I identify with it as a movement. I also studied philosophy at St Andrews University and when I was a teenager I was into Nietzsche, Hegel and Schopenhauer so that was something that creatively was like a whole new awakening for me in terms of taking me from a Scottish situation as a child to basically being able to inspire myself and give myself a direction in life. Through studying at University I gained a sense of my own distilled understanding of a philosophy on life: I think that was very much where I embrace surrealism, humour, and parody, all those elements. The great thing about studying philosophy quite young is that you process thoughts that maybe someone else might not articulate, and for me it was actually all about understanding those thoughts, that articulation was quite an important part of developing my aesthetic: I believe in absurdity, I believe in surrealism and also this is ultimately where a connection with Warhol could be made as I'm slightly irreverent in the sense I don't believe in the system of hierarchy. For me the chalice, the holy grail of meaning, is in the experience of living, all art can do is be a broken reflection of that in some sense.

My paintings are an orchestral celebration of appropriation. I think that's how I see them, I think of them as a celebration of the freedom of the individual to engage with language, that's ultimately what my character the lobster really represents. My paintings are fundamentally narrated by this alter ego character, it's a fully committed persona that ultimately represents my dialogue with art history. Obviously within systems in society, people like to create an illusion of that sophisticated particular language of greatness and genius in art, but I'm more interested in the idea of everyday greatness and capturing it. Ultimately I am quite irreverent, I believe everyone is an artist, a Warholian concept, because I believe actually that living is an art.

**J: Your paintings are now huge, why is scale so important to you?**

C: It began when I was working on a small *Self-portrait as a Lobster (2016)*, I just was looking at what I had done one evening quite late in the studio and thought "you know, I'm sitting in such a comfortable space [with this painting] and this doesn't feel quite right" so I stepped back and imagined my painting continuing, and then moving into the world and suddenly it hit me "wow, of course, what am I doing focusing on the specific, I should be making the world around the lobster", so immediately I thought "what's the biggest size canvas I can fit into my studio?" So, I then drew around the square painting that I had completed and began sketching the rest of a composition that became my *Joshua Tree Painting (2017)* which became the first large painting that I made. The reason why I used the particular desert landscape in that work is because I had an architectural drawing of a cactus house that I had made a few years before which was to be the basis for a painting, this now appears in the background. The idea was that we'd design a house where I would create everything inside and make a philosophy book on how to live in the desert. I went to Joshua Tree National Park several times looking for land and when I was there I went to the Noah Purifoy Outdoor Desert Art Museum, I thought the sculpture park was amazing - I was blown away by it, it just represented exactly what I feel, a creative journey of finding an artist, seeking a platform to build, to create your world: the Joshua tree represented that because it was like a frontier land where people that were basically outsiders could go to and live in their own dimension. The beautiful landscape reminded me of a pop Dali-esque experience which I felt was very now, so hence why I like that environment. It was really informative, like language. I also included surreal visual references to work by Salvador Dali particularly his strange spindly elephants which appeared in his work from 1944, and my lobster is smoking although he has no mouth! But then I have artists that have been overlooked which I enjoy discovering such as Sophie Taeuber-Arp the wife of Jean Arp including sections of her abstract paintings: so, I started actually building my aesthetic and you can see many of my paintings have cacti, Joshua trees and bright blue skies.

**J: In your paintings you are also talking about creating a new aesthetic philosophy, mined from key philosophic thinkers, via Pop Art?**

C: Yes, when I look at some of Lichtenstein's paintings for example the most effective ones are not necessarily the reproductions of comic books, but rather for me where he is narratively engaging with an art historical dialogue, or he's trying to take philosophy that had been evolved by the Cubists or even Fernand Leger. I also identify Leger as being one of the great influences on Pop. I'm leaning towards western art historical dialogue in my work, but I guess that's what I grew up with and that's the language I'm most comfortable with and express myself in. What particularly interests me is the idea of the past dialogue between ideas, and so hence why I saw very clearly a dialogue with Lichtenstein back to Leger and other painters of that period. I also see David Salle trying to pick up that dialogue so I guess I really wanted to join that: hence why I am making lots of engagements with ideas that have been laid down by [James] Rosenquist, but obviously what I'm doing with those is I'm recontextualising, re-positioning and I'm offering my new breadth of concept. So, I see myself coming in with a dialogue in a similar way to how I believe those artists [I mentioned] had a dialogue, anchoring one's work into a sense of art historical discussion, rather than basically existing too much in the fashion of contemporary art. I don't want to engage with a fad or have a piece of art that just very abstractly hangs on a wall, there would be no connection for me.

**J: In your painting London (2017) there is fusion of different visual and cultural references, you are also based in London now.**

C: Well it began with the idea that the Kellogg's packet and the marmalade jar of Golden Shred was very much like my kitchen table when I was a kid. But in terms of influences I was looking at John Bratby, his painting, The Breakfast Table for example from the 50's, there was a certain nostalgia of Britishness in his paintings at a time when I was thinking about my own sentimental connection to identity in this country: so my memory is of staring at these cereal packets as a kid, like they were holy, the effect they had on me was actually something that now I can only try and attempt to replicate because it was so powerful. These products were really symbolic ideas of identity. I tried to include as many as I could in London without killing it. The National Gallery with neon columns, a giant ice cream cone [splatted] on its dome, while in the foreground I am vaping and taking selfies. I want my paintings to be super saturated but I still want them to decoratively flow and have space and breathe, but to really be like, BANG, and to represent all that inflow of information in the one image, because in actuality we all consume: and I



**Dream Hunt**  
oil and acrylic paint on steel panels, neon light, real Hoover  
220 x 160 x 86 cm ( H x W x D )  
2018

consume so much. For me the idea of a Pop painter – and I would confidently say I am a Pop painter because I still hold that idea of Pop as a philosophy not just a postcard idea of the sixties – is a way of looking at aesthetics and a way of looking at the value of art.

**J: The painting also includes references to Bridget Riley, David Hockney and Stubbs...**

C: Yes and also Leon Kossoff who is a Londoner and Frank Auerbach whose family came to England to escape the Nazi's, so giant art characters coming in behind the tourists. So *London (2017)* is from a series of my paintings that were somehow like a homage to Richard Hamilton on one hand and then they have my cartoon world which is what I've been building on the other, the key narrative thread to the works. But in terms of the actual way that I painted this [series], I wanted to feel free about using Google search and having the whole of art history at my fingertips. I loved the idea of photo realistically replicating certain paintings and objects [from the past], because, in the Pop sense, it's the freedom to articulate and play with [visual] language, with all the textural differences playing around gestural mark making. I love the beauty of paint, exploring its different properties, for example the pink pigment [in *London (2017)*] comes from my obsession with Philip Guston.

**J. So the attention to oil painted surface that Guston brings?**

C: Yes, I feel that oil just gives more textural beauty. I have used painting as a way of articulating imagery and often things that I would paint would become prints or sculptures or furniture so it was part of my process,

**J: I'm very interested in this link with art history because if you think of artists in the 19th century who would use references from other artists' works in their work and then in the 20th century, Picasso for example and of course Warhol.**

C. I really love that dialogue because one can use those references from the past artists to communicate. In my *Desert Hunt painting (2018)* it's got so many different artists included in it, but what I like about that is it contextualises them immediately, so it becomes a visual representation of art history yet somehow battling. I'm often interested in the [visual] language and ideas, what's important and connects, what is interesting and gives depth to art history because one's practice is judged through that, because even if you're totally oblivious to it, people will always read art through the context of art historical dialogues...

**J: So, the references to Picasso's Guernica (1937) in Desert Hunt (2018), are important for those reasons as well as its political impact?**

C: Yes, the reason I chose it was because it's such a powerful, iconic picture, Picasso was so able to create powerful dramatic images capturing conflict, war and suffering: It is also the reason I included the compositional references to Rubens' Tiger, Lion and Leopard Hunt (1616) painting because I wanted to play homage to the idea of the eternal hunt, the eternal conflict, ongoing battles and art historical battle painting, Rubens' work is epic and heroic. So, Van Gogh for instance is attacking the lion because he was critical of Rubens in his letters, even though he was influenced by him. I have included Rubens' tigers, lions and leopards but substituted the hunters. One hunter is wearing an Indiana [Hoosiers] shirt, my homage to Robert Indiana, I love his dialogues with language and symbolism in his use of words such as LOVE that universally translate, or the love emoji, also symbols like the blue twitter birds flying through the landscape. I really wanted Rubens-esque grandeur and juxtapositions. The philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, for example had their conceptual ideas of morality as they did in Rubens' time and at the moment there is a quite a dramatic shift going on in some of these ideas where we are even witnessing the destruction of certain values. So, I think that's why I like the idea of cross-referencing history. My Hunt series is all quite apocalyptic because it's ultimately tapping into fears and consciousness of related contemporary culture. We obviously do live in an over saturated media storm, and at the same time we are aware of the damage to the environment: maybe in the sixties people possibly believed in the new clean pop culture, whereas now that pop culture has amassed a huge rubbish dump of old packaging, we're aware of that apocalypse, the dark storm, which is there. Some my paintings are trying to explore the darkness, but they're also celebrating life as well.

**J: You are wearing your egg suit in Desert Hunt (2018)...**

C: Yes, and basically the reason why I always gravitated towards eggs is I love the purity of them - I've always been sieving popular culture for symbols that I felt were basically humorous yet profound. I was trying to identify a crossover, almost like a Venn diagram, where I could touch something that was funny, something that was abstract, something that was almost pure and aesthetic like a Mondrian with a piss-take humour; the egg was it. For me it has that day to day greasy humorous slapstick comedy, yet it's also beautiful in terms of purity, you can paint it and capture it as a graphic with just two colours, you can put it on anything, on your clothing...

**J: Warhol made a number of screen prints of eggs and of course he collaborated with Jean Michel Basquiat on Easter Eggs (1984-5).**

C: Of course, the egg is a powerful symbol because it's the ultimate idea of origin, of birth, but I use fried eggs. Dali also was obsessed with fried eggs but was using them in a different context, mine are not about associated pre-birth memories or sexual connotations. So, I started wearing either lobster or fried egg suits and the more I wore them the more people associated me with the symbol, so it was almost like a forced marriage. I used it on cars and carpets I even made big egg pictures, I love the idea that I can sort of live the art, integrating it with the everyday. For me live art is the best form of art, it's like a Pop Art vehicle, high art should not be about branding, but I didn't look at it like that. For me it was an opportunity, in the same way that Richard Pettibone uses Duchamp's urinal, [I made a wearable urinal.] I thought that was such a powerful symbol because it represents anarchy, it is a piss-take and I felt my clothing needed that.

**J: Your Lion Hunt (2018) however is a far more apocalyptic vision, compositionally referencing another of Rubens' paintings Lion Hunt (1621).**

C: Yes, with this painting there is extreme violence and dark threatening skies, Basquiat is destroying the horse, I have been toppled, there is Van Dyke, there are likes and emojis and error messages, images are bursting out of the computer screen. So, with this amount of complexity there has to be compositional structuring with the meaning and a power in the appropriation. Each painter [I selected] represents a certain approach to painting, that's why they're valued. I love that I can dialogue with anyone and anything. Jeff Koons talks about how he has also always enjoyed creating works that would have this kind of gestalt presence. So in Lion Hunt I was also thinking of factory farming, the lion has been opened up and has been a victim of scientific experiments, with injections stuck into him, so what I'm saying through this painting is that there is actually great violence today. There are other potent symbols such as the Peace Dove which Picasso used as a symbol but it has been shot in the internet box so there is a critique of morality and of society, but the thing is, I still have celebratory elements.

**J: But you are also being attacked...**

C: Yes, but again in a Chaplin-esque way. But the scale of these paintings is also important like in those huge Rosenquist paintings, if you're building a world, there's the relationship of the viewer to that scale, it is like you're in the world of the painting, rather than the painting being in your world. I think that's the challenge of the composition, to control the flow, obviously one spends a lot of time before making the painting, I do sketches with no colour to identify the structures, and then as one is painting there's a lot of alterations. I love the juxtaposition between my photo realistic painting mixed with areas of abstraction because it creates more depth and breadth in the dialogue. So, I am finding appropriated images, from works that are massively reproduced like Basquiat and Picasso and by including them, I was entering into a dialogue by painting onto them. I loved the dialogue between Warhol and Basquiat in the mid 1980's, how they collaborated and I thought "well, if I was in with them and they've basically been playing around between each other I'll just come out and take over with photo realistic work".

So, in *Boar Hunt (2018)* for example I take a very classical grand old master composition but the heroic horse from Jacques-Louis David is now a child's yellow plastic toy horse, I have Rosenquist's spaghetti, the global brand artists that I have included typify ideas of the past, or are almost like fashion brands that are globally collected, a global commodity, it has to have that potent language.





**Dream Hunt Triptych**  
 oil and acrylic on canvases  
 270 x 585 cm  
 2018

**J.: Can we talk brands then, Colgate for example ?**

C: I use brands that I am deeply familiar with because they personally connect with me, so I have so much connection with Colgate it's amazing, its stripes and great graphic quality because when I'm actually painting in Japan immediately people are like, "wow, Colgate toothpaste". It's amazing how you might get more of a connection on Colgate toothpaste than you would get on Rubens and then there is the Coca Cola splash, it's something that we desire, we lust toward an ice cool drink, we've been marketed it so much, it's grown up in our language. I also use the splashing liquid in *Milk Splash (2018)* because pouring and spilling is very much like Jackson Pollock's methods, the idea of a liquid being splashed onto the canvas or the surrealism of being able to take a giant milk bottle and just pour milk all over my character, so that he falls off his horse. It was just a celebration of the freedom of playing around within the scene, then the giant spoon coming in about to scoop him up as if he was in a cereal bowl, its partly a cartoon world of the child's imagination changes in scale and perception the language of the breakfast table. In *Boar Hunt (2018)* I also use sportswear brands because they are these amazingly democratic vehicles they kill class because everyone can access them so Van Gogh with a Nike t shirt on, like it or not in terms of brand recognition they become the same. So you've got this mock grand elevated sort of history scene, but with a sort of hyper bonkers narrative going on. But then of course I add the hangman's noose because I like the edginess of the juxtaposed darkness. Something I'm also using a lot now, which I've brought into the paintings is the almost graph paper backdrops to things, because I like the way that it creates an almost scientific study aesthetic. You've got all these juxtapositions going on but then there's always these undertones of a computer world grid where things are being built on top of each other.

**J: The plug for your iPhone or your computer is pretty universal.**

C: Yeah of course, the things that I have basically locked into as icons within my language are either artists that I see in galleries or see referenced all the time or grew up with, like Leger and studying Bacon they're almost like signposts for me, intellectually, artistically, and representative of a certain idea. So then putting them into the painting is a way of contextualising my characters, because the character represents me, then the whole thing is just a map, it's a creative map of my ideas.

**J: But someone like Francis Bacon had an extreme life, so your inclusion of tortured artists adds to your works layered narrative.**

C: I am often was very drawn to these extreme artists. When I studied philosophy, I was always attracted to the sincere reflection of the human existentialism idea. I was reading and studying things that were hundreds of years old, so why should I just be painting images referencing today? We are standing on the shoulders of ideas from the past, we are still heavily informed by Plato for example, I'm just trying to make paintings form a deeper sense of where the dialogues come from and the influence of the past on the present. But I am presenting a positive spirit. I never put forward a highly valued sense of tortured self-expression, my work is a much more playful satirical celebration of an individual's strife with language and society or art history and the ability to basically overcome these things with self-belief and fantasy.

**J: *Dream Hunt (2018)* your huge triptych takes this even further, but now we have Frank Stella and Klimt, bitcoins and dollar signs and the error message which often appears in your super saturated ever-expanding world.**

C: I like the error sign because it's a spanner in the works, when it pops up on the screen I was always reacting with 'oh no what's happened'. There is a reflection of our current identities in terms of the internet and computers and how that's become such a massive part of our own identity in the way we see things, and how there's all this fusion between the screen and the real world. I also like to play with the scale of things such as the giant nuts and bolts. I identify them as key components of the almost genius sculpture of the everyday. So, in this series and with this painting I am trying to create reflective narrative pop painting, articulating what I felt a contemporary pop picture should look like, but extending it, using this universal language and celebration of the everyday, yet also engaging with deeper ideas of the limits of painting. The centrepiece is this sort of evolution of my character and my character's ability to push his own language within art history, so you've got, in this triptych effective representation of my artistic journey, so everything is on the canvas nothing is hidden, it's all on the canvas. I do include references to Frank Stella whose work I have really looked at and known for quite a while in terms of the obvious works like the more famous paintings, the early period black and white, and maybe some of those more big abstract paintings such as *Harran 11 (1967)* : But when I really got into his art was actually when I saw one of the *Moby dick* prints, I was just like "wow", it had all the elements in it, the sci-fi, the abstraction, and I was thinking

"this is a really cool", he's really developed a cool modern language of abstraction. I could see then when I started investigating them, the way he was pushing, he didn't find a comfortable place and just stay there, he constantly sought and I respected that sort of journey.

**J: You were discussing earlier the ordinary object *Kitchen Chaos (2017)* also includes a number of kitchen implements again the references to the ordinary made extraordinary.**

C: I love the cheese grater, for me it has an everyday quality, but also I find it very violent, because of the fact of the grating aspect of it and the fact it sits around the kitchen.

**J: Like Semiotics of the Kitchen Martha Rosler's 1975 early feminist works?**

C: Yes, so kitchen knives, the sharp stainless steel, it's such an alien surface to us, as a creature with skin and flesh and also we cut so easily, so it's an image with a sort of horror subliminal warning sign connotation to it, I like the objects that have these interesting undertones and aspects. So, in the *Kitchen Chaos (2017)* painting I have my characters, and I am trying to create a saturated effect like a Tarantino movie. The background is like a set backdrop of a sixties pop concept, so hence why I've included a fridge which is stuffed full, I've got a section from Cezanne's *The Basket of Apples* from 1893 and juxtaposed it with a KFC 'Bargain Bucket'; I have a Warhol Brillo Box, I've got a little section of Rosenquist painting and I am sitting in the yellow chair from Van Gogh's bedroom in Arles.

**J: I want to talk about another painting *Venice (2017)* because what you captured so well is the scale of these giant cruise ships and the devastation that they are causing to the historic city.**

C: Yeah, completely, it's quite amazing, if you took a historic Venetian and showed them Venice today, they would think they were in *Blade Runner* the meeting of high and low culture. I was looking at John Bratby's Venetian paintings, like *The Regatta in Venice (1985)* he was almost like a British Van Gogh, he would go to Venice, paint a Venetian scene then end up doing quite clichéd work on some occasions, so it just made me think about the idea of Venice as a rite of passage for artists.

**J: JW Turner with his numerous Venice sketches and paintings.**

C: Exactly, I thought it was interesting that it is not really a subject for contemporary artists in the 21st Century, no one had really reinvented this idea of the Venice painting, capturing this absurd juxtaposition of contemporary Venice, so I thought, it was an amazing opportunity to basically pay homage to the Venice genre painting. I loved the idea of this huge monster cruise ship smashing through the Grand Canal with Philip Guston arms, because there was a Guston show in Venice at the Gallerie dell'Accademia at the same time as I was composing this painting in 2017, but it is also highlighting how Venice is in peril because of its attraction for tourists.

**J: In another of your works from that series *Builders (2017)* the canvas seems to refer to Fernand Legers Builders with Aloe (1951) and also his woven tapestries.**

C: Yes, they're brilliant, I always marvel at the huge construction on building sites and what goes into these very visible creative projects, the fact that builders are in a way like worker bee characters that actually go out and build so I just wanted to pay a homage to this idea of their greatness and Leger's vision.

**J: I also think it's interesting that you have suggested that people misunderstand pop, it was a movement dealing with a society that actually had changed fundamentally from the 1950's and it was reflecting that. Do you think, in a way that's what you're doing with your work reflecting the impact of our 'google' age?**

C: Yes, I'm really fascinated by this notion of how the internet is changing our perspective. If you told people how much they would use phones...we've become semi androids, and so actually it's fascinating how that effect, good and bad, has basically made huge changes in our culture and perspective: It's an endless inspiration [for me] in terms of how I like to continue pushing and investigating these effects, it's fundamental to my perspective now especially





**Milk Splash**  
oil and acrylic on canvas  
195 x 270 cm  
2018

in terms of my paintings. But it's also the political implications because you've got such a mass of available networks of information, these huge networks of power. So, I guess that's why I really am attracted to the idea of saturation, which is so relevant today because it's all very quick forms of connection to information, but we've become rapid, ravenous consumers. So, you build your world then people will come.

**J: Do you also find yourself having a sudden absolute compulsion with certain artists?**

C: Yes, for sure, because I find the zeitgeist interesting, for example Condo at the moment is really in the zeitgeist, so that's why I've been sort of playing [including him], because I feel it's something that can immediately connect people. If you look at paintings such as Double Heads on Red, 2014, You can see how he is appropriating Picasso with his playful art heads and I like the idea taking these images, high art images, taking the philosophy of the freedom of contemporary painting – which is all about using digital media to basically create paintings – and the process of that, using the mouse and the repetition and building imagery: I love the concept of being able to embrace the beauty of painting in terms of the texture, the physicality, the process but also hybridity using computer and image making, and then, the freedom to just copy and repeat.

**J: Warhol had his infamous factory and you also have a studio system...**

C: ...Which I find really amazing, for me the studio concept is super inspiring because it allows you to go to work on bigger imagery, larger scale paintings, of course you do audition people. I love the idea of it being eccentric as well in terms of having crazy characters like Warhol's factory but ultimately it is still a very focused work environment, so generally people that work with me are very technically proficient.

**J: You are now also expanding your world into the virtual, why did you feel it was necessary to do that?**

C: Well I have been realising two things, my lobster toy and the VR world. I'm really inspired by the making of objects so I love the idea of like one's artistic world having that physicality. Ultimately if art is an intellectual language, then why should intellectual language be limited just for the elites who will buy a painting, why not make your intellectual language democratic. But it is one thing to have my alter ego painted in two dimensions, moving him into the VR space, and rendering his world three dimensionally was another challenge. It was definitely the sounding of a new dimension in my work, because when I talk about my world, it's just a very, very direct representation of what for me art is, and my virtual world it's also my attempt to create a fantastical universe for my creative self to live in, basically.

**J.: How did you go about building the world?**

C: I heard about the team who had worked with Jeff Koons, Marina Abramović and Olafur Eliasson and I thought, "well I'll approach them". I already had the three-dimensional files of my character, and I obviously had all the references in terms of my paintings, or within my mood board imagery, for the world of the character, and so we just started from there. I just sort of built these mood boards based on my character already in the paintings I've already mapped out a language around the character anyway, and he obviously is wearing my suit, so it's all very interlinked with this sense of me and of the abstraction around me and the things that I've been using as my icons and symbols; So, in a way that creative direction is already semi set from the past work anyway. So, it was really just about putting all that together and then starting to evolve a narrative of what's going on. Obviously people can interact with my lobster. But I haven't created a narrative yet in terms of what you do there in my world.

**J: It's always very interesting talking to the artists at the beginning of a project. What do you want people to experience with this world? Are there things you want your lobster to do that is more than you can deliver at this stage?**

C: No, I'm still quite blown away by it as a thing because for me it represents the ability to create one's artistic world in a way that people can experience for real when you put on the headset, then they can actually meet the lobster character, and in terms of if art is also about experience, and connecting with people, obviously VR elevates the experience in another dimension.

**J. So, we can experience your world both as a flat surface in your paintings, but also as a new virtual world?**

C: Yes, definitely, I'm embracing the idea of the character representing my artistic persona, so developing an AI like element to the character so that people can ask him questions and he can respond. It's similar to when we talk about Warhol having a persona that's in a way like a puppet to his philosophy of his work. The character

could serve as the sort of autonomous reflection of my work, but it could actually be interesting as it could engage with people on its own ... he could be programmed, even in a nonsensical sort of way, to say and do ridiculous things. For me the character needs to operate in a way that celebrates freedom that's ultimately what I am all about anyway. It's the opportunity for anyone to do anything, really, and that's all I'm trying to push in my work, a demonstration of the fact that you can do whatever you want, you can fuck around with art history if you want. You can put yourself in context with anyone, and you can turn things upside down, and you can also have fun with it.

**J: ... which is a really exciting idea, it teaches one but also it's very playful. It has that element that you have in all your work, the multi layering which gives back to the audience, gives back to the viewer...will the lobster evolve?**

C: Yes 100% yes. Currently I felt there was no need for myself as a character to have a mouth. The great thing is I thought it's like Charlie Chaplin, I felt that basically giving him a mouth was too much, I mean, he does, you know. I studied philosophy long enough to realise there's nothing to say, it's about doing. I have also installed my lobster in the gallery as part of an army

**J: You're so Warholy!**

C: Yes, my Philosophy of action, at the moment other people aren't stepping inside of him and being him or being me yet, but that's not to say that's not possible, he is still a relatively recent evolution in terms of the character really.

**J: Did you feel in this contemporary life that it was also necessary to embrace these relatively new technologies, was that something you felt was important?**

C: Yeah, I think it was, it made total sense because my job in a way is all about experience, it's like why wouldn't I be connecting with cutting edge experience? Because as an artist I'm supposed to be pushing the limits, to the best of what I can do. I was thinking about René Magritte when I was looking at VR, because what it does in a brilliant way, is it creates a parallel reality and when you enter a parallel reality you look back at your own reality, so it creates a great duality, then, in that duality it immediately affirms the limitations of perception. Even though we know when we are in a VR world we know that our other sense of reality is still there, or what we conceive as the real reality: It's like you get to step outside of yourself to look back at yourself, and I think that's quite philosophical. Also, your memory, because in a virtual sense you still remember things, so you realise that, that your memory still records both perceptions, you still bank them. I've also created a lobster coin, I have a character and I have a world, then I should have a currency in my world. The idea is that I'm putting it into the paintings, I'm throwing in my own hybrid symbols, I thought that was interesting because of this idea of the currency in art. There was a lot of talking of bitcoin in art, it's such an obvious thing of the value and obviously has the relationship to currency. So, for me if my paintings are all creating an alternative reality, which is a hybrid between, conceptual art, art historical dialogue and the real... VR makes sense. You will be able to communicate with my characters, you'll be wandering around dancing or anything. We are currently building an AI part of the character developing the brain, so that basically he represents my philosophy, so people can ask him questions. When one thinks about Warhol, one thinks about the fact that Warhol had this amazing very well established almost avatar of himself, so hence when people asked him questions he was able to just answer robotically, so what I really like so much was the parody and the deliberate play. So, Warhol didn't need to defend what he said because it wasn't him. I think the art world at times just needs to be dismantled because ultimately so many people have so much vested interest in basically pushing a smoke and mirrors value system which actually kills the creativity in it. The VR idea is a space where I can take the philosophy within the paintings and help to really push it, and also if people experience it in that dimension, it helps them to articulate the meaning of the character. So, I see my lobster character as a Chaplin-esque, sort of tragic player, ... it is an extension of my art practice.

Ultimately, I like the shuffling of the philosophical deck, so that each of my paintings are like an orchestration of possibilities, rather than just being stuck as one philosophy of painting. You can really just empty your entire mind onto the painting and then there's nothing to stop your ideas ...