

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Art
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Christopher Le Brun

Interview by
Ashraf Qizilbash

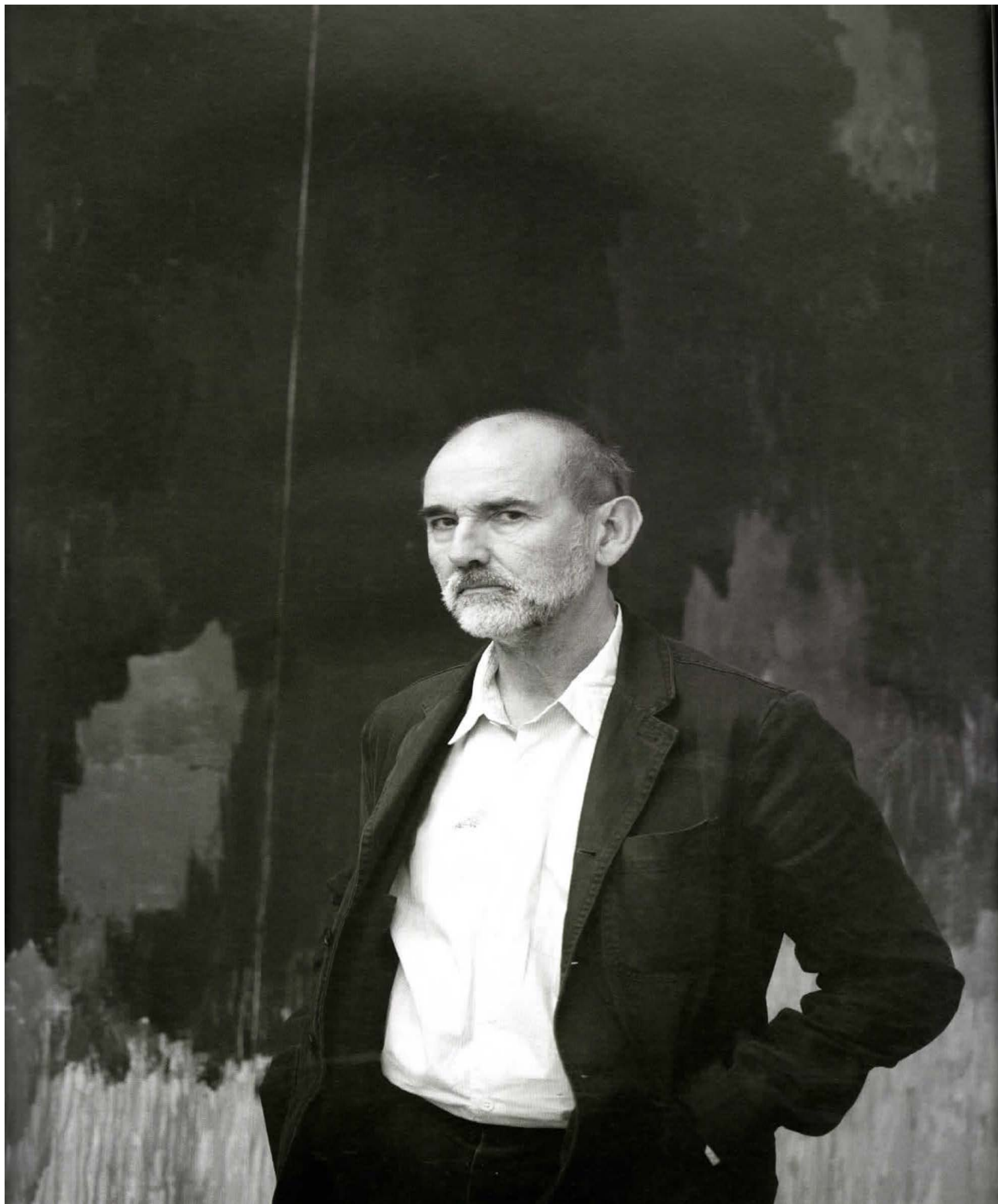
Photography by
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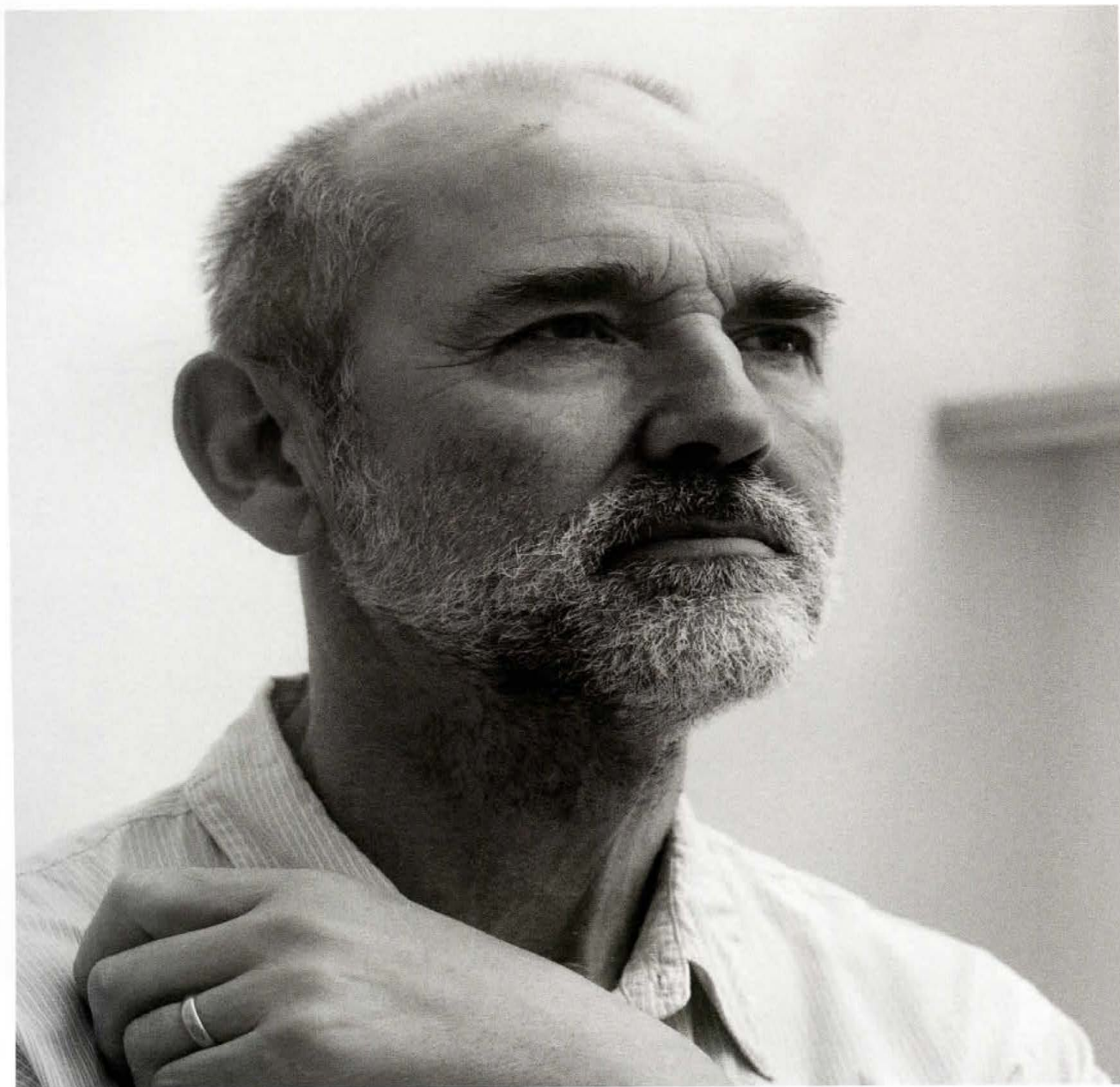


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Christopher Le Brun was elected President of the Royal Academy of Arts in 2011. An accomplished artist, he works as a painter, sculptor and printmaker. He has had numerous solo shows, most recently at Friedman Benda in New York. Christopher has been a prizewinner at two John Moores exhibitions in Liverpool and has been a trustee of the Tate, the National Gallery, the Dulwich Picture Gallery and the Prince's Drawing School. His work can be found in collections around the world, including MOMA New York, and, of course, the Royal Academy in London.



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Ashraf Qizilbash: So, you were elected president of the RA in 2011, bang in the middle of an economic crisis. Whenever there's a recession, arts funding tends to be one of the first things to get cut – but do you find that people's attitudes towards art changes in an economic downturn?

Christopher Le Brun: The thing to remember about the Royal Academy is that we receive no arts funding so we are somewhat less affected by the recession.

How so?

Well, we've been independent and self-supporting since 1768... actually, that's not strictly true because, for the first 20 years, George III supported the Academy but from then on we had to stand on our own two feet. So, we've had no government money, nothing. Which surprises people because they think that we are one of the establishment institutions, which we're not in terms of funding. We do depend heavily on charitable giving, however, and it has been a struggle to keep that up.

Nothing from the Arts Council, or anything like that?

Absolutely nothing – and we still support our schools and all of the exhibitions and everything else that we do. But where the recession could have affected us would have been through our Friends membership or the sales during the summer exhibition, because we rely on those to support the schools. But I don't think it affected us as badly as many other places. The thing is, if you come to the Royal Academy, you have to pay to see the exhibitions. So we're unlike, say, Tate Modern with its collection free to visit so the visitor can just enjoy being there for a long time – that's not the case yet at the RA, although I'd like it to be more like that. When we join up the two parts of the site – Burlington House in the front, with the courtyard, connected through to Burlington Gardens – we have a site of about two and a half acres in Mayfair, and I want to put more of our great collection on the wall. I would prefer the visitor to come to the RA without necessarily seeing and paying for an exhibition. And I think that'll make the experience very different.

So where Pace Gallery is now?

Well, Pace came to Burlington Gardens as tenants and they brought tremendous quality and experience with them. Their first show was Mark Rothko and Sugimoto and it was a big success, a lot of people came to that – and when people come to Pace they're also, in effect, coming to the RA. So that's been a good relationship.

Do you find that when you see other exhibitions, they inspire you for how you would want to curate a show?

Well, if I'm honest, the quality of that exhibition was of absolute museum standard, even beyond what some museums would be able to achieve. So it's a challenge for us to see that standard of exhibition and then we have to live up to it... I hope we do! But then, that was part of the reason for working with such a gallery, with such a history.

And surely the setting of the RA also has to be considered in curating exhibitions, because obviously it's very different to just big, white gallery walls?

Yes, because our building represents a history of architecture – there are so many different parts. Some say our Beaux Arts galleries are the finest gallery spaces in Europe, if not the world. Interestingly, Anselm Kiefer has just opened and although many artists essentially create an installation in the gallery and change the walls, Anselm said, "No, let's just leave it as it is. I just want to put my work into these beautiful galleries." So that's high praise from an artist who is used to completely transforming buildings.

Yep, he's got to live up to the setting.

Exactly, I think it's very tough. The great shows that we've had recently have transformed the space: David Hockney through the volume and energy of his work, and Anish Kapoor with the cannon firing, and the whole back galleries with that huge slab on tracks driving through. So, in a way, it's a bit like a metaphor for what the RA is – you see the contrast of the historic architecture and absolutely new contemporary art. And that's what we're like, because we're an historic institution run by contemporary artists, and I think that's an ideal tension to have.

Is it more important for an institution like the RA to maintain tradition or to evolve?

Well, we do both. Look at the summer exhibition; some artists say, "Oh, you should get rid of the summer exhibition because it's middle class, middle of the road" or "It's not cutting edge" these are typical remarks. But my reply to that is that it's not mine to stop! It has such continuity and momentum that it somehow belongs to people; it's been part of the nation's history for almost 250 years, so it's our job to look after it, and yes of course, to keep it fresh and innovative, which it has been in recent years with co-ordinators like Cornelia Parker and Michael Craig Martin. And then, the archive and records of the RA are immensely valuable and they're not well known enough – and then, overlaid on that, you have each generation of new artists and architects coming in, and it just mixes. It's like London; it's big, complicated, historic.

So, are artists keener now to become academicians than they were a few decades ago?

Oh definitely! I'm probably a good example, because when I was approached in the mid 90s about becoming an academician, I had to think carefully about it, and frankly, in terms of my career – I now think that was rather a mean thought, but it's a real one. My judgment was that this is somewhere that has all the ingredients, and the constitution, and the grand home and could therefore become really great again. So, I was lucky enough to be elected. And since then, a lot of my generation came in – partly with my encouragement... and now they're all academicians. So leading artists of my generation were followed by the YBA generation who had fewer misgivings. And the most recent members, such as Bob and Roberta Smith, Wolfgang Tillmans, Rebecca Warren... they attend our brief ceremony in the General Assembly room, where they receive a medal and they sign the Roll of Obligation.

A Roll of Obligation?

A Roll of Obligation is a wonderful set of charts which have Reynolds' name at the far end, and their name at the other!

Every single person?

Every single academician, you know – Lawrence, Turner, they're all on this list and, as we get to our own day now, the new signatures are there. It's rather moving but my point is that the recent members were happy and enjoyed being part of it. Whereas, if you go back maybe 30 years, there was a real sense of, "Oh, what are we joining here?" So I think it's been completely transformed over the past few years – and that's gratifying.

What was your vision for the RA when you took on your role in 2011?

Well, I've been there for a time and in particular helped with the future plan, which was to unify the site, but I think the broader vision for me was to enable it to be what it was originally designed to be. And that was an international organisation for artists, because the first artists that joined included Swiss, German, French, Italian alongside British artists. I think that's an aspect of the RA that we've not been sufficiently aware of. So, I'm travelling a lot more and making links, particularly in the Far East and obviously in America. I would also like to recover the sense of it being a true Academy rather than just an exhibition venue by highlighting our Schools, our academic programme and collection. My sense of the Academy is actually to become, if I'm honest with you, the greatest independent arts organisation in the world for artists. Because I can't really see anywhere else similar, can you think of anywhere?

No, nowhere that does the same sort of thing.

You see, the old academies of Europe are mostly gone – either through revolution, or they've been modernised out of existence. So the RA is one of the last standing that still has that continuity, it still functions. I was talking to somebody the other day about how some of these British institutions tend to flex rather than break. They absorb new challenges – and my task is to hold it together. Holding together 100 strong-minded, highly successful artists and architects isn't straightforward, but it's possible.

Marrying the old with the new?

Oh completely. For example, take the RA School – it has a cast corridor full of exceptionally important historical casts that date

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right back to the mid-18th century, that have been given as teaching tools. In the past many art schools smashed them up; when I was at the Slade, there were a few bits and pieces that had been painted or chucked off the balcony during student parties, or just generally destroyed. Whereas the RA cast collection is still intact, and of serious significance. And so, to live in a fine old building full of new art, I think that is somehow stylish – not inconsistent. It's like the summer exhibition; I was there with the French designer of the new Louvre museum at Lens. And I took him into the summer exhibition and he said, "Ahhh, J'adore! Magnifique!" I thought he was pulling my leg, but he really meant it. In other words, the unique mixture of the summer exhibition in this building was to him completely surprising and fresh. Because there are aspects of the contemporary art world, which are paradoxically conservative, with control, privilege, authority and all of these things which artists need so their work can be seen exactly as they want. But, if you think of the summer exhibition, where you put your work into this absolute stew of other artists' work and it has to survive – that's pretty testing, but of course the public love it. I think that's what he was noticing, because it's so unusual now. I don't want to sound critical of the commercial art world, because I'm also professionally part of that when I show my own work, but it's good to have preserved that difference somewhere.

Do you think that contemporary art has become too much of a business? Are artists thinking more about the commerce? Obviously, for centuries, artists have always been commissioned, that was what it was all about, but...

I think there are some very smart business minds amongst artists, and there always have been. Artists were frequently in professional families – Brueghels, the Tiepolos. The fact is, the international arts world is so enormous now that you're bound to draw in different aspects of human ingenuity and creativity. Actually, I find sitting at the council table with our advisors or trustees, people from business – retail, legal and finance worlds – I find the mix of thinking refreshing because the best are often just as intuitive or imaginative as the artists albeit to a profoundly different purpose.

As far as artists thinking with a business mind... well, you have to hold your line and you have to keep your vision. What people want to buy is beyond the control of the artist but I think, certainly in my case, I try and pay attention to my sense of beauty and what I believe in. In a way, you're skirting around the issue of truth, which is a rare enough commodity but one would expect artists to have that as a value over and above anything else. Maybe easier said than done...

Do you believe that art needs to have a message?

I'm rather allergic to the idea of art having a message, in the narrow political sense. I think it interferes with being able to trust it for truth. But artists have insightful things to say, for example Bob and Roberta Smith. He's a new member and is passionate about education, as you know. Putting aesthetic values first is already a powerful message but I would resist the call that art should be burdened by obligations.

I guess maybe artists have a voice they can express to say what they want when the people on the streets feel that they're not being heard...

I think that artists are a group whom government and opinion formers are very aware of, and if they do attract more attention it's probably because clever, inventive people have smart and occasionally unpredictable reactions and their comments are difficult to defend against. That's just how art operates; the broader creative industry in this country has an effect on opinion that it might not have had formerly. Also we're so good at it! I've been surprised to the extent that it has happened in my lifetime.

How have you seen that evolve?

As a student, it was just a few galleries in Cork Street – you could see from one side to the other of the art world. It was almost like a series of family relationships: that person taught that person, the torch was passed, it felt as if one could grasp the whole scene. And then there were the art schools like the Royal College, the Slade, the RA, each with their own traditions. But then, with the increase of connections internationally, from the late 70s and early 80s and then the huge influx of artists coming to London – well, that completely transformed it. For example,

I had a warehouse studio, like many of us, on the Thames at Wapping and housing in the east end, places which effectively were pioneered by organisations like Space Studios and the ACME artists' housing association – we had a little derelict house that was due to be knocked down, but through ACME we got a license that qualified us as a council tenants, so we could buy it. Hundreds of artists bought old ruined houses in the east end and had studios nearby. Not only did it preserve those small streets, but it brought productive people into the area. Numbers of people from abroad came to live in London on the basis of that property transformation. And that set us off. And so first of all, we had a house in Limehouse where I painted all my work for my first show in New York. That was demolished a few years later and then we moved to Bermondsey, and now we've been in Camberwell for nearly 30 years.

It's a great place! No plans to move?

No, no, I like it. And our house is just five minutes away from this studio, so it's easy.

Do you feel that there's a risk that Britain may lose out on the next great generation of artists because of government cuts and austerity?

With the RA Schools, those cuts shouldn't affect us, we're pretty robust and we'll survive because we're not dependent on that money. As far as artists are concerned, I think it's true that under economic pressure, fewer people are likely to go into art education and might be seriously discouraged from it as a career. On the other hand, I think that the momentum and success of art in Britain has been so great, that that in itself is driving things forward. So anybody looking at art and saying, "well, it will be tough to make a living" is at the same time looking at the enormous successes and wide possibilities for artists. 30 years ago, the market for art was mostly in this country and frankly it used to be quite difficult to sell paintings to the English – they have other pre-occupations! So, there are markets abroad, whole areas of the world now – for example, I think that South America, the Indian sub-continent, all of these things are yet to come on stage fully. So, all of those are tremendous possibilities for interaction for art in Britain and I think that as long as places like the Academy keep going and London remains a world centre, then that's bound to flourish. I don't see any dangers there; in fact, to me – and I am a natural optimist – it just feels like that momentum is going to create more opportunity and is drawing more people into London. Although, saying London, I immediately feel guilty! I should be saying the whole country but we can't solve that one alone.

How do you manage your work as an artist with all the pressures of being president of the RA?

People are often surprised at how I'm able to do this job at the same time as keeping my work going. But it's absolutely vital that I keep my work going, because all presidents are working painters, sculptors and architects. I am surprised myself at being able to do two things but one can produce energy for the other. And maybe it also has something to do with my age. In other words: if I don't do it now, I may never do it. The increased focus has been very good for my work.

Has your art inspired your vision for the RA? Or has the RA inspired your art?

They're very connected because when people see me in my suit and tie, they might think, "Oh look he's an art bureaucrat" – but then Turner was deputy-president for a couple of years and Delacroix – who I greatly admire – was on the city council in Paris and we don't think of those artists like that. But actually, if you spend all day, every day in your studio then it's quite a solitary existence and you're not using all potential aspects of your personality and temperament – so to interact with the world as president, as well as being pretty challenging, is enjoyable and satisfying. So, whether the RA has inspired my work... well, frankly, I don't think it has! But it's certainly produced more energy for it!



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