



DRIP FEED

Sometimes, to tame the paint, you need to think outside the canvas

IN THE STUDIO

CHRISTOPHER LE BRUN PRA

THE BRITISH PAINTER AND PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY OPENS UP HIS LONDON STUDIO, WORDS: **KATIE MCCABE**, PHOTOS: **TOM DUNKLEY**

You've been in this studio since the 90s, what was the space like before you took it on?

Terrible. [The space] was occupied by a fine art printers called Hope Sufferance Press and the room was black with printer's ink. Through the 90s, it was used by many well-known artists such as Anish Kapoor or Antony Gormley. In fact, on the roof, we've got some struck copper plates [that were used for] Victor Pasmore's last prints.

What's your daily routine in the studio like, how do you begin the process?

The first thing I do, always, is to find a way to get into the studio without looking at my paintings... I look at the floor with my hands covering my eyes, I make my way to the centre of the room and when I am ready, take my hands away and look. It's rather elaborate, but there's a reason; what I am trying to get is my fresh, true reaction to what I've done.

That instantaneous look will tell me what the status of the picture is, and it's either 'oh no!' or 'oh yes'. Then the work of the day starts. Mostly it's 'oh no'. My process is to



POT LUCK

Stray tin cans double up as paint mixing pots

work on two, three, four, five paintings in a day, I keep moving... They are rather like crossword puzzle clues, you get stuck on 17 down, you put it away then 'ah! Three across!'. I keep going, hoping to trick my imagination into

answering the questions the painting is raising.

So you're dealing with an approach that's both imaginative and methodical, how do you combine those two things?

Another analogy is fishing, if you want to catch a fish you have to keep the fly on the water. By being in the workshop, you might catch a fish. No matter how wonderful the day dream or vision of 'the great painting' may be, my experience is that it rarely survives transfer to the studio. Since painting is dominated by the reality of touch and making, for me, it's a workshop activity.

Your two upcoming US exhibitions are titled *Composer*. How does music influence the way you paint? Is it in the studio with you?

Yes I listen, but that's describing the mood or energy that you might derive from music. I'm more interested in music as a composed structure... If you take a big piece by a



MODEL BEHAVIOUR

A collection of Christopher's early small-scale sculptures



major composer, it's a very complicated structure full of imagined space, so it seems as though you hear things in the foreground and the background.

That has strong analogies to painting, as I think of painting as a created space, with the placement of things and colours and marks.

When you were first elected to the Royal Academy it was as a printmaker. What's your relationship to printmaking now?

It's like looking forward to one's summer holidays – literally. As well as London, I've made prints in Paris and Santa Barbara and Venice, I go there to work with technicians, and I admire their expertise.

There's always a faint sense of *The Elves and the Shoemaker*, hoping that overnight they will make the shoes for you. It's never quite as simple as that, but it is a collaboration, and a great printmaker is a person who understands what you're trying to achieve and they nudge you a little bit, to help you.

Recently, I've been making prints here in the studio, woodcuts. It has directly informed my painting.

You've mentioned in interviews in the past how you constantly rework paintings, what is 'finished' to you?

It's enormously difficult. At the very end of Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* there's a painter – she's been working on the painting all the way through – who finally sees the family reach the lighthouse, and puts in a vertical stroke and says 'I have had my vision'. That idea of the completion and the meaning of a painting all coming

LEG UP

The studio step ladder allows the artist to work on large canvases



together is extremely rare... It's really a series of questionings, hints, intuitions... until one day I come in and look at the painting, and it stands up to me. It resists, it stops apologising. It's just there, and the 'thereness' is often the completion.

Christopher Le Brun: Composer runs from 27 February to 27 April at The Gallery at Windsor, Vero Beach, Florida and from 2 March to 15 April at Albertz Benda, New York. www.christopherlebrun.co.uk

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