

# Los Angeles Times

## ART REVIEW : High Romance Meets High Tech in Pasadena

February 18, 1992 | CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT | TIMES ART CRITIC

By choosing the paintings of Christopher Le Brun for the inaugural exhibition of its spare and beautifully articulated new gallery, designed by architect Frederick Fisher, Pasadena's Art Center College of Design has delivered an unusual message.

Le Brun is an old-fashioned painter whose canvases are highly Romantic in bearing. Indeed, these are pictures in many ways more attuned to the intoxications of the 19th Century--think of his countryman, J.M.W. Turner, mixed with fragments of Delacroix, bits of Courbet and even shards of the long-observed fantasist Arnold Bocklin--than to those of the 20th.

At Art Center, such an exhibition is a quiet puzzlement. This is a school whose international reputation has been built on such commercial art disciplines as automobile styling and high-tech packaging design. Its striking building--a black, rectilinear, glass-walled, steel-girdered "bridge" across a hillside canyon, designed by Craig Ellwood Associates in the 1970s--is stark and unforgiving in its rationally planned intrusion across the natural landscape. And the school's smallish but increasingly productive program in fine art has been marked by a perspective that is decidedly Post-Conceptual, one that would seem to leave little room for the soft and muzzy aesthetic preoccupations of an artist like Le Brun.

In fact, this sharp difference may be precisely why the 40-year-old British painter has the honor of being the champagne bottle cracked across the bow of the new gallery. The show, organized by gallery director Stephen Nowlin and with a generally fine catalogue (save for the faulty color of the reproductions) by Nowlin and critic Kay Larson, is hardly a polemic. Instead, Le Brun's Los Angeles debut simply seems designed to give voice to a kind of work that otherwise might not be much in evidence at the school.

The new Alyce de Roulet Williamson Gallery, named in honor of an Art Center trustee and longtime supporter, occupies what was once an open-air courtyard in the center of the building, directly behind the entrance. It's a 4,600-square-foot rectangle whose subdivisions mesh elegantly with Ellwood's modular composition.

In essence, what Frederick Fisher has done is to build a rectangular, white-walled box right inside the slightly larger rectangle of the black, glass-walled courtyard. The airy and spacious

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gallery in the center is therefore surrounded on three sides by somewhat narrow galleries, suitable for smaller works of art.

The whole has been covered with a ceiling punctuated by deeply recessed skylights, which allow for considerable natural light in all the rooms. Doorways are tall and narrow, providing a sweep and willowiness to the passageways that make the galleries feel expansive, while also offering a counterpoint to the chunky modules of the original building. Elegant yet simple detailing in the joinery between ceiling, walls and doorways, together with a plain, polished concrete floor, finish off a space that is respectful of Ellwood's existing design while softening its unyielding rationalism--the better to accommodate the very different demands of an art gallery.

Le Brun's exhibition (a solo show also opened Friday at L.A. Louver Gallery in Venice) includes 22 paintings dating from the last five years. Visually, they are extremely slow. The heavy, seemingly inarticulate surfaces of Le Brun's canvases are built up from layers of gesturally applied paint, and they virtually demand long and measured scrutiny. Little will be revealed by cursory glances.

Even something as basic as the presence of an image within the mottled surfaces can take a while to be seen. These often bituminous fields of color begin to seem shot through with flashes of light and nearly illegible shapes. Gradually, the abstract markings open up to reveal themselves as deep spaces and tangible forms: a wooded glen ("Aram Nemus Vult," 1988-89), a lone "Silver Birch" (1986-88), a thorny bramble ("The Briar Wood," 1990).

Even three mounted soldiers, vaguely North African in costume, emerge from the dense mists of dark color in "Riders Before a Castle" (1988-1991). The picture's Delacroix-like subject matter erupts, up close, into a small fireworks display of turquoise, crimson, powder blue, magenta and gold markings of the brush.

Not all Le Brun's paintings have figures or landscapes buried within the paint. Some are non-figurative--"Green Hook" (1988), for example, or "Alight" (1989), which are traced with linear webs vaguely reminiscent of both early Clyfford Still and recent Brice Marden.

Le Brun's work is simultaneously abstract and figurative in the way a Monet waterlily painting or a Turner seascape is--both a recognizable image and a lush engorgement of paint compete for attention. Paint as representation is carefully balanced with paint as paint.

The difference is that this art's specific echo of an established tradition of abstraction itself feels oddly figurative. These aren't just paintings of trees or exotic soldiers or of motifs recognizable from Courbet and Delacroix; they're paintings of a "thing" called abstract painting, too.

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A small picture from 1988 titled "Thicket" describes the way in which Le Brun's paintings work: It creates a tangle of visual underbrush, out of which the spectator must work himself. Plainly, this method is derived from perceptual experience in nature, for which painting is here constructed as a sensuous equivalent. But, the Romantic tradition of High Art he so passionately embraces shows that it's derived from a knowing experience of culture, too.

Le Brun's art isn't merely a nostalgic revival of a lost tradition. Instead, it reconsiders the imaginative impulse of 19th-Century European Romanticism through a sober lens informed by postwar American abstraction. The conflict between them is what these paintings seem meant to recall. Le Brun tries to open up a space in which the contrariety might yield something fresh.

The weakness of his art is in the gentility with which such a difficult and defining clash in modern life is addressed. You end up wondering whether "mere" painting could possibly be up to the task. Their strength, which is not inconsiderable, is in having grappled with the question at all.

*\* Williamson Gallery, Art Center College of Design, 1700 Lida St., Pasadena, (818) 584-5144, through April 5; and L.A. Louver Gallery, 77 Market St., Venice (310) 822-4955, through March 14. Both closed Mondays.*

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