

Week 23: June 27-July 1, 2000

Christopher Le Brun

Fleet, 1998/2000

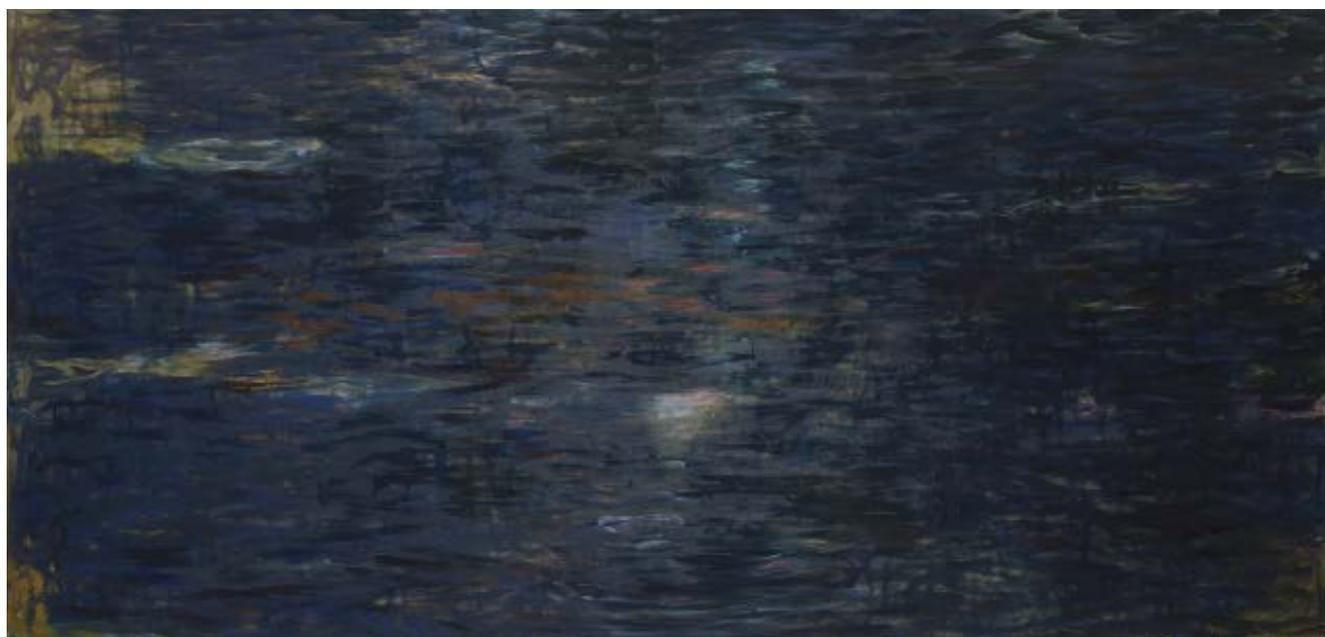
Oil on canvas

82 x 169"

Christopher Le Brun's Fleet reveals an ambiguous sense of scale and colour within an image which is abstract and, at the same time, an extension of a tradition of modern painting that includes the work of Monet, Guston and Baselitz.

The painting's title is both nominative and descriptive, alluding to the symbolic connections between paint and the ocean, while the work's lightness of touch is contradicted by an extraordinary impression of weight and a heavily worked surface.

Christopher Le Brun's paintings have recently been shown in Houston and Oslo, and in the Encounters exhibitions at the National Gallery. He is a member of the Royal Academy and a Trustee of the National Gallery.



Mark Francis: How does Fleet fit into what you have been working on?

Christopher Le Brun: It fits into a group of large paintings which I initially thought of as the Forest series. More recently, there have been two others, called *Cloud Metaphor* and *Time as a subject*. They are all related in format and, to some extent, in time. They are not essentially figurative paintings, although this picture does have a history that involves a figurative element.

MF: The motif in the painting is like a late Monet in that it has long brush strokes which appear to be an evocation of a landscape without identifiable references, such as trees or water – although in the centre of the picture there does seem to be a hint of moon reflected in the water. Is that just imaginary, or is it the focal point?

CLB: I think the key word is imaginary, because the Monet connection needs talking about. The essential difference is that these paintings were invented and totally constructed from memory and imagination.

MF: You mean that the difference between you and Monet was that he was looking at a landscape and translating it into a painting?

CLB: In my case it's more to do with allowing the image to emerge slowly. It is not to do with pushing the paint in a certain direction in response to nature, it's more like responding to the appearance of the painting and how it prompts my imagination. I allow the paint to accumulate and it starts to centre around a type of light and tonality, and that gives it its complexion.

MF: If that's the case, why would you call this series Forest? Is that just a handy title, or is it more to do with symbolic elements of forests?

CLB: Well, it is certainly a very important association. Another difference is that it is referring to a symbolic background. It is the idea of the forest, or the idea of the sea, or the idea of night, or the idea of these large encompassing ideas that is archetypal. I make that reference to enlarge the visual effect of the picture. Although I am saying I let the paint be, nevertheless I establish it in a whole area of thinking rather than just locating it in the present solely visual sensation.

MF: So it can't ever be completely abstract?

CLB: My experience of painting is that I find hardly anything will remain completely abstract. Everything tends towards figuration. This is just the way my imagination works, so no matter how strictly my paint handling denies referring to things, it still continually evokes images. Consequently, that tension is in the grain of my work.

MF: Would you say that is similar to the ways in which paintings by Clyfford Still or Pollock, despite their abstraction, have been interpreted in terms of canyons and figures?

CLB: The famous piece by Robert Rosenblum when he writes about Clyfford Still and the Northern Romantic tradition? The possibility that there was a specific art historical reference didn't seem to me to lessen in any way the existential impact of the presence of the picture.

MF: I think that it is about that American dismissal of European predecessors.

CLB: Well, that may not be possible if it is in the nature of painting. Take an artist such as Malevich, for example. There is still a sense that even the touch in Malevich has this very intense significance about it, which again starts to drift towards nature. Even Mondrian – the early nature reference seems to me to inform the late part of his work. I am describing something perceptual about what happens in painting always.

MF: Perhaps the same thing can be said of Ellsworth Kelly or Brice Marden, to bring this tradition up to the present day?

CLB: It is certainly true of Brice Marden. It is clear to me that his paintings are very much informed by nature and experience of light in different parts of the world. You could argue that the reduction of forms in his work actually highlights that.

MF: In terms of the position you might see yourself in as a painter, do these names form a kind of pantheon?

CLB: Yes, or even a mainstream.

MF: When you say mainstream, do you mean in terms of the way painting is perceived as that avant-garde versus the academy, or in terms of an active tradition?

CLB: It's part of an active tradition to think

about the artists who most embody the potential of the medium. It means that you bring to bear the standards of history on contemporary art.

MF: Can the mainstream be continued anywhere in the world, or do you think it has a cultural connection to certain times and places?

CLB: My own interest is in Western art. It's difficult to have both depth and variety. To make a significant contribution, you need depth of knowledge and understanding.

MF: One of the serious attacks on painting, as against photography, over the last generation was that it could represent only a fictional, personal world, whereas photography and its derivations necessarily represented some sort of truth – the worlds could be recorded on film. I think we can say that the boot is on the other foot. We are in a digital era where photography can be so manipulated that one cannot trust its truth in any tactile form, while that is something which paintings still retains in the sense of Richard Hamilton talks of it as hard copy: there is a visible reality to the touch of the paint on the surface of the canvas.

CLB: That is important. We are sitting in a room where you have the choice of looking at the painting on a website or seeing it here. These are utterly different experiences. And the painting feels different from when it was in the studio because of the changing light – its angle (side-light, not top-light), intensity, colour and authenticity, and put them all together, you get a powerful web of meanings.

MF: In what way would this painting fit into the overall project that is at the core of your work?

CLB: Originally, this was *St George and the Dragon*, a

painting that was buried – one of the contrasts of my work is this tension of revealing and covering. 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.

MF: Where is your work leading, and where is it coming from?

CLB: That's one of the questions I feel superstitious about. It seems to me that if I think of the paintings I most liked as a young artist, that was almost the end of that tradition. If you take something, which comes up through Turner and Blake, and add really thoroughly to it, that would be the right thing to do, given my beliefs. I immediately feel nervous saying that. The fact is that such an ambition was private, because culturally it was not recognised as viable in this country. I think that would explain some of my previous comments as far as I can see, because the drift of contemporary art has been in such a different direction.