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THE FIELD OF RHETORIC: AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER LeBRUN

By STUART MORGAN ☒

The following conversation took place in October in London between Stuart Morgan, a critic who writes regularly for Artforum, and Christopher LeBrun, a painter who lives and works in London.

Stuart Morgan: In your work this year you have concentrated mainly on painting horses—sometimes pastoral and arcadian, sometimes frenzied and romantic. But before that your work consisted of Claudian landscapes, executed in a composite, historicizing style.

Christopher LeBrun: I was trying to produce a sting out of the collision of styles. I used various devices, particularly spatial devices, to produce the greatest degree of disruption. I was trying to allow something—previously impossible—to happen by making deliberate oppositions. But I was making them in the context of something that accepted color and form naturally, as if against the background of the picturesque convention. If I had continued such an approach, it would have become a mannerism. Before, I was using painting in a gridding of styles, slotting elements into the painting. This made it too easily broken, too dialectical. I am trying to say something paradoxical about painting but I don't want to use a paradoxical method, because my subject is not entirely painting. Painting is a kind of mask for my subjects which I will not discuss. The singularity of a painting is sufficiently

paradoxical or ironic without dramatizing the paradox. I thought initially that I was going forward, getting to the edge of painting—in the sense of something new—but I realized in fact I was getting closer to the center of painting. This has to do with understanding why traditional form is so powerful. A Titian painting to me is more wise because what it has is absolute self-possession, something carved with the brush, the continuity of brushwork.

SM: Did your acceptance of picture space, in the horse paintings, mark a move forward?

CLB: The question is whether the development of painting as a medium is fired by going forward by simply extending the devices, the range, or as Patrick Heron called it the “continent” of color; or whether instead its expressive limits are to be found by identifying its most paradoxical aspect: the possibility that something static is the true center of the difficulty of the art.

SM: This involves thinking of all of painting as synchronous.

CLB: It involves thinking like this: imagine there is a typical central image, which stands for all painting. Imagine that painting can no longer develop. Imagine . . .

SM: Why should I?

CLB: Why not? Imagine holding painting still. This generates a tension against its natural desire to go forward. I was finding that this was more expressive and significant than the use of formal devices. There is a semantic potential that is rich and disturbing. It reflects a feeling of dislocation about the question of moving forward or back, and opens up difficult questions like that of authority.

SM: What do you mean by “authority”?

CLB: Finishing a painting provokes the question of when it becomes independent, and why. Authority is not just an esthetic quality; it means trying to understand the wisdom of traditional form, how that oppresses, yet also preserves openness. When you’ve uncovered something that the painting itself wants to project, when it reaches the surface the painting says, “Hold. This is the ideal condition.”

SM: Unfortunately, “authority” has overtones of power, of authoritarianism.

CLB: I want to use it precisely because of its loaded connotations. We must recover words like “authority” from the prejudice against their use.

SM: Take Anselm Kiefer as an example. Where in his work does authority reside?

CLB: He confesses to what has authority and risks himself against it single-mindedly, recklessly, in an attempt to make a tragic art. The strength of his work lies not just in his themes but also in his determination and clear decision to launch his art against the most powerful core within painting. An image can be central but there’s another word to consider: rhetoric. Rhetoric is an empty structure, but the roots of rhetoric, the memory images, are vivid and real. The first project of rhetorical painting is to establish the “field” of rhetoric, “the fields and spacious palaces of memory,” as Augustine calls it. This is the domain of painting. It is peopled, and it has its objects. The major theme in Kiefer is not a historical critique but the making of a fiction sufficiently great to stand against other forces. That project itself is out of step. The credence given to imaginative building is . . .

SM: Greater than it deserves?

CLB: Not at all; there’s nothing greater. The more powerfully one establishes the rhetoric that permits it, the more one mocks the material terms painting has been limited by. It is absolutely essential to treat the images honestly, confess them. I will not censor the images that lead to a particular state of mind I must have in order to paint. The thing one doesn’t want to do when painting is to be controlled by all the implications, because handling paint, touching the whole surface again and again, requires being able to come across something you don’t already know. The more firmly the fiction is based, the more it can be seen that the imaginative world of painting, its inner world, is a safe empire where intentions don’t fetch and carry.

SM: The outer world is frangible enough. What is the relationship between the two?

CLB: Painting mocks by contrast that which is outside it.

SM: We're talking about an act of faith, aren't we?

CLB: Yes.

SM: Why painting in particular?

CLB: Painting is archaic and finite—as we are. Painting is exhausted in the way we are exhausted. It's as if painting is a medium with which we are complicit. This is a period of high Romanticism, and of despair. Painting is anachronistic. That's why it's hopeful. We ourselves are anachronistic in a sense, as is the visually literate imagination.

SM: You just like anachronisms because they seem beautiful to you.

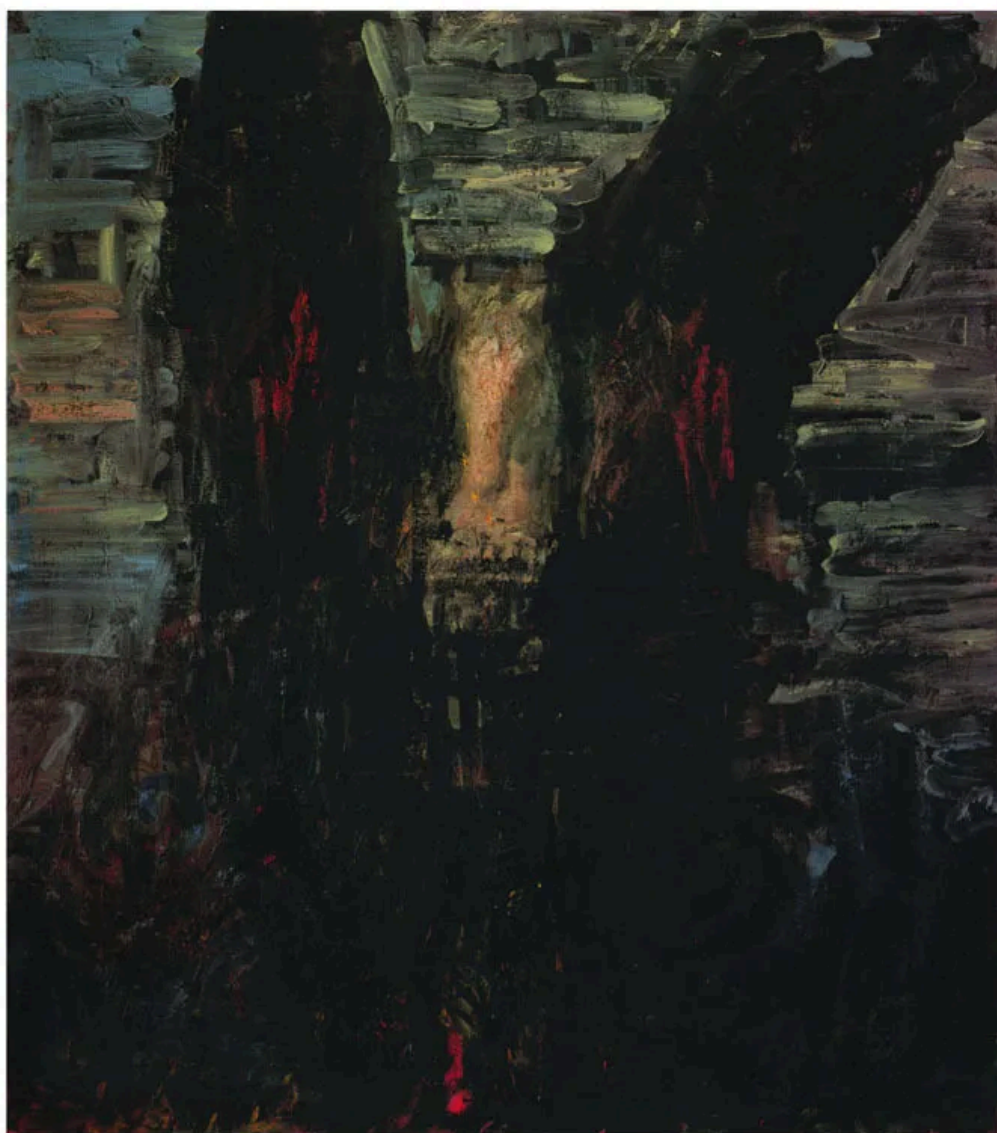
CLB: True. And this sense of beauty is founded on taste. It has been schooled, subjected to the “best” in poetry, in painting, and in literature, and continually exercised by my trying to find out *why* these are the best. My paintings are composed so as ideally to be read as visualizations of that rhetorical world. Taste itself—the idea of the canon, the standard of taste—was formed trying to achieve a perception of nature clearer and finer. Turner's early work is valuable because it wasn't trying to free nature from the picturesque until he understood it.

I find myself with parts whose meaning has migrated. I did a painting made of things once considered beautiful—stones, a boat, a wheel, vases—now abandoned by culture, puzzling, almost untranslatable—Latin. That's an almost impossible position, to have images whose meaning is absent. The rhetoric I'm piecing together is broken. Every part of it is broken. Painting has been a mutual project of discourse as well as touch. It must speak; otherwise it's just optics. The phenomenological picturesque—colors, shapes, marks—is insufficient. What happens to poetic utterance when the rhetoric, the basis of understanding, is broken? These objects have a sting of dislocated content. That's why I must work with the picturesque that's been handled and touched by history—stones worn smooth, steps.

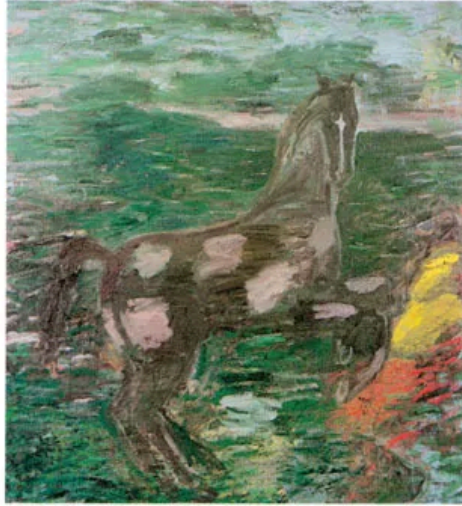
SM: You seem to want to sum up the visually literate imagination, but at the same time you're expressing a historical awareness you can neither manage

nor escape.

CLB: Imagine that there are given to us images that are recurrent and also central to the tradition. Is that memory? Is it invention? Is it taste? If I am obsessed by an image, or convinced that the perfect painting is a certain shape, where does this notion come from? I'm talking about a meditation on painting which has produced, not necessarily the images I am painting at the moment, but which in the course of time has produced an image that is the only consummation of those images I have. I'm talking about something that is a given. I'm not choosing.



Christopher LeBrun, *Trophy (Ange) Reversé*, 1982, oil on canvas, 93 x 81, Gaudin TV, Manchester collection.



Christopher LeBrun, *Untitled*, 1981, oil on canvas, 84 × 98"

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Christopher LeBrun, *Painting on a Dark Ground*, 1979, oil on canvas, ca. 104 1/2" x 65 1/2"

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