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Private matter

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PRIVATE MATTER



The artist Christopher Le Brun came to HKDI in September to share his idea that art is quintessentially private, rooted in emotion and that artists must have the courage to keep their work alive even if the world does not yet appreciate their vision. **DAISY ZHONG** reports.

IN 1976 CHRISTOPHER LE BRUN, who is now President of the Royal Academy of Arts, was a 25-year old fresh graduate. After one year of work he presented what he considered to be his "masterpiece" to one of his teachers.

"I expected him to say 'It's magnificent!' but in fact he said 'It's terrible, what are you doing?'" says Le Brun. "I found myself with a moral dilemma: the teacher said it was bad, but I secretly thought it was good, so what was I supposed to do?"

"I was determined that he was wrong and I was right," said Le Brun at a lecture called *In Conversation with Christopher Le Brun on Creativity & Inspiration* presented at HKDI on September 17 and attended by over 150 students, artists and design educators. He was visiting with the Royal Academy to engage with the arts and business community in Hong Kong.

Le Brun's confident appraisal of his own work must have been spot-on because he left art school to embark upon a life-long journey in art, during which he has emerged as one of the most influential British contemporary artists, known for his mix of symbolism and abstraction.

Born in Portsmouth, England, Le Brun was trained at the Slade and Chelsea Schools of Art in London in the 1970s. As a student who wanted to get good grades but also to be true to himself,



HAMILTON GALLERY, ART AND HKDI



Le Brun painted whatever he liked on canvas and then painted on top what he had been taught to paint. "So I had my secret paintings hidden inside perfectly academic abstract paintings."

The "masterpiece" that he brought to his teacher was a giant painting full of what he had always wanted to paint, this time without guise, full of "landscapes, figures, views of deep space... everything that was unfashionable".

Meanwhile his passion for the romantic English past of poetry, myth and legend led him to begin connecting painting and poetry, to create what he called "literary painting", an approach that was equally unfashionable in the art world. "My painting was in a strange position relative to what was happening at that time, and nobody was painting anything like it," says Le Brun.

Despite that, Le Brun had the courage to follow his heart in setting his own motifs and approach to art. One exhibition in his early career brought him wide recognition from the established art scene. In 1982 he participated in the blockbuster *Zeitgeist* exhibition at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin

This influential exhibition, showing a new direction in painting, helped Le Brun realise that he was actually amongst a group of artists including the Italian Enzo Cucchi and German Anselm Kiefer who had emerged independently in other corners of the world, and who were using rapid, violent brushwork and drawing inspirations from romantic and historical subject matter, the natural world and primitivism. These artists represented the "neo-expressionism" wave of postmodern art in the late 20th Century.

On Le Brun's often large-scale canvasses the same motifs recur with Wagnerian subjects such as wings, forests, horses, wanderers, medieval knights, towers, and castles. All demonstrating a dream-like quality, they seem to share the same root in Romanticism and Symbolism.

His interest in these motifs is natural, says Le Brun, because it is anchored in his own background, as an

English schoolboy born in 1951 who was brought up steeped in tales of knights, adventures and myths. "These symbols (in my paintings) are very deep, going down to the human psyche, and endlessly fascinating. You can't exhaust them."

This mysterious, sometimes dangerous element of childhood memories has always intrigued Le Brun and made him want to uncover the unknown. "I am interested in these symbols because I don't understand them. As long as the motif of a painting remains enigmatic or difficult, it draws me towards it."

Le Brun believes that painting as an expression records the creative process unfolding. "Everything you painted on a painting, you see it in the end. You can see the track laid out. No matter what I express, I'm interested in the layers of myself that come to the canvasses without pushing too hard."

No wonder he also regards the creation of art as an exclusive and personal matter. "If art has a soul, then there is something private in art, so you need to keep this secret ambition back. So my advice (to the students) would be to have your private world, your free space. Do your own work at home, and don't let the teachers see it." ☺

Elected as President of the Royal Academy of Arts on 8 December 2011, Christopher Le Brun is a former trustee of Tate, the National Gallery, and the Dulwich Picture Gallery. His work is in many national and international collections including those of Tate, The British Museum, V&A and MOMA, New York.

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP CHRISTOPHER LE BRUN'S VENICE XV FROM 2002. BELOW CHRISTOPHER LE BRUN IN FRONT OF HIS PAINTING GULF AT THE EXHIBITION RA NOW AT THE ROYAL ACADEMY 2012. THIS PAGE ABOVE CHRISTOPHER LE BRUN WITH HIS AUDIENCE AT CONVERSATION WITH CHRISTOPHER LE BRUN ON CREATIVITY & INSPIRATION AT HKDI ON SEPTEMBER 17 2012; BELOW THE SKETCH OF LE BRUN BY HKDI STUDENT BARRY NG



To Barry -
Christopher
17/9/2012

As Le Brun presented his memorable lecture at HKDI Barry Ng, a first year student at the school, was inspired to make a pencil sketch of the famous British artist, which was presented to Le Brun when he had finished speaking. The President of the Royal Academy said he was delighted with the gift, telling Ng that nobody before, in all his career as a painter, sculptor and art educator had ever made a sketch of him "in action."