

centre
de
création
contemporaine
olivier
debré

the exhibition booklet

olivier debré
reverse figuration

white gallery
14.04.2023 — 25.02.2024

curator : Marine Rochard

In 1963, Olivier Debré presented his latest paintings from 1960 to 1963 at the Knoedler Gallery in Paris and later in New York. As the few reproductions in the catalogue show, visitors were able to discover a new facet of the artist's work.

The evidence is very clear: the artist has worked to give more fluidity to his colours, which are spread out in much freer and more dynamic compositions. You can still see some figures, successors of Debré's 1950s work. The quadrilateral constructed brush stroke has almost disappeared. You will also notice the artists' new interest in square or almost square formats, enabling him to implement a more balanced circulation of masses that tends to become centrifugal.

At the beginning of the 1960s the artist took a break from practice, carrying out new research based on the notion of space and paying greater attention to the landscape. It was not a question of painting nature as you see it, of course, but by this time the artist had already begun to work outside, in nature, in the countryside. The first part of landscape that he inhabited by setting up his works in progress was quite modest since it was simply the garden of his studio in Cachan.

In 1963, when Francis Ponge⁰¹ wrote the preface to this landmark exhibition, he did not overlook Debré's new interest in the exterior, the outdoors, space and the feelings he derives from it as a painter. It was from the poet that we borrowed this idea of «reverse figuration» for the title of the exhibition.

01 Francis Ponge (1899-1988) is a French writer and poet who was close to many artists, especially the surrealist movement.

writing : Marine Rochard
proofreading : Noémie Thibault,
Barbara Marion
translation : Louise Jablonowska

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With Olivier Debré we experience, once again, everything that painting has decided to keep silent about for some time now, to tell us, perhaps more forcefully, what it wants to communicate to us at all costs. [...]

Assume that Olivier Debré is ultimately a landscape painter. All his effort will be [...] to ensure figuration [...], but a kind of *reverse figuration*, which captures and leads our gaze to prevent us from seeing anything precisely, to enable us to mainly feel the gentle, so specific seasonal and local gusts. Painting has always been about immersing the senses through the sole prism of our eyes. And lastly to convince us not to believe our eyes [...]

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The author goes on to write a fictional account, which he presents as a dream, in which he visits the Louvre Museum in the company of a "young peasant from Tours". It is very hot; the museum attendants are falling asleep in front of the masterpieces, "when suddenly I felt a cool air fill the room and, by my wrists and ankles, completely enveloping me".

This concludes as follows:

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[...] Turning round I saw my friend kneeling by the French window which he had just opened. His appearance had changed, and he was holding brushes in his hand. [...] With the help of a few dabs of paint he was trying to wedge the window open to prevent it from closing. [...]

I recognised Olivier Debré.

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The Debré collection at the Centre Pompidou also documents this stylistic and aesthetic transformation: the change in format from vertical to square to horizontal, adapted to represent the landscape; the blossoming of colours, increasingly convincing expressions of a luminescence that would become symbolic of the artist's work; the fluidity of the strokes that, layer after layer, give the canvas a unique texture, indicative of a depth, a different space.

These changes did not come about suddenly at the turn of 1960 but had already been taking place for some years. In June 1956, when Debré presented his paintings at the Michel Warren Gallery in Paris, the art critic Pierre Restany drew an analogy between nature and his work.

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[...] He is an explorer of the equatorial humus of those wonderful putrid areas that the sunlight never reaches. An art of sobriety due to an excess of biological nutrition, a sort of epic inventory of the natural resources of the paste, resumed exactly where De Staël had left it... to find the open air.⁰²

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02 Pierre Restany, "Urgent note to the signifiers of informality", in *Cimaise*, Paris, n°7-8, June-August 1956, p.44.

The following year, in June 1957, the Warren Gallery again presented a solo exhibition by the artist. The critic Pierre Courthion quoted Debré as saying.

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[...] In the countryside, the painter tells me, I am buoyed up by the laws of nature. The sun's effect is a kind of springboard for my imagination.⁰³

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In January 1959, Debré exhibited in Washington (Philipps Gallery) and then in New York in May (Knoedler Gallery). These trips were an opportunity for him to show his paintings across the Atlantic, as well as to meet local artists. He met the abstract expressionist painter Mark Rothko (1903-1970), who came to see his May exhibition; he returned the favour in 1962 by visiting his first exhibition in Paris, at the Museum of Modern Art. Along with Georges Mathieu (1921-2012), Debré was one of the few Parisian painters to come into direct contact with the abstract expressionists - he also met Jules Olitski (1922-2007) and Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008). In the United States, Debré was briefly identified as one of the leaders of what was then known as the "School of Paris". In 1963, when he returned to New York for his solo exhibition at the Knoedler Gallery, he attracted the interest of the American artist and theorist Donald Judd (1928-1994).

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[...] The best works have relatively bare surfaces, tempered with broad, thick or dense brushstrokes, or with a sharpness that reveals the underlying layer. The vast fields are interspersed with rapid traces, forming incisions of colour or texture. They usually take on the appearance of leaves standing out against a forest.⁰⁴

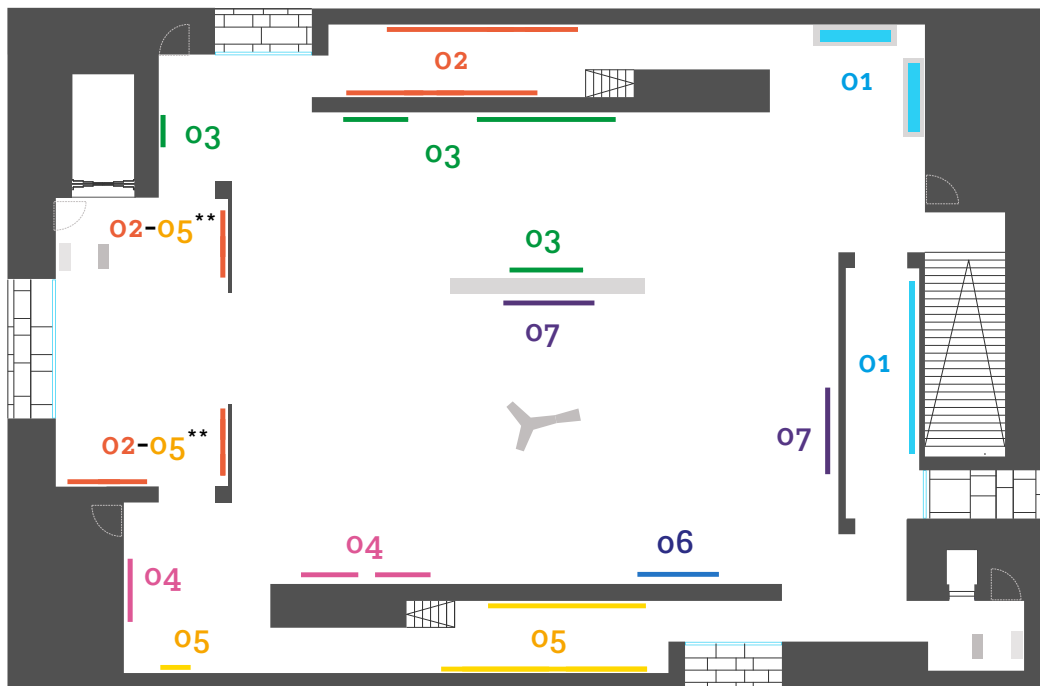
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Although this painting had not yet been created, it sounds like a description of *Grande ocre tache jaune pâle* (1964), one of the key works in the Centre Pompidou's collection, in the transition to landscapes.

This transformation is also well documented by the CCCOD's collection, which includes some very pure inks from the 1960s, as well as charcoals from the 1970s on large horizontal formats. Debré's treatment of the surface, with its density and depth, reflects his intention to grasp the entire space around us.

03 Pierre Courthion, "Olivier Debré and abstract painting", in *Prisme des arts*, Paris, n°14, 1957, p.20.

04 Donald Judd, "In the galleries: Olivier Debré", in *Arts magazine*, New York, vol.37, n°10, September 1963, p.62.



section 01*

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* Due to the delicate nature of the graphic works, which cannot be exposed to light for more than a few months, the exhibition offers visitors three consecutive and different displays of these graphic collections:

- > from 14.04 to 09.07.2023 ;
- > from 11.07 to 29.10.2023 ;
- > from 01.11.2023 to 25.02.2024.

** In this room:

- > display with "character signs"
from 14.04 to 29.10.2023 ;
- > display with « signes paysages dessinés »
from 01.11.2023 to 25.02.2024.

geometric abstraction and drawings on the theme of war

section 01 of the floor plan

In the early 1940s, Debré's first works were essentially figurative. During this decade, however, he radically changed following a meeting with Pablo Picasso (1881-1973). From 1942 onwards, the young artist developed a body of research based on abstract geometric experiments, which are very well represented in the CCC OD's graphic collections.

He focused on the great masters of painting, working from several masterpieces of art history such as *The Sleeping Venus* by Giorgione, completed by Titian, *The Venus of Urbino* by Titian and *Olympia* by Édouard Manet. It is not a question of copying, but of studies aimed at synthesising the visual elements through simple forms. This enabled Debré to reflect deeply on how the composition of the painting was approached.

Like many artists of his generation, he introduced symbols - or 'signs' - into his visual language, initially referring to the shock of the discovery of the concentration camps.

In the second half of the 1940s, the desire to experiment with new media, coupled with post-war shortages, led Debré to use new materials in his compositions (for example, sand mixed with glue and gouache or metallic paints).

At this time, he began a major series on the war and the Holocaust, which developed through several more specific themes such as the dead (e.g. *The Dead of Dachau*, *The Dead and His Soul*, *The Dead and the Assassin*), the Nazis (in particular *The Sadistic Nazi Smile*) and hostages. While it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between these subsets, the hostages have identifiable and recurring visual characteristics. Although most of Debré's drawings remain untitled, a few narrative titles appear as early as 1944 and refer to the concentration camps, the gruesome scale of which is gradually revealed after the liberation of the camps.

These compositions develop symbolic signs. They are not taken from traditional language or symbolism, except perhaps the recurring triangle, which is an emanation of the divine in the biblical tradition. This triangle often overlooks the dead person, who is usually represented by a horizontal shape lying along the lower edge; their soul rises to the sky in the form of repeated accents or waves. The Nazi's smile is symbolised by successive commas as if to signify his breath.

05 Giorgione and Titian are 15th century Venetian masters; the painter Manet, breaking with 19th century academicism, is considered the precursor of modern painting.

The visual techniques used here make sense: the drawings are black; the lines, the crosshatching, and the dotted lines, with their sharp graphics, express a certain violence. Although nothing is immediately legible, and the figurative scene can only be guessed at through the title, the angular forms speak for themselves, bear witness to the barbarity, and symbolise it.

There is a convergence here between the development of an abstract language of geometric shapes and the use of realistic titles, perhaps indicating Debré's need to take on these subjects. As with Picasso's masterpiece *Guernica* (1937), abstract and symbolic language is used here in the treatment of a subject that is close to the usually figurative history painting. The desire to create meaning and to bear witness replaces any need for figuration.

character signs

section 02 of the floor plan

"Character sign", is how Debré chose to name a whole series of works based on the symbolic representation of the human figure. For him, it was a question of using simple and graphic forms that could be identified by everyone.

The horizontal forms reminiscent of the recumbent bodies of the dead or hostages in the 1940s gradually become archetypal, solid vertical forms that stretch upwards. *L'Otage ou Saint-Sébastien* (1945)⁰⁶ is particularly representative of this thematic and formal shift.

Between 1947 and 1952, Debré worked at length on a large painting which he called *Le Concert champêtre ou Grande brune*⁰⁷. The title explicitly refers to Titian's Renaissance masterpiece of the same name (*Pastoral Concert*), and it is the first large landscape created by the artist, for which he produced numerous studies and sketches of standing women that gave rise to the character sign. This extensive graphic research was based on the famous *Birth of Venus* by Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), seen through the iconographic reinterpretation, both more realistic and more explicitly sensual, by the French academic painter William Bouguereau (1825-1905) in the 19th century.

In the character signs, the upper part, which is always wider, gives the viewer the impression that they are looking at shoulders, and by extension a generic human silhouette. The human being stretches towards the sky and is fixed there: for the artist, this is a way of symbolically signifying the spiritual nature of humanity. Often created from only a few gestures and traces, the character signs are the medium of direct and spontaneous expression.

06 Work presented as part of the first exhibition, from 14.4 to 9.7.2023.

07 This painting, which belongs to a private collection, is not shown in the exhibition.

Debré quickly applied this theme to canvases of a sometimes monumental format, stretched to a great height. During the 1950s, the archetype was expressed in numerous paintings, the colours of which were usually flattened and not very contrasting, and the paste structured the composition and froze the figure in an almost archaic hieratic manner.

Although the pictorial character signs were confined to the 1950s, the artist did not abandon this aesthetic research, which he continued to develop through drawing and printmaking. As in his painting, we gradually observe more spontaneity and gestural freedom, particularly when the character signs are made in Indian ink and a wash, sometimes with only two or three traces.

In the 1980s, his focus shifted to the demonstration of raw expressiveness. Although at the beginning Debré was looking for a very constructed and universal sign, he then abandoned the line in favour of the mark. Thanks to their great chromatic unity (they are almost all black), the character signs are easily organised into meaningful series in which repetition acts as a kind of rhythmic resonance.

paintings from the 1950s

section 03 of the floor plan

At the turn of the 1950s, Debré sought to find his way and establish his aesthetic identity from the end of the 1940s onwards. He produced several seminal works such as *D et S* (1948-1950) and *Le Mur blanc ou La Famille* (1950-1955).

"D and S" are the initials of Denise and Sylvie, his wife and daughter. Although family intimacy is evoked here, once again we must look for the source of Debré's inspiration in the history of painting.

During this period, the artist was interested in classical iconographic subjects, in this case, maternity, in other words, the motif of the Virgin and Child.

In the pictorial tradition, this subject is usually depicted in vertical formats and executed in a central composition. The Virgin, seated, turns her face towards the infant Jesus, whom she is holding in her arms or on her lap. There is either a halo around each head or their two bodies together, completely shrouded in light depending on the version and the period.

In *D et S*, the composition radiates around a central point and is meticulously structured by the impastos. These impastos, in various colours, animate the pictorial surface, but the dynamism, above all, stems from contradictory orientations of the knife marks.

This structuring through impasto is new and is characteristic of Debré's style for a whole decade.

Like *D et S*, *Le Mur blanc ou La Famille* is a monumental horizontal composition reminiscent of the favoured format of historical painting. However, it is once again an intimate subject, as the title indicates, but one that tends towards universality through a possible reference to the traditional iconographic theme of the Holy Family.

With *Intérieur bleu* (1956-1959), Debré returns to the genre scenes, interiors and still lifes that were his first attempts at constructed brushstrokes in a small-format. Here, the size is rather imposing but differs from the production in the 1950s, which was more likely to be in vertical or horizontal formats. Almost square, this painting with its thinner impasto and more homogeneous palette foreshadows the stylistic changes soon to be asserted in the paintings of Cachan.

the cachan canvases

section 04 of the floor plan

At the beginning of the 1960s the artist took a break from practice, carrying out new research based on the notion of space and paying greater attention to the landscape. It was not a question of painting nature as you see it, of course, but by this time the artist had already begun to work outside, in nature, in the countryside. The first bit of landscape that he inhabited by setting up his works in progress was quite modest since it was simply the garden of his studio in Cachan.

To move towards more universal emotions, the artist gradually focused on the landscape and above all on the notion of space, which he attempted to convey in his paintings. The composition became lighter; tending to be centrifugal rather than centripetal; the pictorial layer is lighter and more fluid. Debré succeeded in giving his colours an intrinsic luminosity and eventually the canvas became horizontal. This gradual aesthetic transformation lasted until the early 1970s when we began to speak of the "landscape sign".

The contrast between the horizontal landscape signs and the vertical character signs is immediately noticeable, like a reflection of the traditional typology of classical painting (horizontal formats are used for landscapes while portraits take a vertical format).

The palette is limited: the canvases are often quite dark (browns, greens, ochres), even black, enlivened only by a few colourful commas. We understand that Debré sought to assert the flatness of the surface while animating it through coloured contrasts. The gestural challenge is introduced in a more obvious way than in past production. Previously, gestures were visible in the material but were short and limited to coloured rectangular areas. From now on, the traces are wider and more flexible, reflecting the greater freedom of a gesture that extends beyond the canvas.

drawn landscape signs

section 05 of the floor plan

In the 1960s, in addition to his pictorial research at Cachan, Debré began to experiment with new graphics.

The artist became dedicated to a search for the sign of emotion, which corresponds to the birth of the landscape sign, both in his pictorial and graphic production. This shift had already been in the making since 1953, as the poet Bernard Noël revealed in his 1990 exhibition of Debré's hitherto unknown drawings⁰⁸.

The Debré Donation held at the CCC OD includes several drawn landscape signs that were restored and framed between 2018 and 2021.

Among them, are two inks on canvas, created around 1960⁰⁹. The refined composition, reduced to a minimum, presents simple traces of black ink floating on a neutral and empty background. The traces translate the artist's gesture and intention to move, and through the reference to the initials, they also evoke a very personal and subjective expression, an autonomous sign, bringing Debré's work closer to that of other gestural abstractionists such as Georges Mathieu (1921-2012) and Jean Degottex (1918-1988).

At the time, this type of work could be described as 'Zen', referring to the Far Eastern calligraphy that was very much in vogue at the time - a strictly formal resonance, however.

Around 1970, Debré worked more on filling the surface and creating an illusion of depth. Charcoal, with its matte texture, lends itself very well to this type of effect thanks to its dense and intense blacks. The reference to the landscape is obvious here, as these works extend over horizontal formats of three metres¹⁰.

In the 1970s and 1980s, this type of composition on wide formats also lends itself to work in ink, whose traces bear witness to the artist's gesture. Very sober, these black traces are applied to the white paper, thus magnifying, by contrast, the large unused areas.

As in the large, elongated and uncluttered paintings of the same period, in which the emptiness - often coloured - is as significant as the pictorial material applied in impasto, Debré develops his compositions here by reflecting on the distribution of masses which, although irregular, strikes a delicate balance. Reduced to a few basic forms, the visual elements demonstrate a need for expressiveness based on an absolute economy of means or, on the contrary, on the repetition of gestures aimed at covering the surface to create a vibratory and rhythmic effect.

08 "Debré. Dessins, 1945-1960",
Saint-Denis, Musée d'Art et
d'Histoire, 2nd February – 31st March
1990.

09 Third display from 01.11.2023 to
25.02.2024.

10 First display from 14.04 to
09.7.2023 | second display
from 11.07 to 29.10.2023.

the landscape as a studio

section 06 of the floor plan

Debré's main studio is in nature. He has always sought to discover new landscapes and new light throughout the world, from the Netherlands, where he went in 1950, to Mexico in 1997, including China, Greece, Norway, Jordan, Senegal and India.

When he works in France, he has several bases: "Les Madères", in Touraine, the studio in rue Saint-Simon in Paris, or the one in Cachan, as mentioned earlier.

He also focussed on maritime settings, which correspond more to the regular destinations of family holidays. His studio on the Mediterranean coast, at Les Salins, a wooded beach near Saint-Tropez, comes to mind, as does his studio in Saint-Georges-de-Didonne, near Royan, on the Gironde estuary. Debré created more than two hundred paintings there between 1948 and 1997.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the harbour and its boats were the main subjects of his paintings. Then came the beaches and undergrowth, with which one immediately associated the smell of pine and acacia trees.

In the 1960s, the ocean became the central subject of the Royan works, which were mostly produced in shades of blue. The colour is often applied in a very frank manner in flat tints that magnify the almost monochrome surfaces, whose calm is barely disturbed by white traces - probably foam - or by a few impastos in bright colours - reflections on the surface of the water.

With this series, the artist avoids monochrome by intermittently focusing on misty atmospheric effects or the sunset that enlivens the sea with multicoloured shimmers. In Royan, he also sometimes portrays bad weather, storms and the fierceness of the elements.

the touraine paintings

section 07 of the floor plan

The “Madères” studio, located between Tours and Amboise, is the base to which Debré returns again and again.

The Loire, a nearby river, inspires the artist to make use of increasingly panoramic formats, stretched out width wise, as if to better convey the phenomenon of water flowing, tirelessly, placidly or impetuously depending on the season.

The very clear light of the Touraine region had already attracted the attention of Édouard Debat-Ponsan (1847-1913), his grandfather, who was also a painter. It constantly changes the appearance of the river, sometimes giving it the appearance of a very flat and shiny mirror or illuminating the mist to which Debré's painting lends cottony tactile tones.

The artist focuses on this light, on the flowing water that inspires him to create increasingly liquid washes, and on the arid nature of the sandbanks that we encounter in the summer. His gaze is also caught by the vegetation. The lime trees, which line the “Madères” path, are a favourite motif of Debré's, particularly in autumn. Finally, there is also the hillside, opposite the Loire, which overlooks the property. This cliff forms a large white wall above which the vines are overlapping, and then the sky.

Here in Touraine, the painter also developed a certain type of composition that did not go beyond the 1980s. In these canvases, the surface is animated by parallel vertical flows that are repeated across the entire width of the medium (for example, *Taches bleu foncé aux raies verticales*, 1989). The canvases that are more specifically devoted to the Loire follow a more horizontal dynamic and flowing pattern.

the meeting of collections centre pompidou and cccod

In 2023, the cccod is partnering with the Centre Pompidou - Musée national d'art moderne (Paris) to hold a monographic exhibition of Olivier Debré's works from their respective collections.

Since 2016, the cccod has been the custodian of the Debré donation, which consists mainly of graphic works, some of which have been restored in recent years. The Centre Pompidou has a collection of twenty-seven major works that illustrate the highlights of the artist's career. This collection was established thanks to gifts from the artist and purchases by the State, but much of it comprises works from the dation¹¹ made by the artist's heirs in 2002.

These twenty-seven pieces have not been exhibited together since 2003¹². Twenty years later, this exhibition at the cccod will once again demonstrate the quality of this collection and the importance of the choices that make up a collection.

From the Centre Pompidou's collection, only twenty works are shown at the cccod, as the others are too delicate to travel. Ten large paintings are key works by Olivier Debré: they mark important turning points in his work. These include: *Le Mur blanc ou La Famille* (1950-1955), *Grand noir aux taches roses* (1960-1962) and *Taches bleu foncé aux raies verticales* (1989). A set of ten drawings accompanies these large paintings, mainly consisting of experimental geometrical works produced in the 1940s and studies that led to the development of the character sign motif, a recurring feature of his work in the 1950s. These works on paper are set against those held at the cccod, whose collection includes numerous post-war drawings and late character signs in Indian ink.

Due to the delicate nature of the graphic works, which cannot be exposed to light for more than a few months, the exhibition offers visitors three consecutive and different displays of these graphic collections:

› from 14th April to 9th July 2023

› from 11th July to 29th October 2023

› from 1st November 2023 to 25th February 2024

¹¹ A dation allows the heirs of a deceased artist to pay the inheritance fees owed to the State by donating works of art.

¹² "Olivier Debré. Works from the dation", Paris, Centre Pompidou – Musée national d'art moderne, 25th June – 15th September 2003.

related events

tours

- › guided (all year round)
every Saturday and Sunday, at 4.30 pm (1 hour)
- › flash (during school holidays)
from Wednesday to Friday, 3 pm (20 minutes)

the CCCOD tells olivier debré

eight-part documentary series for web about the work of Olivier Debré (1920-1999), accessible on [CCCOD](#) website:

- › episode 1–Debré donation
- › episode 2–the Scandinavian artifacts
- › episode 3–architectural projects
- › episode 4–character signs
- › episode 5–geometric abstraction experiments after war
- › episode 6–the Old Masters and the Deposition from the Cross
- › episode 7–the Italian Renaissance inspiration
- › episode 8– drawn landscape signs

“nouvelles renaissances” 2023

the exhibition *olivier debré. reverse figuration* is part of the regional programme the new Renaissance

In the spring of 2023, the programme “[Nouvelles Renaissance](#)” is coming back for a fourth edition about art and creation in all its forms. This new programme enlivens the Loire valley with a theme “a land of creativity”, which promises a rich and unexpected cultural schedule.



the CCCOD would like to thank:

- › the Centre Pompidou for its generous loan;
- › Tours Métropole Val de Loire and the Fondation Crédit Agricole for their financial support which enabled several works belonging to the Debré donation to be restored;
- › Audi France for its financial support in producing this exhibition project.
- › the société Berthault Tours for his material assistance.

more informations on www.CCCOD.fr