

Christopher Le Brun

Figure and Play

Albertz Benda

515 W 26th Street
NY 10001

May - June, 2020

Matthew Hargraves
Wellspring

Christopher Le Brun's studio is a place of quiet industry. Its characteristic is exceptional light which gives its various rooms a clarity and beauty that resembles the pictures of Piero della Francesca. Even on a wet or overcast day in London the studio is filled with a luminosity that lends everything a still and contemplative aspect. Books are crowded on the windowsills and chairs in the painting room, some lined up, others lying open in the middle of being read. The titles range from the poetry of William Blake, Paul Valéry, Geoffrey Hill, or Wallace Stevens, to monographs on artists - currently Samuel Palmer taking a prominent place - and volumes of music. And everywhere there are signs of labour: paintings in progress, ideas for sculpture modelled in wax, the painter's tools laid out on the table, the smell of oil painting permeating the air.

Since early 2018 Christopher Le Brun has used these spaces to explore the possibilities of the double and the diptych, two separate canvases of equal size hung side by side or one above the other. These doubles and diptychs emerged serendipitously through the studio discipline of reusing materials, in this case when discovering late in 2017 that a pile of left-over proofs for his woodcuts *Changing Light* (published 2018) were an ideal support for oil paintings. Soon these paintings on paper had proliferated into a small series and the experience of sorting and arranging them in the studio, necessarily placing them in two rows for reasons of space, sequencing them, discovering affinities, relationships and family resemblances between them led to realisation that they belonged in pairs.

From this discovery emerged *Left Hand, Right Hand* in the April 2018, the first painting in this new body of work made on canvas with one above the other. The first painting on canvas side by side, the extraordinary and haunting picture *Mind*, was finished in December of that same year. Each canvas is painted in oil on the finest linen, permitting bold and fluid strokes of the brush, gestural marks, richly worked surfaces. Paint is applied, scraped down, layered, worked with the brush, blended, and sometimes applied straight out of the tube to create a combination of marks, strokes and veils that obscure and reveal colours and forms. The process of pairing and arranging the first oil paintings on paper in late 2017 is

indicative of Le Brun's process. All subsequent doubles and diptychs on canvas have developed intuitively after the pattern of their inception, canvases finding their companions sometimes by accident and sometimes by a process of seeming to call out for a specific counterpart.

Take for instance *Mirror, Mirror* (2018). The upper canvas in this double came first with an intense green ground over which was applied a pale lemon yellow. This in turn has been veiled by vertical white lines drawn from the tube to varying lengths and depths, exploring the tension between the transparency and opacity of each white stroke. The lower canvas came next in response to the first and began with a warm rose ground, worked over with the same lemon-yellow layer that responds to the upper canvas, and on top of these layers are additional white marks streaked up and down across the surface of the canvas similarly applied from the tube itself. The title *Mirror, Mirror* naturally connotes the idea of reflectivity, of relation and affinity while also maintaining distance and without either absorbing the other. *Stay* (2019), by contrast, began as two paintings side by side before being separated and worked up as independent canvases. Only much later was their affinity rediscovered and the two reunited, this time one above the other, and then finished in relationship. An upper canvas of fiery yellow now finds its partner in a contrasting and richly impasted one of blues, violets, and mauves but with the same yellow breaking through to call out to the canvas above. Thus the relationships in the doubles and the diptychs is as much accidental as designed, based on intuition and guided by sensory experience, more than conceptual logic or formal planning.

The same concerns manifest themselves even as he continues to develop his interest in single canvas paintings, something that has not abated while pursuing the pairing of canvases. Indeed the range of his creative output from painting, and printmaking, to sculpture has only increased since his retirement as President of the Royal Academy in December 2019 after eight years of intense and successful commitment to that office. A painting such as *Cloud, Castle, Lake* (2020), presents a duality based on the opposition between warm and cold hues that results nevertheless in a great symphony of colour.



Mirror, Mirror, 2018
oil on canvas
280.9 x 230.3 cm



Stay, 2020
oil on canvas
181 x 180.4 cm



Cloud, Castle, Lake, 2020
oil on canvas
170.2 x 221.7 cm

A powerful yellow note runs horizontally across the bottom of the canvas, underpinning a central chord of cool azure and turquoise that reverberates at the centre, bounded by a great peach frame with orange and scarlet accents. Like the doubles and diptychs, *Cloud, Castle, Lake* explores the possibilities of harmony and dissonance and similarly composes itself into upper and lower zones. Le Brun's recent work from the *New Paintings*² (2014) through *Composer* (2017), to the current exploration of doubles and diptychs has appeared to signal a distinctive new phase in his career, a departure from the symbolist or figurative work for which he was previously known. Yet Le Brun is not a conventional artist and naturally resists the cliché of a late style. His current interests in fact represent a return to the deep creative source of his art, part of a regenerative cycle that brings him back to the rich wellspring of imagination that has sustained him since the very beginnings of his artistic progress.

To demonstrate this one need only look back to very early paintings made in the late 1970s, pictures like *Capriccio: Port Royal* (1978) where the entire composition is divided between top and bottom in a manner that anticipates the both the later doubles themselves and single canvases. Moreover, there are small elements within the painting that are almost the germ of one of today's canvases in the doubles and diptychs, current works in embryo. It is possible to go back further still to the countless small drawings the artist made as a student at the Slade in the early 1970s, studies in graphite or watercolour where the media is worked boldly across the sheet in complex forms, vertical strokes, and rounded lines in contrasting rhythms and layers. In all of these studies it is the imagination and feeling that have been given free reign, explored through the of possibilities of line, texture, light, and tone. The affinities between these early drawings such as *The Garden* of 1972 and a new work like *Mirror, Mirror* or a related double such as *Speaking Likeness* (2019), are so apparent that one might think they had been made simultaneously. For *Mirror, Mirror* and *Speaking Likeness* are effectively drawings in paint, imaginative in their origins, richly poetic in their address, and maintaining the mutually sustaining relationship between drawing, printmaking, and painting that holds a key place in Le Brun's work, each informing, reinforcing and guiding the other without overwhelming or absorbing them.



The Garden, 1972
pencil on paper
25.5 x 16 cm

There is in Le Brun a profound sense of the ability to hold simultaneously what would conventionally be opposing forces in mutual esteem and of the creative possibilities of that opposition. This is fundamental to the doubles and diptychs. On one shelf in the studio sits Anita Brookner's classic monograph on Jacques-Louis David, first published when Le Brun was a newly arrived as a student at the Chelsea School of Art. But propped against it and partially obscuring the *Oath of the Horatii* on its dustjacket is a postcard of Sir Joshua Reynolds's masterful *Self-Portrait* in academic robes. Two exemplars of completely different traditions - the French and the British - held in mutual admiration and esteem by Le Brun. It is an image that encapsulates his acceptance of simultaneous contradiction, of duality, that two apparently contradictory things can exist in the same place and time, and exist to their mutual benefit. It recalls what Keats called the "Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason."³ Le Brun's work explores this hopeful paradox.

As such his approach has always been distinctive and against the mainstream, distinctive in being at once deeply cerebral and emotionally expressive. Le Brun's own artistic heritage is steeped in oppositional tendencies that he has been able to absorb and hold in creative tension, without one overwhelming the other. At the Slade and at Chelsea he was taught by an array of exceptional and diverse artists. These included William Coldstream himself, as well as his own pupils. Some, such as Patrick George and Euan Uglow, working in the Euston Road tradition, and others, like Tess Jaray and Bernard Cohen, taking the lessons of Coldstream in other directions.⁴ There were also visiting teachers of the calibre of Frank Auerbach, Lucian Freud, Howard Hodgkin and R.B. Kitaj. Le Brun in particular was struck by Cohen's attention to process, the composition and making of paintings, that has proved a lasting influence. At the Slade in the early 1970s it was possible to be taught simultaneously by two such completely contrasting figures as Malcolm Hughes (1920-1997), a strict Constructivist with a deep aversion to Romanticism, and John Hoyland (1934-2011), whose American inspired abstraction was strongly opposed to rationalistic overthought, and pretentious approaches to painting. Hughes, however, was a deeply sympathetic figure who recognised Le Brun's own needs and had also drafted in

exceptional talent to remedy perceived historic weaknesses in the Slade curriculum. Stephen Bann, Hughes's friend and collaborator in the Systems Group, gave occasional lectures to students from 1973 on the latest theory, chiefly French Structuralism. The artist was keenly aware at the time of belonging to no particular camp, drawing instead on all traditions of teaching available and willing to be singular. As Bann would much later perceive, Le Brun's self-image is distinctively different and implies taking "the detour of an apparent anachronism."⁵ As an art student in the early 1970s, the trajectory in painting was presented as tightly circumscribed: from the geometric abstraction of Ben Nicholson and the Constructivism of Victor Pasmore, to the Op Art of Bridget Riley and the structured formalism of Patrick Caulfield. For an artist drawn instinctively to the works of Richard Wilson and Thomas Gainsborough or Romantics such as J.M.W. Turner, William Blake, and Samuel Palmer this rigid Greenbergian trajectory offered nothing but constraint and no place for nature or the imagination. Resisting this trend has meant following Blake's advice that it is better to "shew an independence which I know will please any Author better than slavishly following the track of another however admirable that track may be."⁶ Like Blake, Le Brun would surely accept that "the tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing that stands in the way...but to the Eyes of the Man of Imagination Nature is Imagination itself."⁷ To this day Le Brun is as willing to be guided by imagination, the senses, and intuition as much as by concept and theory. He still prefers a sign painter's brush, its very length permitting unsteadiness in a brushstroke and so the possibility of the happy accident or the chance to snatch a grace beyond the reach of art. For Le Brun, his task is to find and to fix forms in art. The act of painting is intensely physical and requires labour. The painter's work involves the action of the body, the investment of physical as well as mental energy. In Le Brun's case there is David's high ideal that art should be purposeful and have some public form of address. He is not narrowly insular, no neo-romantic oddity. His formative period in Germany in the late 1980s instilled in him the fundamental importance of the vocation of the artist, the unapologetically public role of art as a real profession that was then a seriously weakened idea in Britain.



Stream, 2020
oil on canvas
170 x 240.3 cm

But unlike David he employs no legion of studio assistants, does not delegate to trusted confrères save for the preparation of stretched canvases. There is no preparatory sketch, no underdrawing, no mixing of colours on the palette. The art comes from within and cannot be delegated. Le Brun's paintings must be worked into life, often coaxed out of their resistance. The process is at times agonistic. *Stream* (2020), the largest of his most recent paintings, was described by the artist as a "battle" to paint. And the Davidian model of narrative art has never been Le Brun's approach. Poetry is Le Brun's preferred mode. Narrative's affinity to prose involves an attenuation, the progressive exhaustion of an idea unlike the striking punctum of a poetic expression. Prose diminishes what poetry reinforces. For Le Brun, there is no idea in poetry that does not transfer to painting, hence the studio replete with the work of a host of French, British, and American poets. He particularly admires the American poets in the vein of Whitman for the sense that they have not been taught but have worked things out for themselves and on their own terms. There is an obvious affinity with the British tradition in painting where that strict studio discipline of the French academic system never applied. The British approach was always experimental. The liberation of French Romantics like Gericault and Delacroix in the 1820s came when they discovered British painters because of their freedom from the strict rules of their own system. Like his forebears, Le Brun's art has often developed by experiment, pushing painting forward through discoveries made using other media. Just as Turner's use of oil paint was profoundly shaped by his experiments in watercolour, so Le Brun's own development has been shaped by the same exploratory means in various media. The impact of etching has profoundly shaped the trajectory of his painting. As Barbara Rose has argued, printmaking has been critical to the development of many modern artists, Le Brun no exception.⁸ From biting lines on top of existing lines in etching when making his series *Fifty Etchings* (1991), Le Brun discovered the ability to lay a painted line on top of another, so that lines cease to be mere patterns but interact to create form, as in *Untitled* (1988-89). The discovery of forms through an exploratory and self-conscious dialogue with artists of the past, and the interaction of the sister arts of Painting and Poetry, forms the basis of his creativity.

In earlier work Le Brun approached these poetic concerns through an attachment to the imagery of

symbolism. This imagery has gradually ebbed away with symbolic motifs slowly disappearing despite the attachment to symbolism itself persisting. In *Truth* (2013), for instance, a horse's head literally fades into mere vestigial form across the surface of the canvas and has not returned, yet. But representation, whether symbolist or figurative, was never really what Le Brun's work was about. Representation was merely the expressive vehicle for fixing forms that had their origins in what was essentially sensory and imaginative. Paradoxically, prior to moving into pure abstraction Le Brun spent almost a decade between 2004 and 2012 making ideal landscapes in watercolour, drawings in the tradition of Claude and Turner. These, rarely exhibited and never in a significant group, are scarcely known in his oeuvre but were regenerative, a necessary journey back to the wellspring of his ideas. The turn to watercolour began through necessity: a needed break from the harder manual work of oil painting after surgery on his painting hand. The exploration of watercolour persisted beyond the forced period of recuperation and produced a remarkable corpus of drawings. Seen together, the elements within these richly poetic images contain precisely the same interest in duality that would burst forth in full fruit in the present doubles and diptychs. An architectural form will often emerge suddenly and incongruously from a landscape but without seeking after a resolution. These seemingly contrary elements exist side by side within the drawings, neither overpowering the other, nor demanding that they explain themselves. The power of the doubles and the diptychs lies in their same ability to hold two often opposing elements in a state of cohesion.



Ziggurat, 2008
watercolour on paper
56 x 76 cm

Aside IV (2020), has a left panel with a rich putty colour, an addition to Le Brun's palette in the last five or so years. The colour is highly receptive to light and shifts itself according to prevailing illumination like respiration in a living creature. The entire surface of this canvas has been worked through a combination of scraping and blending. By contrast the right panel has a ground of tough dark red over which has been drawn an intense jolt of turquoise. The combination of the reposeful left-hand panel and the bold right-hand panel with its turquoise burst of coloratura invite the eye to rove back and forth between the two, exploring ever deeper the nuances within the two canvases. Both elements exist independently, retaining their autonomy despite the fact that a new work has been created out of their pairing. Dialogue is too weak and inappropriate analogy for this relationship. There is no conversational back and forth that seeks mutual understanding and consensus between the two pictures. A better analogy proffered by the artist is that of the stage where two players perform alongside each another in mutually sustaining roles to create a whole, or two singers performing a duet whose distinct voices combine to produce a third sound without overwhelming each other. In *Aside V* (2020), the eye is drawn first to the left panel with an intense scarlet burst at its centre. Then it moves across to the right where a pewter colour has been applied straight from the tube over a solid charcoal ground, a completely contrasting palette and process of facture. Yet in each panel the eye passes back and forth from side to side being invited to see ever greater complexity in each with every pass, to peer through the layers, to perceive depths and beauties that were not noticed before and look deep into the wellsprings of Le Brun's imagination. And the result is always enthralling beauty. Beauty, so long either deliberately rejected or explicitly denied as a goal by artists, establishes the direction and lies at the heart of Le Brun's work. This searching after beauty is its central feature. The sheer beauty of painting is Le Brun's triumphant and unapologetic hallmark and implies more than superficial attractiveness. As Keats said of his Negative Capability: "with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration."⁹ The reality of beauty as an objective value, and of its power to affect us and connect us to fundamental existential questions is central to his work, perhaps its ultimate wellspring.



Aside IV, 2020
oil on canvas
90.3 x 200.3 cm



Pale UMBER, 2020
oil on canvas
150.6 x 140.3 cm

No matter how abstract his work, the creative impulse behind his work mirrors the beauties in nature. A characteristic in his oeuvre is the way in which an individual detail functions as a pattern for the whole. As previously seen, a detail in *Capriccio: Port Royal* (1978) could be a prototype for one of his most recent canvases, such as those in *Wait* (2020) or in *Pale Umber* (2020). Similarly, look at the details within his pictures and it is possible to see how the individual unit within a picture can establish the pattern for the entire painting and from there relate itself to the entire corpus of his work. The nature of the part determines the nature of the whole. One explanation for the capacity of his paintings to communicate a transcendent beauty lies in their resonance with greater, indeed universal, patterns in the natural world. From individual detail, to entire painting, to entire corpus of work, Le Brun's art sits within nested hierarchies that continue to extend beyond themselves to embrace something universal. His paintings where parts relate to wholes, and wholes relate beyond themselves to something larger correspond to the vast nested hierarchies observable within nature itself. This perhaps also explains their peculiar capacity to embody something akin to consciousness. As Bann notes of the *Fifty Etchings*, "they dramatise a consciousness in the same way as they enact a technical process." Yet the paintings appear to go beyond this by not merely representing the artist's consciousness played out through technical experiment, but to actually perform it. It is as if the act of bringing the paintings into life, of overcoming their resistance, he has somehow quickened them. The English 'soul' is *psyche* in Greek and *anima* in Latin and it is the simultaneously unnerving and exhilarating impression that we are encountering something that is animate when contemplating the diptychs and doubles that gives them their peculiar power. It is a mysterious, poetic effect that points towards some primitive system pervading the entire created world. Le Brun's art is attuned in some fundamental way to that ultimate well-spring, participating as a part within the grand whole of the universe, expressed nowhere better than in a favourite poet of the artist, Wallace Stevens:

The central poem is the poem of the whole,
 The poem of the composition of the whole,
 The composition of blue sea and of green,
 Of blue light and of green, as lesser poems,
 And the miraculous multiplex of lesser poems,
 Not merely into a whole, but a poem of
 The whole, the essential compact of the parts,
 The roundness that pulls tight the final ring

Wallace Stevens, *A Primitive Like an Orb*, VII

¹ I am indebted to Nicola Togneri for clarifying various questions of detail and chronology for me, and for her invaluable assistance in the writing of this essay.

² *New Paintings*, an exhibition at Albertz Benda, New York, in 2014 with an accompanying monograph (Ridinghouse, London, 2014); and *Composer*, two concurrent exhibitions at Albertz Benda, New York and The Gallery at Windsor, Florida in 2017 with an accompanying publication (Windsor Press: Vero Beach, 2017).

³ John Keats to George and Thomas Keats, December 22, 1817. I am grateful to the artist for bringing this affinity to my attention.

⁴ Other important teachers include Jeffrey Camp, Rita Donagh, Noel Forster, and Mick Moon. I am grateful to Christopher Le Brun for discussing the formative impact of his teachers with me.

⁵ Stephen Bann, 'The Prince Entering the Briar Wood,' in *Fifty Etchings*, The Paragon Press, London 1991, p.11. I am grateful to Stephen Bann for providing me with details of his teaching at the Slade and for sharing additional thoughts on Christopher Le Brun with me.

⁶ William Blake to Dr. John Trusler, August 16, 1799, British Library Add MS 36498, folio 324.

⁷ William Blake to Dr. John Trusler, August 23, 1799, British Library Add MS 36498, folio 328.

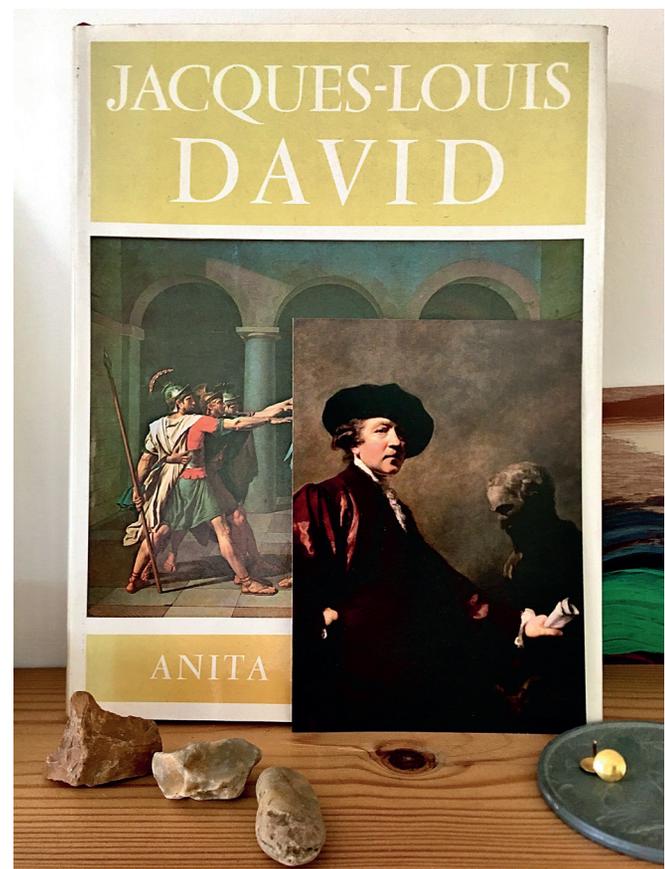
⁸ See Barbara Rose, 'Christopher Le Brun: Composer,' in *Composer*, Albertz Benda: New York, 2017, pp.15-20.

⁹ John Keats to George and Thomas Keats, December 22, 1817.

© Matthew Hargraves, 2020

Matthew Hargraves is a British art historian and writer, and Chief Curator of Art Collections and Head of Collections Information and Access, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut.

photo credit opposite Matthew Hargraves





Wait, 2020
oil on canvas
180.8 x 180.5 cm



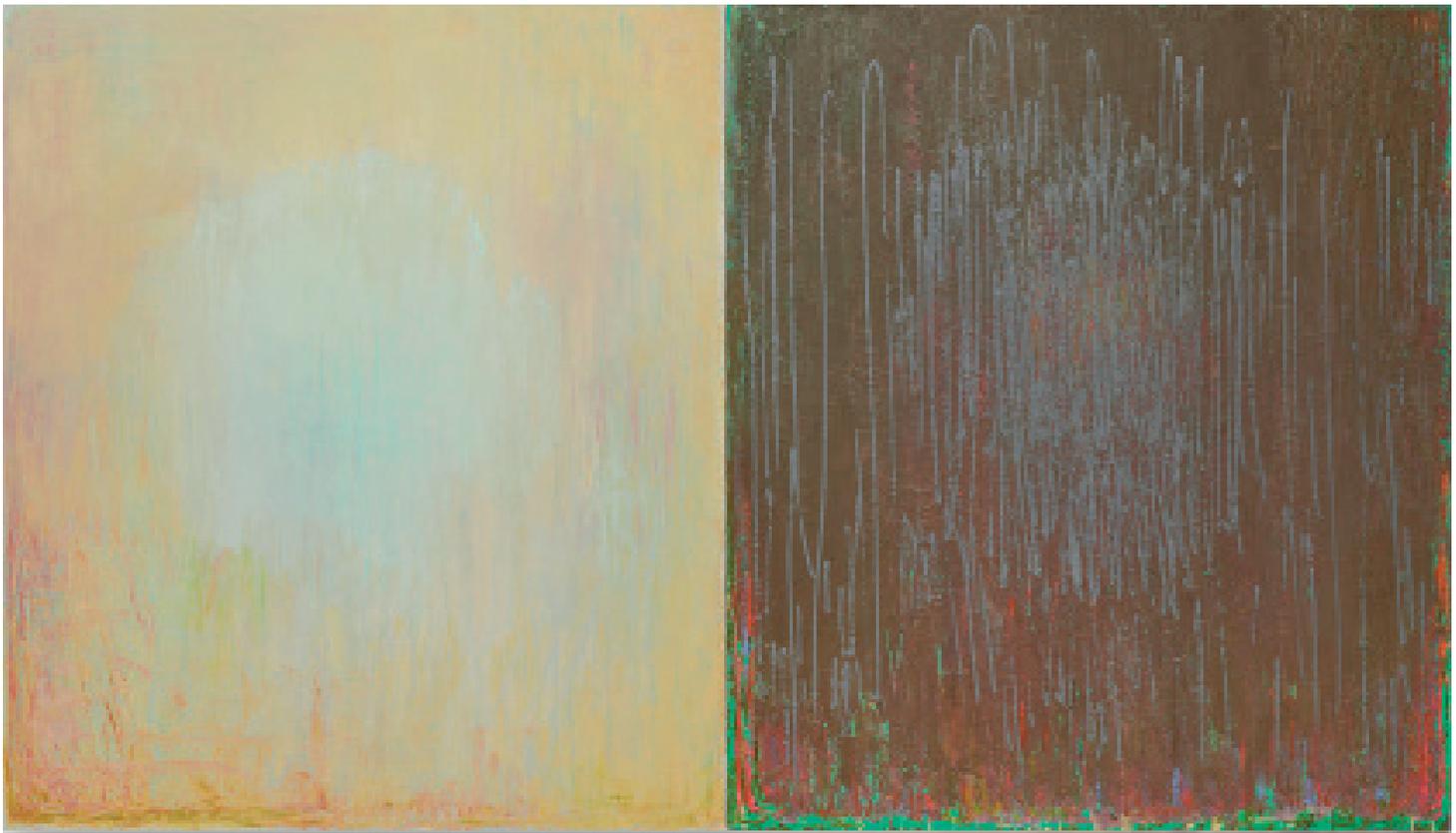
Cloud and Could, 2020
oil on canvas
81 x 61.4 cm



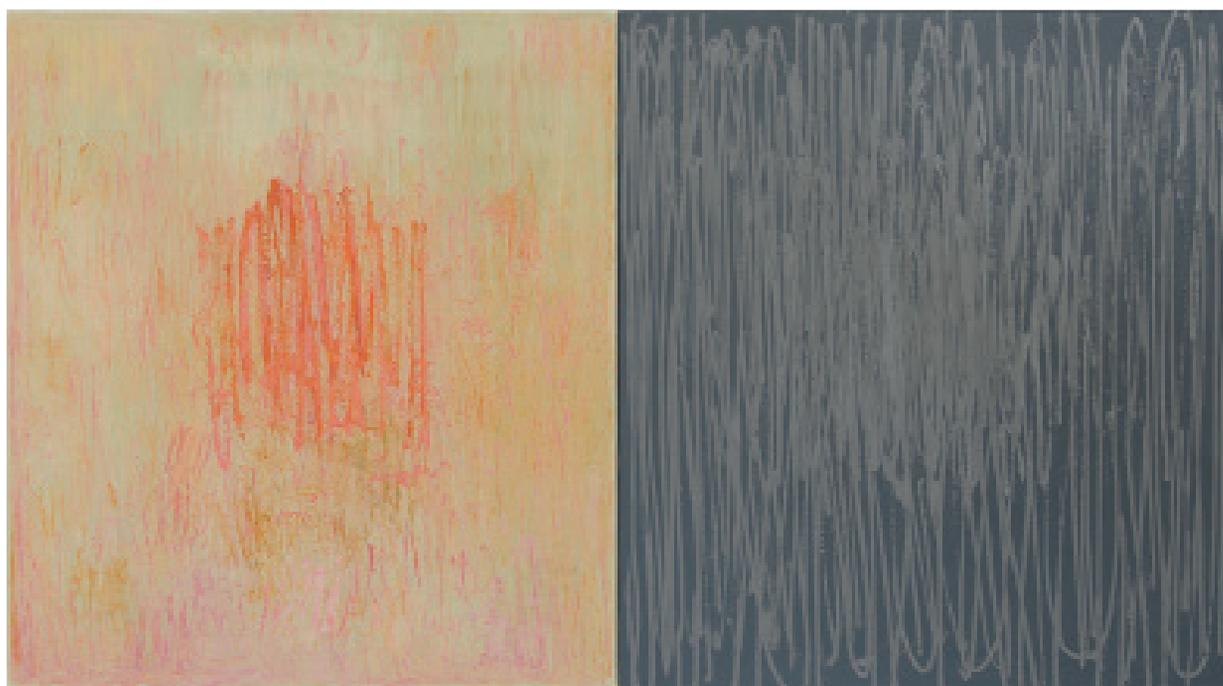
Woodnotes, 2020
oil on canvas
170.2 x 220.3 cm



Speaking Likeness, 2019
oil on canvas
280.8 x 230.4 cm



Declaim and Redoubt, 2020
oil on canvas
160.4 x 280.4 cm



Aside V, 2020
oil on canvas
90.3 x 200.2 cm



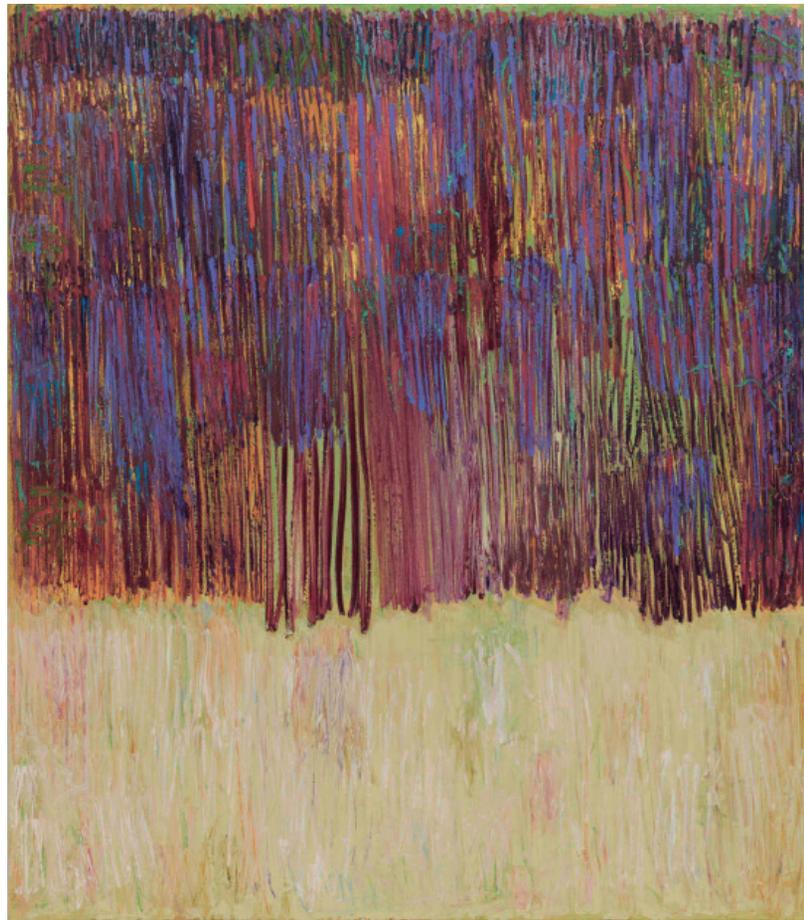
By, With or From, 2019
oil on canvas
280.1 x 230.4 cm



Untitled 14.9, 2019
oil on canvas
140 x 130.7 cm



Figure and Play, 2020
oil on canvas
160.4 x 280.5 cm



Twenty Twilights, 2019
oil on canvas
172.5 x 150.5 cm

albertzbenda.com

515 W 26th Street
NY 10001

all images © Christopher Le Brun