

Review: Christopher Le Brun at the Gallery at Windsor, Vero Beach, Florida, and Albertz Benda, New York



From left to right: "Middle C," 2015. Oil on canvas, 78.7 x 66.9 in. "Angel Blue Seraphim," 2016. Oil on canvas, 86.6 x 66.9 in.
(Christopher Le Brun, The Gallery at Windsor, and Albertz Benda)

Christopher Le Brun recently remarked in a public discussion with critic Tim Marlow that he didn't believe color could be ironic; like music, it always elicits a sincere emotional response. The occasion for their chat was the opening of Le Brun's show at The Gallery at Windsor, located on the grounds of the private beach living community, Windsor, in Vero Beach, Florida. The artist likens the construction of his recent abstract works to the production of a musical score. The 28 paintings—divvied up and concurrently displayed at both Windsor and New York's Albertz Benda gallery—explore the relationship between color and music, not unlike the work of modernist master Wassily Kandinsky.

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Christopher Le Brun, 2016.
Photo by Benedict Johnson.

Le Brun, however, isn't a fan of being categorized by any specific "ism" or compared to any particular precursor. Now the president of London's storied Royal Academy, the British artist gained recognition for his figurative painting in the 1980s as part of the Neo-Expressionist movement—another classification he has resisted over the years. Yet, in some ways, Neo-Expressionism remains a suitable lens through which to view Le Brun's works on view in "Composer," especially given his distaste for irony. A reaction to the conceptualism and Minimalism that dominated the Western art world in the 1960s

and '70s, Neo-Expressionist artists like Georg Baselitz, David Salle, Julian Schnabel, and of course LeBrun were lumped together for their use of figuration, bright colors, and emotional self-expression at a time when these attributes were seen as tacky. The artist's paintings in "Composer" are similarly colorful and expressively gestural; they're also completely gauche in their abstraction.

"The Poet Architect," 2016, shown at Albertz Benda, is a keystone piece between the two-venue exhibition and it's undeniably an experiment in pure formalism. Measuring roughly seven by nine feet, myriad hues of paint are brushed, scraped, squeezed, and spackled onto the canvas in distinct layers, although a trumping turquoise dominates the composition. The top half of the work is whitewashed, yet the colors underneath seep through. Like many of the other paintings in "Composer," Le Brun leaves the edges of the canvas bare to emphasize the materiality of the oil paint on the canvas surface; the paint's application is dramatic but ultimately controlled.

In a 1984 New York Times article on the resurgence of figuration in painting, critic Michael Brenson stated: "The interest and dilemma of Neo-Expressionism is how to find a way to be gestural and free while remaining, to some degree, calculating and inhibited." It's worth noting that Le Brun's "Amphion," 1981, was cited as an example of such qualities in the same article. Brenson's assessment could now easily be applied to "The Poet Architect," revealing a certain dedication to form if not content in Le Brun's work: His moody use of color and strong facture is similar to his earlier works even if his most recent paintings share none of the representational imagery. "Middle C," 2015, on display at The Gallery at Windsor, is composed similarly, in that the canvas has been heaped with layer upon layer of color. The artist coated the surface with a wave of violent crimson applied in aggressive vertical strokes that make it look like he may have finger painted it in a feverish pawing motion. The title of the work references the musical note often used as a link between a piano's treble and bass clefs; spanning the two staves, "Middle C" represents having a hand in two worlds. Likewise, Le Brun's latest works straddle being idealistically unaware or incredibly brazen in their emphatic abstraction; but, in the tradition of Neo-Expressionism, they are ultimately achingly sincere.

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