

# BLOUINARTINFO.COM

# MODERNPAINTERS

ART/ARCHITECTURE/DESIGN/PERFORMANCE/FILM

SEPTEMBER 2014

TOP

FALL  
GALLERY  
SHOWS

**MOYRA DAVEY**  
READS HERSELF  
INTO THE FRAME

**DANH VO**  
SPIRITUAL  
HUSTLER

**CHRISTOPHER  
LE BRUN**  
OFFERS SERIOUS  
PLEASURE

**RICHARD  
NONAS**  
ON SCULPTURE AND  
SKEWED SPACE

Kunitz, Daniel. "Serious Pleasures: Christopher Le Brun's Enduring Ambition Plays Out on Canvas," ARTINFO. September, 2014.

**FRIEDMAN BENDA** 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001

FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760

SEPTEMBER

# CONTENTS



19

**Moyra Davey**  
*Ruby Glass*, 2013.  
 Digital C-print,  
 tape, postage,  
 and ink, 12 x 18 in.



## Showcase

- 46 **Introducing**  
 Danna Vajda  
*by Laura Barlow*
- 48 **Introducing**  
 Gamaliel Rodriguez  
*by Thea Ballard*
- 52 **Danh Vo**  
 Culture chameleon  
*by Michael Sienke*
- 73 **Top 100 Fall**  
 Gallery Shows

## Masters

- 60 **Christopher**  
 Le Brun  
 The Royal Academy  
 president goes abstract  
*by Daniel Kunitz*
- 66 **Richard Nonas**  
 Q&A  
*by Scott Indrisek*

## Comment

- 34 **Curating the**  
 Post-Ethnographic  
 Museum  
 An essay  
*by Clémentine Deliss*
- 43 **Film**  
 Tim Sutton's *Memphis*  
*by Craig Hubert*
- 81 **Reviews**  
 Gabriel Kuri's *Regen*  
 Projects debut,  
 Berlin's Documentary  
 Forum, Lygia Clark,  
 Louise Lawler, and more

Kunitz, Daniel. "Serious Pleasures: Christopher Le Brun's Enduring Ambition Plays Out on Canvas," ARTINFO. September, 2014.

**FRIEDMAN BENDA** 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001

FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760

# SERIOUS PLEASURES

BY DANIEL KUNITZ

Christopher Le Brun brings ambition and exuberance to the canvas



Kunitz, Daniel. "Serious Pleasures: Christopher Le Brun's Enduring Ambition Plays Out on Canvas," ARTINFO. September, 2014.

**FRIEDMAN BENDA** 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001

FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760



Kunitz, Daniel. "Serious Pleasures: Christopher Le Brun's Enduring Ambition Plays Out on Canvas," ARTINFO. September, 2014.

**FRIEDMAN BENDA** 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001

**FRIEDMANBENDA.COM** TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760

**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 warrenlike studio in Camberwell, South London, only a short walk from where he lives with his wife, the painter Charlotte Verity, Le Brun decries 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. This is a serious, adult act.” Survey the current landscape of balloon puppies, de-skilled paintings, and parodic performances, and it’s not hard to conclude that very few artists today aspire to something we might call adult work; even fewer would admit to it. Yet it may be that his impatience with the status quo has made Le Brun’s work more relevant than ever. Like many a Dalston or Brooklyn hipster, 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 broadly 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 1980s, with their recurrent motifs of winged horses and mounted knights, among other things. The figures tend to be treated as symbols rather than naturalistically. A white horse gallops through an otherwise abstract landscape of gestural brushstrokes ranging from red to black in *Prow*, 1983. 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 slashes of white and blue pigment. Indeed, what stands out most in what is an otherwise Turneresque miasma of whites, blacks, and blues is the blood-red English cross on the knight’s shield.

These are not Susan Rothenberg’s Stone Age horses but, rather, something closer to characters from a Pre-Raphaelite 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 *Iliad* to the poems of Geoffrey Hill. Of course, in the early ’80s, 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 resounded 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 Cuoghi.

On the other hand, these early pictures are moody and difficult. One can say of 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 awhirl with energy—a combustion 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 *Union*, 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 on a young girl’s bedroom wall—squeezed between two huge disks, one white, one black.

That picture, says Le Brun, “is me trying raise the stakes of painting. I understood the moves 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 entirely encapsulating masterpiece that has everything in it, and that strikes me as not something to be abandoned. But it’s incredibly difficult, obviously.” Such unjoking, explicitly stated ambition, which Le Brun continues to exhibit today, seems to me his 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 an aspect of symbolism which is implicit in people like Clyfford Still, but by making it more explicit, maybe you take a risk.”

As for the horses, the artist neither rode 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,

OPPOSITE,  
CLOCKWISE FROM  
LEFT  
*Scriabin*, 2014.  
Oil on canvas,  
110½ x 51¼ in.

*Painting as  
Sunrise*, 2013.  
Oil on canvas,  
111¼ x 106 in.

*Seraphim*, 2014.  
Oil on canvas,  
55 x 51¼ in.

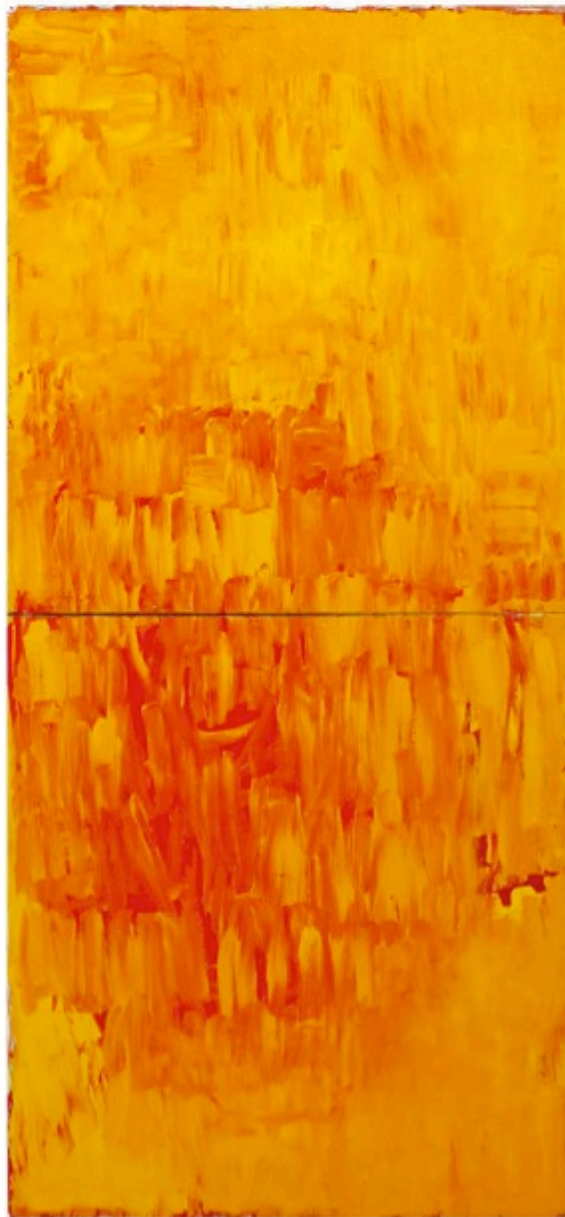
*Atlas (Shelley)*,  
2014.  
Oil on canvas,  
55 x 51¼ in.

Kunitz, Daniel. “Serious Pleasures: Christopher Le Brun’s Enduring Ambition Plays Out on Canvas,” ARTINFO. September, 2014.

**FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001**

**FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760**

ALL IMAGES COURTESY ARTS COUNCIL OF BRUN AND FRIEDMAN BEND. NEW YORK



Kunitz, Daniel. "Serious Pleasures: Christopher Le Brun's Enduring Ambition Plays Out on Canvas," ARTINFO. September, 2014.

**FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001**

**FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760**

**"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 R.B. Kitaj—that dominated the scene from the 1960s until the 1990s.

By the '90s, any number of artists had begun to embrace narrative and illustration; Le Brun just kept raising the stakes for himself. A devotee of music, he embarked on a series of paintings based on another master encapsulator, Wagner, as well as a series, for the Liverpool Anglican Cathedral, depicting Christian parables. In each, he gives free rein to his storytelling impulse, the play of the mind, and his operatic aims. Works such as *The Valkyrie*, 1993, with its almost aggressively odd imagery of a yellow maiden sporting elfish ears atop a flying white horse, mix a dark painterly ground with spirited draftsmanship.

In both series he reinvests, as it were, in a love of drawing that was first established in his childhood. He grew up not surrounded by artworks or with consistent opportunities to visit

museums but with books and, crucially, with pad and pencil. "I wasn't drawing people or going outside drawing things—I might copy things, but essentially I wanted to make up a world," he says. He continues to draw today the same way he did at, he says, "age two: I take the pencil and just start."

**He also makes watercolors** and sculptures. In fact, what's perhaps most important to understand about Le Brun is that he isn't the sort of artist who does only one thing. As a student, he created entirely abstract paintings, and in the late '90s, he began to push his figurative canvases into the realm of abstraction. Beyond a certain luminous atmosphere, it would be difficult to point to what works like *Half Light*, 1997, or *Cloud Metaphor*, 1997–98, actually represent. The latter, a large horizontal picture that recalls a Monet water-lily painting in both format and palette, employs a loose weave of brushstrokes to suggest reflected clouds.

Since 2011, another thing Le Brun has done is serve as president of the R.A. It's a position he enjoys. The academy "represents continuity," he points out. It provides a forum for "young artists to speak to older artists," at a time when generations are often disconnected from each other. The job has also provided fruitful distraction. By compressing his hours in the studio, it has led to his producing some of his finest work, a generous selection of which will be on view in his show opening September 11 at Friedman Benda gallery in New York.

Early in 2013, Le Brun came across a tin of cadmium-yellow paint and thought that what he'd really like to do—if no one would see the result—was, as he says, "just make a yellow painting. But then I saw it wasn't enough. I thought, I need something that will make me think about painting. So then the question of the red comes in, and with just two elements you begin a sort of dialogue—the painting starts to talk back to you." The outcome of this dialogue was a group of powerfully direct, sensuous explorations of color and mark making: the jittery dance of red streaks in a field of yellow layered upon more red in *Ceres*, 2013; the white strokes that nearly make a rectangle looming over an expanse of yellow-inflected red in *Choir*, 2013; the bluish-gray curtain struggling to assert itself through a torrent of white in *Fall*, 2013; the erotic intermingling of yellow and red in *Scriabin*, 2014. Confrontational and enveloping, the vertical canvases range from about five to eight feet tall but maintain the calmness of simplicity.

Less time kicking about the studio has kindled "more urgency" about the work, Le Brun feels, "and also asking this question about truth more and more." He asked himself what were "the simplest moves I could make and still do what I care about." In a recent text, his friend the artist Edmund de Waal writes, "There is a lot of letting go in these paintings." Le Brun himself calls what has happened concentration. Of course these are two sides of the same coin, one circulating in a very old economy of mature art: the paring down of means, the recognition that the most basic things are often the most beguiling and hence the most complex, the ease with oneself that allows for an intensity of concentration.

What seems strangely new and what is oddly unconventional, even at a time of resurgent abstraction, is the grounding in history, the paintings' sense of continuity. Whether explosive or buoyant, all these recent works are nourished by roots sunk deep in European soil, giving their pleasures a strong, enduring foundation. *MF*



Kunitz, Daniel. "Serious Pleasures: Christopher Le Brun's Enduring Ambition Plays Out on Canvas," ARTINFO. September, 2014.

**FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001**

**FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760**



Untitled 10.2.14  
(3), 2014.  
Oil on canvas,  
51 1/2 x 35 1/2 in.

©Kunitz  
Sept. 2014.  
Oil on canvas,  
106 1/2 x 67 1/2 in.

Kunitz, Daniel. "Serious Pleasures: Christopher Le Brun's Enduring Ambition Plays Out on Canvas," ARTINFO. September, 2014.

**FRIEDMAN BENDA** 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001

**FRIEDMANBENDA.COM** TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760