



5 October -12 November 1994

Christopher Le Brun Paintings 1991- 1994

Catalogue Introduction to the exhibition
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Marlborough Fine Art London 1994

In the last twenty years, Christopher Le Brun has created some of the most beautiful and effulgent paintings made by an English artist in my lifetime: strong paintings, often on a grand scale, with highly specific imagery expressed in a modern equivalent to the grand manner and painted with such exuberant panache that one accepts, almost without question, their extraordinary content. On consistent terms which Le Brun has made uniquely his own, he has created a considerable body of work in large or quite small paintings, with drawings and many engravings of inventive refinement which, put all together, makes a visible and credible world of its own. An intensity of visual concept in its broad sense sustains an oddly relaxed, divergent and exploratory tension derived from the calculated and extremely variable deployment of each brushmark in its placement on the canvas. He offers us a feast for the eye demanded by Delacroix as the first requisite of any painting before it has meaning. Some of the ways in which Le Brun deploys pigment appear to stem from early Guston and, before that, from the late Monet that we encounter in the Musée Marmotton – but the world celebrated by Le Brun in this use of paint stems in essence from the romantic past of poetry, myth and legend.

If we accept the validity of this world as a starting point, almost without question, it is because Le Brun is not offering us pastiche, or a contrived neo-romanticism, but a re-definition of the past in terms of the present: the objects, events and presences of an ancient and legendary world caught up and transformed by the imaginative urgency of a painter working in the late twentieth century – in the wake of abstract expressionism as well as total abstraction. Although they are poetically and obsessively held in Le Brun's imagination, these events and presences are subordinate to the way in which the image is constructed in terms of painting: each event is experienced and has its life in the making, as it were, in paint on canvas.

A number of things also are consistent: the prevailing mood or atmosphere in Le Brun's painting is often noctur-

nal, elegiac or valedictory; sunset or late afternoon rather than morning or sunrise; farewell and passion spent rather than physical engagement or direct encounter; mysteriously interchangeable shadow and substance. Ostensibly, Le Brun is concerned with images from a world of romantic poetry, of shadows lengthening across deserted, dream-like landscapes, dark forests, dense haunted undergrowth, a pale moon in vast night skies, riders on white horses. He has recorded his point of departure for some paintings in the early eighties in the *Isle of the Dead* painting by Bocklin, with its disquieting calm and air of tense melancholy offset by the grandly soaring, horizontal masses of rock, mausoleum and cypresses. But even in the early works, it is the strange discrepancy, the consciously equivocal gap, between the archaic connotations of Le Brun's subject and its wholly modern handling in terms of brushstrokes that give the paintings their edge.

From the beginning, Le Brun's use of colour has been schematic – and three quarters of the way towards abstraction – rather than directly descriptive: low-keyed, subtle in its orchestrations of warm and cold greys, matt of shiny blacks, frugal use of crimson or vermillion red; cobalt or Prussian blue, a sense of colour no unlike a symbolist extension of Venetian colour harmonies and always within the shallow space of most abstract painting. The emotional resonance established in Le Brun's paintings is all the stronger for its diffusiveness, its restraint, and the distancing of imagery rendered almost as a visual echo when combined, almost synthesised, with its sensual presence as painting. His forms tend towards that attenuated, lean, almost nerveless presence so typical of the fin-de-siècle symbolists.

In some ways, Le Brun seems to have been feeling his way towards the sort of visual half-world suggested by the music of Parsifal: the recent commission to create for an opera loving patron a group of paintings inspired by Wagner's Ring must have been welcome, if daunting. If we accept that Le Brun's paintings have never been literary in effect, that he paints the image behind the words as surely

as Munch or Ensor, and that his often hallucinatory images have an alluring physicality only in terms of paint, colour and brushwork, there is also in many of the larger paintings a sense of the ceremonial, almost of ritual. An event or presence is half enmeshed in the time-flux through the physicality of handling, and half detached from it or elevated above actuality through the massive simplifications of placement and emphatic structure. Le Brun's habitual composition is essentially a solemn, presentational isolation of the dominant form, crescendo of light, or object, like a visitation or a mirage shimmering in light and space.

Le Brun's paintings are certainly not theatrical – beyond his concern for a ceremonial presentation of the subject – but many visual aspects of the world of *The Ring* seem as valid an extension of Le Brun's acknowledged love of poetry and legend as any other, and he has in fact created a new group of paintings which bring him a stage further in his preoccupation with the figure in space – or in a landscape, or occupying, directly or indirectly by shadowy inferences, a mythologically fantastic space.

From Giotto to Piero and from Raphael and Tintoretto all the way through to Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, Boccioni's *Lady Walking a Dog* and Matisse and Picasso, the idea of the figure in space has been the most absorbing problem for any artist to solve, only shelved for a couple of decades in our mid-century by abstract painters in Europe and America with other ideas to pursue. From its primitive place within a decorative formalization of nature in early religious art, the figure emerged as small and fearful in the early landscapes of Patinir, dwarfed by the immensity of nature. Gradually, over two centuries, an equilibrium is achieved between the figure and the landscape – man in nature – culminating in the formalized integration between landscape and figures in the paintings of Poussin. But in Claude, the figures are still subordinate to the engulfing landscape, tiny figures caught up in the magic of ancient legend. Rubens humanized landscape in quite a new way in his panoramic *Landscape with a Rainbow* as well as the distant view of his *Chateau de Steen*, where in both paintings human usage and occupancy are implicit in the great vistas of woods, tilled fields and meadows unfolding to the spectator's dominant viewpoint, in which the artist's estate is merely one element. The mellow mood established here by light, colour, warm tonality and intimate detail – bristling with sites for hunting, farming, poaching or picnics – is almost Shakespearian in its ripe tenderness. In the great portraits, from Titian to Gainsborough, landscape is seen first as an accessory, almost, and certainly as detached, subservient background, then the figures, single or in family groups, find themselves on equal terms with landscape – until the arrival of impres-

sionism, when figures often become an incidental part of nature, fused into the dappled sunlight and shade, no more or less significant within the whole scene than a patch of poppies. In England, it was Turner in the full baleful flood of the Industrial Revolution who gave empty landscape or seascape a tragic dimension, quite new to us: the landscape inhabited by human conscience and suffused with a sense of morality to match the pessimism of his *Fallacies of Hope* poetry.

In cubism, the figure and its enveloping space were flattened out and realigned within a single shallow space of multi-faceted planes. In expressionism, the figure becomes almost submerged or devoured by its landscape context, or radiates its own nervous tension outward into the surrounding space to reflect states of being. De Kooning's figures exist in an expressive vacuum, but he also made sumptuous landscape paintings without figures in such dramatic and violent close-up that they are intensely redolent of human occupancy and strong feeling. Figure and landscape are synthesized at a new level.

In Le Brun's work, the figure or the subject, the object even, and its space are finely balanced on equal terms: space, light and darkness exist as protagonists as forcefully as a tree, shield, or a horse and rider. The artist has written very clearly about his balanced fusion of figure and space at the service of a fine degree of abstraction.

Most of my paintings move in their development between subject matter and abstraction. I don't use the word 'mythological', as I think it can be misleading in the context of my work. It implies an image that finds its meaning in its role, whereas I find the meaning of an image in its appearance. Therefore, I would rather describe these images as moving between motif and abstraction, because the subject matter is not necessarily represented by the motif or the object depicted. So a painting of a wing, for example, is not in my case a painting 'about' a wing. The word motif appears to hold up the 'peak of the tent' if you use three categories: subject matter (content), motif (object) and abstraction (material embodiment). A comparison was made between my work and that of the French director Robert Bresson, particularly the film *Lancelot du Lac*, a film for the sake of an image. It stayed with me, this idea: an image for its own sake and in a mysterious relationship to time and meaning, just its splendid complex musicality of form. The dislocation of an image from its time brings home to us with a shock how strange and poetical images can be and how mysterious appearance as a form of being is. But fluctuation between the different types of work is a continual testing of their relative value. Which is more true, an unintentional image formed by touch or an ideal

image that lives in the mind alone?

Le Brun was born in 1951 in Portsmouth; with three sisters, he was the oldest of four children. His mother was musical but there were hardly any books at home and no art of any kind. His father, a printer by trade, served in the Royal Marines: an excellent sportsman and high diver, in the RM waterpolo team. Le Brun's father's family had lived in or around the New Forest area, Lymington and Christchurch. His grandfather on the male side of the family came from Jersey - Le Brun is a common name in the Channel Islands - and married a Miss Evans whose mother, Miss Duquesne, was French. As a captain in the 1914-18 war he was awarded the Military Medal.

Christopher Le Brun was educated locally and then at the Southern Grammar School where he received an excellent broad education, with a good art class. Like his father, he excelled at sport - in football, cricket or running - and broke the school record for the triple jump, becoming Victor Ludurum at athletics. The art teacher emphasized drawing and maintained a strict routine but was replaced by a more liberal minded teacher, encouraging Le Brun, who began to draw at home. There were no visits to museums and galleries until he was seventeen.

At sixteen, through the enthusiasm of his English teacher, Le Brun began to explore English literature beyond the curriculum and this more than anything stimulated his visual imagination. He read Edward Thomas, poetry and prose; Keats and Blake; and among the moderns, especially Virginia Woolf - he made some pictures connected with the 'stream of consciousness' concept found in *To the Lighthouse* and *Waves* - and Joyce. He worked at school and at home.

Choosing to write an essay on Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*, Le Brun came across a reference in a critical text to Claude's *Enchanted Castle*, in the National Gallery: '...a magic casement opening...' This discovery helped him towards a strong feeling for Turner as well as Claude or Poussin. Essentially, a sense of landscape and its possibilities as visual imagery formed itself at this stage, revealed from romantic poetry, and a relationship between Le Brun and landscape was established in this oblique way. He began to search the poetry of Coleridge, Tennyson and Wordsworth for landscape references and found all he needed for the time being. Later, Le Brun discovered Ezra Pound, his imagist concept of poetry, and 'the way he placed an exquisite image in a sea of language'. Le Brun liked the way it shone and 'worked' inside its relationship.

At the end of his school days, Le Brun's music master

played Debussy's *Pelleas et Melisande* to his class, in the original Ansermet recording, and this music was a revelation compared to the poetry. By the time he left school at eighteen, his visual world was established with the additional discovery of Paul Nash, Hitchens and Sutherland (Penguin Modern Painters) who seemed to fit into the pastoral world that already fascinated him. In 1970, Le Brun entered the Slade. He had considered working as a naval architect, within the context of Portsmouth and his father's Marines connection; but a friend of his art master saw some drawings of local landscapes made by Le Brun and suggested the Slade School. He had already begun to work at oil painting. In that same year, Le Brun's father died, so that he began life at the Slade in some tension but with the iron determination to succeed, stimulated rather than daunted by the negative backlash of the student unrest in 1968. Within the past two years, English art students had banned the life class, locked up printing presses and staged strikes and sit-ins at many art schools throughout the country, but notably in London, at Hornsey. The protest movement in England had not sprung directly from any single political confrontation as it had in Paris - where students had paraded initially in support of the Renault workers' prolonged strike - but from a variety of reasons. The central sociological reason here was the neglect of the regions for decades by the Government: poverty and hardship confronted by the superficially affluent gloss of the sixties, and a negative sense of surfeit after the successive revolutions in style of the sixties. There was also revulsion shared by young people at the escalating Vietnam War, and, among art students, a puritan revulsion against the excesses of the art market and a degree of xenophobia. In 1970 Art Forum declared: 'Painting is dead' - discouraging news for a young art student.

Le Brun found at the Slade endless meetings to determine the role of art in society and tightly politicized student leaders. It was the time of David Medella, Guy Brett, Paul Overy, John Stezacker. Conceptual art was at one cerebral extreme of possibilities, art and language, systems art or performance art lay in other directions, supported by Richard Cork, Victor Burghin or Charles Harrison. Many of the participants seemed like thin-lipped Soviet commissars. Maoism and Trotskyist politics proliferated in a nihilist or negative phase of demos like 'Mrs. Thatcher, Milk Snatcher'. A grey and bleak atmosphere prevailed at the Slade. In these circumstances, Le Brun's single-minded purpose in becoming a mature painter seems even more remarkable. The staff included Stuart Brisley, Bernard Cohen, Tess Jaray and Noel Forster, with John Hoyland making occasional visits. But it was Malcolm Hughes, himself a constructivist and remembered fondly by the artist as 'a wonderful man' who saw immediately what Le

Brun needed, and pointed the way to abstract expressionism. I recall the remains of the post-Bomberg group of painters and a hermetically sealed school of life-painting, with little sense of pointing tradition and the past towards a possible future. The intervention of Hughes provided Le Brun with the perfect stimulus. Abstract expressionism was already in the past, but it was still near enough to have great relevance for Le Brun. He was particularly drawn to Guston, Still and Rothko. Although regularly attending life-class, Le Brun began to paint figures in landscapes, affected by abstract expressionism. And he ignored the prevailing Marxist interpretation of art history, discovered Turner in depth, and spent hours at the Courtauld Collection of French painting and the National Gallery. He chose Turner's *Hero and Lysander* to depict a certain type of pictorial space that concerned him – and Richard Hamilton's *What is it about...* painting/collage for similar complex space reasons.

In 1971, Le Brun explored art in Paris for the first time, discovering Puvis de Chavannes, the *Musee Gustave Moreau*, the *Delacroix Massacre* and *Gericault's Raft of the Medusa* at the Louvre. He had read the de Chirico novel *Hebdomeros*, and de Chirico's paintings also seemed to belong to his expanding imaginative world. Back in London, he saw the Barnett Newman show at the Tate and Bernard Cohen's Hayward Gallery retrospective. He kept up a long running argument mentally through the processes of painting, and found valid comparisons in the work of John Walker. He began to sense his own predilection for tacking a course between abstraction and figuration, with alternating emphasis. He admired the way in which Hoyland was trying to invest abstract art with something of the splendour of the grand manner.

In 1972-3, Le Brun hitchhiked through Holland and encountered Mondrian's painting for the first time, seeing in the plus-minus *Pier and Ocean* paintings and tree studies how abstract principles could arise from nature. At most art schools, by contrast, abstraction was taught from purely formal context, exercises and components – from the aftermath of the basic design courses derived loosely but inaccurately from Bauhaus theory. In his last year at the Slade, 1974, he went to Sicily but made no drawings or studies – he rarely works directly from nature in this way. He read Camus and existentialist literature; Pound and Heidegger; and read with intense pleasure French symbolist poetry: Baudelaire, Mallarme, Rimbaud, Verlaine and de Heredia. As in the painting of Puvis de Chavannes, he realized that the atmosphere of an ideal world lay in this poetry, and it seemed to him that the purpose of a work of art was to construct an ideal world, free of irony or surrealist subversions or distortions. In Paris, he had

realised that there was an acute difference between the British and the French treatment of medieval motifs and the ancient world. The French retained a lucid, intellectual and conceptual ideal of that world, as in Debussy, Satie, Moreau and Puvis de Chavannes, and seen at its best in the work of Redon as the pure forms of symbolism without the trappings. In England, the Pre-Raphaelites had essentially produced Holman Hunt, and his *Scapegoat* with its real sea, real desert, real goat, and concern for details of real costumes, as in Alma Tadema, Leighton and Burne Jones. It meant that the transition from Moreau to Matisse is easier because the colour frees itself from the form more readily, whereas in English art, generally speaking, colour tends to retain its literal, descriptive role. From Puvis to Matisse is a relatively simple abstraction, and predictable. In the Autumn of 1974, Le Brun left the Slade and entered Chelsea School of Art which offered a transitional course from school to professional status: a post-graduate year. By now, he was with Charlotte Verity, a fellow painter at the Slade, who later became his wife. At Chelsea, Le Brun encountered Sean Scully and Ian Stephenson among other painters on the teaching staff.

In 1974-75, his paintings were big simple expanses of colour in oil paint on canvas: 'a dark, symbolic range of colour' and rather restricted in range: deep Van Dyck brown, blacks, deep blues. These colours were symbolic in that they tried to sum up complete areas of experience in an intellectualized or conceptual sense and did not merely represent mood or physical atmosphere. They were reasoned.

At this stage – he was 23 – Le Brun liked the work of Clyfford Still, Brice Marden, Robert Ryman – and Rothko, but especially Guston in his own thinking about abstract expressionism. His idea of painting was both imaginary and idealistic, seeking to develop the idea that painting could convey what you wanted it to reflect, as something emotive or splendid, rather than embody a dialectical idea or principle. Marden's work began to seem increasingly like a formal development only and not an experiential development. As a kind of painting, this was ironic because of the lack of any possible purpose – an ironic paradox lay at the heart of it. A kind of 'neo art' arrived and took hold in different forms repeatedly though the seventies and early eighties. It seemed to Le Brun at the time, that Marden gradually looked like another 'neo' figure compared with Rothko or Still – Marden's purpose being to compress his temperament rather than to display or expand it. Such deliberate limitation produced the compression that was supposed to give the work its strength, but it did not. By comparison, Rothko, De Kooning and Pollock seemed to be artists of enormous temperament.

In later years, Le Brun became equally critical of Robert Rauschenberg's 'what you see is what you get' paintings, although he was at first seduced by the work of an artist who seemed like another Mallarmé. Le Brun's own 'sheets of colour' at this time, 1975, contained quite elaborate under-paintings: he was rehearsing what he wanted to paint, and then covering it up in an aspect of current abstract style. The bulk of the painting was submerged by a coloured form of obliteration to echo - for a brief period - what a lot of modern painting was supposed to look like. But Le Brun had resisted the negative and the conformist group slogans - anti-success, anti-elitist, anti-American - of the early seventies at art school and he soon became bored by 'the pioneering drive to total abstraction' that surrounded him and which he felt no wish to extend. He was exposed as a young artist to what seemed to many of us at the time to be the thinner and weaker work of the post-abstract expressionist generation on American ab-

stract art as it was disclosed in Europe. And there were few examples readily at hand in England of work by the older generation. His underpainting subjects were landscapes with figurations: earth, sky, an island or distant sea disrupted by huge formalized bars or lozenges, inserts disrupting any kind of possible view of a place, or a conventional scene.

He began to feel strongly that in dealing with subjects, which were what his mind was increasingly filled with, it is as if you are a composer and you compose or think of an opera, and then you paint it. Even completing his studies at Chelsea, which he enjoyed, he still felt with regard to the art world at the time that it was as if you were always being told 'that has been done, and this is the direction for you to explore' - but you wanted to explore rather differently on your own.

Le Brun left art school finally in 1975 with his MA and

Götterdämmerung, 1994

100 1/4 x 149 1/2 in. 254.6 x 378.4 cm



worked for a period without showing, except for one painting, *Barre Island*, 1978, in the annual John Moores show, which won a prize. Peter Moores bought the painting: a tall, rather severe, vertical structure of squares packed together like a checkers board below an implied horizon line, and ovoid shapes like simplified lay-ins for the attenuated vertical ovals of the cypress trees which were to become a familiar element among Le Brun's landscape images. The cypress form appears to emerge more clearly in another 1978 painting: *Headland*, also abstract, like *Barre Island* but with its simple rectangles and lozenges appearing to exist within an atmospheric space, fluctuating in light and density. By 1980, the cypress trees had appeared fully formed together with a moored boat, vast classical urns, and abandoned wheels. Pegasus, the winged horse, also appeared in a 1980-81 painting. *Arion*, *Xanthus* and *Mars in the Air* followed in 1981. Le Brun had found himself, with the courage and the technical means to paint what moved him and seemed most true to his experience of painting and his imagination, largely formed by poetry.

The period 1976 - 1980, the first four years of work outside art school as an independent young artist, was plainly the crucial phase in Le Brun's development in strength of vision, through coordinating and refining the different strands in his imaginative world of reading and perception. But this did not take place in a vacuum: much thought and experience led up to it, and Le Brun's thinking was not formed only inside his studio. In the late seventies, in this acutely formative period, he explored the big Courbet show at the Royal Academy, and this event affected him very strongly.

In Courbet, he found that the imagery within the landscapes appeared to correspond quite vividly with his own ideas. He was impressed by the way in which Courbet had the ability to isolate or detach a visual event so that it takes on a supercharged density and I enjoyed equally the slab-like density of paint with such a material existence of its own, achieved before Cezanne. The scene, whatever it was, was extracted from the time-flux through its innate monumentality and however different the subjects were to de Chirico, the same detachment ensued through this monumentality. Considering Courbet's renowned physicality, the real tactile presence of stone, tree-bark or water, this is an odd reaction but quite valid from one aspect of Le Brun's innate sensibility as a developing painter.

If you think of still life, Courbet makes an archetypal work constructed as much as it is observed. Courbet seemed to epitomise a whole genre of painting. Each painting had such a convincing presence, and for all Courbet's academic

knowledge of art, his touch and actual use of paint was unpredictable and always surprising.

Le Brun had also loved the becalmed stillness and fable-like, distilled atmosphere of *The Huntsman*, one of the greatest images of the 19th century and the embodiment of 'poetic' imagery in its tension and repose between figures in a landscape through the counterbalance between a standing and crouching figure in dappled *sous bois* light and shade. He relished the spirit of romance, its glamorous, dream-like power. Around the same time as the Courbet exhibition in London, he was also becoming interested in the paintings of von Mares - a German artist active in the late 19th century, often compared with Cezanne - whose figurative compositions had for Le Brun an abstract conceptual structure and an abstract pictorial structure as their main purpose. Abstract conceptual structure is where an image is found that epitomises an area of thought. Abstract pictorial structure describes the problem of locating it in a composition which looks so fundamental that it looks predestined.

Courbet seemed - and still seems - far more of a poet and a dreamer to Le Brun than the realist he called himself. In early self-portraits, he depicts himself as a lover, a murderer, as a murdered man lying under a tree. There is a portrait of himself with his wife who is then painted out when she left him. These paintings have nothing to do with work, and a lot to do with dressing up. I think that most of the paintings which are also normally thought of or seen as part of his political agenda display more of a zest for life than a desire to preach. Le Brun loves the whole reach of French painting from Millais to early Seurat, filled with such a strong feeling for life, perhaps before the intrusion of science and optical theory which surrounded and succeeded impressionism.

Le Brun's professional career took off very quickly in the eighties, with a small one-man show in Paris and mounting interest from the art department of the British Council - following Le Brun's participation in the Berlin *Zeitgeist* show in 1982 - which included him in more and more travelling shows of British art abroad throughout the eighties. It was from a mixture of his own concerns with European painting, and the eventual retreat in the early eighties of the blankly xenophobic mood of the London art world in the seventies (lightened by several notable exceptions, of course, among individual artists and galleries) that Le Brun began to be aligned with the new wave of figurative painting emanating from the Continent at that time. Although his work began to be included more and more frequently in the major anthology exhibitions of the period, it is the series of spectacular one-man shows

held between 1980 and 1989 at Nigel Greenwood's gallery, at first near Sloane Square and then in New Burlington Street, which established Le Brun's reputation and then consolidated his presence in England and increasingly throughout Europe and America. Greenwood is a true entrepreneur as well as a dealer, and his enthusiasm for Le Brun's work in all its aspects was invaluable through this first decade of Le Brun's professional life.

I saw Le Brun's second one-man show at Nigel Greenwood's Chelsea gallery in 1982 - his first show there was confined to drawings - and was bowled over, like most of the other visitors. I do not easily warm to modern figurative painting - unless it has the authority of a Balthus or Matisse or Bonnard - because most figurative painting in the 20th century is morbid. I am temperamentally allergic to expressionism - unless it is abstract expressionism - because life has always seemed quite sufficiently expressionist already, without having to endure some painfully distorted figure on a canvas grimacing at me from the wall after the pressures of an average day. I gravitate toward the balanced calm of Indian, Chinese or Persian art or the soaring optimism of Brancusi. Frenzy belongs in my eyes to the psychiatrist's couch or the clinic. I have spent a good deal of my life in presenting and enjoying many forms of abstract art, from Mondrian to Rothko and Pollock. A lot of the emerging figurative painting in the early eighties seemed worse than usual to me, academic in one way or another (the several academies in abstract art are equally obvious) and when new in subject or handling, coarsely frenetic in style. If the crucial stylistic battle of the century had always been between Disney and Brancusi, Disney was winning. In the influx of painting from the Continent, the most notable arrival, up to a point, was Kiefer, except in some very big paintings which seemed empty inflated, and too graphic.

Le Brun's paintings convinced me instantly. I accepted the seemingly archaic content because of the inventive way in which each painting was constructed in terms of painting and relished the evident tension between subject and handling. The paintings were intriguing in another dimension because some aspects of those turbulent great canvasses - all of them intensely romantic but with a disconcerting edge, a kind of double-take on romantic content in which the painting surface triumphed - seemed not too remote from a post-Tarkovsky world. The paintings occasionally seemed to touch upon a kind of brilliant cinematography - first glimpsed in the famous 1938 version by Michael Curtiz of *The Adventures of Robin Hood* - which, in presenting us with an image goes far beyond its 'reality' in its concern for lighting, *chiaroscuro*, texture, density and an unexpected oddness of angle or isolation, as

in Cocteau's 1946 *La Belle a la Bete* and some later films by other hands. It is not fashionable to speak of cinema in relation to serious painting, but at the end of the 20th century I doubt if any painter, or any other creative person, has not been visually touched, however marginally or unconsciously, by the great cinematography of our time, built up in collective awareness through seven decades. It interested me later to come across a reference to Bresson's marvellously hermetic, vivid and austere film *Lancelot du Lac* in connection with Le Brun. But of course, far more importantly, Le Brun's paintings seemed not only post-cinematography, in the way light and dark as occasional surface glitter were used, but post-abstract expressionist - and to have sieved through and maintained the best of the new-found freedom in painting of the previous decades. Each brush stroke in Le Brun's best work seemed to be instinct with imaginative intelligence.

Le Brun's work has moved on a good deal in the past decade, if anything gaining in stature, with only a few unresolved encounters with a variable pitch of darkness in blacks and greys in two or three large and almost impenetrable paintings of 1987-90, which seem to resist proper illumination in any form, natural or artificial. In 1986, some of the loveliest works were embarked upon: a series of drily tender paintings derived from plant life, increasingly detached from reality, in which the structure of natural forms was so formalised that the leaves, tendrils and stems of vines, or the mottled bark of trees achieved a more abstract metamorphosis through abstract structure and within a schematic range of colour: dark greens and Indian reds, pale clouded greens and shifting tonalities of warm and cold silvery grey touched by faint colour. The painted surfaces worked in a curiously dry, slack almost graphic way, reminiscent of some phases of painting in Picasso's work, later sometimes employed by Dubuffet, and first used in England by Sutherland: a surface which has an oddly unsensual yet expressive force, scratchy, perfunctory, rather dry and terse. Most memorable among these paintings and with a more obviously sensuous surface was the big *Silver Birch* painting of 1986-88 in which the almost spectral, pale presence of a tree looms up, glinting through its enveloping greyed space, shot through by light with dark green accents of leaves floating in the top foreground: a painting reminiscent of Vuillard in its loosely constructed intensity of time and place, and its almost de-materialized intimacy.

In the eighties, Le Brun felt a particular empathy with some newly arrived German painters and in his travels met all the new generation of artists, including Baselitz, Lupertz, Koberling and Kiefer; with Chia from Italy and Fischl and Schnabel in the U.S. From the beginning of the

decade, he had liked the way in which German painters seemed to be dandies, so confident in their work and in the European tradition, like Munch or Matisse in the early years. What they were creating was not American painting, and up until that moment, c.1980, everything had been American.

Le Brun has sought ways to keep the ability in all his work to improvise, and to drastically change the image in the process of working while attempting to retain the rich tonalities achieved with orthodox technique. Turner is the greatest technical exemplar here, in combining the luminosity of colour in traditional technique, with all the flexibility of modern thought.

In Le Brun's work, the composition and even the content can change: I have always found this huge gulf between the state of the image in painting, as something very remote, and the painting itself, which is here and now. I find the contrast pointed and moving. It may go some way towards explaining my imagery. I get a whisper, catch a hem of something, and try and follow it. So that the subject is little more than an apprehension, a feeling, a generation of something essentially internal (it has to be because it doesn't exist, it is in me as a visual intuition) which has to be externalised and made strong, through the physical paraphernalia and stuff of oil paint and brushes, stretcher and canvas. I realise that I'm treading a very fine line here but I can't find any other way. There's an interior tacking system, also, like a yacht moving from side to side, between figuration and abstraction.

The recent commission to make paintings connected with The Ring has resulted in a grand sequence of works, with many brilliant studies, which considerably extend Le Brun's range in colour, form, and painterly approach. It has been an immense task, with many rejected experiments. The paintings - study and final version - for Siegfried break new ground in the arrival of a far more corporeal treatment of the human figure than before, echoed in a group of paintings of Muses, reminiscent both of Corot and the wall frieze of women in the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii. The studies for Gotterdammerung and the final version show a richly inventive range of approach to the most difficult of all fantasy subjects - characteristically, Le Brun has honoured his commission and the imaginative identity of his subjects but extended them powerfully into

his own terrain.

He has brought this strange world to a new life and now seems very strongly prepared to extend its own imagined world. Le Brun should have the last word, not just a proposal for his most recent work but about the entire business of being a painter, on his own terms:

I have a tremendous anxiety about the image, which I suppose will never leave me. The formal properties of painting can give an illusion of control, balance, composition and so on, but this image, with its meaning and implications, must always be beyond complete understanding even for an artist with a formidable technique of content such as Eliot or Pound. There is no end to the connectedness of things recalling the world. But not to paint something because of the implications, that would be very poor. All those things which are easier to avoid because they are too loaded or specific - the figure, the face, the eye - are threatening to the integrity of the picture. There is a danger here, yes, but there's also concentrated meaning of inexhaustible complexity, which is a painter's inheritance. Isn't it also dangerous because although you see the painting before you, something vital or important is always somewhere else? It has a remoteness and an inaccessibility that confront us. I also feel that it is feared as one of the original art forms, with its vast and monstrous history. It reminds me of Goya's Saturn Devouring his Children. This is not the vernacular. This is where Leonardo, Titian and Picasso stand. Painting can eat you up if you get too close. There are many examples of artists who have been destroyed by this contact. Your identity is immediately at risk. George Steiner calls this 'a wager on transcendence' and Samuel Beckett writes: 'The artist...stakes his being'.