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Donald Kuspit, "*Christopher Le Brun: Sperone Westwater*"
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Christopher Le Brun continues his pursuit of the elusive, almost as an end in itself. The sense of mystery that pervades his work is the residue of – and perhaps an attempt to revive – that sense of ‘tragic insight’ which Friedrich Nietzsche regarded as ‘the most beautiful luxury of our culture.’ In his paintings, Le Brun combines an iconography of isolation with a muted sensual surface, less important for its assertive painterly quality than for its seductive atmospheric one; it bears some resemblance to Monet’s elusive continuum of surface. There is a sense of restrained fullness in this surface, which makes the object embedded in it – yet also thrust onto it as if the curst of some barely contained passion – seem all the more haunting. I used to think that the specificity of the object of was important for Le Brun – that it mattered whether it was a horse or a wreath, each imbued with its particular mythopoetic associations – but now I think it is an excuse for isolation. In the works here, a tree predominates, as in *Tree with Hill*, 1986, and *Tree with Blue and Red*, 1987–88, but what counts is its removal, which is sometimes suggested by abstract markings. These markings claim the image for the realm of art – as pure shaped colour – but also highlight it as an emblem of loneliness. The isolated tree also provides an imagistic pause in the music of atmospheric flux. For all the singularity of the object, its rendering is more about the silence within the musical surface, and the sense of isolation that silence articulates, than about bespeaking a material reality, in however elusive a manner. The fact of the object matters less than the feeling of nothingness its isolation arouses: it exists to bring out the nothingness in which it exists.

Le Brun’s work recalls the indeterminacy of Symbolism: one might almost say that indeterminacy has become a fetish for the artist. Enigma, as I have elsewhere suggested, is the last frontier of art. Perhaps art’s only remaining task will be to preserve a margin of incommunicability in a world saturated with messages. In the crossfire of communications, art offers a sense of enigma – the last sanctuary of interiority – for it represents the immeasurable, the inner infinite. Le Brun’s revival of the sense of the hidden, in a world that wants to expose everything, goes against the social grain. Le Brun manages to mystify and interiorise, despite the demand for things to be demystified, debunked, and turned inside out. These works have the soft light of inner sensuality, the oddly quiet clarity of a self-assured *je ne sais quoi*. Le Brun is the *Watteau* of the new expressionism, or shall we call it the New Lyricism, that aims, again in Nietzsche’s words, to make “iron, leaden life... lose its gravity through golden, tender, oil-smooth melodies.” Le Brun’s gesture liberates his objects from their melancholy heaviness, making them the perfect hiding place for our own gravity and melancholy.