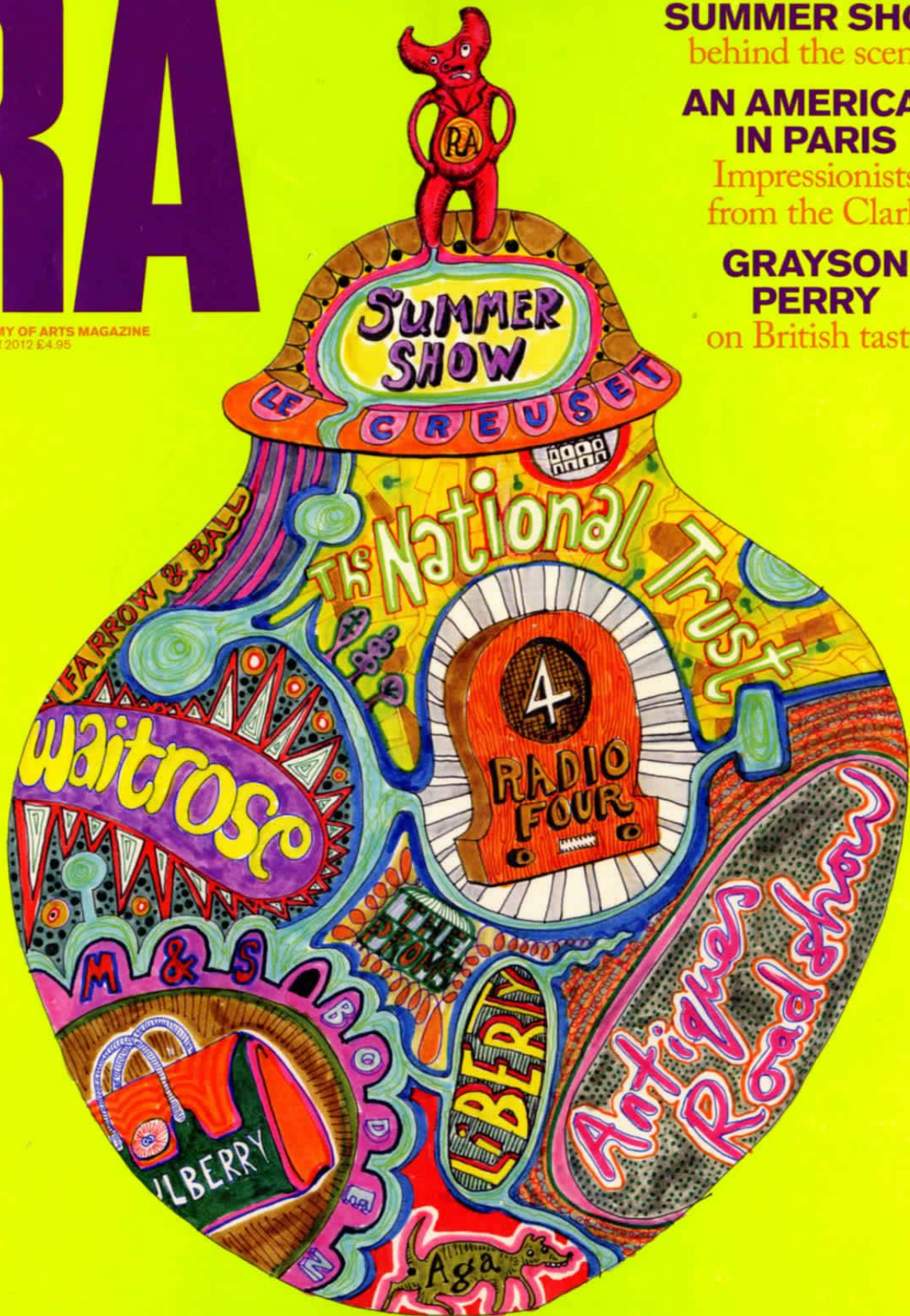


# RA

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**THE RA  
SUMMER SHOW**  
behind the scenes  
**AN AMERICAN  
IN PARIS**  
Impressionists  
from the Clark  
**GRAYSON  
PERRY**  
on British taste



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Matthew Collings interviews the new President of the Royal Academy, Christopher Le Brun, about his vision for the RA, which he believes is poised on the edge of a golden age. Photograph by Gautier Deblonde

# The Painter President

'It's a very human place,' Christopher Le Brun said recently about the RA. It was the end of last year and news of his presidency had just been announced. Reporters were asking what his appointment meant to him. He said he felt very aware of his 'illustrious predecessors'. Merely polite when taken separately, together these two phrases sum up the RA's potential, a place where, if you interpret 'predecessors' to include J.M.W. Turner and Joshua Reynolds, art's great past is convincingly connected to a dynamic present. The humanity is to accept the seriousness of art, and reject the posing and game playing that so often undermine it today.

In April, I talked to Le Brun in his south London studio about his plans and ideas for the RA. It was clear he felt a key issue was institutional identity. 'For most of the 20th century the RA wouldn't be the first location that occurred to you if you were thinking about anything important that happened in art.' The Summer Exhibition is often the focus for this negative perception. But this was already changing for the better in the situation Le Brun inherited. Since the late 1990s the RA Membership has been increasingly made up of well-known artists, whether it's Sir Anthony Caro or Tracey Emin, who are thought to be broadly non-conservative or non-conventional. Initially they may have been token figures, making the 80 or so RAs a bit more lively round the edges. But now these types are becoming more the mainstream.

This move in the direction of relevance (the end of the RA's hostility to the new, characterised by Sir Alfred Munnings PRA's attacks on Picasso and abstraction) is inescapably reflected in the Summer shows, since the Academicians, by constitutional right, display several works each and also select, design and hang the exhibitions.

Le Brun thinks positive change at the RA is speeding up. 'The golden age could be right now.'

These are slow shifts in the tectonic plates of power and Le Brun has played a role in bringing them about. When he was overall co-ordinator of last year's Summer Exhibition, his hang of the grand Gallery III harked back to Victorian convention, with strategically chosen walls chequered with several rows of large paintings. But he also invited Michael Craig-Martin RA to hang a room, which was, by contrast, distinctly minimalist.

My own feelings about the RA over the last 30 years is that the big shows organised by Norman Rosenthal (who left in 2008) have been

*'The perception should be that the RA is a centre of art, run by artists, with a vision of what is the best in art, right now'*

amazing, but until recently I considered the place as a whole a sort of blank. If I had to choose one show at any gallery anywhere that stayed with me more profoundly than any other, it would be the RA's 1983 survey of Venetian painting in the sixteenth century. Experiencing Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas*, not as a reproduction in an art book but as a real object – six-feet wide, with a surface of paint that is amazingly rough and chaotic but also full of restless, insistent logical rhythms – taught me something important about the endeavour of making. Traditions built up over centuries are inherent to, and expressed by this painting. And it demonstrates how meaning in art actually works – as a mixture of intellectual and visual communication. No amount of obedient

study of philosophy or theory could match the lesson this painting provided, not to mention the rest of the show. The problem is I didn't connect any of it to the RA and its principles. It was the same with other shows over the years: so many brilliant ones but all experienced in an ideological void.

So what appealed to me about talking to Le Brun was his serious approach to art and his belief that the Academy was not a leftover husk from the past, but the institutional embodiment of that seriousness. When I visited him in his light-filled studio, I saw a painting from the early 1980s – an image of a horse emerging from between vast abstract discs of black and white – made at the time I first met him, the occasion of my first ever interview for an art magazine. Today the main space is crowded with works. All feature strong, flowing marks with an independent painterly life. At the same time these marks support, or are intertwined with, a certain kind of figurative imagery. There is something nineteenth century about it, prepared to risk sentiment. But the play between the picture or the narrative element in his work, and its abstract structure, is sophisticated, and the paintings require constant re-reading. It's not the individual motifs, as such, that appear to be the point, nor even the meaning of this whole world of characters and objects signifying a lost nobility. It's more a proposal about painting: Le Brun seems to ask, how can you reinvent it, so you really understand its significance?

He is excited about being the RA's first painter-president in 20 years. He thinks the art world, doubtful about painting, underestimates the general public's respect for it. 'When people come in their thousands to the Hockney show it demonstrates there's a hunger for painting and its history.' I see him again later at the RA and he

points out the statues of Gainsborough and Turner, presented in alcoves to either side of the main staircase. He says he wants to reposition them so they're visible at the top of it, so you're reminded of the RA's high art identity.

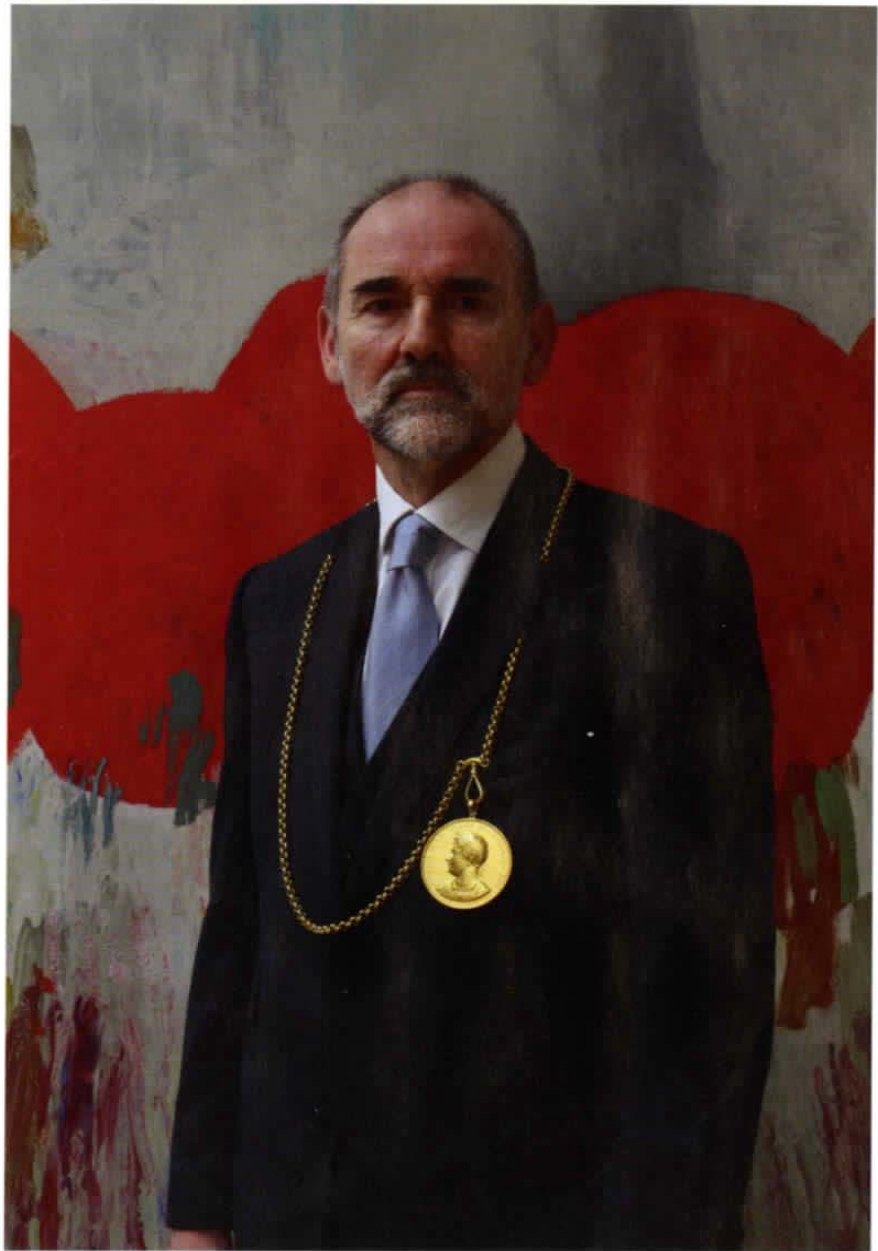
Le Brun is an artist of several mediums: principally a painter, but an ambitious sculptor as well, he was initially made an RA, in 1996, for his printmaking. He has a message: he wants the

*'The ideal Academy represents energy and desire. The great artists are the ones with the greatest desire, not just the greatest skills'*

RA to stand up for art. He means a distinction between creativity, whether art or architecture, and simply the business side of the institution, the financial ideas it has to keep thinking up in order to survive. I take it he also means the RA's ideal of art should be connected to the past but not stuck in it. He says the big shows the RA puts on are full of variety and that this quality should be perceived as a principle of the RA as a whole ('diversity of experience within the institution'). He's got a great sense of meaningful contrast: 'The literalism of the Zoffany show and the painterly enquiry of Hockney. With Zoffany you know there will be a fingernail at the end of every finger, with Hockney you don't know that, it's more that there'll be a brush stroke there – you're not given that direct link to objective reality.' The RA shouldn't just be a pure heritage site, where visitors go in order to see England. 'The perception should be that it's the centre of art, run by artists, with a vision of what is the best in art, right now.' Individual RAs should be better known and more visible to the public: they should have solo shows, if not in the main space (which can only really work financially with the most well-known names) then in the new spaces planned for 6 Burlington Gardens. The redesign will involve part of the RA Schools becoming visible to the public. Le Brun hopes this will have an effect on how the public sees the Schools and their relationship to the rest of the RA's programme.

For artists and art-world insiders he thinks the RA should include a club-like aspect – a bar comparable to the Odeon in New York in the 1980s and 90s, the glamorous venue where artists regularly met. If someone important comes to town, the RA bar should be the obvious place to go. He wants the formal discussions, public presentations and debates that already take place at the RA to be more of a feature of the institution. He's not asking for anything over-fancy, or stilted, but he wants important, serious, formidable people to appear.

Currently, at a typical General Assembly of the Royal Academicians, he says, you can find a great number of distinguished people from different mediums and different generations



Christopher Le Brun PRA wearing his presidential medal in front of one of his paintings

talking to each other. 'How often does that happen elsewhere?' he wonders. 'The Academicians as a body can show great generosity. They are concerned about the education of young artists and they are aware of the difficulties of the profession. Sometimes we are too concerned with that, leaving little time for intellectual debate. I would like the Academy as a whole to reflect more fully what its Members achieve as individuals. Could we rethink Reynolds' *Discourses* so they make sense today? How do you retain the idea of a pantheon and a set of values, while acknowledging that

acquiring skills isn't today the only criterion? Everyone knows that authority in the art world is still there,' he says. 'It's just that it's hidden. Certainly it's not as explicit as it once was. With enough energy and intelligence the RA can be an enquiring institution, if the stress is put on inventiveness and conviction. People expect it to be a representation of fixed values, and they're disappointed when it isn't, when it fails to pretend to be an exam board. But the ideal Academy represents energy and desire. The great artists are the ones with the greatest desire, not just the greatest skills.'

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