

REVIEWS NEW YORK

## Christopher Le Brun

Sperone Westwater

By Donald Kuspit

Christopher Le Brun continues his pursuit of the elusive, almost as an end in itself. The sense of mystery that pervades his work is the residue of—and perhaps an attempt to revive—that sense of “*tragic insight*” which Friedrich Nietzsche regarded as “the most beautiful luxury of our culture.” In his paintings, Le Brun combines an iconography of isolation with a muted sensual surface, less important for its assertive painterly quality than for its seductive atmospheric one; it bears some resemblance to Monet’s elusive continuum of surface. There is a sense of restrained fullness in this surface, which makes the object embedded in it—yet also thrust onto it, as if the crust of some barely contained passion—seem all the more haunting. I used to think that the specificity of the object was important for Le Brun—that it mattered whether it was a horse or wreath, each imbued with its particular mythopoetic associations—but now I think it is an excuse for isolation. In the works here, a tree predominates, as in *Tree with Hill*, 1986, and *Tree with Blue and Red*, 1987–88, but what counts is its removal, which is sometimes suggested by abstract markings. These markings claim the image for the realm of art—as pure shaped color—but also highlight it as an emblem of loneliness. The isolated tree also provides an imagistic pause in the music of atmospheric flux. For all the singularity of the object, its rendering is more about the silence within the musical surface, and the sense of isolation that silence articulates,



Markus Lüpertz, *Titan* (detail), 1986, painted bronze, ca 8' 3 9/16" x 27 1/2" x 29 1/2". From his installation in “*Ambiente Italia*,” 43rd Venice Biennale, 1988. Photo: Attilio Maranzo.

### SEPTEMBER 1988

VOL. 27, NO. 1

ARCHIVE

than about bespeaking a material reality, in however elusive a manner. The fact of the object matters less than the feeling of nothingness its isolation arouses: it exists to bring out the nothingness in which it exists.

Le Brun's work recalls the indeterminacy of Symbolism: one might almost say that indeterminacy has become a fetish for the artist. Enigma, as I have elsewhere suggested, is the last frontier of art. Perhaps art's only remaining task will be to preserve a margin of incommunicability in a world saturated with messages. In the crossfire of communications, art offers a sense of enigma—the last sanctuary of interiority—for it represents the immeasurable, the inner infinite. Le Brun's revival of the sense of the hidden, in a world that wants to expose everything, goes against the social grain. Le Brun manages to mystify and interiorize, despite the demand for things to be demystified, debunked, and turned inside out. These works have the soft light of inner sensuality, the oddly quiet clarity of a self-assured *je ne sais quoi*. Le Brun is the Watteau of the new expressionism, or shall we call it the New Lyricism, that aims, again in Nietzsche's words, to make "iron, leaden life . . . lose its gravity through golden, tender, oil-smooth melodies." Le Brun's gesture liberates his objects from their melancholy heaviness, making them the perfect hiding place for our own gravity and melancholy.

—*Donald Kuspit*

REVIEWS NEW YORK



Jonathan Borofsky, *Man with Beating Heart and Flags of Nations, 1988*, fiberglass with electronics and acrylic on canvas, installation view.



Christopher Le Brun, *Tree with Hill, 1986*, oil on canvas, 72 1/2 x 82 1/2."

stressed and, in fact, rises above the tendency that society has toward squelching personal freedoms. The metaphor Kabakov evokes is more universal than specific to Soviet society, reminding us of the tension between the antithetical realms of personal freedom and social order.

—Kirby Goukin

**JONATHAN BOROFSKY**  
PAULA COOPER GALLERY

Jonathan Borofsky's wonderfully ambiguous, unusually spare installation contained none of the clutter of several previous installations, in which spectators were invited to participate—they became part of one show by playing ping-pong—in a space crowded with objects. But the muted melodrama of other shows remained. The viewer was again brought face to face with a giant robotic figure. It was more robust and rounded than previous flat figures, and though it did not "chatter," it remained ominous. Large, blue, and male, with blank eyeballs, the giant's left hand rested on its hip. Its right hand was extended in an indeterminate gesture, and in the cavity of its chest, a sacred-heart-type of red lamp blinked on and off, synchronized with a repeating tape-recorded heartbeat. This powerful but strangely dumb giant was located in the center of a space on whose walls hung the flags of 37 countries, arranged as a frieze. The painted flags looked colorful and bright, but together they formed a monotonous list. Their dullness as a group stood in marked contrast to their attractive, spruce appearance.

The flags functioned both literally, as emblems of a country, and abstractly, as flat designs. Each function seemed to mock, even cancel out, the other; the art identity nullified the flag function, the picture's equivalence to a flag negated its

abstractness as art. By using the flag in this way Borofsky detached the image from its wealth of sociocultural associations. Yet these associations haunted the flags' "purity," the result being an insidious semiotic chaos. Only the labels suggested how to read the pictures, but there was no reason to take their instruction seriously: it was still possible to read these pictures as abstract designs, referring to nothing. The doubleness of the reading helped induce a state of panic—an intense anxiety about both art and nationality, as equally insulting ideas.

The allegorical giant suggested a dumb-founded humanity, reaching out in a friendly gesture. But to whom was he reaching? The giant stood isolated and lonely in an empty space, made all the more empty by the vacuous insignias on the wall. Here, art has degenerated to an empty sign as much as nationality. These terms no longer refer to anything—they have become free-floating signifiers. That once seemed good, but now it is bleakness, death (and clearly not a living death). Borofsky's work suggests that both the autonomous work of art and the nation state abstract—indeed, profoundly violate—humanness, which has become an inert giant with a mechanical heart. Borofsky has created a work of great despair, profound hopelessness, one that shows the apocalypse within, the interior catastrophe. He has articulated the true, unhappy postmodern consciousness of both art and the world, the wretchedness within their glamorous look. This installation is truly great public, political, conceptual art.

—Donald Kuspit

**CHRISTOPHER LE BRUN**

SPERONE WESTWATER

Christopher Le Brun continues his pursuit of the elusive, almost as an end in

itself. The sense of mystery that pervades his work is the residue of—and perhaps an attempt to revise—that sense of "tragic insight" which Friedrich Nietzsche regarded as "the most beautiful luxury of our culture." In his paintings, Le Brun combines an iconography of isolation with a muted sensual surface, less important for its assertive painterly quality than for its seductive atmospheric one; it bears some resemblance to Monet's elusive continuum of surface. There is a sense of restrained fullness in this surface, which makes the object embedded in it—yet also thrust onto it, as if the crust of some barely contained passion—seem all the more haunting. I used to think that the specificity of the object was important for Le Brun—that it mattered whether it was a horse or wreath, each imbued with its particular mythopoetic associations—but now I think it is an excuse for isolation. In the works here, a tree predominates, as in *Tree with Hill, 1986*, and *Tree with Blue and Red, 1987-88*, but what counts is its removal, which is sometimes suggested by abstract markings. These markings claim the image for the realm of art—as pure shaped color—but also highlight it as an emblem of loneliness. The isolated tree also provides an imagistic pause in the music of atmospheric flux. For all the singularity of the object, its rendering is more about the silence within the musical surface, and the sense of isolation that silence articulates, than about bespeaking a material reality, in however elusive a manner. The fact of the object matters less than the feeling of nothingness its isolation arouses: it exists to bring out the nothingness in which it exists.

Le Brun's work recalls the indeterminacy of Symbolism: one might almost say that indeterminacy has become a fetish for the artist. Enigma, as I have elsewhere suggested, is the last frontier of art. Perhaps art's only remaining task will

be to preserve a margin of incommunicability in a world saturated with messages. In the crossfire of communications, art offers a sense of enigma—the last sanctuary of interiority—for it represents the immeasurable, the inner infinite. Le Brun manages to mystify and interiorize, despite the demand for things to be demystified, debunked, and turned inside out. These works have the soft light of inner sensuality, the oddly quiet clarity of a self-assured *je ne sais quoi*. Le Brun is the Watteau of the new expressionism, or shall we call it the New Lyricism, that aims, again in Nietzsche's words, to make "iron, leaden life...lose its gravity through golden, tender, oil-smooth melodies." Le Brun's gesture liberates his objects from their melancholy heaviness, making them the perfect hiding place for our own gravity and melancholy.

—DK

**BARNETT NEWMAN**

PACE GALLERY

I think it is time to stop taking Barnett Newman at his word. He's a fine and important painter, but not for the reasons he gives. To believe that carefully placing a zip in a field of atmospheric color is an act of heroism, or the esthetic equivalent of terrifying primordial awareness, is an absurdly ambitious idea. While Newman's understanding of his works is an overinterpretation, the formalist understanding of them is an underinterpretation. I would suggest that the truth of Newman's achievement lies somewhere between his own grandiose claims and the formalist emphasis on pedestrian deconstruction—on art's increasingly tedious self-scouring, its masochistic exposure of its ground of being.



Artforum is a part of Penske Media Corporation. © 2025 Artforum Media, LLC. All Rights Reserved.