

**Contemporary British Art in Print**

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## Christopher Le Brun - *Seven Lithographs*

*Seven Lithographs* was the first of a series of projects made by Le Brun for the Paragon Press. Prior to embarking upon this project, Le Brun's experience of printmaking was limited to the etchings he had made at the Slade School of Fine Art under the tutelage of Anthony Gross and Bartholomeu dos Santos, and to a series of coloured monotypes he had made with Garner Tullis in Santa Barbara, California, in 1986 and 1988.

The lithographs were made between October 1988 and January 1989 and have a close rapport with the monotypes he had recently completed, particularly the large sixty-part print measuring 15 x 36 feet made in November 1986 (this has never been exhibited). The rapid improvisation which monotype printing on such a scale required (the whole print was completed in just two days) provided the key to the method employed in *Seven Lithographs*, where some of the prints were invented directly on the plate. However in *Seven Lithographs* Le Brun could adopt the more considered approach that lithography offered, and, above all was able to work on the project in London over a longer period.

Although the portfolio features only seven lithographs the artist made a larger number of prints, which he edited down. This method of working in the series, developing ideas in the work itself and responding directly to the nature of the medium is a constant in Le Brun's art.

The imagery in the lithographs has its origin in the paintings Le Brun made in Berlin where he lived and worked as a guest of the DAAD from 1987-1989. These were paintings such as *Theory* of 1987 with its single tree set against light and dark bordered with a curving line; *Grove* with its line of trees; and *Tree between Walls* of 1986-87. The image of a recumbent lion, developed in one of the horizontal prints in *Seven Lithographs*, is particularly rich in implication. In this print the figure with his arm raised holding a

sword was later developed into the Siegfried figure in the *Wagner* paintings and prints; and the group of horsemen in the background inspired the prints and paintings of the *Four Riders* sequence. The lion itself recently reappeared in Le Brun's etching *Atalanta and Hippomenes*, made for Ted Hughes' translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

These lithographs relate quite closely to the paintings Le Brun was making at the time though the same could not be said of his etchings. The reason for this has much to do with the technique and process particular to each medium. For Le Brun the technique is very much a part of the image-making process, and just as he would wield the brush with his arm to make a painting, allowing his physical movement and sense of rhythm to affect the work, so he could do the same in making lithographs on large metal plates. Consequently these prints have a gestural, painterly resonance.

## Christopher Le Brun - *Fifty Etchings*

This project was begun in January 1990. Le Brun` was given no specific remit regarding size, number of prints or theme, Charles Booth-Clibborn simply having asked him to make a group of etchings. Le Brun was keen to try etching since he felt that one of the limitations of lithography on metal plates (the technique he had used for *Seven Lithographs*), was that the image could not be easily altered or developed once the mark had been made. Booth-Clibborn introduced the artist to various studios in London; Le Brun chose to work at the Hope Sufferance studio, which was then in Rotherhithe, London.

Le Brun had made etchings as a student at the Slade School but otherwise had little experience with the medium. He began by working on a large number of preparatory plates and drawings. Not being accustomed to the medium and to the very fine gauge of the etching needle, he initially had difficulty establishing the scale of the work, but after several weeks of experimentation began producing the first of what evolved into a series of fifty etchings.

Le Brun worked in close collaboration with the technicians at Hope Sufferance studios, Peter Kosowicz and Simon Marsh: they would prepare the etching plates with soft-grounds and hard-grounds and help him achieve the effects he desired, but at no point did they prompt him to use particular techniques. He worked on four or five plates at a time, and the technicians would proof them at regular intervals. Consequently each print relates to and develops from the others. Since he was discovering a new technique and a new language of marks, the process of etchings itself was driving much of the image making. Experimenting with the etching tools, he would create line or form in one plate and would then develop it in a different direction on another plate.

Some of the prints were done quickly and exist in just one state while others were taken through as many as thirty different trial states. Hence an etching

begun early in the sequence of fifty might have been finished halfway through the series. This intricate, cyclical approach, working on several plates at a time and not in a strictly linear sequence, meant that motifs appear and re-appear throughout the whole suite of fifty etchings. The final series of etchings could be viewed as a narrative about the language of Le Brun's art, his coming to terms with the etching process, and his journey of discovery.

Stephen Bann, in his book on Le Brun's *Fifty Etchings*, uses the metaphor of the 'prince entering the Briar Wood' to provide a guide to understanding the work. The entanglement of the line, the barbed figure and the glowing light of the paper, show how the technique of etching itself engenders its own 'natural' imagery. In the vast, sixty-part monotype Le Brun had made in 1986, the overall image is of a forest woven with representational, figurative elements, and marks which represent the painting process itself. Whereas in that very large work those events are present simultaneously within the image of the forest, in the *Fifty Etchings* the images occur and must be seen laterally or in sequence.

The issue of concealment had been very much in the artist's mind in the preceding periods. His paintings are normally made up of layer upon layer of different images, which cover and conceal one another. In a group of large format paintings, *Forest* (1987-88), *Tristan* (1989), *Aram Nemus Vult* (1990) and the *Briar Wood* (1991), he had exploited the monolithic and mysterious properties of paintings as a covering skin, where the tension of concealment dominates. He was acutely aware of the destruction and waste of buried imagery on which the strength of these paintings depended. Etching, however, because of the use of line, inclines to the web or net, favouring transparency and enabling images to gather by addition and modification rather than by cancellation. The period Le Brun spent working on *Fifty Etchings* corresponded with a period when he was trying to find a way

to retain images conceived in the painted medium. Particularly figures that had previously been covered.

In the *Fifty Etchings* series the images move backwards and forward between abstract and figurative motifs. On the copper plates he would explore the possibilities latent in the etching medium, and then introduce a figurative image – a building or a tree or an image taken directly from one of his paintings (the horse for example in XVIII). In subsequent plates he might then work with that image and incorporate a new range and layering of marks.

In the early prints in the sequence Le Brun introduced figurative images, which had already featured in his painted work and analysed them in the etching medium. In etching XX he introduced a new image of four riders standing before a building. He later developed this particular image in a separate series of etchings (the *Four Riders* series) and also into a painting, *Riders Before a Castle*. Similarly, etching XXV is a figure with shield and sword-arm raised which the artist developed throughout the sequence culminating in etchings XLIX (subsequently realised and the painting *Study for Siegfried*). By this stage Le Brun had come to understand the importance that etchings could have in his art, as a way of inventing new images through the etchings process. Because he was working in a new medium he felt he could invent and allow images to remain with greater freedom than in painting. Furthermore, the act of working in reverse on a copper plate meant that the proofed prints had a striking freshness and intensity. In late May, once Le Brun had made about twenty etchings, he decided to make the project into a suite of fifty works.

Many of the plates following etchings XXV are composed of meandering lines which relate to foliage and trees and images obscured by things. These images may be seen as an analogue of Le Brun's working method in painting, which involves the lay-

ering of one painted image over another. In learning the etching process Le Brun was required to experiment with the marks made by the various etching tools and it was through this process that he found that he could invent all manner of new marks, forms and images. Images which were invented directly on the plate were later developed into paintings include XLI which became the *Bay Muse* (1993).

In *Fifty Etchings* we are offered an extraordinary insight into the thinking and processes which lie behind an artist's work. Le Brun sees the series as a kind of narrative and acknowledges the general influence of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, in which there are a range of texts and images of different types, which are built up, with a rolling accumulation of motifs – the ideogrammatic method. Le Brun remarks that 'Pound's method has affected my work, in fact the second etchings I ever made in 1970, was based on lines from *Canto IV*.'

A 124-page book on *Fifty Etchings*, with an essay by Stephen Bann, was published by the Paragon Press in 1991.

## Christopher Le Brun - *Four Riders*

These four prints grew out of Le Brun's work on *Fifty Etchings* and continue the same numbering sequence in roman numerals (LI to LIV). They are Variants of etchings XX from *Fifty Etchings*, which shows four riders in front of a castle. Although the image of the medieval rider occurs throughout Le Brun's work from early 1980 (for example, a painting of *Sir Tristram* in Southampton Art Gallery features a rider with a plumed helmet) the group of riders was a new image in his oeuvre. Etching XX was developed into a large painting, *Riders Before a Castle* (1990-92), which is now in a private collection in the USA.

In contrast to the previous project with its developing cycle of interconnected imagery, the *Four Riders* was a deliberate attempt to construct a monumental single work in etching. The image of the armoured figure occurred increasingly in Le Brun's work of the early 1990s. In general terms the artist likens his use of an image 'out of its time' to the device employed by George Baselitz of turning the image upside-down. Both strategies dramatise the autonomy of the work of art. But whereas in Baselitz's case the painting can be readily assimilated into the formal development of modern art, Le Brun also attempts to engage directly with the subject of Time and art's relationship to it.

Concurrent with his work on these prints Le Brun was reading Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King*, the long narrative poem based on Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. He points out that it is a mark of the difficulties inherent in the use of allegorical form in modern times that there has been a prolonged controversy over the relative success or failure of Tennyson's book ever since it was written.

Etching LII, which is a hardground etching, closely follows the composition of the *Riders Before a Castle* painting. Although its numbering sequence puts it after etchings LI, LII was begun first but was proofed slightly later. Number LI was made with two etching plates: the plate used for making LII (with a fourth rider added, and a second plate, which gave extra tone and depth. Etching LIII is a reworking of both plates, with the castle and three of the riders burnished out (though their ghostly presence is still discernable; LIV uses these same two plates (one inverted) and incorporates a third.

## Christopher Le Brun - *Wagner*

In 1992 Le Brun received a commission from a private collector for four large paintings on the theme of Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. By 1994 three of the four paintings had been completed: *The Rhine*, *Siegfried* and *Brunnhilde*. In making the works Le Brun produced numerous studies and other paintings: he decided to record and consolidate and develop these in printed form.

The *Wagner* print portfolio contains eight etchings of similar size. Le Brun made several other etchings on the same theme, including two small etchings of *Brunnhilde* (subsequently issued as individual prints) and one large one of *The Rhine*. The size of the latter precluded its inclusion within the portfolio though the artist does see it as part of the same series.

The eight etchings are all developed from photogravures. Photogravure is a technique usually associated with the nineteenth-century printmaking and is rarely used today. Essentially it is a process of transferring photographs - in this case of Le Brun's *Ring Cycle* paintings - onto copper etchings plates. The photogravure plates for the *Wagner* suite were made by Hugh Stoneman, one of very few printers capable of carrying out the process. As an initial experiment four photogravure plates were made of one of the paintings. Le Brun worked on these plates (the images have never been editioned) and then proceeded with the complete project, ordering a total of forty further plates of paintings from the *Ring Cycle* project.

Le Brun began, then, with copper plates bearing etched reproductions of his own paintings; he then proceeded to alter the plates with conventional etching techniques. He made relatively few alterations to some of the photogravure plates but substantially reworked others.

Le Brun's paintings and etchings now relate to one another in complex ways: ideas generated in etching

may be developed in his paintings and later reintroduced into subsequent etchings. In a sense he used etching in the same way that some artists use drawing, formulating his ideas in the medium. The etching *The Rainbow Bridge*, LX, develops from a photogravure plate of his oil painting of the same title, only the photograph for it was taken some time before the painting was completely, so the finished painting and etching differ in fundamental ways. The second etching, titled *Siegfried*, LXI, was done from a photogravure of Le Brun's painting study for the main *Siegfried* painting. Le Brun reworked the plates for these two etchings, erasing some elements by burnishing them out and adding to other areas. In the third etching, *Fafner*, LXII, Le Brun removed the sky, which had featured in the original version of the painting and re-bit the plate with spit-bite. The painting was subsequently re-worked so now differs quite considerably from the etched version.

The fourth etching, *Siegfried and Fafner*, LXII, was generated from the final version of the oil painting; and the fifth etching, *The Valkyrie*, LXIV, from an oil study for the *Brunnhilde* painting. The last three prints all develop from the same *Brunnhilde* image (the final version of the oil painting) though Le Brun altered them in different ways. The first, *Brunnhilde LXV*, was heavily burnished; the second *Brunnhilde II*, LXVI, was very strong acid biting; and the third, *Brunnhilde III*, LXVII was heavily re-drawn and went through a total of forty proof states.

The *Wagner* portfolio was published by the Paragon Press in conjunction with Marlborough Graphics Ltd.. The series was exhibited simultaneously at Marlborough Galleries, in New York and London, in October 1994, alongside the *Ring Cycle* paintings and oil studies.