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RA

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Luke, Ben. "Painting the Mystery," *Royal Academy of Arts Magazine*. Autumn 2014.

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Enter the City, 2013, by Christopher Le Brun PRA

and began with the names of the composer and the opera written on the canvas. But in the midst of painting it, Le Brun said he 'had an absolute, sudden conviction' of what he needed to do, and painted the entire canvas red, leaving only traces of pale blue beneath. The effect, Le Brun says, was to bring all the elements underneath into connection, so that they were all 'speaking with each other'. So while the specific references to Walton's opera are now lost, its emotional power and a deep, almost overwhelming, sense of the sublime remain.

That overpowering quality is a strong element of Le Brun's new paintings. Both *Enter the City* (2013, left) and *Ceres* (2013) prompt gasps with their hot yellows and vivid reds, while *Neither White, nor Warm, nor Cold* (2013), some four metres long, envelops you in gentler tones, evoking veils of mist or diffuse early morning light on water. Le Brun is a proud descendent of 'extreme Romanticism' as he puts it, and the connection between these works and Turner's later paintings is unavoidable.

Le Brun, through his process of revealing and covering, can evoke landscape to different degrees. *Painting as Sunrise* (2013) is a crucial painting in this sense. It immediately conjures a morning sky of deep vermilion and pale blue, with white and lilac clouds and the circle of the sun just about distinguishable in an expressive flurry at the bottom right of the picture.

But that title is important: not *Painting of Sunrise* but *Painting as Sunrise*. It speaks of the power of painting not only to depict its subject, but to embody it: to provoke feeling, to stir emotion, to create wonder, just as a natural phenomenon like a sunrise can. This is the abiding feeling that Le Brun's new work transmits – of a deep conviction in and passion for painting's transcendent power and enduring mysteries.

## Painting the mystery

New paintings by RA President Christopher Le Brun embrace the transcendent powers of abstraction, says BEN LUKE

More than a decade ago, Christopher Le Brun PRA spoke of one of the consistent tensions in his work as being that between 'revealing and covering'. He added: 'That can be just as potent psychologically as any narrative. What goes on in the overall project is this continuous debate, or dialogue, internally as to what painting can be.'

One's initial reaction towards his latest pictures, which go on show in an exhibition in New York this September, might be that covering has the upper hand – these are the most abstract paintings Le Brun has created to date. But rather than breaking with his past work, he told me that

he felt that he was 'letting the essential elements of my work speak more clearly, and relying on those to do the work'. This is what makes that tension between exposure and concealment such fertile ground – because of what Le Brun calls 'the odd, metaphysical language of painting', so much can be evoked in the interplay of colour, the swathes, dabs, mists and drips of oil on canvas.

Take the breakthrough picture of this new group of works, *Walton* (2013), a rich, crimson painting with intricate trails of drips along its bottom edge. It was triggered by William Walton's late Romantic opera *Troilus and Cressida*,

**Christopher Le Brun: New Paintings** Friedman Benda Gallery, New York, [www.friedmanbenda.com](http://www.friedmanbenda.com), 11 Sep–15 Oct  
**Christopher Le Brun: New Paintings** by David Antam and Edmund de Waal, Ridinghouse, £17.95, available at the RA Shop. Le Brun exhibits sculpture in **Beyond Limits** at Chatsworth, Bakewell, Derbyshire, 01246 565300, [www.chatsworth.org](http://www.chatsworth.org), 8 Sep–26 Oct

For more information and images of Christopher Le Brun's recent projects, visit <http://roy.ac/lebrun>

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