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Q & A

‘Joy has to be part of the vocabulary of art’

Christopher Le Brun

Courtesy the artist and Albright-Knox, New York

As an exhibition of new paintings opens across two venues in the US, Christopher Le Brun PRA talks to Thomas Marks about the musical and mythological inspirations behind his work

1. *Strand (Thus the light rains, thus pours)*, 2016, Christopher Le Brun (b. 1951), oil on canvas, 220 x 440cm

Your upcoming exhibition has the title ‘Composer’ What correspondences do you perceive between musical composition and the process of painting?

Very early on, when I first started listening to music, I realised that there were particular correspondences in the sense of structure. I even borrowed a score of Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* from the central library in Portsmouth because I just wanted to see what it looked like; I could imagine images but I wanted to see how it all came about.

Although I can’t read music, I find it fascinating to see the strange correspondence between a notation and the sound. That struck me as having a

relatively straightforward connection to what I was thinking about as an artist. In the exhibition in New York there’s a painting called *Strand* (Fig. 1). When I was just 17 I did a small watercolour study for an imaginary large painting, and it looks like this painting that I’ve just done – so something about music I think, even from that young age, has persisted with me and in a way is only now starting to play out.

When you listen to music, you feel the rhythm, you feel the presence of the music, but you also very powerfully feel the spatiality – particularly in the music that interests me, which is from the early 20th century. Then you feel out these structures with your mind. That seems to me to have a correspondence with painting, where you’re feeling for and sensing structures and forms of space.

Is there something of the notation of music in some of the vertical marks in these paintings?

Take an idea like a chord: it’s a fairly straightforward comparison to come up with a grouping in its verticality. Things obviously operate very differently in a painting, but I’m not unhappy if that becomes analogous in the way that you look at it. Of course, my work has included trees, stems, branches, all of these relatively abstract vertical components.

Do you listen to music while you are painting?

Yes, but not always and it’s absolutely not a direct response. No, that’s not the relationship, not at all. In fact, if anything I may use music to switch off. There’s one painting called *Pelléas*, and that stands as an attempt to encapsulate my ideas about an opera that I’ve been thinking about for more than 40 years. The connection is never straightforward.

In the catalogue, you describe painting as ‘a questioning form’ What types of questions do these paintings ask?

Painting is essentially about appearances. The only way to encounter appearances is by looking. Can you hear in the word ‘looking’ how it’s a question? It’s not seeing, it’s looking. Looking immediately engages you in a questioning or wondering way.

A painting can be used to carry messages and it can illustrate stories, and the bulk of paintings historically are illustrative of stories, but the type of painting that holds me contains, as it were, innocent questions about the world. Why is there appearance at all? Why do things look like this?

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