

Interviews–Artists

Volume Two: Recordings 2010

Christopher Le Brun

Nicholas James interview, recorded 2010

NJ We're sitting in your studio in Camberwell with new works on the go. How long have you worked here?

CLB About fourteen years now, before that I was working in a large garden studio built by Albert Houthuesen in the street where I live.

It's a wonderful space, on several floors.

Yes it's a good space, it's got a beautiful top light. In fact there's more light than I need, so I quite often screen it off. It's cold in the winter, that's the disadvantage of having a space under glass.

Years ago at Nigel Greenwood's gallery in Sloane Gardens, I saw a very intriguing painting by you. What I took away was your characteristic hatched brush work; horizontal strokes which seemed to me to be setting up some kind of dialogue between the image, the story of painting and the nature of painting itself.

Painting a picture and then painting over it had become so habitual to me that I was very aware how the flat of the brush both covers and at the same time constructs. But the appearance and the way of painting that you describe also comes from thinking about structures in music and how, say, notes seem to hover over a background of tone – the simultaneous effects that are possible in time. I wondered how some of that complexity in the structure could be introduced – something that contained paradox or mixed feelings felt more to

me like reality.

I also got the feeling of literary sources to the work.

It's true there is a hinterland, but where it's more difficult to describe, is to say how specific they are. Because what I'm doing as a painter is trying to work with imagery without too consciously choosing it.

Choosing as against something happening?

Well it's one of the most interesting aspects of art, this question of choice, or rather intention. One doesn't want to reiterate what one knows, that seems too deliberate, but rather to be confronted by something that happens, or to make something new. Here I'm skirting around notions of the unconscious and the authentic. The clear difference between literary sources and looking at them when they're in a painting is simply that they are physically there. So that means, the contribution of my physique, hand and touch, has the greatest effect rather than my more conscious choices about what I want to achieve.

So this is the difference between something that is described, or illustrated, or becomes actuality?

Go on.

No, no, it's your interview. (laughter)

I ask you to go on because I don't quite grasp your meaning

The aim is to achieve a reality in the work.

It's conviction that I'm looking for. At a certain point in a painting you say, that's what I meant. It seems to have a weight, or to have locked into a position that seems to say what you mean. I can often tell because the format or the shape of the painting comes to feel saturated or co-existent, it suits the image and is somehow denser, it has scale, whereas before it is ready the format just appears merely big or small.

With the layering and the changing you don't really obliterate, you don't destroy.

It's accumulating, gathering although it appears to be obliterating, I could well be scraping off, as you see on the floor of the studio, but nevertheless there's always something left behind. So it's gradually building up this accumulation.

Lets look at two works that seem to have a correspondence.

This is *Reef* and that's called *Prow*.

Brother and sister paintings, or are they from different times?

They were made in 1982/83, but as you can see they do look related. In fact they're both in America, this one, *Prow*, is in the Museum of Modern Art, New York; *Reef* is in Chicago.

Reef almost seems like a study, it's more abstracted, but they're definitely related.

Well, it's very heavily painted for a study. They're both big paintings. But they are related in that they both show this clear composition structure. The idea of an underlying key image or archetype, what that might be and how its connected

to one's identity, still acts as a type of base for me – that's what the title *Reef* refers to. I think of the brush marks like barnacles clinging to the underlying idea. You can see that compositional idea developing slowly throughout my work in all media over the years; *Union* is another good example.

These are interesting but quite formal descriptions. There's also a mythic aspect I hesitate to say the dream, but can't help thinking about that.

I don't know whether it's deliberate but the work often arrives at a point of atmosphere, and emotional tension, which even as I talk about it makes me feel uncomfortable. It's a point of intuition. It's something to do with achieving pictorial space as well. A picture will be flat for days and weeks, and then one day, or in one hour the type of space is there. Something is initiated by violently painting something out – the destructive impulse – as if I was tired of the painting or had given up on it. I think I become more concentrated but also rather unaware and simultaneously image becomes more convincing. Colour is often the trigger. There's also a sense of letting go or at least stopping trying, and it's like and inner impulse saying, "now" and what were merely shapes then become form.

This leads back to your way of painting, the loose hatching that allows you to keep this dialogue in play, waiting for something to emerge. It's always very open weave.

Yes it is, except something I push that more and close the whole picture surface off, or use a small brush that produces a different type of painting. I think I'll always be willing, always to take the risk of going into any areas of painting, or figuration, or illusion because I sense the power of those ways of painting as well.

Your activity as a printmaker, you don't make them

here?

At one stage there was a print studio next door, so I did make some of the prints here. But in the early days I was working with Hope Sufferance Press at Hope Sufferance Wharf on the river. I did make a couple of etchings at the Slade, of which I've only got one proof of each plate, Then a long period passed and I didn't print at all.

Fifty etchings at the Fitzwilliam 2005.

That's the most recent publication. The first was Fifty Etchings 1990, with Paragon Press and I don't think that Charles (Booth-Clibboorn) knew what he'd let himself in for. I started printing with the idea of making half a dozen and I got so interested, I was learning such a lot about it, from plate to plate, we kept the whole process going. The "mistakes" were the most fruitful, in particular I came up with a way of using stop-out to draw with and open biting through the varnish. It was always combinations of methods – sugar lift, aquatint, dry point, where most times I'd discover something. In a way that works very well with me because at least half, if not more, of the driver of my work is the engagement with the materials. The public perception of my works is often through imagery, because it's coming through a reproduction. In fact it's more often dependent on handling, feel the weight of the material, and sensing the scale. That was leading the development of the print series, just as much as the imagery.

Do you do preparatory work for the etchings, or do you go straight in, intuitively?

When I did the most recent set in 2005, knowing more technically about the medium, I worked partly away from the print workshop. The first Fifty Etchings, everything was improvised, but this time I had homework. I'd draw the plates over

night then take them in and bite them the next day, so actually they were a little more prepared. In a way I divided the process into two; the pictorial drawing side and the processing, with the pictorial side riding on the back of it. That's a typical play between the two that I enjoy.

What is it like, working with the printers?

It's really enjoyable and amusing. Occasionally we'd play surprisingly competitive cricket (with rolled up paper and a wooden hand-rest for a bat) down the length of the workshop while waiting for a plate to bite in the acid bath. The fascination of the printing process is that the work is transformed, something new can appear suddenly – it's rather like the story of the Elves and Shoemaker – overnight it might get mysteriously completed. Whereas, with painting, you're confronted continually with what you've done. There's no way out, what you put on the canvas is what you see. No elves, as it were. With print, you draw the plate, bite with acid, it comes out mirrored, and with texture. It's absolutely different. That's why it's so compelling.

We're looking at the study of an upright wing.

It's called Motif Group, it's an oil painting about six feet high. In fact it's very similar to an etching I made, so it may have come from that composition. I had it somewhere in mind then and eventually it appeared as a painting.

The reason I picked these is they have a direct link with the proposal for a landmark sculpture commission at Ebbsfleet.

Having found the image that way, in this case I took it into sculpture. Although it seems a simple move, it makes a big difference. I'm highly aware of painting's layeredness, what's in front and what's behind; and when you make a sculp-



Christopher Le Brun **Ziggurat** 2007
Watercolour on paper 57 x 76cm Private collection

ture, you can walk around it, so you can see the consequences. Like the dark side of the moon – an image that previously only ever had one aspect is then shown to have unexpected potential. The Ebbsfleet proposal is a good example of that.

Looking at the photo of this rather lovely pair of wings, I'm still feeling painting: a painting/sculpture?

Yes, also because the feather is like a brushstroke. The sculptures at maquette stage were made of wax pushed across with the side of my hand, and of course that is like a painting action. It's also like the blocking action, which we talked about before. The wing's an image that suits my painting behaviour, and the atmosphere of it feels natural to me.

Now, a painting and a sculpture.

Yes, that one's called A letter to Puvis, that refers to the artist Puvis De Chavannes. In fact the painting started as a Dante and Virgil subject; there's nothing left of that except the face of

Virgil, who then turned into the seated, barbed Knight. It starts to be painted out in two ways: one with the briar which wraps around, and then with the interruption of the colour on the right and at the back, which was me in a rather desperate mood, starting to paint it over again. When I came in the next morning, it was half painting out, but was there. In other words, but stating the problem frankly I recognised the work as complete. I admire Puvis, I find his work, well, the most accurate work is "noble", and melancholy, and I'm moved by its failings. There is the oddest tension between his work and early modern art. So the idea of the letter to Puvis was somehow about difficulty, complexity, over loadedness, history. The title was a conceit but it felt appropriate.

The wing appears again in the Ebbsfleet proposal.

The site was tricky, with huge pylons everywhere. The sculpture was to be seen from the motorway and the railway; you'd just get a glimpse. Shoreham is very close and Samuel Palmer was an early inspiration to me and I kept thinking of his

paintings where the moon just touches the hill. I thought, wouldn't it be wonderful to make a sculpture of the planet just touching those hills, so from far away it would be like a disc gently sitting on the horizon. At sunset it would be coloured, at dawn it would be coloured, that was my idea. At the same time I thought the wing would animate it sufficiently with its shadow, to make the sculpture always alive. In the event the references to a satellite dish were unavoidable.

Did the dish act against you?

I think so. When I came to assemble the model, the first thing I put in was the wing on its own, a solitary giant wing, and there was a moment when I thought, that's it, that's sufficient. In fact I've gone on to make a piece for the City, which should be there later this year; a single wing at ten metres high.

Four recent watercolours. You love Turner?

Yes.

And have looked closely at Turner?

Yes I have looked closely at Turner, not just him obviously, but it's difficult to be an English painter without being aware of Turner.

In your interview by Cecilia Powell you talked about, not the later watercolours, which everybody looks at, but for a change it was the very finished studies, the challenges of those.

Well I think with an artist like Turner one should pay attention to how he himself approached his work. My feeling is that the later work, much as I appreciate it, has been over weighted as opposed to the evidence of his professional behaviour, which favoured the finished, structured watercolours that held the range of his response to nature

and history and poetry. The later work is part of it but I don't think it's necessarily the key to Turner. For various reasons now, we're more comfortable with the vague, than we are with the specific. And yet Turner is highly specific, in fact that accounts for much of his achievement. His observation is so true and careful, and interested in the world. They're not vague at all.

Every part of the myriad of his great watercolours is worked through.

Yes, and of course they are somehow silently critical of many assumptions we have now about painting. We may feel more comfortable with the material quality of art, which is dumb, but nevertheless has existential authenticity. We probably prefer that to the mixture of intellect and feeling that he was attempting. The great watercolours are intellectual painting, there are ideas embedded in them. Now that we have a diffuse canon, if any canon at all, the notion of history painting feels more tenuous.

In your watercolours you allow yourself to go backwards and forwards in histories and dream, and they are works within themselves. They are not studies.

They're all discovered within painting. I've come to this medium relatively late so its special qualities feel like a real discovery. Since my oil painting has involved the drama of burying and rediscovering the image, the absolute transparency of all one's moves in watercolour, from front to back, from white of the paper, is a fresh, contrasting way of thinking about painting for me. The lightness and spaciousness of it is a pleasure. So I slow the whole process down, tinting very slowly and moving through the painting slowly, often working on four or five, or six or seven, at the same time.

A watercolour grows from a point, but how much obliteration will it take before ruin sets in? It needs to

be coaxed.

Coaxing is a good work; you intensify the colour, gradually intensify the darks. Occasionally you can get back the light by scraping or scrubbing.

Risky, but Turner did.

Turner did. It's partly a result of the quality of paper he had then. There are ways of masking; you can set out a masked area and bury it, and come back to it later and reveal the light. Also there is use of smaller brushes, and a much more careful, gentler relation with the work, than what one might have with an oil painting.

It is a beautiful medium. This painting is called?

Its called *Lyre*.

You challenge yourself, that's a fair thing to say; not all the time and there's a continuity, but you do take chances.

I'm addicted to risk (aesthetic!) in fact. Take the commissions, for example when they have involved a given narrative. That was an openly public challenge, which I can see raises genuine questions, particularly if the necessary irony involved in is no longer there. But it was something that I felt I had to attempt. The artists I admire are essentially generous and un-controlling in spirit. I've probably to some extent parted company with my audience at various stages as the difficulties of following particular routes became too great.

You'd rather choose disturbance than comfort?

It's not really a question of choosing, it's rather recognising how I actually work. You know it's symptomatic that we've just been talking about the watercolours when at the same time over the last few years I've been making the "Day Paint-

ings" – very fast large oil paintings without revision. Maybe surrealism is more important to me than I'd previously realised. The apparently inconsistent ways of working I've employed and the images I've made that can't be easily assimilated probably come from that. But when I consider that major elements of abstract painting originated in the surrealist movement, which led to De Chirico but also to Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still, than I feel more reconciled to the hand I have to play.

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Christopher Le Brun **Prow** 1983
Oil on canvas 259 x 259cm. Collection Museum of modern Art, New York
Courtesy of the Artist