

Christopher Le Brun: Joy in Leaping

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Something lost in the digitisation of literature is the physical manifestation of reading time. That is, the way a book's heft falls heavier on the right or left hand, depending on how much of the thing's been read. In very old books, the transparency of the page makes that passing time more visible still. Time is something seen and felt, something with a weight. A dark cloud of read and remembered (or half-remembered) words gathers in the periphery of the reading eye, blacker and denser and less legible as time – both the narrative's and the reader's own – dwindles away. That dark fog of type stands for lost experience: imagined rooms, landscapes, and faces are in there somewhere, never to be recovered in quite the same way.

Few other cultural forms are able to render memory in physical terms, except, perhaps, painting. In Christopher Le Brun's recent canvases – take a work like *Voice* – skeins of colour, applied in clusters of vertical marks, build upon each other without ever fully effacing what came before. The viewing eye glimpses, or seems to glimpse, a depth within that is not so much spatial as temporal. We seem to have been granted access to the physical traces of a remembering mind. There's something in there, somewhere. If these marks, which generally appear in discrete clusters, recall the jagged urgency of a scrawled note to self, so much the better. The aesthetic, as singular as a signature, lends this and all of Le Brun's recent paintings unmistakable associations with a written language, albeit one for whom legibility is not the point. The residual heat of past experience, recollected in tranquillity, maybe is. The mark is a mind scratching at itself. Caught in the act of remembering.

A painting's surface is like an accumulation of pages in which past moments are just about visible, and therefore remain in play, remain recoverable. The drama of his paintings, says Le Brun – you might say in painting as a whole – is in the act of covering. That's to say, how a hand's mark relates not only to the specifics of a given surface (its size, texture, shape, resistance) but to all the marks that preceded it. As described by Henri Matisse in his 1908 'Notes of a Painter,' the various painted marks "must be balanced so that they do not destroy each other." If the violence of the tone is alarming in the context of Matisse's own emotionally subdued work, it feels apposite for Le Brun's approach, in which a kind of muscularity of touch contends with a tendency towards shimmering, ethereal lightness. The viewer is reminded not so much of Mark Rothko – whose bands of hazy colour bear some resemblance to Le Brun's instinct for the horizontal – but of his contemporary Jackson Pollock, whose best works exist between misty ephemerality and brass-tacks bluntness

It's possible for a viewer of Le Brun's work to register these apparently opposing pulls, towards and away from the body. Even the most ostensibly immaterial painting – *Rise*, say, a light-soaked haze of pale lemon and white – is densely handled, its emphatic physicality working with, not against, the draw of the ephemeral. In Le Brun's paintings, that push-and-pull is the animating factor in their power to speak directly to the viewer. Whatever their metaphysical intent, their syntax is a bodily one. The painterly sublime of mid-century abstraction entails a kind of bodily detachment on the part of the viewer: give yourself up to the engulfing red mist of a Rothko or a Newman, and you too might be transported into realms of pure thought. In Le Brun's work, the embodiment continually expressed by those marks, and their hand-size, hand-recalling scale, keeps bumping us back to earth.

Le Brun's *Siren* – its title poised, typically, between the mystical (the monstrous enchantresses of classical myth) and the earthy (the howling police sirens that punctuate the peace of his south London studio) – is large enough, at 3 metres wide by 2 metres high, to envelop the viewer utterly. A field of marks, building upwards from pink-flecked whites through golden yellows to a climax of blazing reds at the upper edge, mitigates against passive absorption by insisting, again and again, upon its facture. As is characteristic in Le Brun's work, the edges of the canvas remain just that. Colour is applied straight out of the tube. The tube's lip becomes the tool that makes the marks. An actor paces on the stage, feeling its edges, testing its limits. The movements of his or her body reiterate the dimensions of the stage itself – upstage, downstage, stage left, stage right – as though reminding the audience of the parameters of the medium. This is all there is (and yet). In *Siren*, the brush builds up squalls of vertical strokes, each one an echo of the canvas' own dimensions, each downward movement articulating the gravitational pull of a human hand held up to a surface. The gravitational pull, too, of a body towards the earth. For all their exuberant colouring and joyous energies, one detects, however dimly, a melancholy awareness of that joy's only end. The received space of the painting's surface: this is all there is, perhaps. And yet there's that contradictory pull again: the rain of marks run down, the heat of colour surges up. Most of Le Brun's paintings enact this vertical drama (note how your eyes float, when looking at his paintings, as though unbidden, upwards, again and again), which seems to approach some sort of articulation of what used to be called the human condition.

It's worth remembering that abstraction in western art is still in its infancy: younger than photography, a mere blip in comparison to the centuries of figuration from which it emerged just over a century ago. It would be absurd to proclaim its energies spent. Le Brun expands the reach of abstraction by refusing to frame it as a spent force, against the orthodoxy of many contemporary painters for whom modernist abstraction is an embarrassing inheritance that ought to be held at a distance between thumb and forefinger. The bloody-mindedness is true to form. Throughout his career, Le Brun has found himself going against the prevailing artistic current, from his embrace of symbolist/romanticist figuration within the headily conceptual climate of

1980s art to this more recent engagement with gestural abstraction. Or rather re-engagement: Le Brun's earliest work, on graduating from Chelsea College of Arts in the mid-1970s, was entirely abstract too. Oscillation between the figurative and the abstract comes as no surprise any more, long since Philip Guston's then-startling return to figuration in the late 1960s, or Richard Diebenkorn's back-and-forth between the two a decade earlier. Yet such examples are instructive.

Considering, for instance, Guston's work with the benefit of hindsight, the startling reappearance of representational imagery late in his career seems less a U-turn and more an inevitability. Even at his most ostensibly abstract – those interwoven reddish, pinkish marks, clustering at the centre of the canvas – Guston thinks, unwittingly or otherwise, in traditional painterly terms of figure/ground. Can the same be said for Le Brun? Is that presence in the heart of the deep space of Le Brun's paintings, glimpsed through those knotted veils of paint, something real? Something seen? Is the composition of a painting like *Prom*, from 1983, in which a naturalistic white horse appears framed amid densely worked patches of abstract brushwork, somehow retained as a structural conceit within these wholly non-representational recent works? Doesn't the act of covering (one of Le Brun's chosen analogies for his habit of layering mark upon mark) imply something within?

If some of the strategies of figuration are retained here – if, that is, Le Brun never fully gives himself over to total abstraction – that might account for his paintings' magnetism, their way of drawing the viewer's eye and body inwards. That most cardinal of sins in viewing abstract paintings, seeing things, seems not only accepted but actively embraced: when forms gather density, they loom upwards like landmasses appearing through thick fog, or modern buildings jabbing up into the sky. Some of their titles (*True North, Cape, Orient and Immortal, Pole*) imply orientation, even cartography, but at the same time evoke, in their vagueness, some of the disorientation of the polar explorer or 16th century adventurer, setting forth with only a half-formed idea of their destination. What, after all, is the 'Orient' (or, indeed, 'Pole') but a notion held in the head, a psychological imperative not mappable onto the world we know? Whatever's within, deep beyond those veils of colour, it's a place in time, Housman's 'land of lost content', or a land that exists in name only, there to justify the journey's existence.

The place appears as it's being described: description calls it into being. As in the atmospheric perspective of the landscape backgrounds in Renaissance paintings, colour loses its heat the more distant the view (like those 'blue remembered hills' of Housman's poem). Often, that distance is temporal as well as spatial. Earlier moments from a painting's main narrative appear as though literally far away: they are somehow both places and moments in time at once. Colour relationships in Le Brun's paintings function in a comparable way, constructing a fictive space or event that hovers on either side of the painting's surface, but, true to the disorientation of their titles, what's described never quite coheres: it is only ever somewhat there. In *Concert*,

melting islands of colour fade in and out of view in a way that irresistibly recalls Turner's late watercolours of Mount Rigi in Switzerland, which play between the solid and the insubstantial (mountain, lake, boat) as though performing that conflation of space and time in paintings of the past. Having retraced the artist's footsteps in the early 1860s, John Ruskin claimed that the function of landscape painting was to be less concerned with the 'image of the place, as the spirit of the place.' So too in Le Brun's work. His pentimenti – in Old Master paintings, the earlier and abandoned brushmarks revealed as their colours fade – are inextricable from his paintings' power to evoke if not literal places, then the experience of place as refracted through memory and imagination. Flip the paintings over (writer's privilege) and their backs are often scrawled with the artist's notes. Dates written in charcoal are crossed out when the decision is made to return to a painting; titles change as the painting does. One work, *Defer or Sigh*, retains that change of mind in its own name (it was first Defer, later Sigh, and later still kept them both), and the work itself, composed of two roughly equally sized horizontal areas of olive and turquoise, with ochres, oranges and greens gradually revealed beneath, is suffused with that spirit of uncertainty. It radiates, but that's not the right word, what the artist calls 'complicated English light': the perennial changefulness that demands a flexibility of wardrobe if a person is to survive here. Look out of the window, check the clouds; defer, or sigh. Or both.

Le Brun's painting *The King's Highway* feels, both in title and in its physical actuality, central to this latest body of work. As in his other paintings, its title implies a Ruskinian spirit of place rather than a fixed location. A highway is defined as such by the motion of bodies and vehicles upon it. It is a place between places, and is defined just as much by this inbetweenness. Motion, inbetweenness, defer or sigh: these fugitive terms are operative in the declension of Le Brun's paintings. In this painting, marks – some vertical, others glancing off to one side in counterpoint – build up in scrimms of pinks, tangerines, ochres and creams, that modify the vibrating reds and greens that give the surface visual weight, generating a presence that is like, but isn't quite, a place. Its full title comes from Geoffrey Hill's short, fragmentary poem *The Jumping Boy*, which evokes something like a memory or dream of childhood. For Hill, the boy of the title embodies youthful exuberance, in all its heroic futility:

Here is the jumping boy, the boy
who jumps as I speak.
He is at home on the king's highway,
in call of the tall house, its blind
gable end, the trees – I know this place.

This place: a spirit, not a map. Embedded in the title, too, are echoes of fables and fairy tales, narratives handed down through time, which gather local detail in every telling. At home on the king's highway: a contradiction

in terms, surely? Not for the jumping boy, 'winning/ a momentous and just war/ with gravity' (think of that push and pull in Le Brun's flurry of soaring marks). In his essay on the Brothers Grimm, Philip Pullman describes the essential fluidity of the fabular narrative in terms that Le Brun and his viewers might well understand:

The fairy tale is in a perpetual state of becoming and alteration. ...you have a positive duty to make the story your own. A fairy tale is not a text.

The form of the fairy tale is defined, like the highway itself, both by its motion and its fluidity. It exists only in its telling, is only really itself as it jumps from word to word and from teller to listener. If this is also what painting is, it isn't news to Christopher Le Brun, for whom painting is an action, not an end, a conclusion forever (if sighingly) deferred. 'He leaps,' (Geoffrey Hill again), 'because he has / serious joy in leaping.'