

‘Between *splendor* and *umbræ*’: Contemporary Painting’s Classical Tone

Ruth Allen, 2018

Painting has often been defined as the modernist medium *par excellence*. Whether one thinks of Hegel’s landmark *Lectures on Aesthetics* (in the 1820s), Charles Baudelaire’s essay, ‘The painter of modern life’ (1863), or the writings of modernist art critic Clement Greenberg, painting is thought to be synonymous with ideas of the modern. Greenberg in particular theorised twentieth-century painting as a progressive movement away from imitation towards the ineluctable qualities of the medium—towards flatness, surface and colour. In his 1940 essay ‘Towards a newer *Laocoön*’, he railed against the stale academic conventions of western painting, responding to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s 1766 German essay on the ‘limits of painting and poetry’ (itself centred around an aesthetic critique of Greek and Latin art and literature). ‘It was not realistic imitation in itself that did the damage so much as realistic illusion in the service of sentimental and declamatory literature’, Greenberg wrote: ‘Perhaps the two go hand in hand. To judge from western and Graeco-Roman art, it seems so.’

This essay takes as its starting point Greenberg’s insistence that modern painting is non-representational— and, therefore, non-classical. At the same time, however, I argue that modern and contemporary painters (in particular those who may appear to be the heirs of modernist abstraction) evince a diffuse yet distinct mode of classicism – what might be termed ‘classical tone’. As we shall see, they sidestep ‘realistic illusion’ and literary allusion in favour of a more visceral and sensuous engagement with ancient painterly styles and themes. Through a focus on the work of British painter Christopher Le Brun (three of whose works are included in *The Classical Now* exhibition), the essay shows how artists as diverse as Mark Rothko, Anselm Kiefer and Chris Ofili have continued to challenge the limits of academic literariness by asserting the physical and psychical properties of their medium: in so doing, I suggest, they have conversely reaffirmed ancient approaches to paint, whether theoretical, stylistic or material.

PAINTING MYTH

The myth, history and poetry of ancient Greece and Rome pervade Le Brun’s painting, permeating his recent abstract colourscapes as deeply as they have shaped his early figurative work. Far from illustration, or even citation, Le Brun’s engagement with ancient literature and myth not only provides the subjects for his paintings, but also allows them to function as metapoetic sites for examining history, narrative and physical manufacture. In this context, it is surprising that the ways in which Le Brun’s practice resonates with Greek and Roman *art* – and with painting in particular – have not been explored. Instead, his engagement with classical imagery has been viewed primarily through the lens of neoclassicism and romanticism. Le Brun himself has cited the influence of Poussin, Delacroix and Puvis de Chavannes on his use of symbolic, narrative content and on his

exploration of gesture and form, while his abstract style – with its elusive shapes and restless expanses of refulgent colour – is frequently set against the light-saturated landscapes of J.M.W. Turner. And yet, putting

Le Brun's work into dialogue with Greek and Roman painting, both as it appeared in antiquity and as it looks now, reveals subtle formal, material and conceptual points of contact: the exercise asks us to recognise a 'classical' quality in his work, and to locate Le Brun's classical tone as much in his treatment of paint as in his choice of mythological subject matter. A focus on this aspect of Le Brun's classicism also offers new ways of approaching the work of a number of other post-war and contemporary painters whose practice is not typically thought of as relating to ancient artistic traditions.

Of course, Le Brun's depiction of mythological – or mythologising – narratives and motifs is one aspect that invites immediate comparison with the classical traditions of Graeco-Roman antiquity. Le Brun does not draw consciously on ancient visual precedents, but if we look to his early figurative work we see echoes of composition and pose familiar from Roman frescoes; while his recent expressionist paintings resonate with Greek and Roman works in terms of their gesture, colour and texture. These subtle reverberations of iconography and form allow Le Brun's works to speak across time and place; indeed, they promote painting – as object and action – as a form of conversation with the past, mediated through a classical frame. In this respect, Le Brun's work can be sited within the immediate historical context of a generation of European and American representational painters who rose to prominence in the 1980s, and who are often referred to under the banner of 'Neo Expressionism'. Reviving a supposedly redundant and ossified medium, these artists embraced representational or pictorial elements that constituted a backlash against the dominant sway of Minimalism and Conceptualism (and – before that – of modernist abstraction). Works by Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente and Anselm Kiefer, who all gained recognition as part of this apparent *retour à l'ordre*, exploit both the expressive possibilities of figurative painting, and the medium's capacity to re-enact (as well as simply to depict) historical themes and styles. The works of this broad grouping of artists have typically been analysed in terms of their 'quotation' of mythical or arcane subjects (from Icarus to the Cyclops). But Le Brun's more tentative and oblique absorption of ancient sources perhaps offers a more subtle way of understanding their perceived 'new historicism'.

In *Helm* [1985], for example, a lone woman, semi-draped and with her back turned, is shown steering a small boat, looking towards a distant light on the horizon. Floating through a darkening expanse of sea and sky, anchored neither physically nor temporally, the figure is devoid of narrative and hence assumes symbolic weight. This is enhanced by her emblematic, classicising pose, which recalls the appearance of reclining classical river gods and partially dressed Aphrodites, while the ocean's 'wine-dark' hue evokes the archetypal Homeric epithet. It is not clear if the figure is moving towards the light or away from it. But there is a yearning in her reaching gaze – something that echoes the composition and tone of a popular Roman fresco-type, found in a number

of examples at Pompeii and Herculaneum, showing the figure of Ariadne abandoned on the island of Naxos. We often find the Cretan princess shown in similar pose and dress, lying on the shore and gazing out to sea at Theseus's departing ship. In some examples, Ariadne is accompanied by weeping cupids or other figures who watch her as she watches Theseus leave; in one version today held in the British Museum, Ariadne gestures towards the ship herself. More than just illustrating an episode from myth, frescoes like these foreground questions about the gaze: they ask how looking (at an image) might provide a means of engaging with an absent object of desire. We might view *Helm* as a similar exploration of looking and longing. But we might go still further: to see the ancient Ariadne-image that hovers beneath the painting's surface is to see the (classical, painted) past as itself the subject of the woman's gaze, and in turn also of our own. The very medium of painting provides a primary mode for conversation between the here and now and the absent past.

Le Brun's more recent work approaches similar questions through abstraction rather than figuration. Indeed, it uses classical myth to test the potential for non-figurative representation to convey narrative meaning. Take *The Coast of Africa* [2014], which nods obliquely to the story of Aeneas's arrival at Carthage. It confronts us with a blazing heat-haze of cadmium and ochre that not only evokes the intensity of the North African climate (whilst simultaneously tracing the contours of its coastline), but also suggests the form of a citadel glimpsed at sunset, or perhaps through flames: it is hard to look at this painting and not see Troy burning on the horizon at the same time as Dido's pyre. Crucially, the painting's colours also echo the appearance of frescoes from the Villa dei Papiri in Herculaneum – themselves depicting temples and rural structures – which, once red, were transformed by the heat of Vesuvius's eruption so as now to appear yellow. Conjuring at once the mythic and the archaeological, the poetic and the painted, *The Coast of Africa* not only describes an arrival at a city of the past – both real and imagined – but also a departure and a return. By demanding that we approach and enter antiquity in this way, the painting becomes a means of traversing history and confronting the passage of time: it comments on painting's unique ability to act as conduit and catalyst for this kind of evocative, sensory transportation.

Le Brun's turn from figuration to abstraction is also a 'return' to the kind of 'mythic abstraction' evident in the work of post-war American artists such as Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman and Helen Frankenthaler. In the work of all three artists, mythological subjects are glimpsed – or entirely sublimated – within a partially or wholly abstract composition: one thinks, for example, of Pollock's *Pasiphaë* [1943], Newman's *The Song of Orpheus* [1944–1945], or Frankenthaler's *Trojan Gates* [1955], with its shifting, amorphous colour-forms. Likewise, Mark Rothko's early representational dreamscapes – many of which are explicitly classicising in both their form and content – later give way to more diffuse, non-figurative treatments of mythic subjects, eliminating explicit narrative elements.

Where we are used to thinking about these artistic engagements with the classical only (if even) in terms of their

mythological referents, Le Brun's subtle, gestural classicism –based as much on colour and shape as on subject – also encourages us to recognise their abstracted classical 'style'. A case in point is Rothko's early painting *Interior* [1936], which appears to show a stage-like arrangement of classical pilasters and painted walls – something akin to a classical *skéné* before which a mythological drama might play out. Impressionistically rendered statues stand either side of the panelled façade, where a group of figures (or actors) stand in a central doorway. For all that the painting depicts a figured scene within an architectural setting, the abstract 'structure' of Rothko's most famous pictures is already in place – the green lower half of the picture contrasts with the maroon upper half, in anticipation of the abutting rectangular masses of his purely 'abstract' canvases, which are themselves architectural in structure and scale. It is possible to see how the classical entablature and evocative colours of this early picture were later sublimated into an abstract format, in which classicism itself becomes a subliminal – yet nonetheless operative – force.

Le Brun has spoken of his desire to work out in paint the process by which pigment is given meaning, examining the relationship between content and form, and between the independent structures of scale, colour, light, space, texture and tone. Ancient commentators on Greek and Roman painting were concerned with similar issues. We are often used to conceiving the 'classical' as something defined by its purity of form, its sculptural whiteness or its figurative and representational lifelikeness. But ancient discussions of painting reveal an interest in more abstract painterly concepts – in luminosity and shine, for example, in the juxtaposition and saturation of colours, and in surface finish. These discussions theorise what painting is in terms of its mechanics, as indeed what painting *might be* in terms of its effect. As such, they also offer a way of viewing the handling of paint in the work of Le Brun – and of other modern and contemporary artists – with a more 'classical' eye.

Ancient viewers seem to have been especially sensitive to saturated colour. Citing earlier authors, the first-century AD 'encyclopaedist', Pliny the Elder, describes two categories of colour: the 'florid' and the 'austere'. These terms seem to have demarcated the brilliant and concentrated from the muted and subdued, while perhaps also referring to the ways in which individual colours were made to stand out from one another. Tonal range and the effects of juxtaposing colours within a pictorial field also seem to have served as criteria for evaluating ancient painting. According to Pliny (*Natural History* 35.29), the Greek word *harmoge* ('harmony') describes the 'juxtaposition of, and transition among, colours', referring to the technical question of what colours could most effectively be placed next to each other and how a smooth transition between them might be achieved. By contrast, *tonos* ('tone') is defined as 'that which ought to exist between *splendor* ['brilliance'] and *umbrae* ['shadows']', and describes the controlled gradation of hues, individually and collectively, from bright highlights to deep shadows. Just as today, there is an inherent musical dimension to the term that makes *tonos* analogous to pitch: Pliny's discussion seems to acknowledge the potential of looking at painting to be a

multisensory experience; in one sense, it foreshadows Kandinsky's theories about the relationship between

colour and music, and the potential for total abstraction to evoke profound psychological, physical and emotional responses (as expounded in his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published in 1912). Music and pigment are likewise deeply entwined in Le Brun's work (exemplified by *The Herald's Note* [2016] and its symphony of pulsating colours), while Pliny's text also pre-empted Chris Ofili's literal translation of colour to movement: consider his painting of the bodies of dancers in Aakash Odedra's ballet *Unearthed* [2014], for example, or his back-drops for the Royal Ballet's *Metamorphosis: Titian 2012* (in which undulating masses of vibrant colour echo the shapes of the dancers' fluid poses). Both ballets were inspired by classical myths, relating to the stories of Prometheus on the one hand, and of Diana and Actaeon on the other. No less importantly, both sets of myths are concerned with transformation, creation and the permeability of bodies and forms: once again, classical myth creates a space for meditating upon the representational and narrative possibilities of painting as a medium.

The interplay of colour and light, of shape and texture, is likewise integral to Le Brun's painting. From the deep gloom of *Tristan* [1988], through the icy brilliance of *Glow* [2016], Le Brun's work operates in the extremes of *splendor* and *umbræ*, as well as in the spaces between, exploring the limits of *tonos* and *harmoge* to ask how abstract colour might best be applied to a canvas in order to convey meaning. *Glow*, for example, not only takes resplendence as its subject, but also confronts its viewer with the kind of blinding white-out that comes from looking directly at intense light – and that replaces vision with trembling spots of colour. In so doing, *Glow* expresses the capacity of painting to blur reality and representation – indeed, to become what it depicts. It also suggests that seeing a painting (or any two-dimensional image) could be a lived, sensory experience: one might recall Salvador Dalí's description of how, as a child, he would dizzy himself to stimulate hallucinatory visions, swinging his head 'right and left until it gorged blood and I became dizzy'; 'with eyes wide open,' as Dalí puts it, 'I could see a world that was solid black, suddenly spotted by bright circles that gradually turned into eggs fried "sunnyside down".'

In this respect, too, Le Brun's work has much in common with Rothko's expansive colour-field paintings, which exploit the relationships between colours and tones to create dynamic pictorial spaces that can be experienced bodily as well as visually. Devoid of figurative representation, they nevertheless hint at landscapes and tactile forms that appear to ebb and flow in rhythmic sequence, encouraging the viewer to move in and through the painted space of the canvas. It is telling that Rothko was directly influenced by frescoes seen during his visit to Pompeii in 1959, where he recognised 'the same feeling, the same broad expanses of sombre colour.' Where scholarship on Roman painting tends to focus on the depiction of figurative scenes, Rothko's comments might invite us to consider the role played by 'background' colours in shaping space and framing narrative in the ancient world.

ARCHAEOLOGIES OF PAINT

The dreamlike quality of much of Le Brun's painting is the result of a complex layering of paint that turns the surface of his canvases into tremulous landscapes of half-glimpsed forms. Images are suggested, as if seen through a veil, or else they are hidden beneath brushstrokes, part-obscured or effaced entirely by colour and light. As well as conveying a sense of pictorial immateriality, this process also draws attention to the material *reality* of painting as a form of erasure or burial. Le Brun himself has said of his move away from figurative representation that:

...at a certain point, I painted all the horses out, which produced a wholly different direction in my work which was, in appearance, abstraction. On one level it's about the image not being there... The content starts to become whether it's there or not there. And quite often it's underneath, it's buried.

The gesture of layering and covering consequently becomes as much a part of Le Brun's examination of what a painted image is as his testing of the relationship between abstraction and narrative.

As a result, Le Brun's paintings encourage a kind of looking that is akin to excavation. *The Trial* [2011– 2014] is on the surface a shimmering mirage of cascading light and shifting hues, its subject indistinct and metamorphic. It was once, however, a representation of Dido's death as recounted in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Although reworked and renamed, the painting preserves traces of its former self: the blaze of red across its centre suggests the arc of Dido's pyre, just as the simmering yellow at its lower edge evokes the glimmer of sunrise. The canvas therefore operates on two levels, both as a remnant and as a self-conscious examination of what it means to create a painting. As a vestige of a mythological image, *The Trial* also conveys nostalgia for a lost (classical) past through the very act of erasure and burial that gave it new subject and meaning. We find a similar combination of classical theme and painterly accrual (with the latter threatening to subsume the former) in Anselm Kiefer's *Icarus – (Sand of the Brandenburg March)* [1981], in which the body of the falling boy has been substituted for an artist's palette, supplanting medium for content. The overall image is a crude, expressionistic layering of paint, which gestures towards figurative *representation* – hinting at the appearance of a wing, a palette, an aerial view of ridged fields – but that ultimately buries its subject in the process of its own transmission.

For Le Brun, the same act of layering paint becomes a potent means of depicting the passage of time, of concealing the then with the now. In *Present* [2016], for example, an expanse of white is overlaid first with red and then burnt yellow so that the surface – the implied 'present' of the title – is shown to be a series of burials, an accumulation of both medium and history. Like *The Trial*, the image has the texture of overpainted fresco, and in this sense, Le Brun's paintings resonate both visually and conceptually with the contingent physical qualities of Roman wall-paintings as they appear now – enhanced here by *Present's* Pompeian tones; even its

border of bared canvas and streaked paint echoes the fractured edges of excavated frescoes cut from their walls and reset in plaster. As remnants of a buried age – hidden, scuffed, and often themselves repainted – the materiality of these ancient paintings embodies their own status as objects caught between the present and the past: they are a survival, and in this respect accord with Philip Guston’s modernist definition of the picture as that which ‘remains – an endurance.’ Set alongside Roman frescoes and viewed similarly as ‘archaeological’ fragments, Le Brun’s paintings not only describe the passage of time through the application of paint, they become artefacts of duration, the stuff of history. They also suggest that Roman painting’s contemporaneity could be determined by its very fadedness. By demonstrating the fluid and tangential ways in which the art of antiquity maintains presence in the colours and textures of contemporary painting, and even in its material form, Le Brun’s practice asks us finally to locate the ‘classical’ in the two-dimensional and the colourful, and to recognise Greek and Roman painting’s own potential for abstraction, suggestion and non-figurative representation.