On View

‘There Aren’t Any Reasons for Painting. That’s What’s Special’: Watch Artist Christopher Le Brun Walk Through His Latest Body of Work

The artist was preparing for his third solo show with Lisson Gallery, now on view in London.

Artnet News, July 15, 2022

British artist Christopher Le Brun recently celebrated his 70th birthday, but despite having been painting for decades, the artist remains as deeply curious about why he paints and where his inspirations come from as when he started. In fact, in his London home and studio, the artist keeps a framed drawing he made in his younger years, the dash-like passages in the sketch echoing the mark-making in his most recent gestural canvases.
Now, with his third exhibition with Lisson Gallery, “Momentarium,” Le Brun is presenting a group of ambitiously scaled canvases—including, for the first time, monumental triptychs and diptychs. The exhibition’s title is a word meant to reference a collection of fleeting moments, and the works within tap into the artist’s fascination with how to represent time. The centerpiece, Momentarium II, serves as a visual palimpsest of sensations and testifies to the artist’s continual exploration of technique, scale, and color compositions.

Many of these works make musical and literary references, too. In White Diptych, colors coalesce with intensity, as though in a crescendo, before fading toward the canvas’s edge. Meanwhile, The Waves nods to the 1931 novel by Virginia Woolf and similarly meditates on the nature of time. These works are juxtaposed with recent acrylics on paper that seem to isolate passages and gestures found in the large-scale paintings at a smaller scale. To mark this exhibition, the gallery recently released a short film of Le Brun preparing his works in this studio and talking about the continuing mystery of painting.

Watch the film below.
“Christopher Le Brun: Momentarium” is on view at Lisson Gallery, London, through August 20, 2022.
In the studio with... Christopher Le Brun

The British artist works across painting, sculpture and print. While his work often incorporates a wide range of visual, musical and literary sources, he believes in the pleasure of painting for its own sake and is led by intuition, colour, movement and texture. ‘There aren’t any reasons for painting. That’s what’s special about it. It doesn’t need justification. It’s essential that it’s not used for other purposes. All of the things which will, as it were, take away from what’s mysterious about it,’ he has said. His work is currently the subject of a solo exhibition titled ‘Momentarium’ at Lisson Gallery in London, until 20 August.
Where is your studio?

In south London – it’s a five-minute bike ride away from where I live. It’s on the top floor, with windows on two sides. On one side I look out over an enclosed garden with young trees and on the other there’s an uninterrupted view over the city. I get wonderful sunsets: the light in the late afternoon strikes my painting wall which a lot of artists might regard as irritating, but to me, it comes as a welcome change to what I’ve been looking at all day.

What do you like most about the space?

The light. Everyone who comes here remarks on how beautiful the light is. The only slight problem is that it makes everything I do look its best, so I often complete my paintings at night when they look their worst.

What frustrates you about it?

I paint large paintings and because it’s on the top floor, it’s awkward to get the works to the ground floor; there’s a lot of stretching and un-stretching of the canvas. Recently, however, I’ve been making some of my paintings in panels so they’re much easier to move.
Do you work alone?

I have an assistant for part of the week, but he’s in a different part of the studio, so effectively I’m working on my own. There’s also someone else who works with me, but they work from home for most of the week. There’s a lot to do: dispatching prints, preparing canvases, general liaison with the outside world. I’m grateful for them doing all that hard work for me so I can concentrate on the enjoyable bit – not that it is always enjoyable.

Do you follow a particular working routine?

I do and it’s possibly quite odd. I come into the studio looking at the ground and I make my way round to where my latest painting is by looking at the floor. What I’m trying to do is to catch it unawares so that I can get a first impression. When a painting is too familiar, I can’t see it as an object so that’s what I do every day: I try to surprise them.

Other than that, my routine is fairly regular. The main issue for me is that it takes me a long time to warm up, which means that even if I start painting in the morning, I’m probably not getting to where I want until late afternoon or early evening. It’s a bit like being a fisherman: as soon as you take the fly off the water, a fish is bound to jump. You have to keep the fly on the water. Increasingly what interests me most about painting is the bit I can’t, at will, get at: inspiration. I know that’s a complicated word, but I’ve experienced it intensely in my life and I’m always hunting it, always, always.

Does that mean that you work late into the night?

Sometimes. If I find myself in that place, I try to keep going for as long as I can, before I get too hungry or keel over with exhaustion, but it’s very elusive. You never quite know when inspiration is coming. The only way is to prepare the ground by working.
Do you listen to anything while you’re working?

I do unless I forget to because I’m so wrapped up in the painting. I spent most of my life listening to Radio 3 until Spotify came along. Now Spotify competes with Radio 3. Generally, I start with what you might call serious or difficult music and as the day goes on, it tends to become more rhythmic or jazzy, but it depends.

How messy is your studio?

Well, there are several parts to the studio. The painting part is very messy and relatively disorderly, and then the other part, where my studio staff work, is very clean and tidy. When I think I’ve got a painting near completion, I take it into the clean space and look at it there as if it were in a gallery. Mostly, the painting isn’t quite good enough, so it goes back into the messy part for more work. I find having those two different types of space very helpful.

![Studio Image](image)

Do you pin up images of other artists’ work?

A little bit. I’ve got a self-portrait by Reynolds. I also feel very strongly about Blake. Blake and Reynolds didn’t get on, but I like them both. I’ve got an illustration of a painting by [Jacques-Louis] David on Anita Brookner’s monograph, and a postcard of a wonderful desert line by Richard Long, which makes me think of far away. Oh, also *The Wood on the Hill (Wittenham Clumps)* by Paul Nash. I love Paul Nash.
What’s the strangest object in your studio?

Probably me. Apart from that, I’ve got a block of lapis lazuli, which was brought back from Kabul. Whenever I look at this beautiful thing, I think of the mountains of Afghanistan and I also think of Titian, the wonderful blue sky in Bacchus and Ariadne. It’s a strange object, but it’s full of meaning for art.

Which artistic tool could you least do without?

A big palette knife as I spend so much time drawing with it or scraping paint off the canvas and onto the floor.

A J (2021), Christopher Le Brun. Courtesy Lisson Gallery; © Christopher Le Brun
Who’s the most interesting visitor you’ve had to the studio?

Goodness! I rarely have uninteresting visitors, but is there anybody who isn’t interesting? I remember a very strange visit many years ago when I had a commission for the Royal Opera House. This was in the early eighties. Over several days, every member of the board came to my dark, vaguely sinister studio in Bethnal Green, leaving their black cars and chauffeurs waiting outside. One by one, in what felt like their pin-striped suits, they stepped over the cans and tried not to touch the wet paint. At that time, the director of the Royal Opera House was Sir John Tooley. For some reason I offered to collect him, so I drove to Covent Garden in my little yellow Morris van. He couldn’t sit in the front seat with me because Bryan Robertson, the other visitor, had a bad leg, so John had to climb on all fours into the back of the van and the only way the doors shut was if I locked them. There was a little grille, like a prison, between the back and the front that made the only light. He thought he was being kidnapped, and he kept talking bravely to keep his spirits up while sitting on a spare tyre. It was quite a long drive to my East End studio. It may have put him off ever visiting an artist’s studio again.

Is anyone or anything banned from the studio?

I always thought artists’ studios were meant to be places of great freedom so banning seems rather paradoxical, but I think I might ban a word, if I may? That word is ought, as in you ought to do something. Relevance is in the same family. All those words relating to obligation are banned, in fact. The studio is for joy, pleasure, and satisfying difficulty.

‘Christopher Le Brun: Momentarium’ is at Lisson Gallery, London until 20 August.
Preview
The new Courtauld Gallery

Former RA President Christopher Le Brun celebrates the restoration of an original vision with today’s public in mind.

Many of our greatest British cultural institutions have recently been renewed, and the latest to have emerged, with some triumph this November, is the Courtauld, so thoughtfully restored and refreshed by the architects Witherford Watson Mann. Through the resolve of the Courtauld’s leadership, William Chambers RA’s Somerset House building - which he designed for the RA among others in the late 18th century - is now speaking again, as it were, in its original voice.

Museums and galleries get increasingly furred up with the very time that they attempt to outline. Clutter and short-term fixes obscure the rhythm and unity of imagination in an architect’s initial conception. The best recent national projects (of which this is one) can be characterised as introducing light, and it is a fitting metaphor. The clarity, fresh colour and general straightening out has been accompanied here by the equally significant consequence that in the clearing away, the original intention of the founders has been looked at with fresh eyes.

The best of our contemporary architects answer questions that are unlikely to be posed: essentially, how can our cultural buildings (specifically those devoted to high culture) respond to and satisfy our instincts first? Chambers realised this (imagine how brief his brief was), so that his building is infused with soul and imagination. By that, I mean an entrance with a sense of ceremony, a roofline that complements the clouds and sky, stairs that offer some sense of display (not necessarily the full rumbling legs-in-the-air of Rowlandson’s Exhibition ‘Stare Case’), antechambers to absorb and welcome the chatter, and a final destination so satisfying that it induces silence. How gratifying then that above the entrance door to the Great Room on the top floor, the distinctly off-message inscription ‘Let no stranger to the muses enter’ is retained as a recollection from a more confident age. I wonder whether being in ancient Greek has helped its survival?

Not least of its achievement, Witherford Watson Mann has elegantly and practically fixed the things that Chambers couldn’t be bothered with. Concerning a modern art gallery’s working mantra for the visitor experience – ‘see, tea and pee’, Virilius, or the classical canon, isn’t much help with the last two.

Picture the scene. The Ritz in Brixton is showing the Mike Leigh film Mr Turner (2014). In the darkness of the cinema, as PPA, and Humphrey Ocean, as Professor of Perspective, watch our predecessors on the screen with forensic interest. The scene of potential anguish, triumph and disappointment that is the RA’s annual exhibition is played out in the film convincingly and, readers I assure you, can be heard virtually word for word at today’s Academy. It is therefore impossible to enter the now beautifully restored Great Room of Somerset House without a frisson. This double-height top-lit space created for the display of painting in full salon-hang style remains one of the foundational dreams of British art. It is a mild irony (quickly dispelled) that one of the greatest assemblies of modern French painting existing in this country is nowadays gathered here – including a glorious entire wall of Cézanne.

The writer Charles Sisson once described the art of public administration as being essentially a poetic enterprise, as the administrator’s twin masters – the nation and the crown – are essentially poetic constructs. Although Sisson had in mind the Civil Service, the conjunction of art, scholarship and public role that the Courtauld represents, as both a gallery and a school of art history, surely applies just as much. For all the Zoom meetings lacking zoom and the PowerPoint without power or point, for holding your nerve and remembering the love of art that brought you here - Courtauld, architects, Heritage Lottery Fund, donors, and all who made this happen - congratulations. You have given us all something of real beauty for the future.

Christopher Le Brun, PPRAs work is included in the new display ‘Explorations in Paint’ in the Royal Academy’s Collection Gallery (page 68)  Courtauld Gallery, London, reopening 19 Nov
Cecily Brown introduces her new commission for the gallery’s historic staircase

Two naked males stand at the centre, seeming to step out of the canvas into our present. The world around them is part beach, part picnic, seething with fragmentated bodies in shifting land and sea. Surrounding blizzards of paint slip in and out of focus: a basket of fruit, a painter’s palette, bare legs stretched out on a towel.

Beaches, bathers and picnics have been a subject of mine for a long time. In this painting Unmoored from her reflection (2021; above), I particularly like the length of the three panels together and the way they encourage an almost filmic reading of the work: on the left a stormy sky punctured by hulls of boats and body parts. A blonde nude kneeling on a striped towel on pebbles. Gauguin’s ghost beset by nymphs and sirens. A smeared palette with phallic thumb (or baguette). In the central panel, two or three male bathers (after Munch). Sea, sky and sand, my face looking like the Teletubbies’ Sun Baby between the figures. In the right panel, a male bather lifted and regendered from Manet’s Le déjeuner sur l’herbe. More sea and sky, blondes and boats, English and German tourists, a shift in scale, eyes and mouths free-floating. Criss-crossing sunburned limbs, haunches, toenails, sunhats, traces of other pictures.

When I was invited to make a work for the Courtauld, I was intimidated by the thought of showing next to some of the world’s greatest paintings. I realised that a way in would be to think of the artists in the collection as my peers, and that we were all in a group show together. It wasn’t hard to imagine hanging out with Edouard, Paul, Eugène and the others, talking about paint and love and life.

I realised that I had one advantage over them - the hindsight of abstraction. I thought about how thrilling it would be if they could see what had happened in art after their death, and what they would do with the unlimited freedom a painter has today.

When I started painting the picture, I knew I wanted a ‘French’ palette: blues and greens and golds. I wanted naked men, to engage with the multitudes of naked women that populate the collection. I looked at many reproductions of mostly Impressionist paintings and kept them in my peripheral vision as I worked. I mostly looked at Manet, Boudin, Cézanne and Gauguin, and also at Cassatt, Morisot and Munch.

In a text by Rachel Sloan (in the recent catalogue The Courtauld Collection: A Vision for Impressionism) about Manet’s superstar work A Bar at the Folies-Bergère, I was struck by the phrase ‘unmoored from her reflection’, to describe the paradox in the painting wherein the subject’s reflection in the mirror is not where it belongs – it’s drifting away from her. There’s a shift in time that occurs within the painting that suggests nothing is certain, nothing is still.

— Cecily Brown has a show at Blum & Poe, Tokyo, until 15 Jan – her first solo exhibition in Japan

Gillian Wearing RA looks forward to the Courtauld’s focus on Van Gogh’s self-portraits

Vincent van Gogh painted what was to hand in his life – landscapes, interiors, objects and other people, as well as his own image. With his acute vision and obsession, he showed us that anything could be interesting and alive. He was essentially a realist, in that he painted what he saw, although not in a realist tradition.

He experimented with paint, pushing himself to try out new brushstrokes to further his skills but also to promote his unique way of seeing the world. That world became one of swirls and patterns that are hypnotic to this day.

To Van Gogh, the face is as much a landscape as the fields he painted. When I look at his self-portraits, roughly half of which the Courtauld will display, I get swept up into his painted surfaces as the different aspects of the canvas cohere. This effect is strong in one of his last self-portraits, made in August 1889 (Self-Portrait, 1889; right). Blue strokes of paint wrap around his head, and he uses the same colour for his shirt. The patterns all integrate. It is like when you stare at yourself in the mirror for long periods and things begin to merge; you can become an object in space almost like any other object. What I get mostly from his work is that everything becomes important: the background, the foreground, it is all one. Thanks to his incredible strokes of paint, you want to look at and appreciate everything.

— Gillian Wearing has a solo show at the Guggenheim, New York, until 4 April 2022
○ Van Gogh Self-Portraits | 3 Feb–8 May 2022
克里斯多夫·勒·布倫

雙聯作

里森畫廊上海空間2019年底呈獻克里斯多夫·勒·布倫（Christofer Le Brun）於中國的首次個展，以最新「雙聯作」系列初探亞洲當代藝術市場的味蕾。展場中，可見布倫深受二元的畫布與色彩所感。他坦言：「這些雙聯作似乎抹去了創作者的面貌，更展現了有關繪畫的本質。」相較以往畫面的繁複，這次則以簡約純粹的視覺接觸，將畫布、純色和對比強烈的色彩，卻不抗拒地彼此吸引。勒·布倫同時藉由雙聯作展陳顯示所處社會，人即使時常面臨各種挑戰，仍能直覺理出一套解決方式，逐漸地也並非能依循特定因素或原則，如何抗衡與運用色彩便是很好的例子。直覺所見，藝術家看似是無論無的創作精神，打造一幅需要精準測繪的畫作，實則仍受限於個性背景與經驗。

與戲劇、音樂或文學不同，對勒·布倫來說，繪畫作品將隨著時間逐漸绽放自己。他策展初期便試圖以循環變換，發覺畫作彼此間的落差與對比，將意外釋出藝術家創作階段，經歷如命運、挫折與成就感撫

250週年的慶祝與翻新計畫共事，歷經許多高層的會議與抉擇時刻時，

在工作室的創作思路反而變得更加清晰與珍貴，對專注於創作時所獲得的喜悅也愈加強烈。

此外，勒·布倫熱衷與藝術學子交流、探討他們的學術經驗，以及想像籍由藝術闡述的訴求或態度。他認為：「畫布上就是寫著所有我們的問題和想

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【雅昌快讯】克里斯多夫·勒·布伦中国大陆首次个展「双联作」于里森画廊开幕

2019年11月5日，英国伦敦皇家学院的第一位美术教授、皇家美术学院院长克里斯多夫·勒·布伦 (Christopher Le Brun) 于中国大陆的首次个展在里森画廊开幕。此次展览呈现了勒·布伦最新双联作系列，在为期三个月的展期里，作品将分为两部份在不同时间段内展出。
勒·布伦的双联作中，细腻回应着对作品的理解与感受，同时探索作为艺术家的实践。色调交响碰撞，将画布一分为二，一侧为浅，一侧为深，模拟着观者认知、思考和记忆的心象过程。仿佛跳入望远镜的视野，大脑汇聚着来自双眼不同景象的寻觅过程。与戏剧、音乐或文学不同，“绘画”对勒·布伦来说，“是瞬间而来的。”而当引入一个互补元素时，这些作品将随着时间逐渐绽放自己，幅幅自成一体，彼此映照，而构成的整体又讲述着另一番景象。
11月上海展讯（画廊篇）：暴走魔都艺术季，这些展览替你安排上了

JAMES TURRELL 詹姆斯·特瑞尔
2019.11.5 - 12.21

ALMINE RECH Shanghai 上海

11月的上海又将迎来一番热闹的景象，不知道有哪些展览值得打卡？artnet新闻为你准备了一份“艺术活动手册”。流连于“你方唱罢我登场”的活动中时，请记得———一定穿好舒适的运动鞋！

点击阅读上篇看展攻略

11月上海展讯（艺博会、机构与美术馆）：看展=去健身房？请穿好运动鞋！

画廊篇
里森画廊

黄浦区虎丘路27号2楼

克里斯多夫·勒·布伦：双联作

2019年11月6日 - 2020年2月29日

克里斯多夫·勒·布伦，《Mind》（2018）。图片：© Christopher Le Brun, courtesy Lisson Gallery

里森画廊上海空间即将呈献克里斯多夫·勒·布伦（Christopher Le Brun）于中国大陆的首次个展。此次展览将会带来勒-布伦最新双联作，作品在为期三个月的展览中将分为两部分展出。勒-布伦的双联作中，细腻回应着对作品的理解与感受，同时探索作为艺术家的实践。色调交响碰撞，将画布一分为二，一侧为浅，一侧为深，模拟着观众认知、思考和记忆的心象过程。仿佛跳入望远镜的视野，大脑汇聚着来自双眼不同景象的寻觅过程。与戏剧、音乐或文学不同，“绘画”对勒-布伦来说，“是瞬间而来的。”而当引入一个互补元素时，这些作品将随着时间逐渐绽放自己：幅幅自成一体，彼此映照，而构成的整体又讲述着另一番景象。
与此同时，里森画廊（A128）为西岸博览会带来的玛丽娜·阿布拉莫维奇（Marina Abramovi）、安尼施·卡普尔（Anish Kapoor）以及理查德·朗（Richard Long）这三位当代艺术家的作品，自然将继续成为西岸博览会上不可错过的亮点。

里森画廊 展位A128现场，2019西岸艺术与设计博览会

在琥珀大楼2层的里森画廊空间里，克里斯多夫·勒·布伦（Christopher Le Brun）个展同样值得你的到访。

克里斯多夫·勒·布伦个展 里森画廊（上海）

虎丘路27号2层
Christopher Le Brun, Late Play, 2019

oil on canvas, diptych, 160 x 220.4 cm (each)

Christopher Le Brun, courtesy Lisson Gallery

左右大相径庭的画面或许会给观者带来一定的视觉冲击，但这也应了艺术家的料想，它们吸引

着你的目光，延长着你对它的所思所想。对于艺术家而言，正是这些双联作展露了有关绘画的本质：“绘画拥有一种瞬间性，而当引入一个互补元素时，这些作品将随着时间逐渐绽放自己: 幅幅自成一体，彼此映照，而构成的整体又讲述着另一番景象。”

展览至2020年2月29日
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勒·布伦曾说：“这些双联作似乎抹去了创作者的固有呈现，而展露了有关绘画的本质。”通过延长观者的心路观感，而不仅是匆匆一瞥，艺术家质疑着自己的角色，是开发者还是终端用户？例如《夜间出游》(2019)中，强烈的对比道出了截然不同的表达形式，左侧暗色交织恍若骤然急雨，右侧则是炽热红橙璀璨夺目。大相径庭的画面却不可抗拒地彼此吸引，如同磁体的异性两极，在火红烛影细细辉纹间“出游”。

这些二元性重重包缚于深浅不一、明暗交错、刚柔并济的画面中，延伸至展览的其余部分，连结着每幅双联作，例如《思绪》(2018)、《桥梁》(2019)。而勒·布伦相互映照的表达形式也在《一笔一画》(2019)中有所体现，艺术家的双手仿佛搭起抽象表现与自动书写的桥梁，左手主导而右手执行，一笔一画，相辅相成。

Christopher Le Brun, Banque, 2019. oil on canvas, diptych, 160.2 x 221 cm (each). © Christopher Le Brun, courtesy Lisson Gallery.
Christopher Le Brun, Late Play, 2019. Oil on canvas, diptych, 160 x 220.4 cm (each). © Christopher Le Brun, courtesy Lisson Gallery

Christopher Le Brun, Bridge, 2019. Oil on canvas, diptych, 200.4 x 170.3 cm (each). © Christopher Le Brun, courtesy Lisson Gallery

Christopher Le Brun in describing the further potential for his art making and appreciation of the natural harmony in his work, he stated: “To concentrate energetically and relax the body, and to have a good concept of the field, to have some knowledge of the boundaries, not to consider thus, while at the same time focusing on the details.”
地点：里森画廊上海空间

时间：2019年11月6日至2020年2月29日

关于艺术家 | Christopher Le Brun


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[My Art Influence] 01 Christopher Le Brun Touched Our Story

Art creation is good, and the positions of other art circles are good. There will always be impacts on the road, and they will be influenced by different painters, exhibitions, a good book, and even other things. Every thing can be a great painting, you can have no meaning for someone else thought, but the story behind the highly moving, even then a small, precious. Arts this month, we invited eight arts sector to share their stories.

Please applaud, first of all, please call the famous British abstract painter Christopher Le Brun. Le Brun has a long-standing reputation in the art world, and in 2011 he was the President of the Royal Academy of Arts. The little story he shared, professional and delicate, is really moving. Art Moon exhibits so many art treasures that not everyone can afford, but the people behind them, the things behind them, have touched us.

TEXT: He Zhaobin

Christopher Le Brun Photo by Tom Dunkley, 2017. Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery
1. "Landscape of the Vernal Equinox" 1944 (Paul Nash)

"When I was about 16 years old, I was still studying. I saw this picture in a book. The two hillsides in the painting are the famous Wittenham Clumps. Farm hill), which is located in Berkshire, but I also like to see youth went, Hampshire County, South mound and Sasekesi land trails. While really have their views, but Nash with the sun and the moon Calling the mysterious beauty of William Blake (poet) and Samuel Palmer (painter). At the same time, it seems to be a casual play, but at the same time has an unforgettable unity. Skills, the transition of this painting very creative place, use of color does not pass systems, the expression is very modern.

my first life paintings there is a moon, when I painted it white reflection, it gave me a strong "to enjoyable and meaningful sense of feel, until today."

Paul Nash (1889-1946), Landscape of the Vernal Equinox (III), oil on canvas, 1944, 53.5 x 76.2 cm, Tate
2. "Vir Heroicus Sublimis" oil on canvas 1951 (Barnett Newman)

"This is the first time I have encountered a large contemporary abstract painting that has been impacted by it. It seems to be eye-catching, mysterious, and highly serious, demonstrating the painting can be achieved at the same time both simple and ambitious too highly. It also verified how to use color in itself, is enough to bring the glory. I first saw Newman's works, his solo exhibition in 1972 at the Tate when it when I was painting began to create large-scale attempt to control the size of this huge work product. Recently I saw this again works in MoMa, it reminded me of the great paintings, how to never get tired, inexhaustible."

![Barnett Newman (1905-1970), Vir Heroicus Sublimis, oil on canvas, 1951, 242.2 x 541.7 cm, MoMA](image)

3. "Horse Frightened by a Lion" (George Stubbs)

"The first time I saw this work, it was the cover of a British poetry. It was like a magic for each poem. It has a typical force amount, not entirely because of its subject matter, but the moment to see the kind of white against the gloom of the scene, while the blue on the screen just right. blue, white, black, brown, gold, green, each color carry out their duties, such efforts have little video. I said from the bottom of my heart really, it's like I know from elementary school, like poetry, remains in my memory, fantasy, and even in my work."

![George Stubbs (1724-1806), Horse Frightened by a Lion, oil on canvas, 1770, 100.1 x 128.7 cm, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool](image)

4. "The Return" oil on canvas (Philip Guston)

"Before I saw the painting, I heard it first. Once I heard Guston talking to the art critic David Sylvester on the radio. He talked about the direction of painting, immediately I wrote it down. He explained that painting is consistent with thought, neither before nor after, painting should not be a service idea, but should combine imagination and doubt into the habit of the painting process. Because Guston, At the same time, I was exposed to the depth, honesty, and certain knowledge of art, so he brought it to me."
5. "Deriding Polyphemus" (JMW Turner)

"This, to me, it works just like a big opera painting industry. Blend of dexterity and fire on the
body, nature, history, pictures, various metadata
elements gathered, and the implementation of a unified style. It is undoubtedly a
masterpiece under the influence of romanticism. I hope that today's predicament paintings
have the power, when the
vast ambition under their brush, in this generation is almost difficult to achieve in. Painting
without the slightest irony, makes the work is particularly strong
beautiful, large, works very symbol of convergence, but he will make his own world collect
paintings. This is a blatant challenge "good taste" in
the works."

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Talk to Tom Marlow
Christopher Le Brun, Dean of the Royal College of Art in London, and Tim Marlow, Art
Director of the Royal Academy of Arts, share their artistic insights and creative insights.
Date: March 28th
Time: 1:30 pm
Venue: There is a conversation in the VIP room of the Convention and Exhibition Center.
Registration: www.swissproperties.com/artbasel
Christopher Le Brun’s “New Painting” at Lisson Gallery, London

“Concert,” 2017, by Christopher Le Brun (1951, Portsmouth), Oil on canvas, 220 x 440 cm, Photographer: George Darrell, © Christopher Le Brun, Lisson Gallery London
(Courtesy: Lisson Gallery)
At its London venue, Lisson Gallery is featuring a new series of Abstract paintings by Christopher Le Brun created over the past two years, culminating in a number of large-scale paintings, some light in touch and some involving dense accretions of color and gesture on view through August 18.

These works represent a singularly rich moment in his 40-year career.

“Le Brun has been a celebrated British artist since the early 1980s; he has also been an instrumental public figure in his role since 2011 as President of the Royal Academy of Arts in London, which celebrates its 250th anniversary this year,” the gallery says.

“The glowing, scintillating surfaces of Le Brun’s recent oil works on canvas — containing passages of pure painting that could be described as both luminous and numinous — are what he describes as “primary, non-ironic” responses to the act of painting, rather than self-reflexive commentaries on the process itself or homages to previous artists,” the gallery says.

Le Brun often takes poetic references in his titles.

The gallery recalls the English writer Walter Pater words in 1869 on the work of Leonardo: “It is the landscape, not of dreams or of fancy, but of places far withdrawn and hours culled from a thousand with a miracle of finesse.”

Christopher Le Brun is a painter, printmaker and sculptor based in London. Born in Portsmouth in 1951, he trained at the Slade and Chelsea Schools of Art, London. In his early career, he was a double prizewinner at the John Moores exhibitions (1978, 1980), also showing at the Venice Biennale (1980) and the ground-breaking exhibition “Zeitgeist” (1982) at the Martin-Gropius Bau, Berlin.

Le Brun served as a trustee of Tate from 1990–1995, The National Gallery from 1996–2003, the Dulwich Picture Gallery from 2000–2005, and as a founding trustee of the Royal Drawing School from 2003–2016. He is currently a trustee of the National Portrait Gallery. He was elected the first Professor of Drawing of the Royal Academy, London in 2000, where since 2011 he has been the President, the 26th since Sir Joshua Reynolds and the youngest since Lord Leighton in 1878.

“New Painting” is on view through August 18, 2018 at Lisson Gallery, 67 Lisson Street, London, UK.
Where to buy...

The Week reviews an exhibition in a private gallery

Christopher Le Brun
at Lisson Gallery

Given that he has been president of the Royal Academy since 2011, you may imagine that Christopher Le Brun (b.1951) was the very epitome of the "establishment" artist. In fact, he is an unlikely rebel. Since the 1970s, he has been producing paintings that defy categorisation, but which are almost all possessed of an earnest energy and drama at odds with the irony and theoretical baggage common to most British contemporary art. This show of abstract paintings created over the past two years features some truly ravishing works. A number of large pieces feature colour combinations that start off subtly at the sides of the canvas before coming to a crescendo at the centre – think of Whistler's Nocturnes reimagined by the abstract expressionist Robert Motherwell.

Concert, 2017 (detail), 220cm x 440cm

Others are quieter, but no less transfixing. Le Brun is a modern painter in the tradition of the late Howard Hodgkin; his best works are capable of inspiring awe without the viewer needing any context. Prices range from £50,000 to £150,000.

Royaume-Uni

Christopher Le Brun – Peinture
| Londres – Lisson Gallery

L’artiste britannique, célèbre depuis le début des années 1980, présente une nouvelle série d’abstractions créées au cours des deux dernières années. Des toiles, aux surfaces brillantes et scintillantes, particulièrement lumineuses, en réfèrent fréquemment à la musique et aux écrits poétiques.

⇒ Jusqu’au 18 août. Lisson Gallery, 67 Lisson Street, London.
www.lissongallery.com
Blockchain gets arty

The Art Market | The trade gets the bitcoin bug, now opening in Geneva and Florence: rare chandelier at Sotheby’s. By Melanie Geria

Blockchain may be the birthplace of the digital superstars of today, many of whom are now making a bid to command the art world. Whether it be the Morgan Library in New York or Google in London, blockchain is being used to revolutionize the way art is catalogued, sold and stored. At the heart of blockchain is the idea of a distributed ledger that records every transaction, providing a tamper-proof and transparent way of tracking ownership and ownership changes. This is particularly useful for the art world, where the provenance of a piece of art can be crucial to its value and authenticity. By using blockchain, galleries and auction houses can ensure that the transactions they undertake are secure and that the pieces of art they sell are genuine. This technology is also being used to create new forms of digital art, allowing artists to create unique,不可复制的作品, which can be sold as non-fungible tokens (NFTs). These tokens are essentially digital certificates of ownership, which can be traded on blockchain-based platforms. This is changing the way art is valued and sold, and is opening up new possibilities for the art world.

Geneva and Florence: rare chandelier at Sotheby’s

For more...

Melanie Geria

Sotheby’s ‘Novel’ auction

The Art Market

FT Weekend
27/28 January 2018
On the record

Christopher Le Brun, seen here with his Painting as Sunrise (2013), will exhibit at the Lisson Gallery, London NW1, from July 4–August 18 (www.lissongallery.com). For more on the New Royal Academy of Arts and its programme of 250th anniversary events, visit www.royalacademy.org.uk/ra250

Where is your favourite place in Britain? Portswod Hill looking across Portsmouth Harbour towards the Isle of Wight.


Music? Pelléas et Mélisande (Debussy).

Food? Steak frites.

Who is your hero? Edmund Burke.

Dinner guest? John Keats.

Alternative career? Jazz musician.

The image of the artist as perpetual rebel is, he thinks, super-ficial. ‘Most of us have several types of potential in our personality. I find something about this job very, very satisfying. It may be my background that makes me think of structures and responsibilities as benign. You make things happen.’

He adds: ‘I like people and I’ve found a way to work with people. At the same time, after a certain amount of that, I need to be completely on my own.’

Mary Miers
Christopher Le Brun

The artist and President of the Royal Academy on its 250th anniversary year

To ask yourself "is it good for my accepted membership. 'You have national acclaim, he wouldn't have his own work was reaching inter-

the 26th President in 2011 (the was elected in 1996 and became

Academicians. Mr Le Brun, who a new generation of successful

exhibitions under its belt and imminent, a slew of outstanding

ing of a huge capital project almost impossible to control'.

(legacy of the RA's notoriously

of older men in tweeds sitting 'trying to get consensus'. Con-

run by artists, he sees his job as

ral assembly and the council

'It holds its two parts—the gene-

influenced—that of America.

reminding me that the RA's con

beautiful structure,' he says,

British institution. 'It's got this reverent of the history and trad-

are so successful, he believes,

it can directly address the public.'

The RA sits between the museum

position of the art world, the sole

big, taxpayer-funded institutions

see there was a danger of the

Jones and Ron Kitaj joined and

such as David Hockney, Allen

a cool thing to do. Then, people

when I venture that the Royal

'It's like a beautiful car,' he proffers

His experience as a trustee

One reason why its exhibitions

His esteemed charge back to its

erniser, committed to steering

foot on the accelerator.'

corniche, so I effectively put my

in fact, it needs to be out on the

only been used for light shopping;

in a barn. You get it out and it's

Bentley that you discover unused

on all cylinders. 'A wonderful

when I venture that the Royal

'In other words, we have an art

absolutely wedded to that—mostly

which remains free and we're

missing from that view is that

as an exhibition venue. What's

implores. 'We receive no govern-

other main institutions? 'Don't

Reynolds, it establishes how we

Gallery has been devised by the

collection, with the only Michel-

ial library and a very serious

ition. Plus we have a very spec-

importance of preserving the

my contention is that they do.'

began and whether the principles

President himself. 'Starting with

Gallery has been devised by the

ural display of the Collection

of contemporary works. The inaug-

ing a great, as yet untapped, body


Alternative career?

Dinner guest?

Who is your hero?

Food?

Music?

Book?

Favourite building?

On the record

www.countrylife.co.uk

Country Life, February 28, 2018 63
In New Prints, Christopher Le Brun Channels “Serious Matters in a Playful Vein”

Celebrated British artist Christopher Le Brun once humbly explained in an interview (with Clocktower Radio) that he spends his life “covering surfaces and arranging things.” He has even compared his studio practice to sitting at a breakfast table and moving around salt and pepper shakers and packages of cereal. Le Brun’s aptitude for arrangement surfaces in a new series of prints created in collaboration with the London-based art publisher Paragon Press, which has been working with major contemporary artists for almost three decades.

Le Brun, who has been president of London’s prestigious Royal Academy of Arts since 2011, values cross-disciplinary artistic exploration and mark-making as a powerful vehicle for individual expression. In his new series, titled “Seria Ludo” (2015), woodcut prints reveal abstract patterns made from vertical swathes and scrawls of color and negative space. Red, yellow, blue, and grey ink contrast with the bright white of the paper to highlight energetic, gestural motions on each block’s surface, allowing intricate textures to materialize. While he’s best known as a painter, Le Brun’s strong eye for composition and color come through brilliantly in print form.
In *03 from Series Ludo* (2015), horizontal and vertical lines are set ablaze by bright yellow, while in *02 from Series Ludo* (2015), aggressive, carved lines recede into a blank white space in the center. Red ink contrasts sharply with white and underscores areas where Le Brun didn’t carve quite so deeply. Fine lines that evidence the artist’s hand appear like scribbles and scratches covering the picture plane, save for key moments where no ink touches the paper. As with Le Brun’s abstract paintings, there is a keen sense of structure at play here, a balance between exuberant chaos and measured order. Given the title of the series, a Latin phrase that translates as “serious matters in a playful vein,” this effect is clearly just what the artist had in mind.

Le Brun regards the activity of printmaking as he does painting, calling it “deeply romantic, full of idealism and risk and emotion.” To see his ink marks on paper is to trace the layers of his artistic practice—a passionate pursuit of individual expression.

—Anna Furman
Christopher Le Brun

Composer, Albertz Benda Gallery, New York (March 2–April 15 2017) and The Gallery at Windsor, Vero Beach, Florida (February 27–May 12 2017)

Christopher Le Brun is president of Britain's Royal Academy of Arts. He is also a painter of unusual seriousness. His latest exhibition Composer has been curated by Zurich-based art consultant Emilie Bruner. It is held in two parts: at the Albertz Benda Gallery in New York City (until 15 April 2017), and at The Gallery at Windsor, Vero Beach, Florida (until 12 May 2017). Not many people will get to see both parts of the show, so it is as well that each half offers a more than satisfactory viewing experience in itself.
The exhibition prompts one to wonder whether Christopher Le Brun is an abstract painter nowadays. There are paintings where images are made difficult to read by the exuberance of his paint handling: Bax (2015) is a brushily painted view of a headland against the sea. In other paintings, images are hinted at: Pelletier (2014), the oldest painting in either half of Composer, looks very much like a lake or inlet seen from the near shore, though in a strangely distorted colour palette. There are paintings like Middle C (2015) where images appear to have been obscured by overpainting. Most of the paintings, however, appear to be entirely abstract.

Le Brun insists that this is not the point. The distinction between figuration and abstraction is a false one, he maintains, because human perception instinctively looks for images, so that 'in all abstract painting—even in a Barnett Newman—one’s psychology seeks out recognition'. On the other hand, he does not try to pretend that figuration and abstraction are the same thing. Rather, he says that 'the balance between the two things is too fruitful to resolve'.

One of the most remarkable paintings in either New York or Florida is the diptych Golden Grove (2015-16), which might vaguely suggest autumn foliage to some spectators. It stands almost nine feet high, and is hung on the end wall of the long final room of the Albertz Benda Gallery. Like many of the works in Composer, much of the picture is filled with repeated vertical strokes of paint; tangled in unruly rows across its surface. The glowing colour is what impresses first of all. The dominant range stretches from pale cream through yellows to deep reddish- oranges, and includes everything from the very English-looking colour of custard powder, through pale and dark mustards, to very un-English suggestions of ripe papaya, mango, and other tropical fruits. Underneath the picture's top surface are marks in sky blue and various greens from mint through to a rather muddy grass.

Just as in a number of other paintings here, the density of Le Brun's markmaking cases up within a couple of inches of the canvas edge, and the lower edges of the two canvases make it obvious that Golden Grove did not start out as a diptych. Underneath the top layer of paint on the right hand canvas, there was clearly a stage when very fluid paint was allowed to drip in narrow rivulets to the bottom edge. This evidence is absent from the other canvas.
This is significant because the history of each of Le Brun’s paintings is crucial. He talks of ‘treating every mark as a moment’, so that the finished work is an accumulation of such moments. This is not because he sees the painting process as a cathartic outpouring of feelings. In fact he is rather dismissive of the significance of such feelings. ‘How you feel about the world on any particular day might just be wrong’, he says. Instead, if his paint marks are to have authenticity (and thus value), then this most erudite of artists relies not upon psychology or intelligence, but upon the physical process of manipulating paint. The physical is the element whereby you’re more likely to get some authenticity’, he says. ‘It’s no different to swimming. You don’t think about swimming, you just get on with it.’ If a painting has this ‘physical authenticity’, then he insists that ‘painting will demonstrate the truth of yourself, not just in a mental sense, but in your being.’

If a painting is conceived as an accumulation of charged moments, then the idea that it might parallel musical composition—which is implied by one interpretation of the exhibition’s title—makes sense. Le Brun repeatedly uses musical terms and references as titles for his paintings. As well as those already cited, there are paintings here called Score, Note, and Symphony (all dated 2016). But he is also fond of literary references (the subtitle of Strand (Thus the light fades, thus pours) (2016) is taken from Ezra Pound), and of course in another sense composing is something that any artist does. Le Brun is not merely persuaded of the similarities between the pictorial and musical arts; in other words, he sees all artists of significance as pursuing a similar imaginative ambition.

This reveals the broad romantic streak that runs through Le Brun’s artistic intelligence. Recalling the beginnings of his career he says, ‘I sensed in the general culture of northwest Europe a sort of imaginative romanticism that wasn’t reflected in any contemporary art that I could see’. So instead he turned to the great artists of British painting. ‘If you look at Turner or Blake, you see running through them a powerful visionary impulse to make a world of your own’.
This is what Christopher Le Brun attempts. These are paintings of the utmost seriousness and the highest ambition. As such they are unlike much of the art that we see nowadays, though perhaps they are appropriate for the artist who heads an institution that will celebrate its 250th anniversary next year. They are not about truth to experience. ('That just strikes me as wrong,' he says.) They are not ironic. ('I think irony has a very short shelf life. The battery starts to run down almost as soon as you invoke it.') Instead they are a sincere attempt to create something that has not existed in the world before, and which might thus stand alongside the great art of the past. 'That sounds like a rather grand ambition,' Le Brun concludes, 'but it struck me that that's what art feels like.'—[O]
CHRISTOPHER LE BRUN

THE BRITISH PAINTER AND PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY OPENS UP HIS LONDON STUDIO. WORDS: KATIE MCCABE. PHOTOS: TOM DUNKLEY

You've been in this studio since the 90s, what was the space like before you took it on?

Tennants. The space was occupied by a fine art printers called Hope Sufferance Press and the room was black with printer's ink. Through the 90s, it was used by many well-known artists such as Anish Kapoor or Antony Gormley. In fact, on the roof, we've got some stuck copper plates that were used for Victor Pasmore's last prints.

What's your daily routine in the studio like, how do you begin the process?

The first thing I do, always, is to find a way to get into the studio without looking at my paintings...I look at the floor with my hands covering my eyes, I make my way to the control of the room and when I am ready, take my hands away and look, it's rather elaborate, but there's a reason; what I am trying to get is my fresh, true reaction to what I've done.

That instantaneous look will tell me what the status of the picture is, and it's either 'oh no!' or 'oh yes'. Then the work of the day starts. Mostly it's 'oh no!'. My process is to work on two, three, four, five paintings in a day, I keep moving... They are rather like crossword puzzle clues, you get stuck on 27 down, you put it away then 8 across, I keep going, hoping to tick my imagination into answering the questions the painting is asking.

So you're dealing with an approach that's both imaginative and methodical, how do you combine those two things?

Another analogy is fishing, if you want to catch a fish you have to keep the fly on the water. By being in the workshop, you might catch a fish. No matter how wonderful the day dream or vision of 'the great painting' may be, my experience is that it rarely survives transfer to the studio. Since painting is dominated by the reality of touch and making, for me, it's a workshop activity.

Your two upcoming US exhibitions are titled Composer. How does music influence the way you paint?

I find, but that's describing the mood or energy that you might derive from music. I'm more interested in music as a composed structure. If you take a big piece by a
major composer, it's a very complicated structure full of imagined space, so it seems as though you hear things in the foreground and the background.

That has strong analogies to painting, as I think of painting as a created space, with the placement of things and colours and marks.

When you were first elected to the Royal Academy it was as a printmaker. What's your relationship to printmaking now?

It's like looking forward to one's summer holidays - literally. As well as London, I've made prints in Paris and Santa Barbara and Venice. I go there to work with technicians, and I admire their expertise.

There's always a faint sense of The Eves and the Shoemaker, hoping that overnight they will make the shoes for you. It's never quite as simple as that, but it is a collaboration, and a great printmaker is a person who understands what you're trying to achieve and they guide you a little bit, to help you.

Recently, I've been making prints here in the studio, woodcuts. It has directly informed my painting.

You've mentioned in interviews in the past how you constantly reread paintings, what is "finished" to you? It's enormously difficult. At the very end of Virginia Woolf's novel To the Lighthouse there's a painter - she's been working on the painting all the way through - who finally sees the family reach the lighthouse, and puts in a vertical stroke and says I have had my vision. That idea of the completion and the meaning of a painting all coming together is extremely rare... it's really a series of questionings, hunches, intuitions... until one day I come in and look at the painting, and it stands up to me. It resists, it stops spooling up, it kicks into gear, and the "thickness" is often the completion.

Christopher Le Brun: Compooser runs from 27 February to 27 April at The Gallery at Wedes, Venet Beach, Florida and from 2 March to 15 April at Albert Le Benda, New York.

www.christopherlebrun.co.uk
‘Joy has to be part of the vocabulary of art’

Thomas Marks

As an exhibition of new paintings opens across two venues in the US, Christopher Le Brun PRA talks to Thomas Marks about the musical and mythological inspirations behind his work.

Your upcoming exhibition has the title ‘Composer’. What correspondences do you perceive between musical composition and the process of painting?
Very early on, when I first started listening to music, I realised that there were particular correspondences in the sense of structure. I even borrowed a score of Debussy’s *Pelleas et Mélisande* from the central library in Portsmouth because I just wanted to see what it looked like; I could imagine images but I wanted to see how it all came about.

Although I can’t read music, I find it fascinating to see the strange correspondence between a notation and the sound. That struck me as having a relatively straightforward connection to what I was thinking about as an artist. In the exhibition in New York there’s a painting called *Strand*. When I was just 17 I did a small watercolour study for an imaginary large painting, and it looks like this painting that I’ve just done – so something about music I think, even from that young age, has persisted with me and in a way is only now starting to play out.

When you listen to music, you feel the rhythm, you feel the presence of the music, but you also very powerfully feel the spatiality – particularly in the music that interests me, which is from the early 20th century. Then you feel out these structures with your mind. That seems to me to have a correspondence with painting, where you’re feeling for and sensing structures and forms of space.

Is there something of the notation of music in some of the vertical marks in these paintings?

Take an idea like a chord: it’s a fairly straightforward comparison to come up with a grouping in its verticality. Things obviously operate very differently in a painting, but I’m not unhappy if that becomes analogous in the way that you look at it. Of course, my work has included trees, stems, branches, all of these relatively abstract vertical components.

Do you listen to music while you are painting?

Yes, but not always and it’s absolutely not a direct response. No, that’s not the relationship, not at all. In fact, if anything I may use music to switch off. There’s one painting called *Pelléas*, and that stands as an attempt to encapsulate my ideas about an opera that I’ve been thinking about for more than 40 years. The connection is never straightforward.

In the catalogue, you describe painting as ‘a questioning form’. What types of questions do these paintings ask?

Painting is essentially about appearances. The only way to encounter appearances is by looking. Can you hear in the word ‘looking’, how it’s a question? It’s not seeing, it’s looking. Looking immediately engages you in a questioning or wondering way.
A painting can be used to carry messages and it can illustrate stories, and the bulk of paintings historically are illustrative of stories, but the type of painting that holds me contains, as it were, innocent questions about the world. Why is there appearance at all? Why do things look like this?

Does your work retain the interest in the mythological that characterised it in a more figurative stage? If so, how does that now manifest itself?

Yes, it does. I remember as a student, one of my teachers used to say to me, ‘Christopher, the quest, remember it’s a metaphor,’ because I always misinterpreted, thinking the metaphor was the real thing – and I suppose I’m still susceptible to that. The metaphorical aspect of painting is very powerful for me. Now I paint to re-enact myths rather than picturing them.

Composer (2016), Christopher Le Brun. Courtesy the artist and Albertz Benda, New York

It’s extremely important because you can smother a painting with the wrong title, but the right one can bring it to a more subtle life. Take the case of Strand, which is the painting that had this forerunner early drawing – just after
that I started reading Ezra Pound. There’s a translation by Pound, a little phrase by a troubadour poet, maybe Arnaut Daniel, something about the sun raining light, and he says, ‘Thus the light rains, thus pours,’ which to me described the vertical marks of falling light, not rain but falling light. I’ve never forgotten it.

You worked on these paintings while the Royal Academy’s ‘Abstract Expressionism’ exhibition was coming together, and finished some of them as it went on display. How has that movement influenced your own painting?

I can illustrate a particular moment, which was the first time I encountered Philip Guston. But I didn’t encounter him through the look of the painting. I heard a tape of a radio interview he did with David Sylvester, so all I heard was two men talking about painting, and I was completely gripped by it. I remember it clearly because what Guston was talking about was painting as a means of thinking, or thinking as a means of painting.

That was an important moment for me. It left behind the notion that the artist thinks up a picture – I use the word ‘picture’ deliberately – and then carries it out in the form of a painting. What Guston is doing, and what the great Abstract Expressionists are doing, is thinking, living, painting all at the same time with anxiety and doubt as their material rather than their problem.

My work has had this continual dialogue with those artists for many, many years. I believe that in many ways Abstract Expressionism was one of the last primary events in painting.

What I and other artists did in the 1980s was also primary in a sense, because we then overlaid the achievement of Abstract Expressionism with the possibility of figurative risk. In Germany, the clear analogy is Baselitz. His move of terrific conceptual economy was just to invert the figure, and that’s not something I was prepared to do. I preferred to hold on to the picture problem in painting.

Your role as President of the Royal Academy carries many responsibilities and duties. But has the post altered your attitude to your own painting?

One side is practical, and the other side is semantic. That may sound a bit pretentious but I’m trying to describe it accurately. On the practical side, it intensifies my work because I give three days to the Academy and I give the rest of the week to my studio, so my suit and tie come off and my jeans come on and I’m in here working, and I have an absolute distinction between the two things.
One type of interpretative framework for these abstract works is their titles, which range from enigmatic pronouns or adjectives to a snatch from Ezra Pound. How important is the act of titling each painting?

On the other side, the presidency has a symbolic role, which connects me directly back to Joshua Reynolds. This isn’t about me, it’s about the presidency, what it means. And for someone to whom history is very vivid, it raises the stakes because the whole position of the Royal Academy and the presidency is an imaginative act that in our curious English way we’ve embedded in the middle of society. We’ve put a group of creative people whose lives are led by their imaginations into a central public position. This is completely glorious.

And finally – to refer back to your 2015 woodcut series, Seria Luda – do you still feel a sense of play when you paint?

There are several words that one uses with extreme caution: pleasure, joy, the ecstatic... Joy has to be part of the vocabulary of art. In fact, isn’t it part of our duty as artists, our responsibility in a way to bring out the pleasure of art? Someone came to the studio the other day and said very tentatively, ‘There’s a lot of joy in these paintings’. There’s always the risk of thinking that’s a bit second rate. But is it?

‘Composer’ is at the Gallery at Windsor, Vero Beach, Florida (27 February–27 April) and Albertz Benda, New York (2 March–15 April).

From the March 2017 issue of Apollo. Preview and subscribe here.
Christopher Le Brun PRA Touch And Improvisation The Artlyst Interview

3 March 2017 / Art Categories Art News, Features / Art Tags abstract painting, Christopher Le Brun, exhibitions, New York, RA / / / / / / / /

Christopher Le Brun, PRA, painter and president of the Royal Academy is a very busy man. With two shows currently on in the United States, Christopher Le Brun: Composer, at the Albertz Benda gallery in New York (2 March-15 April 2017) and Christopher Le Brun: Composer in Vero Beach, Florida (25 February-27 April 2017) at the Gallery at Windsor, he continues to expand his international reach as a force to be reckoned with.

AL) How would you describe your practice? Please delve into medium, application, concept and (artist) influences.

CLEB) I am a painter, but my work has been augmented by sculpture in bronze and marble, occasionally on a monumental scale. I have been especially nourished by my love of printmaking. I have worked for many years with the publisher Charles Booth-Clibborn of Paragon Press, mostly in etching but also lithography and monotype. My new series of large-scale woodcuts has been worked on in parallel with the painting. Barbara Rose in her essay on my work for the current exhibitions gives printmaking a key role in my development. I've been variously described as neo-expressionist, post-modernist, symbolist, romantic, but also (less plausibly) as the School of London. Shoving from the outset with major European and American figures, it would be more reliable to say that I am one of the very few painters of my generation to have achieved some recognition amongst my celebrated British sculptor peers.

Christopher Le Brun PRA
AL: Has music always had a profound influence on the direction of your work? Describe. Talk about some of your musical influences and genres of music that inspires you.

CLB: Yes. It is not so much listening while I work, as considering the structures of serious or classical music and how they open my painting imagination. So the period of rapid formal development in music at the start of the 20th century from late romanticism to atonality has particular relevance. Two pieces stand out — Debussy’s radical symbolist opera of 1902, Pelléas and Mélisande, and Arnold Schoenberg’s Gurrelieder composed between 1900-1910. They have an organisation and sensual complexity that side stepped the whole question of figurative/abstract or figure/ground that entirely dominated painting debate when I started exhibiting my work.

AL: You have just opened two big shows in the States how will you continue this momentum and still have time to paint and grow? In other words, what do you foresee in the short and long term?

CLB: Because I favour touch and improvisation, my decisions are made in the studio with brush in hand. I find embarking on a plain of white canvas as exciting today as I ever did. I like your word momentum because in a sense rhythm is all. As for the short term, in early April Albertz Benda are presenting my work alongside Ed Moses at the Dallas Art Fair in a booth curated by Barbara Rose. Barbara and I are in conversation at a public event there. After New York, the next exhibition is with Arndt in Berlin during Berlin Gallery Weekend at the end of April.

AL: How do you balance your life as a working artist and as President of the Royal Academy, very demanding jobs.

CLB: Frankly, I’m not sure I know. The PRA role is an immense privilege, but certainly not straightforward — every year I am subject to re-election in a secret ballot. This is my 6th year so far. But my fellow RAs know I am passionate about it and its pretty clear the Academy is currently going from strength to strength. Next year we have our 250th celebrations with the opening of our new joined up site which has doubled in size. I have a wonderful team around me at the studio so I am able to devote myself entirely to my work when I’m there. If anything my Presidential role seems to have produced more energy for painting.
AL] How important (or not) is your national identity to your painting and do you feel your work has a particular Britishness about it?

CLB] My first encounters that were profound enough to have lasted were with Blake and Keats and Wordsworth and Nash and Hitchens and Turner – poets as well as painters. Perhaps because I was brought up in the “South Country” of Edward Thomas, I was and still am moved by those landscapes, cycling out as a teenager to draw on the South Downs. It was dismaying (and confusing) to learn at art school that this was considered provincial. I now know it isn’t. They are just a set of memories and feelings that have resonance and depth particular to me. It’s the particular I look for in all artists wherever they are from.

AL] We are living in volatile political times with Brexit, the election of Donald Trump and a swing to the far right in many European countries, how do you feel you can best use your influence to counterbalance this dreadful reality.

CLB] The last French symbolist poet Paul Valéry speaks about truth and art, but he draws attention to the special truth of making. It is not easy to hold onto the truth of making but it promises to be or at least has a chance of being, sound, foundational, and free of mere opinion. Words like authenticity hover nearby. Putting exactly the right word or colour or mark in exactly the right place has, to use the ancient trope of western art, made some very rare poems and paintings outline the lives of their makers. These great works radiate truth – and in uncertain times it is not such an ignoble ambition.

Artlyst exclusive interview by Paul Carter Robinson © Artlyst 2017 Top Photo Christopher Le Brun [British, b.1951] Strand (thus the light rains, thus pours), 2016 Courtesy of albertz benda and the artist.
Exhibitions from Florida to Cleveland this winter are asking visitors to consider the affinities between sound and visual art — and the way we see (and hear) artwork.
This season, both the Gallery at Windsor in Vero Beach, Florida and Albertz Benda Gallery in New York are mounting work by Christopher Le Brun, a British artist and the president of the Royal Academy of Arts. Both called “Composer,” the exhibitions immediately introduce the connection between paintings and musical compositions, with work titles like “Score,” “Symphony” and “Middle C.” “It’s particularly early 20th-century music that interested me,” he says, “where you’re seeing a battle between tonality and atonality. The spaces that it makes you think of are complicated and speculative and very rich.” Concepts shared by art and music, like texture and tone, impact the way he layers oil on his canvases. And the relationship works in both directions: Le Brun’s painting “Cloud” inspired a piano composition by the composer Richard Birchall (above). For more evidence of artist-musician collaboration, stop by the New Museum’s Raymond Pettibon retrospective in New York — record covers for bands such as Sonic Youth and Black Flag feature the American artist’s subversive drawings.

Rudolf Bauer’s “Symphony,” 1919-23. © Rudolf Bauer Estate and Archive, San Francisco
Another “Symphony” hangs at New York’s [Leila Heller Gallery](https://www.leilaheller.com) as part of an exhibition that celebrates the birth of the Guggenheim Museum. This early 20th-century painting, by the German artist [Rudolf Bauer](https://www.wikiart.org/en/rudolf-bauer), similarly connects principles of musical arrangement with the organization of bright, exuberant shapes on his canvas. “The idea of composition is a double entendre,” affirms curator Brooke McGowan Herzog. She points out that concepts such as balance and rhythm also structure an abstract painting. In 1939, Solomon Guggenheim opened his Museum of Non-Objective Painting on Manhattan’s West 54th Street. According to Herzog, the curator and artist Hilla Rebay ensured that both Bach and Beethoven played in the space, creating a contemplative atmosphere. The Leila Heller exhibition includes works from artists who impacted the Guggenheim Foundation collection at its incipient stages, including the famed synesthete [Wassily Kandinsky](https://www.wikiart.org/en/wassily-kandinsky) (who heard color and saw sound). The art invites visitors to imagine the days before the Frank Lloyd Wright space opened and classical music stopped flowing through the galleries.

Over at the [Museum of Contemporary Art in Cleveland](https://www.mocacleveland.org), different kinds of sound — gospel music and speech — inform the American artist [Adam Pendleton](https://www.adampendleton.com)’s exhibition “Becoming Imperceptible.” The voice of David Hilliard, the former founding chief of staff of the Black Panther Party, emanates from a three-screen film installation Pendleton created as a kind of portrait of the activist. “He’s always there giving voice to the objects,” Pendleton says. Paired with Hilliard’s words, the large-scale vinyl wall work “Black Lives Matter #3” conveys a continuum of conflict and activism in American culture. In another video work, “Just Back From Los Angeles: A Portrait of Yvonne Rainer” (making its museum premiere at MOCA), the renowned choreographer and dancer reads from a list of recent victims of police brutality while sitting across a table from Pendleton himself. At the end of the film, Pendleton juxtaposes gospel music and shots of Rainer dancing. The sound, he says, “gives a different kind of attention to the gestures Yvonne makes.”

Finally, the Spanish sculptor [Jaume Plensa](https://www.jaumeplensa.com) offers an alternative to all this noise with his exhibition “Silence,” on view at New York’s [Galerie Lelong](https://www.galerielelong.com). His installation includes a series of bronze busts of women’s heads. Disembodied bronze hands cover their eyes and ears or make a hushing gesture, as though urging the viewer’s silence. On benches arranged throughout the gallery, Plensa has placed larger wooden busts of women’s heads with closed eyes and calm demeanors that indicate quiet, meditative states. “I’m working on the concept of silences almost always in my work,” Plensa says. In the past, he’s recorded the
sound of his bloodstream and incorporated instruments into his exhibitions to present a contrast: “Our body is so noisy we cannot listen or feel the silence.” Silence, he asserts, has some major benefits: “Words, many times, could not express exactly the things that we want to say,” he says. “Just to look into the eyes of somebody else or feeling the vibrations of the other people, many times, you communicate much more or you understand much better the messages of others.”
CHRISTOPHER LE BRUN with Barbara Rose

FEVERARY 27 - APRIL 27
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On a recent trip to London to see the historic Abstract Expressionism exhibition curated by David Anfam at the Royal Academy, I visited the studio of Christopher Le Brun, President of the Royal Academy since 2011, and the youngest to be elected since Lord Frederic Leighton in 1878.

I have been following Le Brun’s paintings ever since they first impressed me in the 1982 Zeitgeist exhibition in Berlin, which originally triggered a resurgence of expressionist abstraction. At the time, he was a figurative painter, although his painterly style gradually became more abstract. Subsequently, his works were shown in New York, Los Angeles and London in the most prestigious galleries, and included in group shows at MoMA, but he could not produce enough product to satisfy today’s gluttonous market for novelty.

Born in 1951, Le Brun is not a YBA (Young British Artist) catapulted to fame through Sensation, Norman Rosenthal’s épater le bourgeois exhibition, and marketing promotion of public relations czar Charles Saatchi. Nor is he an OBA (Old British Artist) of the generation of David Hockney, Malcolm Morley, Derek Boshier, Richard Smith, John Walker, and Howard Hodgkin—although, like them, he was classically trained.

When not at the Royal Academy, Le Brun is in his spacious skylit walk-up studio in Camberwell, south London, where I interviewed him about his recent large-scale abstractions, and the inspiration he draws from music.

Barbara Rose (Rail): I want to know about this new group of paintings called Composer. Why did you choose that title?

Christopher Le Brun: I realized I’d never really shared much about my love of music. When I was first aware of art and poetry I remember hearing the Debussy Quartet in G minor on the radio. I was completely captivated hearing this slightly scratchy thing coming out. I borrowed a record from school, which was of Ansermet conducting Pelléas et Mélisande. I had the mini score from the Central Library, even though I can’t read music.

Rail: Do you know why?

Le Brun: Well there’s duration in music, there are spaces. And through the music I was imagining so many pictures that seemed full of significance.

Rail: People forget that abstract art has two or three sources, and one is music. Kandinsky actually painted paintings that could be played. The idea was that if you could communicate emotion and feeling through music, which is abstract, you could do so in painting as well.

Le Brun: Some of Kandinsky’s early subjects—knights, riders, flags—make that fiercely embarrassing expression “the fairy-tale atmosphere” correct: symbolism, imagination, but also innocence. Those images come naturally from childhood onwards. They’re not forced. It’s not necessarily because of a meaning or a message. I use them because they conjure an imaginary field or space for me.

Rail: But these recent paintings seem to be entirely abstract. Do you see them as entirely abstract?

Le Brun: I always try to avoid that question! [Laughter.] I don’t know why. I think I’m reluctant to have something saying, “oh it’s a bit abstract, a bit figurative.” That always seems to me feeble.

Rail: It is feeble! Is anything entirely abstract? I don’t think the issue is abstraction versus figuration. I think the issue is pictorial space. Painting can be figurative, but it cannot be illusionistic in the sense of old master paintings, you can’t go backward. But the issue is still the creation of an imaginary space.
Le Brun: I completely agree. Painting wants to be spatial. It has a compass in it that switches to north, and the north of painting is space.

Rail: Isn’t the purpose of painting to create space and to create light, neither of which is literal? Isn’t painting different from the other arts in that it is a creation of imagined space and light?

Le Brun: There was some to-and-fro the other night in a panel discussion at the R.A. [Royal Academy of Arts] about the exhibition Abstract Expressionism. I said, this exhibition feels to me more about painting than sculpture. Abstract Expressionism itself always feels like it is more about painting than sculpture: it’s something about the layering, and how we see or “read” painting—it has a metaphysical implication. Although it’s foursquare in front of you, something is withheld or far away. The presence of sculpture is just different. John Golding called painting the “aristocrat” of the arts world.

Rail: Sculpture shares the viewer’s space, whereas painting has its own space, which is created and not literal. Barnett Newman said “sculpture is what you bump into when you back up to see a painting.” The problem of academic illusionism is that it implies a sculptural space. There were sculptors of the New York school, but only David Smith was promoted by Greenberg. There were many other sculptors, and there’s still one great living sculptor, Mark di Suvero. I think sculpture is much more complicated right now than painting for a variety of reasons.

Le Brun: There’s been such an emphasis on what sculpture can do recently because there’s so much more financial investment and scale involved, and to some extent it has seemed to dominate.

Rail: It’s money, it’s politics, and that’s where everything begins and ends today. You mentioned the word “sensitivity”—we don’t have many sensitive people, shall we say, dealing with art. There are people dealing with money, and politicians. All public spaces are political. So of course, you can ask for incredible amounts of money for these gigantic blow-ups of piles of whatever. I live in public space too, and I object personally to having my space invaded by kitsch.

Le Brun: The recent hang at Tate Modern—in the new Switch House—had virtually no painting. My impression was that there were only two or three paintings in the entire hang.
Rail: There was a generation of curators like Jan Hoet, one of the creators of Documenta, who said that painting is dead. Therefore, if you’re a painter, you’re dead. People believed them. Few were able to continue to paint on canvas. Cecily Brown, who moved to New York from England, I admire enormously, because she kept on painting—serious painting. That’s brave, courageous. For me, what you’re doing is courageous because I care about painting.

Le Brun: It’s not an uninteresting position in which to find oneself; curiously, it gives you imaginative freedom. In a sense, my work has been able to develop slowly. I hope that something has happened in recent years: a shift.

Rail: These new paintings we just looked at have a force, cohesion, and a sureness—they’re not tentative. That is a sign of a certain maturity. You know where you are and what you’re doing, and you believe in it. That is the fruit of years and years of experience. You can’t buy experience. You have to live it. It’s not overnight. You can’t suddenly say somebody at the age of twenty-three is a great painter: that’s the myth.

Le Brun: I barely sold any work until I was about thirty. I earned my living by teaching.

Rail: Well of course, it takes time to be educated.

Le Brun: But painting is also—which is not said enough, at a high level—extremely difficult. Because you’re not trying to simplify the situation, you’re trying to carry everything forward, which is complicated.

Rail: I agree with you, but I’m not sure everyone does, since art is now a vehicle for every kind of propaganda and message. That’s the kind of thing one sees in museums because of the cowardice of curators and museum directors who want to please the public, enlarge the public, get huge donations from people who don’t want to spend much time looking at anything. They make their money fast; they want to spend their money fast. We live in a culture that is not hospitable to the kind of painting we are talking about. For example, how do you feel when people call you an elitist, an Academician? After all, you are the President of the Royal Academy.

Le Brun: I’m proud of being an Academician because there have been such wonderful Academicians before me. Few people are aware that Turner was acting President of the Royal Academy. When Martin Archer Shee was ill, Turner deputised for two years. He sat on the Audit Committee—we’ve still got his notebooks with the account figures.
Rail: You dress better, if that film on Turner had any truth.

Le Brun: Some of the scenes rang true, and I’m rather moved by that continuity.

Le Brun: Never worry about being called a dinosaur; they were splendid creatures! The biggest that ever walked the earth.

Rail: In this climate, there’s a false idea of democracy, which is vulgar populism. To stand for quality, values, goals, continuity, and experience is not very trendy. Young artists seem terrified of painting as if you mean it.

Le Brun: I believe something has come into their world which makes painting seem as if it had to earn its place or perform some duty. I say, there’s no duty, just paint. The best way to mean it is to enjoy it. Let painting carry the burden.

Rail: The only way I think you can make a good painting, not even going so far as a great painting, is to absorb the history of art. You don’t have to read necessarily, but you have to do a lot of looking and absorb the lessons of the masters, visually by looking at original works of art, which takes time. Young people are not going to do that because they have their heads in their iPads. All reproductions lack quality, and above all, they lack material surface texture. An image transmitted digitally looks nothing like the painting, it’s not the same experience.

Le Brun: There’s a structural problem at the moment between depth and breadth. In a general sense western culture has enormous breadth of possibility but few moments of depth. To be a serious painter, you need to thoroughly absorb the canon. Just think of Delacroix and his range of learning. That may be setting the bar high, but it’s unsatisfactory to settle for less.

Rail: Do you think there’s ambition for greatness any longer?

Le Brun: That is why I put so much of my time into the Royal Academy, because it was designed for greatness: to look after it, dwell on it, question and nurture and carry it forward. That’s why there’s gold leaf, as a not so subtle proof that we care, and the busts of Raphael, Titian, Michelangelo to remind you. That’s the original purpose of these organizations. Mostly they fail of course, but it’s the aim that counts – no matter how impossible it appears – it’s natural for the imagination to dwell on this subject.
**Rail:** There are 250,000 MFA graduates every year in the U.S. Basically MFA programs are storage tanks for rich kids, “trustafarians” attracted to the lifestyle of *la vie de bohème*. Museums are now paid for and bought by “emerging collectors,” meaning investors. They fund shows of absolute trash because they are invested in it. Museums use their money to expand, and for entertaining events and festivities, and to pay curators to travel to the biennale of Guangzhou or Azerbaijan or wherever, where they can chill out with each other. Museums today are corporations, and the rule is the corporation must grow or die. The aim is to have as many people inside a museum as in a sports stadium or rock concert, which determines the kind of art you have to show to attract the public.

**Le Brun:** When I first started showing I realized I could only have a show every two years because it would take me two years to paint ten paintings. So, given the way galleries have rapidly increased in size, the relative visibility of my painting and some of my sculpture colleagues were diverging.

**Rail:** The problem with the 250,000 arts graduates is that despite all the activity, there are only a handful of things that last. At any time in history there are no more than four great figures. In the Renaissance, the High Renaissance, you were lucky: you had Raphael and Michelangelo living at the same time. Between two and four, but not more.

**Rail:** Someone said, and I’m not sure I agree with this, that you’ve been influenced by Philip Guston. Do you feel that’s true?

**Le Brun:** I can be very specific about that. I wasn’t influenced in the way you might think. It was not by seeing his work, but by hearing him! Because my Slade tutor, the Constructivist Malcolm Hughes, gave me the interview tapes that David Sylvester made with American artists in the late 60’s, so when I heard Philip Guston, I didn’t know what his paintings were like. But he was talking about an approach, painting as *thinking*. There was color, pink, blue, form, a journey, loss, appearances, representation, spaces, history... I thought, what intelligence, what lucidity. So it’s not how to make a picture—but the values and beauty of the process itself, namely the feeling of making while not knowing. It was a helpful revelation that having a problem may bring you closer to the truth than finding a solution. Which is grown-up. Which is the adult approach to life. *[Laughter]*
Rail: Well, Pollock is always quoted as saying he was "in" his painting, which, literally, he was. There's that film by Namuth, and everybody sees he's actually in it. The great painting I believe that I just saw, that could be in the wall of any great museum, is by Larry Poons. Larry did not study art but studied composition; he was a composer at the Boston Conservatory. And one day he decided he liked to paint, and he was rather good at it. Then he just continued to paint, but he never studied painting. He was just in New York and met everybody. He became involved when he was very young with Barnett Newman, which is a good place to start. But Larry's new paintings are extraordinary; he's living in them.

Le Brun: I find this interesting because he was a name that I was familiar with, we didn't see many of his pictures over here, hardly any, occasionally you would see one, and the first ones I saw were the ellipses, the dots, because later I think John Hoyland told me that Poons was throwing buckets of paint, standing in footprint indentations on the summit of a mound of paint.

Rail: Greenberg had a whole theory—merge the image with the support and whatever—that was very convincing to people who really didn't love painting. The theory was too neat. It was reducible to something that uneducated people could repeat to each other, which was flatness. What on earth does that mean, except nothing... In the early '70s Jules Olitski, whose work I do admire—but Jules began as a Tachist painter in Paris after the war. All these guys, who were older, had the G.I. Bill—so they didn't come back to America, they stayed in Europe, which was a smart thing to do. The second generation of the New York school all had the G.I. Bill—Kelly, Rauschenberg, Olitski—all of them stayed in Paris. Jules was painting in a kind of Fautrier way, with these very built-up surfaces. Then in the '70s he stopped staining and dying and started building up the surface. Larry was never a color field painter. He decided he wanted also to emphasize surface and texture. He began to experiment—an experiment is part of it. What is it: "I don't find, I seek; I don't seek, I find." Cézanne was seeking and not finding, but Picasso said, "I don't seek, I find."

Le Brun: Here in England, given our light, it's mostly seeking.

Rail: I'm definitely with the seekers, not the finders. I won't live to see it, but I think Picasso's reputation will go down. He and Duchamp are the greatest 19th-century painters of the 20th century. I think there's going to be a huge revision in which Matisse and Miró will seem far more radical, far greater artists. Picasso was the end of something, not the beginning. Anything that was radical was Braque's idea anyway. The Picasso myth, created mainly by Picasso, was easy to commercialize because there's nothing more interesting than the sex life of the artist. How do you decide when a painting is finished?

Le Brun: Time. I just use lashings of time. I've got a method actually. In the morning, I come into the studio, take my coat off, put everything down and walk into the middle of the room just looking at the floor. When I'm ready I look up. If the painting stands up to me, it may be finished. But if the painting is talking back or something comes into my mind, then I'm still on the journey. But if it resists or has an air of independence then maybe I've got somewhere—but that is not very often.
Rail: Do you start a number of paintings and then go back and revise?

LeBrun: Yes, they’re all on the go—that’s everything in here before they go to the room next door to be considered again in a clear white space. I got to an interesting stage with this one. This painting was just three days, I thought, it’s got a freshness, I’m going to mess it up if I go on, I’m just going to hold onto that. There’s a stack of paintings I’m working on. Normally I may be working on up to ten paintings at the same time.

Rail: I find that’s what serious painters are doing now. They’re going back to the way Cézanne worked. Cézanne would have ten “Mont Sainte-Victoires” on the floor, and he’d do a bit there, then go away, and then come back. It’s all about equilibrium. It’s not about, the composition of this form echoes this form; it’s when you feel it snaps into equilibrium. As you say, it stands.

LeBrun: Yes it gives, but it doesn’t give in. There’s a wonderful quote from Walter Pater, talking about Leonardo’s supreme discrimination: “hours culled from a thousand with a miracle of finesse.” He is describing Leonardo going all across Milan just to make one touch of the brush.

Rail: Nuance, nuance, rien que nuance (nothing but nuance). This is the Symbolist poets’ idea that is once again relevant. It’s all in the nuance. That’s why serious painting today is on a different road toward a different experience, that of nuance and not of the graphic pop image that grabs you and then you forget about it. To look at these paintings of yours, it takes time before the image comes into focus. The response is as much—if not more—tactile as optical. Tactility has been absent from painting for such a long time because Greenberg said painting is above all about flatness. This is not true. Painting is above all about the creation of non-existent space and light, and of the physical experience of surface and texture.

LeBrun: Paint is designed to be nuanced. Oil paint is designed to blend, to be a space-creating thing. Where I was uninterested or unmoved by Pop Art was that I felt oppressed by the agenda of the image—someone was telling me something—and then mostly about style. I don’t want to be buttonholed. I want to be charmed or moved by something. Hence Turner, Corot, Rembrandt: mysterious innately, their aims are primarily poetic.

LeBrun: Actually the creation of beauty is part of the artist’s job. Making form through putting things together is certainly a responsibility. It’s easy to share chaos, but it’s difficult to put together something with integrity and unity. The problem with the word “romantic” is that it sounds wet. Of course, it isn’t. Romanticism is a powerful revolutionary idea about individuality and feeling in a particular period of history, as well as a perennial attitude towards life.
Rail: You are obviously interested in light as well as color, and light comes in through skylights.

Le Brun: Yes. With this beautiful top light, the color and light in the painting are always different. It’s not pure north either, so the colors are always shifting. There’s a very odd thing about painting and natural light. You might say, which is the true picture? When do you ever see the true picture? It doesn’t exist! All the colors shift, morning to evening, the space shifts, it’s alive.

Rail: How do you mean it shifts?

Le Brun: Daylight on this canvas allows you to somehow look into it although it’s a flat surface. I want to say there is a metaphysical aspect: it’s putting something somewhere else all the time. You see it but you don’t. Daylight does that. If you blast it with strong artificial light, it flattens out and you lose all the visual subtlety. I heard Per Kirkeby was once hanging a show and somebody asked, “Does it have impact?” He said, “That’s exactly what I don’t want it to have.”

Rail: Politically correct art reminds you of what is already in the headlines. I once asked a young person, “why should museums be showing what is already in the newspapers and on televisions?” She answered that the space of art is what everybody looks at, so that’s why we have to put statements in that space. Fine, but doing so means you’ve taken away the space from fine art.

The Abstract Expressionists took tremendous risks. One of the things I notice today is that nobody wants to take a real risk. Artists want to fit into some category that is going to get them on some slide right into a museum. There’s little individuality. What you see is what is already there in this world. But the job of the artist to make things that are not in the world as it is, but only in the imagination.

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Think a Free, Artist-Run School Is Crazy? Christopher Le Brun on the Royal Academy of Art's Avant-Garde Tradition

By Loney Abrams
Dec. 17, 2016

As the oldest art school in the UK and with ties to the Crown, the Royal Academy of Arts in London may be just as fancy as its name implies. But despite its traditional history, the Academy is a progressive school, with free tuition, museum-worthy exhibitions, and a faculty jam-packed with heavy-hitting artists like Yinka Shonibare, Wolfgang Tillmans, and Rebecca Warren. And, by maintaining its independence as a private school, it offers the only three-year postgraduate program in the UK and Europe.

At its helm is Christopher Le Brun, who became the Academy’s youngest president when he was elected by the Academy in 2011, since Lord Leighton in 1878. Crucial to the Royal Academy’s ideology is that the school is entirely artist-run, and Le Brun is no exception to the rule. A painter, sculptor, and printmaker, Le Brun pays tribute to the
Romantics and Symbolists in his work. (If you happen to be in Florida, you can see his work in person at The Gallery at Windsor, opening February 27th, of if you’re in New York, you can see his show at Albertz Benda in Chelsea, opening March 2nd.)

Here, Artspace’s Loney Abrams speaks with Le Brun about the difference between tradition and historical continuity, the importance of “doing” in arts education, and the Royal Academy’s unique model as a free, artist-led school.

The Royal Academy is unique in that it’s a school that is funded largely in part by the exhibitions that the Academy hosts in its galleries. I’m wondering what the relationship between the exhibition program and the school is like. Are the students involved in the programing?

One of our students sits on our exhibitions committee so they are part of the decision-making, but they are sitting with really senior figures—staff, art historians, and artists. They are part of it for the experience, but they don’t really determine the program. We focus on making great exhibitions, believing that that’s what the students will want to see. In the RA Schools, in conjunction with the staff, the students determine who comes in as visitors, but on the exhibition program they are witnesses to the process rather than being influential.

The academy was founded in 1768, and it prides itself on its legacy. Art needs innovation, progression, experimentation—how do you negotiate this dichotomy where on one pole you have history, tradition, convention, and on the other you have adaptation and innovation?

Put to the side the question of history. Go back and rather concentrate on continuity. For example, when Lord Frederic Leighton and his friend George Frederic Watts came into the Academy as young artists, they wanted to change the world and they made an exhibition the way they wanted to make it. In their day they were innovative. Now we look back and they look tremendously grand and stuffy, but they were young artists. It was the same for Sir Joshua Reynolds and his friends when they came in in 1768. They were young artists in a tough situation needing to find somewhere to show their work, to sell their work, and a way of setting up a school.

Each generation is innovative. Now, the affect cumulatively is that it looks like a historic progression. To call it tradition is to misname it. It is just another set of artists coming up. At the moment if you look across all different people—whether its Yinka Shonibare, Grayson Perry, Eva Rothschild, or Tracey Emin—they are all new but on another level just the same as Lord Leighton and Watts and Reynolds. They are just more artists.

When you look back on the minutes of meetings from over the last 250 years you see the same things come up over and over. They’re always discussing: How do I make my living? What do people think of me? How’s my reputation? What work do I want to show? Do I like these other people I’m in the room with? Exactly the same stuff; it is very human. The way I look at innovation is to really enjoy all of the new temperaments and attitudes and types of people that turn up generation after generation. That is the joy of it. Because we have been around for a long time, it is a bit like having a family home that you can always go back to. We are not going away—we are always going to be here. I
like to think of it as a sort of home for artists, in a generous sense. You need to slightly forget the age of an institution and think about all the subsequent generations as young artists.

Whether higher education is worth the expense is a hotly debated topic right now. And before we can know the full ramifications of Brexit or Trump, I think many young people find it hard to justify investing in graduate school, or even to undergraduate school, when the future feels so uncertain. Why do you think art education is a worthwhile investment, especially when a degree in art doesn’t necessarily qualify you for lucrative jobs or stable careers?

Art school didn’t promise me a job when I was a student, either. There are at least two sides to this—probably five or six, seven or eight sides to it. One reason artists need to go to art school is that they need to know what their peer group is thinking. In one way there is no such thing as an untrained or naïve artist; it doesn’t work, and it probably never worked. You need to know what is going on, either so you don’t repeat what others are doing, and also to know what you disagree with so you can take up a position relative to your own contemporary art culture. It is very important that the schools carry on teaching art and being a place where you can paint, either at the undergraduate level or graduate level. It is really important.

The other thing is once you start to lose the knowledge those places convey, you break the thread of continuity. When you do that the different generations start to not share the same language, and all of the accumulated knowledge and experience is forgotten. In order to get real depth of culture, real quality of thinking and painting and art-making, you need to remember a lot of things. You can’t remake it all of the time. For all of these reasons art education is profoundly important for artists. The other thing is, as you know you, there is an enormous audience for art. Everyone wants to go and see new art in museums—millions of people—and those people will also have an interest in being educated in it. Even for all of those people who go through graduate school and don’t become artists, they become very attuned and sympathetic to what art is.

Is it possible to gain the education you’re talking about—art history, essentially—by just being a member of the audience you speak of? If I live in New York or London or a city where there is a very robust art scene, could I educate myself through involvement? Isn’t that another way to find context for my own work?

It is, but the difference is doing it. What you are talking about is experiencing work. When you are involved with making it, it is profoundly different. One of the misunderstandings about art is that artists have clever ideas and they then convert them into reality, whatever the form. In fact, the making of the work is the primary content—painting is made of paint; painting isn’t made of ideas, and so the difference between an appreciative audience who loves painting or loves poetry, and the poet and a painter who makes it is quite a serious difference.

Unless we understand through making, then art suddenly gets distorted and you find people suddenly expecting art to send messages, or art to be about serious things, or art to make the world better. Strictly speaking, none of those things are about art. Those are things we ask art to do for us, but they are not really about art. Painting is about painting, and the beauty of painting is somehow free of the necessity of telling us stuff. I think that distinction between learning by experiencing in a great city or learning by doing is really vital.
You went to school in the early to mid 70's, before the internet, before the art world had become so commercial, before the major rise in biennials and art fairs. Since then, how has the role of the art student changed?

When I went to the Slade I went straight from being a schoolboy, because they only took 12 students a year. It was a very small group of us chosen from applicants from all over the country. The professor knew exactly who each of us was, and that was an amazing privilege. Now, if I go to a school that takes 400 students in its foundation, I immediately feel a little concerned about it—it makes me feel actually rather sad. I can't see how the professor could know each student in the same way. There is an irony here: education is now extended to far more people and provides far more opportunities. But while the breadth has gotten better, the depth has suffered.

The Slade was different from Chelsea, and Chelsea was different from The Royal Academy. Each had a different identity and history. The Slade was connected to Bloomsbury, you had Augustus John, and the writers of the Bloomsbury group. The Slade had a character to it, a sort of slightly Boho intellectual side, whereas Chelsea was rather King's Road and fashion. Royal College was very design and smart. Even to this day, The Royal College artists like David Hockney and Allen Jones are very different culturally than I am due to our school's different traditions. Now, I think that is rather good for the variety of the art world.

This is a rather long answer, but the major difference is the enormous expansion of the field. Also, I was being trained as a painter, which is a very specific tradition. It means my work and the way I put the paint on the canvas would be read in terms of the way Walter Sickert might paint or the way William Alexander Coulter might paint, or the way Philip Wilson Steer might paint, or Whistler. If the students aren’t being taught a particular tradition and are just coming in as “art,” then in a way you have atomized the continuity into small blocks, some of which have very new traditions.

This is a really complicated question you have asked me! I’m trying to answer it directly in terms of my experience. I think that I was fortunate in coming into a continuity of painters in the way that my teacher learned from another teacher and that tradition would have gone all the way back to Degas and the way the French drew—and that means a lot to me. That was string! I want to know what you think—are you an artist?

I am, actually, and I did go to grad school and I do have my MFA. I’m just a few years out so I don’t have any historical experience for context, but I will say that I do feel the weight of my student loans, that’s for sure—and I think that that’s a relatively new phenomenon. But I think this student debt problem is mainly an American thing.

Am I right in thinking that the Academy is free of tuition?

Yes.

How can that be?

That’s a good question! When they set the RA Schools up, they began a Summer Exhibition program, and some of the proceeds of the exhibition went to pay for the school—and that’s exactly the same today. We do this enormous Summer Exhibition open to everybody in the world. Hundreds of thousands of people come to see it and we sell a lot of work. The artists get 50% and the Academy puts the money it makes back into the Schools. This is one of our
principles. You have to blink and scratch your head to believe it’s true, but it’s true. Every now and then we get advice from somebody who says we must be sweating our assets and we should be making people pay tuition who can afford to pay, but this is absolutely out of the question. By keeping free tuition as a principal, we’re left free to chose people by merit, to chose people that we think we can help or those who would make the best use of three years. We are not accredited, we are not part of any university system—students are just coming here to study at The Royal Academy. It is a unique model in this country and Europe as well.

Why isn’t this model more common? It just seems so obvious and yet no one uses it. Is that because for the model to work, the school needs a huge audience, a huge collector base, and a long history?

It’s a good question. Maybe nobody else would be mad enough to do it, because it is a lot of work and most of my job is fundraising. The great thing that we do have that nobody else could match is that we have a building that is free, because the government gave us a 999-year-long lease. Originally The Academy was set up at Somerset House by Waterloo Bridge, where Turner and Reynolds were, then they moved to the National Gallery on Trafalgar Square. In 1868 they came here to Piccadilly, and the deal was that we were given the building for free—that was the government’s way of supporting us, and it didn’t cost the government any money. In return for that we have charity status, and I think we contribute a lot to national life. For example, if the president decides to visit, he might decide to come to The Royal Academy—quite often we do that sort of thing.

We are slightly at arm’s length from the establishment but, because we are connected to the crown, we do all sorts of things that are in the general public interest. We don’t act like a private organization. We are a private organization that is there for the public good. The person we look up to isn’t the government but rather the crown. I go to see the Queen every year. I take our accounts and she signs them off. That is really important as a symbol to reinforce independence for The Royal Academy. The government can’t come and take us over or tell us what to do. That sort of thing we don’t talk about very much but it is rather important.

If you link that back into the free education of the students, we have sort of drawn a line around a very benign place to care for the arts. All of the Royal Academicians that serve on the committees give their time for free, apart from the offices that get a stipend. You are sort of getting a lecture on British history here, I hope you realize that—but it is relevant. The other question that sort of lurks is: where do we get our money, and if we get it from big business then won’t they start influencing our exhibition program? The way that we negotiate, since we do have corporate sponsors, is to put on an exhibition program that the sponsors would want to be associated with, and they would be really messing it up if they tried to interfere.

The year that you became president of the Royal Academy you also had three solo shows. How do you juggle your administrative career with your career as a painter and artist?

I am really good at keeping them separate. I work Monday to Wednesday at the academy in my suit and tie from early morning to late at night. Thursday, Friday, and Saturday I am in the studio painting. I’ve got a very good studio manager who keeps things running for me. We have a hand-over on Thursday morning in the studio, and then she
leaves me and I am back in the world of painting. It seems to work and has surprisingly given me more energy for my painting; I'm not quite sure why that is, but that's what happened.

How do you feel that your painting influences your job at the Royal Academy? And more generally, what do you think artists can offer art education?

The academy is really helpful because it is a place run completely by artists. The same thing applies now as when it started. It is an opportunity for artists to speak directly to a wise public without going through the medium of the commercial system, or the museum system, or publicly funded help, or anything like that. This is really important. The ideal is that the voice or attitude of the artist is represented somewhat directly. At the same time, The Academy is a charity and therefore it is not designed to make money—it is designed to promote the arts and design, but because it is also a big business, as it were, artists get involved with all aspects of the academy and how to run it, from its exhibition program to looking after the schools to looking after the collections to their general view of where they want to be in the art world and how they want to speak out on any issues. All of those are unique virtues of the system of The Royal Academy.

When you say artists being involved in all of these things, do you mean the students?

No, I mean the Academicians—the painters, sculptors, architects, printmakers. All of us get together and we literally run the Academy, although we have a chief executive who looks after the staff, the Academicians look after the direction of the Academy and make, as it were, decisions alongside the staff. They are the trustees or the board of the Academy.

As you say, it is a rare opportunity for artists to be unmediated in their interactions with the public. How do you think that influences the program? What is the benefit of not being beholden to the market, or to a museum, or to shareholders?

One way to describe it is to talk about how we present our exhibitions. Obviously, we need our exhibitions to attract people to them and we need lots of visitors to buy tickets and support us. I think the difference is that we've had a whole series of monographic exhibitions—whether its David Hockney, Anish Kapoor, or Anselm Kiefer—where we have effectively given them the galleries and we've said, "Look, you make the exhibition you really want to make", and we have done that with very little interference, we just support. For example, with the Anselm Kiefer exhibition, he wanted to put a big sculpture on the top of the stairs where we normally sell the catalogues and the books, but we made sure that Anselm could put his sculpture there, which had an effect on our income. We had a discussion with Anselm on ways of matriculating that and he was very helpful. The same sort of thing happened with David Hockney. David was given all of the galleries and was allowed to do anything he wanted. We really have the ideal of trying to let the artist make the exhibition that they want, unmediated. We find that that often captures the public imagination and also captures the imaginations of our sponsors who like to see us making the greater exhibitions. The Abstract Expressionist exhibition is a good example as well. We thought that it was the time to do it and had a clear goal—to make the greatest Abstract Expressionism exhibition ever.
That's a tall order!

I know, I know. We're like that [laughs]. The last time a big survey show had been shown in Europe was in 1959. In fact, many people are saying this is the Ab Ex great show! It was wonderful to get together a room of Clyfford Stills. I talked to Sandra Stills—his daughter—at the opening and I asked “What would your father have thought about this?” I was aware that he was very strict about how he would allow his work to be seen. She said he would have loved it. That was very important to me because I felt I was hearing her father through her. Because it was just run by artists, because it didn’t have commerce as its primary aim, he would have been entirely comfortable with giving such a generous group of works.
Royal Academy can be 'rather intimidating' for new visitors, says president

By Hannah Furness, Arts Correspondent
12 August 2016 - 10:00PM

For nearly 250 years, visitors to the Royal Academy of Arts may have hobnobbed with royalty, heard lectures by JMW Turner and admired works by everyone from Reynolds to Hockney.

Fans deem it a bastion of academia and excellence, while critics including Damien Hirst have accused it of being “a big, fat, stuffy, old, pompous institution”.

But the Royal Academy is set for something of a shake-up, as it works to shed an “imposing” image and welcome a new generation through its arches.

A revamp of the RA will see what once would have been the preserve of gentlemen opened up to 20-somethings drinking at the bar and toddlers scampering around its sculptures.
One of the artists behind it is Christopher Le Brun, the president of the RA who cheerfully admits the building can be “rather intimidating” and advocates making it a social hub.

Visiting any gallery can be “quite hard work”, he says, with RA guests now welcomed in for cups of tea and a nice sit down whether they want to see much of the art or not.

“I think the big difference in museums and galleries today and in the past is that it’s far more social,” he says.

“If you want younger people to come, particularly the ideal demographic we’re all looking for which is 20 and 30-somethings, then you do need a fantastic bar and things like that.”
“Actually it can be quite hard work if you spend a couple of hours in a gallery. You do need to sit down and recharge your batteries.

“It’s all part of it. I don’t think it demeans the art in any way.”

Among the plans is a new entrance on the north side, giving an alternative to the Piccadilly archway which he fears proves off-putting for new visitors who aren’t quite sure they are allowed in.

“A lot of people we know don’t come in because they think it’s a private place,” he says. “It’s also very grand.

“There’s just a sense, particularly for a younger audience who might be inclined to go to Tate Modern, that the building is historic and imposing and special.”

Le Brun, 64, is supposed to be taking an annual break from his duties. But his idea of a holiday, he says, is to get back to his studio to work, gladly taking part in an interview to help boost the upcoming Maggie’s Culture Crawl, a cause close to his heart.

After five years as RA president, one might expect Le Brun to be guarded, schooled in the task of preserving the old traditions of the 248-year-old Academy.

Instead, he sums up his attitude as: “What’s the worst that can happen?”
Such a mantra saw the walls of the RA last year painted in bright pink, blue and turquoise for its Summer Exhibition. “For years and years, people would mock it and make fun of it as an old-fashioned dinosaur,” says Le Brun, of a reputation he is working hard to shed.

David Hockney at his exhibition ‘82 Portraits and 1 Still-life’

“...In fact now the Academy is starting to enjoy it, the uniqueness of that experience.”

He sound relaxed, I tell him.

“Don’t say that, I’ll be cursed. It’s not that I’m relaxed, but I love the place and am full of confidence for its future.”

It’s perhaps just as well.

The next few years will see the most significant transformation of the RA perhaps since its inception, with ambitious plans to link Burlington House to a second building at 6 Burlington Gardens for a greater focus on architecture and contemporary art.

Plans are afoot for a new collections gallery, allowing the RA to show off its treasures for free as an alternative to paid exhibitions, as well as that new entrance with a more modern feel.

“We’ll be encouraging more people just to come onsite,” said Le Brun. “We have restaurants and bars and all sorts of things in the Academy now, so there’ll be access to all of those until late.
"It really will feel different."

As it stands, the Academy is riding high on a series of blockbuster exhibitions, from Rubens to Ai Wei Wei and David Hockney.

While others may entice visitors with gimmicky social media projects—including an Arts Council drive this week to catch Pokemon in galleries—Le Brun believes the secret to the RA’s success is to let art and artists speak for themselves.

“We essentially say to the artists: go on, do what you want to,” he says.
"We're free, because we have no government money and no support anywhere. So we depend on our imagination to get interest going.

"We try and keep it simple; just do the great exhibition and let it be. And then people will come and do what they want with it."

A recent exhibition, Sensing Spaces, invited architects to fill the gallery with sculptures, welcoming visitors to touch as well as look.

The result, le Brun insists, caused less tutting than one might expect.

"It was full of toddlers running up and down the ramps and interacting with the architecture" he says.

'It was a rather unusual moment. We just picked up a completely different part of society.

'It doesn't mean we don't have the highest academic standards. It just means we're flexible and imaginative with our schemes.

'I think it's a sign of the academy's confidence."

His driving force now, he says, is trying to show the public that being surrounded by beauty is good for body and soul.

To that end, he has signed up to open the laudable Culture Crawl, the charitable walks by Maggie's Centres.
Eight Academicians have designed centres at last count, according to Le Brun, who says: “I would really like people to become much more conscious of how the environment can affect people’s health.

“It’s profoundly important the way a good and carefully thought about environment can actually help people.”

And the RA’s future?

“We definitely need to encourage new audiences all the time. It never goes away. It’s on an equal par with fundraising: it never stops.

“In 2018, it will be even better.”

Maggie’s Culture Crawl will be held in London on Friday, September 16 and in ten other destinations. Tickets are on sale now.

:: Maggie’s are offering Telegraph Online readers a £5 discount on the entry fee to Culture Crawl London, using the code DRUN16.
CHRISTOPHER LE BRUN

The artist's favourite places show an eye for beauty as well as a taste for symbolism

CHARLIE MCCANN | NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2014

BEACH HAYLING ISLAND, HAMPSHIRE

When I was a child, my mother and I used to walk down to Southsea Beach almost every summer morning. Behind us was Eastney Barracks, where my father was based. And in front was Hayling Island—and its lovely white-sand beach, backed by dunes. Going there was always a sort of dream of mine. You had to get an open-top bus (the essence of adventure) down to a little ferry, which crossed a dangerous tidal race. Every year people drowned swimming there. So the beach had this very strong atmosphere; it was this place of romance, but the journey there was treacherous. It was a weird combination.

CITY ROME

I recently had an exhibition in Rome with the artist Enzo Cucchi. It reminded me of how Rome has meant a lot to my work as a painter. It’s one of the few cities that are both a place and a symbol. On the one hand, it’s a monument to Western art; you can’t be there without appreciating that this is where Raphael lived, or where St Paul was imprisoned. Interestingly, “Roma” is a palindrome of “amor”; so even the city’s name has this monumental quality. But at the same time, my friend Cucchi can leave his studio, go next door to the old Italian restaurant, and be fondly greeted as “maestro”. So Rome is like a village, but it’s also a great world symbol.
BUILDING: MY SOUTH LONDON HOME
In the 1960s, my wife and I left East London (where we lived next to a brothel) and went south of the river. We found this villa in Camberwell—where, we were told, Ruskin’s secretary had lived—and we’ve been there ever since. It feels like the sort of house a child might draw. The roses in the front were planted by us; two of my children were born there. It proves it’s possible to be in the centre of London and still live in a house with a garden filled with fruit trees and flowers. I can’t imagine this in Paris, Berlin or Tokyo.

JOURNEY FROM BEIJING TO YINING
In 2010, my son Edmund went on his gap year to Yining, in the province of Xinjiang. My wife and I were worried. Edmund was one of only two Europeans in the city, and there’d been tremendous unrest in the region. After eight months, we decided to check up on him. We flew to Beijing and got on a train. Our journey inland was really exciting: from our cabin we saw tiny villages, where every little patch had been cultivated, and passed vast deserts where huge dust storms turned the sky black. Eventually we got to Xinyang. By that time, Edmund could speak rudimentary Mandarin. With him, we ended up travelling to Yining by an overnight coach. It was the maddest bus full of chickens, geese and dogs.

HOTEL BENESSE, JAPAN
On the Japanese island of Naoshima there is a sort of art museum-hotel called the Benesse. It is the most famous place there is a spiritual quality to it. Designed by Tadao Ando, a boxer turned architect, the hotel is simple, clear, absolutely modern. Each room has a different sense of space and light. It’s like being in an art installation: everything has been considered—the doors, the floor, the wood. And Benesse is full of works by artists like Hiroshi Sugimoto, Richard Long, Jasper Johns, Hockney.
WORK OF ART PIERROT (FORMERLY KNOWN AS GILLES), BY JEAN ANTOINE WATTEAU
Stylistically, my work is very different from Watteau’s, but “Gilles” somehow represents what I feel about painting. It is curious, enigmatic: the man portrayed is an actor so you don’t know whether you’re looking at him or the character he’s playing. The painting’s status is odd—it may have been commissioned to advertise the players’ company—but I think the status of all paintings is odd. What do they do? Watteau’s work, full of fantasy and imagination, acknowledges the artificial character of painting; it’s not a document, it’s not necessarily about truth. The point of painting is pleasure and mystery. It satisfies metaphysical questions about life.

VIEW PORTSMOUTH HARBOUR
When I was ten, there was an art competition at school. We were taken to the top of Portsdown Hill in Portsmouth, and we each did a painting of the view. It was an extraordinary scene: you could see Portsmouth’s little terraced houses, Portchester Castle, the boats in the harbour, the islands in the distance. My painting won the competition, and went on tour—rumour had it, to Japan. Anyway, I’ve never seen it again. In a way, though, that painting, and that view, set me on my path. I

Christopher Le Brun was talking to Charlie McCann
Christopher Le Brun interview: ‘From the drama of the image in my earlier work, I've switched to this other drama where the image is erased or obscured’

Royal Academy president Christopher Le Brun has produced 33 new canvases for his solo show at Friedman Benda, his first in the US in 10 years. He talks about his move from mythological and symbolic imagery to abstraction, the source of his inspiration and his use of colours

Christopher Le Brun: New Paintings
Friedman Benda, New York
11 September – 18 October 2014

by JILL SPALDING

New Paintings, a major exhibition of Christopher Le Brun’s recent work, has just opened at Friedman Benda in NY and it’s a micro blockbuster. His first solo show here in 10 years, it consists of 33 radiant canvases, all painted in less than two years – a staggering output given the time the artist devotes to administration as the president of London’s prestigious Royal Academy. Le Brun is no stranger to academics, having served as trustee of the Tate, the Dulwich Picture Gallery, the Prince’s Drawing School Gallery, the National Gallery and now the National Portrait Gallery, but the attention he has to give to such mandatory exercises as the enormously demanding yearly Summer Exhibition belies the absorption and passion that overtakes his life as an artist.
I ask him how he reconciles the two activities.

**Christopher Le Brun:** In a way, both are about imagination, and utopias, and idealism. I haven’t taught since the 1980s – something had to go – and working alone in my studio, I find my own company insufficient. So the couple of days I spend at the academy every week is my time with other human beings. And there’s precedent. Joshua Reynolds was president of the Royal Academy, and Delacroix – imagine, Delacroix – was a member of the town council. As for the Summer Exhibition, one of the pleasures of being president is that I don’t curate and I don’t hang. I resolve differences of opinion, but I prefer to let my colleagues do the rest.

**Jill Spalding:** What about the effect on your work of being continually exposed to the output of so many other artists?

**CLEB:** Well, I’ve been painting for a very long time, so there’s no nourishment from that direction. If anything, quite the opposite: I defend myself against the onslaught.

**JS:** You came out of the gate running, instantly recognised for your drawing and painting. At what moment, after leaving the Slade, did you find your own voice as an artist?

**CLEB:** Actually, I knew long before college. I was obsessed with drawing and painting as a child – for many years I brooded over this idea of a secret masterpiece. Then I went to the Slade and tried to be a good student, and for four years the image was obscured to me – I lost myself to myself. But when I left, it came back to me, and I was able to paint it. I’m not sure it was very good!

**JS:** Gustave Moreau and the English Romantics have been seen, understandably, as directly informing your early work – a world of brooding mystery, which openly pulls its imagery from symbolism and archaic mythology. But what has led you to this new phase? Was there a moment of revelation or a dramatic event that caused you to exchange your field of dark knights mounted on white horses for one of fiery light and saturated abstraction?
CLEB: I know it feels like a new phase, but it's not that far removed from my earlier work, and is just as essential. I'm still interested in the tension between covering and revealing, in the intuitively right response to a feeling. A fellow artist told me it's as if my work has gone back into the gene pool of myself, less explicit but entirely present.

JS: Nonetheless, even those conversant with these paintings see them as a departure. They are less observational, more thoughtful. Your friend, the artist Edmund de Waal, observed of them: “There's a lot of letting go.” Others, like myself, sense a conscious control, coming off years of incubated imagery and conversations with history that you have intuitively reworked with poetic licence and honed craftsmanship into a fresh pictorial language. The dark energy has become radiant. Image has become allusion. The canvases burn or they cool, but even as they cool, they rejoice, yearn and drip. And each move seems deliberate. Are you challenging us to see differently, to question, to spend more time, to work harder?

CLEB: No, it's more a question that I put to myself: what is the underlying behaviour that I couldn't take away and yet remain essential to myself? The surprise for me is that I can separate out the various elements of brushstroke and colour and line and, even as they split up or realign or seem to disappear, they say what I want to say.

JS: Which work best illustrates your meaning?

CLEB: [He singles out Swan, where cobalt blue brushstrokes fall free of each other on what seems to be raw canvas, but is actually slathers of white paint, which, as you approach, bring the background to the fore] You witness something appearing extremely mysteriously.
JS: In telling contrast, *Neither White, Nor Warm, Nor Cold* seems to owe its dreamlike evocation of a Monet water lily painting to a very different concern, one that addresses atmosphere over image with an almost indiscernible weaving of brushstrokes that build up to a sheen of seemingly translucent opalescence.

CLeB: The eye shifts between the drawn and the covering effect.

JS: The closest to a discernible image is in *The Trial*, which projects an emotive abstraction of fear, a sort of veiled *Scream*.

CLeB: The potency of buried content can be as psychologically powerful as narrative; every brushstroke throws off an association.

Asked to detail the imagery of his more intricate works, Le Brun responds elliptically, with an ambiguity that would suggest the same ramble into the subconscious as automatic writing, did one not know of the deep library of scholarly imagery that he has built up through years of researching the classics and developing ever subtler methods of veiling and revealing their meaning.

CLeB: I let the work speak for itself. I don’t push the image because I want to leave you with a sense of immanence. From the drama of the image in my earlier work, I’ve switched to this other drama where the image is erased or obscured. [He points to *Painting as Sunrise*, a massive, burnished flame of a painting that held an image of a blue horse, until he revisited it months later and painted it out]. The horse was there and now is not there, which is its content—both its implication and its meaning. I no longer need to manifest it; it is present.

Le Brun is more forthcoming when I ask about inspiration and process ....
JS: When you undertake a new painting, do you have a premeditated subject in mind?

CLeB: Not at all. At the most, a musical phrase, or the shape of a jar. If I approach the blank canvas thinking I know what I want to do, boredom sets in at once. I have to look at the canvas and just start, apply paint, one stroke, then another – until it looks back at me. I want it to be vivid and strong. One brushstroke leads to another, just as layering on paint with a knife may lead to scraping it off with a knife, or the mark of one brush might lead me to pick up another brush. Or I’ll use the same brush in different ways to achieve contrasting effects – the flat part for covering, the points for drawing.

JS: How do you approach colour? You have a wide palette; each colour seems to have a distinctive place in your emotional vocabulary, with a few standing out more prominently – red, for example.

CLeB: I think I do use red symbolically. I’m not sure what function it serves, but it seems to have become significant.

JS: Yellow, too.

CLeB: You must be referring to Enter the City. My mother used to wear a yellow dress, and that yellow came back to me recently, and a feeling came with it, an emotion. And I really wanted to paint the yellowest yellow. Then, of course, red had to follow. Colours are urgent that way. I’ll put green on the canvas, which means I have to add blue, then I’ll go back to my chair, and have to jump up immediately and add white. One step almost always leads to the next. The canvas talks back to you. One has to listen to an inner prompting.

JS: What about lighting? You seem to prefer diffused lighting to spotlights, and wall washers to LED.
CLEB: Yes, they’re much warmer. When my paintings are lit correctly, the light in them is always changing.

JS: I understand that you rarely paint a canvas start to finish, and that the colours and composition often change completely before you sign off on it. Even the titles may change. On the back of Walton, for example [inspired by Sir William Walton's opera Troilus and Cressida], you’ve scratched out five or more titles; it seems to have started out as Troilus and gone through several iterations.

CLEB: That’s right. I have a stack of paintings in my studio, and they all keep moving forward like a vast flotilla, and occasionally one comes to the front. Sometimes I get stuck, like doing a crossword puzzle, and have to put it away and then bring it out again, until I get it right. Some go on for six months, even more.

JS: What determines what you will be working on at any particular time?

CLEB: In a lifetime of working, you get into habits of thought. I tend to get into a rhythm. I’ll start on a watercolour and do watercolours for a stretch, or I’ll tackle a large canvas and stay with large paintings for a while. I’m never influenced by having to prepare for a show; when I have enough work that I feel is ready, then I’m ready. The key is to respond to intuition, to that inner prompting.

JS: You are also a sculptor. Timed with this show at Friedman Benda, one of your large sculptures, Maro, has just been installed at Chatsworth House in Derbyshire as part of Sotheby’s selling exhibition Beyond Limits [which continues until 26 October]. It’s a spectacular marble wing, very large, very white. The carving is incredibly intricate.

CLEB: Credit the craftsmen!

JS: You have another, Union, a large bronze horse flanked by discs, on permanent view at the Museum of London, and several more in various museums and collections. With painting having presented you with seemingly endless possibilities, what first drew you to sculpture?
CLEB: It happened by accident. Around 20 years ago, a friend saw a tiny wax model in my studio and took it to his foundry and cast it in bronze. I liked it; I found it very refreshing. It took the place of printmaking. I liked working with the craftsmen, and I liked working with wax; it's soft to the touch, it takes colour. But over the past few years I've just been making paintings. Painting is a purely internal dynamic; I'm entirely focused on painting now.

JS: Where do you see painting going? And art for that matter? With the young generations veering to the digital realm – 3D printing, off-the-wall photography – and all it implies, do you think art as you understand it has a future?

CLEB: That's a very difficult question. I'm not sure I know. But I'm gratified that a younger generation has discovered my work.

JS: Hopefully, they'll distinguish these complex abstractions from the glittered, thinly washed acrylics that have largely driven abstract painting's comeback.

CLEB: They'll certainly be surprised once they research the past work; it was mysterious even then. The symbolism and romanticism of the images I introduced in the 70s and 80s were as challenging for that time as the veiled complexity of the current work is today. These paintings challenge the current irony and easy assumptions about abstraction. They are all about touch and presence and looking, which the art of the past was all about too, which is all I am really interested in, and which has become really important again. They represent the continuity from one artist to another. How I put my brush to the canvas is not enormously different from how Velázquez did – the same limits of canvas, the same colours, the same emotion. Very beautiful.

I don't ask Le Brun for his definition of beauty: the work speaks for itself. I ask, instead, that he put on his academician's hat for a moment ...
JS: How confident are you about the future of art as we understand it?

CLEB: Considerably. As long as you don’t take pencil and paper away from the child.
Serious Pleasures

By Daniel Kunitz

Christopher Le Brun brings ambition and exuberance to the canvas
ARTISTS, SAYS CHRISTOPHER LE BRUN, “mustn’t be conventional or accepting of the status quo.” This might seem an eyebrow-arching statement to come from the current president of Britain’s Royal Academy of Arts. After all, academies have historically been bastions of conformity, upholders of both status and quo—or at least that’s the mold in which the avant-garde has long cast them. And Le Brun would seem to have no interest in joining today’s avant-garde, if such a thing can even be said to exist.

Seated at a small table in his spacious though warrilike studio in Camberwell, South London, only a short walk from where he lives with his wife, the painter Charlotte Vetrey, Le Brun recounts the fact that our culture, and especially our visual art, is “swamped with irony.” Still, he says it with good humor, the joyous resignation of an artist who has always cut against the grain yet has nevertheless thrived.

He has done so in part by marrying the imaginative freedom of fantasy with sobriety of purpose. Of Romanticism, the influence of which can be discerned throughout his career, he says, “This is what art should be: This is man and the world and metaphysical things. Très à la sérieusement, adult art.” Survey the current landscape of balloon puppets, desultory paintings, and periodic performances, and it’s not hard to conclude that very few artists today agree to something we might call adult work even fewer would admit to it. Yet it may be that his importance with the status quo has made Le Brun’s work more relevant than ever. Like many a Dalston or Brooklyn laggard, he has in recent years been revisiting abstraction, albeit without any tinge of irony and with a far more mature cognizance of history.

Le Brun’s is a particularly English sensibility, something he proudly defines as “an interest in symbolism, landscape, poetry, and history.” One can see it operating most nakedly in the paintings that made his name in the early 1960s, with their recurrent motifs of winged horses and mounted knights, among other things. The figures tend to be treated as symbol rather than naturalistically. A white horse gallops through an otherwise abstract landscape of gestural brushstrokes ranging from red to black in Prance, 1963. And the shadowy figure in Sir Belvedere, from the same year, sits atop a white steed in a similarly indistinct landscape in which clouds seem to be reflected in a distant, shimmering lake rendered in thick, choppy dashes of white and blue pigment. Indeed, what stands out most in what is an otherwise Turrensque mass of whites, blacks, and blues is the bloodred English cross on the knight’s shield.

These are not Sturtevant Rothenburg’s Stone Age horses but, rather, something closer to characters from a Pier-Raphaëlle daydream that have wandered into an Abstract Expressionist canvas. On the one hand, they reflect Le Brun’s strong and abiding appetite for literature. While at his studio, we discussed some of the many books lying about, from The Blind Man by the poet of Geoffrey Hill. Of course, in the early ’60s, when the art world was still in the grip of Clement Greenberg’s modernist strictures prohibiting the mixing of the arts, Le Brun’s embrace of literary elements in his paintings would have resonated like a smack in the face of convention. Illustration,” he asserts, “is a profound form of painting.” In this he found company with a number of American peers among whom he was often classed, other image makers like the Neo-Expressionists Eric Fischl and Julian Schnabel, although he professes more of an affinity with Europeans like Roberto Caucci.

On the other hand, these early pictures are moody and difficult. One can see in them what the artist himself says of Edward Burne-Jones, that “he manages to find forms and shapes to make serious paintings in disguise.” Except that Le Brun’s canvases are often quite large and awkward with energy—a combination of the physicality of the paint handling and the emotive pressure of juxtaposed color. There is no disguising the amplitude of their effects. But what sort of seriousness can ground Le Brun’s dreamy characters? How are we to take, for example, the horse at the center of the enormous canvas Uranus, 1984, which is more than ten feet long and nearly eight feet high? We are confronted with a long, white equine face—one that might have been lifted from a poster at a young girl’s bedroom wall—squeezed between two huge discs, one white, one black.

That picture, says Le Brun, “is me trying to raise the stakes of painting. I understood the mood of the Abstract Expressionists in relationship to what had come before, but I am in a different position, thinking. A lot of these painters are the greatest of our time. Now what can be done?” His answer was to look to Europe, and specifically to the example of J.M.W. Turner. “Turner,” he says, “always tries to make the entire encapsulating masterpiece that has everything in it, and that strikes me as something to be abandoned. But it’s incredibly difficult, and it’s a casualty.” Such unjoking, explicitly stated ambition, which Le Brun continues to exhibit today, seems to me most singular—not to mention admirable and courageous—trait. There are many artists who must feel it: virtually none are willing to own it.

At the time of Union, however, he was asking himself how he could up the ante in painting in a way that hadn’t been done before, and, he says, it seemed there was a sort of symbolism which is almost in people like (Clyfford Still) but by making it more explicit, maybe you take a risk.”

As for the horses, the artist neither rules nor grew up around them. Like the knights or his single large wings (another recurring image), they are suggestive motifs, something to which the artist responds. Which is to say, Le Brun is, in his words,
"This is what art should be," says Le Brun, the Royal Academy president. "This is man and the world and metaphysical things. This is a serious, adult act."

"Driven by imagination." He stands well apart from the British tradition of observational painting—David Hockney, Lucian Freud, Leon Kossoff, and he includes E.B. Kellog—that dominated the same from the 1980s until the 1990s.

By the 90s, any number of artists had begun to embrace narrative and illustration. Le Brun just kept making the same thing for himself. A devote of music, he embarked on a series of paintings based on another master composer. Wagner, as well as a series for the Liverpool Anglican Cathedral, depicting Christian parables. In each, he gives free reign to his storytelling impulse, the play of the mind, and his iconic aims. Works such as The Valkyries, 1899, with its almost aggressively old imagery of a yellow maiden sporting Gilbert and Sullivan and a furious white horse, with a dark, painterly ground with a spirited draftmanship.

In both sense he remains, as he were, in a line of drawing that was first established in his childhood. He grew up not surrounded by artworks or with constant opportunities to travel.

In 2013, Le Brun comes across a tin of warm yellow paint and decides that what he really likes to do is one of the few who would see the result—was, as he says, "just make a yellow painting." But then I saw it was enough. I thought, I need something that will make me think about painting. So then the question of the red comes in, and with it comes a sense of the abstract—what the painting starts to look back to you. The outcome of this dialogue was a group of powerful paintings, an exploration of color and surface, the interaction of red with a field of yellow layered upon the same red in Ceria, 2013, the white strokes that make a rectangle looking down on the image of the yellow painting in Ceria, 2013, and finally the black and grey contrasting to assert itself through a torrent of white in Fall, 2012, the white strokes that make a rectangle looking down on the image of the yellow painting in Ceria, 2013, and finally the black and grey contrasting to assert itself through a torrent of white in Fall, 2012, the white strokes that make a rectangle looking down on the image of the yellow painting in Ceria, 2013, and finally the black and grey contrasting to assert itself through a torrent of white in Fall, 2012, the white strokes that make a rectangle looking down on the image of the yellow painting in Ceria, 2013, and finally the black and grey contrasting to assert itself through a torrent of 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2013, and finally the black and grey contrasting to assert itself through a torrent of white in Fall, 2012, the white strokes that make a rectangle looking down on the image of the yellow painti..."
Hi Christopher, can you tell us a little more about the Royal Academy of Arts and your role there as president?

The Royal Academy of Arts is effectively the last of the great academies that at one time existed throughout Europe. Our very robust and adaptable constitution, which incidentally predates the American constitution by some years, may well have been informed by contributions by Edmund Burke and Samuel Johnson.

The academy consists of painters, sculptors, architects and print-makers, and today comprises probably the strongest groups ever in the history of the academy.

The academy is an independent and privately-funded institution - how does that position benefit how the academy is run?

Among the big five – the Royal Academy, British Museum, National Gallery, V&A and Tate - we are the only ones that are independent and privately funded. The drawback is that we devote so much time and energy into securing our day-to-day finances and future, but the advantage is that we are free from the bureaucracy that necessarily accompanies public funding.
We are proud of our independence, which gives artists and architects a voice. It's also true that we attract support from those who wish that sort of independence to survive. However, I realise that this model depends very much on our being in Mayfair, in London, and will probably be unsustainable beyond the capital.

One of the founding principles of the Royal Academy in 1768 was simply "to promote the arts of design" - does that principle still remain?

Yes, the principle remains although the meaning and echoes behind the word "disegno" are fainter now. It still links all our disciplines. We have just elected Thomas Heatherwick and Ron Arad as academicians so our categories retain their flexibility today.

You studied painting at the Slade and Chelsea schools of art in the 70s and have since taught and lectured - what are the biggest changes you have seen to the way art is taught?

One of the biggest changes has been the expansion of student numbers; I was one of only 12 in my first year at the Slade. That first year was effectively a foundation year as I went straight to form school. The Slade tradition in drawing was still intact and a line could still be discerned back through Coldstream to Legros and Degas. Drawing from observation was a completely normal part of an artist’s training - now that it may be elective, it is possible to graduate without that experience at all.

It's a subject perhaps too big for this one interview but I found it increasingly difficult to teach in any depth in my subject without a background consensus, no matter how broad, on the canon. The replacing of art history with cultural studies has tended to promote what one might call the prestige of the word, over the skills and sensibilities a young painter or sculptor might bring with them to art school.

Before becoming president, you were the chief coordinator of the academy's annual Summer Exhibition - how do you go about making a truly great exhibition?

I can't think of any formula other than to have a great curator and encourage their personal vision beyond what they might even hope for. In the case of Anish Kapoor, David Hockney and Bronze, with David Ekserdjian, we gave them freedom to make as imaginative an exhibition as they could have dreamed of.

Do you agree with Susan Jones that artists find themselves at the "bottom of the cultural food chain"?

Absolutely not! I am not aware of the argument but my innate romanticism, which despite myself I am unable to entirely suppress, would put the inventive capacity of artists as one of its greatest assets. It seems to me that only invention can truly produce. Everything else is just shuffling material.

What state do you think art education is in at the moment?

I do feel strongly about art education. Effectively I was unable to continue as a teacher because at one time I was forced to choose between my studio or teaching full time. This was because part time visits, which had been such a feature or art school life, were slowly replaced by full and permanent contracts. This had several effects, one was to reduce the exposure for students to fresh thinking, another was to reduce opportunities for artists to support themselves in the early years while continuing to paint. And lastly, it removed from the front line the most commercially successful professional artists.

I am concerned that the worlds of art education and the profession of art are in parallel and possibly diverging development, which is clearly not in the interests of students.
As to whether arts and creative courses are being devalued, I prefer to say that we are now experiencing an astonishing harvest of great artists and architects, so one needs to think: what are the circumstances that led to this flowering of the arts?

Christopher Le Brun is president of the Royal Academy of Arts – follow the academy on Twitter @royalacademy
Christopher Le Brun, New Art Gallery, Walsall

From the fourth floor of the New Art Gallery, you get a view of the architectural mix and match of this Midlands city: mosque, parish churches, multi-storey car park. Next, Powerhouse, Asda... Inside, as you examine this 30-year retrospective of the paintings, sculptures and etchings of Christopher Le Brun, you seem to have shifted back in time to a world more familiar to Tennyson, Browning and other 19th-century medievalists. And perhaps even further back, to Malory himself. You spot a plaster disc of a winged horse, a painting of a horseman in plumed helmet entering a city gate. There's Gothic Revivalism in the air. Romanticism, too. It all feels curiously anachronistic.

Le Brun left art school in the 1970s, his head full of the recent past: Pop Art, Abstract Expressionism, more native abstraction. None of it was for him.

The aim here is to show us Le Brun, the man as maker, from start to finish. There is a display of his notebooks. The top floor is about life at his studios in London and Suffolk. There is a sense of the clutter, the indecision of making: maquettes on shelves, watercolours hung hugger-mugger on the walls.

All are points of reference, points of departure. Le Brun is going back to the same motif again and again: the tower, the horseman. Scenes of chivalry. And horses: the nobility, the sleek beauty, of horses. Horse and rider as symbol of
what? The painter’s spiritual quest of a subject worthy of his gifts? The painter himself in pursuit of the Grail of artistic perfection? It feels lofty, high-minded stuff.

But Picasso the sculptor is coming through too, in knobbly organic forms. And sometimes Le Brun rather awkwardly fuses the two – see the large sculpture, monstrously tall, called Statue with Shield and Shadow. The plinth is a soaring steel girder, topped by a figure of a woman who looks like a society dame. She casts a giant shadow, and that shadow, the shape so jarringly inappropriate, reminds us of Picasso the sculptor.

Other large works are often yearningly symbolic. Childe Roland trit-trots towards the Dark Tower, and waits for the significance of his quest to be revealed. And that is the problem; so much of this work yearns to mean so much. It’s like that giant chest in the attic, full of ancient lumber and always labelled Highly Significant.
THE FIELD OF RHETORIC: AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER LEBRUN

The following conversation took place in October in London between Stuart Morgan, a critic who writes regularly for Artforum, and Christopher LeBrun, a painter who lives and works in London.

Stuart Morgan: In your work this year you have concentrated mainly on painting horses—sometimes pastoral and arcadian, sometimes frenzied and romantic. But before that your work consisted of Claudian landscapes, executed in a composite, historicizing style.

Christopher LeBrun: I was trying to produce a sting out of the collision of styles. I used various devices, particularly spatial devices, to produce the greatest degree of disruption. I was trying to allow something—previously impossible—to happen by making deliberate oppositions. But I was making them in the context of something that accepted color and form naturally, as if against the background of the picturesque convention. If I had continued such an approach, it would have become a mannerism. Before, I was using painting in a gridding of styles, slotting elements into the painting. This made it too easily broken, too dialectical. I am trying to say something paradoxical about painting but I don’t want to use a paradoxical method, because my subject is not entirely painting. Painting is a kind of mask for my subjects which I will not discuss. The singularity of a painting is sufficiently paradoxical or ironic without dramatizing the paradox. I thought initially that I was going forward, getting to the edge of painting—in the sense of something new—but I realized in fact I was getting closer to the center of painting.
This has to do with understanding why traditional form is so powerful. A Titian painting to me is more wise because what it has is absolute self-possession, something carved with the brush, the continuity of brushwork.

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**SM:** Did your acceptance of picture space, in the horse paintings, mark a move forward?

**CLB:** The question is whether the development of painting as a medium is fired by going forward by simply extending the devices, the range, or as Patrick Fieron called it the “continent” of color; or whether instead its expressive limits are to be found by identifying its most paradoxical aspect: the possibility that something static is the true center of the difficulty of the art.

**SM:** This involves thinking of all of painting as synchronous.

**CLB:** It involves thinking like this: imagine there is a typical central image, which stands for all painting. Imagine that painting can no longer develop. Imagine . . .

**SM:** Why should I?

**CLB:** Why not? Imagine holding painting still. This generates a tension against its natural desire to go forward. I was finding that this was more expressive and significant than the use of formal devices. There is a semantic potential that is rich and disturbing. It reflects a feeling of dislocation about the question of moving forward or back, and opens up difficult questions like that of authority.

**SM:** What do you mean by “authority”?

**CLB:** Finishing a painting provokes the question of when it becomes independent, and why. Authority is not just an esthetic quality; it means trying to understand the wisdom of traditional form, how that oppresses, yet also preserves openness. When you’ve uncovered something that the painting itself wants to project, when it reaches the surface the painting says, “Hold. This is the ideal condition.”

**SM:** Unfortunately, “authority” has overtones of power, of authoritarianism.

**CLB:** I want to use it precisely because of its loaded connotations. We must recover words like “authority” from the prejudice against their use.

**SM:** Take Anselm Kiefer as an example. Where in his work does authority reside?

**CLB:** He confesses to what has authority and risks himself against it single-mindedly, recklessly, in an attempt to make a tragic art. The strength of his work lies not just in his themes but also in his determination and clear decision to launch his art against the most powerful core within painting. An image can be central but there’s another word to consider: rhetoric. Rhetoric is an empty structure, but the roots of rhetoric, the memory images, are vivid and real. The first project of rhetorical painting is to establish the “field” of rhetoric, “the fields and spacious palaces of memory,” as Augustine calls it. This is the domain of painting. It is peopled, and it has its objects. The major theme in Kiefer is not a historical critique but the making of a fiction.
sufficiently great to stand against other forces. That project itself is out of step. The credence
given to imaginative building is . . .

SM: Greater than it deserves?

CLB: Not at all; there’s nothing greater. The more powerfully one establishes the rhetoric that
permits it, the more one mocks the material terms painting has been limited by. It is absolutely
essential to treat the images honestly, confess them. I will not censor the images that lead to a
particular state of mind I must have in order to paint. The thing one doesn’t want to do when
painting is to be controlled by all the implications, because handling paint, touching the whole
surface again and again, requires being able to come across something you don’t already know.
The more firmly the fiction is based, the more it can be seen that the imaginative world of
painting, its inner world, is a safe empire where intentions don’t fetch and carry.

SM: The outer world is tangible enough. What is the relationship between the two?

CLB: Painting mocks by contrast that which is outside it.

SM: We’re talking about an act of faith, aren’t we?

CLB: Yes.

SM: Why painting in particular?

CLB: Painting is archaic and finite—as we are. Painting is exhausted in the way we are
exhausted. It’s as if painting is a medium with which we are complicit. This is a period of high
Romanticism, and of despair. Painting is anachronistic. That’s why it’s hopeful. We ourselves
are anachronistic in a sense, as is the visually literate imagination.

SM: You just like anachronisms because they seem beautiful to you.

CLB: True. And this sense of beauty is founded on taste. It has been schooled, subjected to the
“best” in poetry, in painting, and in literature, and continually exercised by my trying to find out
why there are the best. My paintings are composed so as ideally to be read as visualizations of
that rhetorical world. Taste itself—the idea of the canon, the standard of taste—was formed
trying to achieve a perception of nature clearer and finer. Turner’s early work is valuable
because it wasn’t trying to free nature from the picturesque until he understood it.

I find myself with parts whose meaning has migrated. I did a painting made of things once
considered beautiful—stones, a boat, a wheel, vases—now abandoned by culture, puzzling,
almost untranslatable—Latin. That’s an almost impossible position, to have images whose
meaning is absent. The rhetoric I’m piecing together is broken. Every part of it is broken.
Painting has been a mutual project of discourse as well as touch. It must speak; otherwise it’s
just optics. The phenomenological picturesque—colors, shapes, marks—is insufficient. What
happens to poetic utterance when the rhetoric, the basis of understanding, is broken? These
objects have a sting of dislocated content. That’s why I must work with the picturesque that’s
been handled and touched by history—stones worn smooth, steps.

SM: You seem to want to sum up the visually literate imagination, but at the same time you’re
expressing a historical awareness you can neither manage nor escape.

CLB: Imagine that there are given to us images that are recurrent and also central to the
tradition. Is that memory? Is it invention? Is it taste? If I am obsessed by an image, or convinced
that the perfect painting is a certain shape, where does this notion come from? I’m talking about
a meditation on painting which has produced, not necessarily the images I am painting at the
moment, but which in the course of time has produced an image that is the only consummation
of those images I have. I’m talking about something that is a given. I’m not choosing.
The Field of Rhetoric: An Interview with Christopher LeBrun

The following conversation took place in October in London between Stuart Morgan, a critic who contributes regularly to Artforum, and Christopher LeBrun, a painter who lives and works in London.

Stuart Morgan: In your work this year you have concentrated mainly on painting forms—sometimes pastoral and anecdotal, sometimes frontal and ornamental. But before that your work consisted of Conceptual Landscapes, executed in a somewhat formalizing style.

Christopher LeBrun: I was trying to produce a string out of the collision of styles. I used various devices, particularly spatial devices, to produce the greatest degree of disruption. I was trying to allow something—previously impossible—to happen by making deliberate oppositions. I was making me in the context of something that accepted color and form naturally, as it was against the background of the picturesque convention. If I had continued such an approach, it would have become a mannerism. Before I was using painting in a straightforward, direct way, employing all the painting involved in the painting. This made it a bit too easy, too dialectical. I am trying to produce something paradoxic about painting but I don’t want to use a paradoxic method because my subject is not entirely painting. Painting is a kind of mirror for my subjects which I will not discuss. The simplicity of a painting is sufficiently paradoxic or ironic without dominating the palette. I thought initially that I was going forward, getting to the edge of painting—in the sense of something new. But I was not satisfied when I was closer to the center of painting. This has to do with understanding why traditional form is so powerful. A Titian painting to me is more alive because it has a sense of absolute persuasion, something drawn with the brush, the continuity of brushwork.

SM: Did you accept your picture space, in the horse paintings, mark a more profound

CLB: The question is whether the development of painting as a medium is fixed by going forward by sempre extending the devices, the range of tools to which style or whether instead its expressive limits are to be found by identifying its most paradoxical aspect. The possibility is the something static is the true center of the difficulty of the art.

SM: This involves thinking of all of painting as synchronous.

CLB: It involves thinking of this—imagine there is a typical central image, which stands for all painting. Imagine that painting can no longer deceive. Imagine:

SM: What do you mean by ‘authority’?

CLB: Finishing a painting provides the question of when it becomes independent, and why. Authority is not just an aesthetic quality; it means trying to understand the weapon of traditional form. How that opposition, yet it is paradoxical? When you’ve unmasked something that the painting itself wants to project, it makes for the surface the painting says: ‘Hello, This is the ideal condition.’

SM: Unfortunately, ‘authority’ has centuries of power of authoritarianism.

CLB: It wants to use it because of our loaded connotations. We must recover from the ‘authority’ of the prejudice against the use.

SM: Take Aim at Kotler as an example. When in his work does authorship reside?

CLB: His anthropomorphizes to what has authority and takes himself against it single-minutely, redingly, in an attempt to make a tragic art. The strength of this work lies not just in the idea but also in the determination and the decision to launch his art against the most powerful core within painting. An image can be central but there’s another word to consider: medium. Medium is an empty structure, but the power of rhetoric, the memory images, are evoked and are. The first project of rhetorical painting is to exploit the ‘hold’ against, the fixity and the iconic power of memory, as Augustine says it. This is the domain of painting, it represents, and it has objects. The major themes in Kotler is not an historical critique but the making of a fiction sufficiently great to stand against other forces. That project is itself out of depth. The evidence given to imaginative building is

SM: Imaginary thinking.

CLB: Not at all. There’s nothing greater. The more powerful one establishes the medium’s parodic nature, the more one makes the material terms painting has been implied it is absolutely essential to treat the images honestly, according to them. I am not certain the images that lead to a particular state of mind, must have in their own. Painting the one doesn’t want to do when painting is to be controlled by all the implications, because handling a painting, handling the whole surface again and again requires being able to cross everything you don’t already know. The more the illusion of the problem, the more one can see that the imaginative world of painting, its inner world, is a safe arena where intentions don’t pitch and carry.

SM: The outer world is terrifying enough. What is the relationship between the two?

CLB: Painting makes by contrast that which is outside it.

SM: We’re talking about an act of faith, aren’t we?

CLB: Yes.

SM: Why painting in particular?

CLB: Painting is a field of forms. As we are, Painting is exhale in the way we are. It is if Painting is a medium with which we are compact. This is a question of being attuned to the pressure one takes on the field in a completely different manner. Painting is anachronistic. That’s why it’s difficult for us to imagine.

SM: You just like anachronistic because they seem beautiful to you.

CLB: True, this sense of beauty is found on stage. It has been assigned, subordinated to the ‘need’ in painting, in painting. And in literature, and continuously and essentially new by bringing together the various forces. My paintings are composed as ideally as they are for visualizations of the rhetorical world. Taste mischief in the social and the specific shape of the shape of the shape of the shape of the shape of the shape. The ‘trigger’ is in the social. To enter the social, entering the social, entering the social, entering the social, entering the social. The condition of the painting is where that parallelism is broken. Everything is broken. Everything is broken. Everything is broken. Everything is broken. Everything is broken. Everything is broken.

SM: You see, I want you to imagine the visual relevance of painting, but you can see that the experience of a painting is not just to be seen as a visual experience of the rhetorical world. Taste mischief in the social and the specific shape of the shape of the shape of the shape of the shape of the shape. The condition of the painting is where that parallelism is broken. Everything is broken. Everything is broken. Everything is broken. Everything is broken. Everything is broken. Everything is broken.

CLB: I find myself with parts whose meaning has migrated. I did a painting made of something considered beautiful—stones, a leaf, a mushroom, a beast—now by culture, painting, almost unappreciative. That’s an almost impossible position. To have images whose meaning, subtle. The painting is broken. Every part of it is broken. Painting has been a mutual process of discourse as well as it. I must speak, otherwise it’s just a picture. What happens to position, tolerance when this happens, the basis of understanding. Sometimes one is completely lost, one can see that the painting is a certain shape, where does that notion come from? I’m thinking about a meditation on painting which has produced, not necessarily the images as a painting of the moment, but which is the course of time has produced an image that is the only consumption of these images. I mean, I’m talking about something that is a given. I’m not choosing.