

CHRISTOPHER LE BRUN with Barbara Rose

By Barbara Rose

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.



Christopher Le Brun, *Hereby*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

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)

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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.

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Christopher Le Brun, *Symphony*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

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

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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.

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Rail: You're looking for essences. That is a long and slow search. Now we are in instant-everything; everybody wants everything right away. That militates against duration, against experience, and it becomes very problematic to sustain a life—I don't say a "career" because it's a *vocation*—as a serious artist. It's very difficult and most people don't want to engage with difficulty; if it's easy, let's do it the easy way. Just take a reproduction and let a mechanical process make it monumental.

Le Brun: The other question is your association with the medium. The great violinist has committed their entire life to their instrument. And painting is like that. It is a medium with which you need intense familiarity and identification. And then when you speak through it, people pay attention, knowing you've given your life to it. I don't think that's an exaggeration. It is profoundly different to choosing a medium out of convenience "This is my medium"; "This is what I do." Painting resists being used primarily as a vehicle. It rewards your love and association as an artist; it doesn't want you to use it to carry what the world regards as a worthy message.

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.
Rail: I personally also appreciate continuity. I've written art criticism, but fundamentally, I was formed as an academic art historian of the 16th and 17th centuries. I'm called a dinosaur because I love painting. I want painting to be present and I want it to have a future. The *Abstract Expressionism* show at the R.A. showed us again what great painting in the Grand Manner is. I believe it can still be done. That's not a popular position to take.

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

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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.



Christopher Le Brun, *Composer*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

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 Rose, Barbara. "Christopher Le Brun with Barbara Rose," *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 1, 2017.

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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 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

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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 dyeing 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

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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?

Le Brun: 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.

Le Brun: 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.

Le Brun: 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.

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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.

Le Brun: 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.”

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