National College of Art and Design

Faculty: Fine Art

Department: Painting

Retreating Forwards

The Paintings of Mark Tansey and Christopher Le Brun in the Return to Figuration

by

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Nothing could be further from the authentic art of our time than the idea of a rupture of continuity. Art is - among other things - continuity, and unthinkable without it. Lacking the past of art, and the need and compulsion to maintain its standards of excellence, Modernist art would lack both substance and justification.

(Clement Greenberg, 1961)

I believe it is still possible to develop, or at least find variety of expression, within the classical tradition. Perhaps the hubris involved, the audacity of this position, can only be understood now as 'ironic', but it was really founded on strong feeling and belief challenging a stifling orthodoxy.

(Christopher Le Brun, 1991)

This problem [of depicting 'reality' in painting] is not one that can or ought to be eradicated by reductionist or purist solutions. We know that to successfully achieve the real is to destroy the medium; there is more to be achieved by using it than through its destruction...In the late Seventies, what was particularly attractive about pictorial representation was that one faced an opening and extending realm of content rather than dematerialisation, endgames and prolonged swansongs.

(Mark Tansey, 1991)

The idea of modernity is closely bound up with this principle that it is possible and necessary to break with tradition and to begin a new way of living and thinking. Today we can presume that this 'breaking' is, rather, a manner of forgetting or repressing the past. That's to say of repeating it. Not overcoming it.

(Jean-François Lyotard, 1985)

1. Mark Tansey, Forward Retreat, 1986, Oil on Canvas, 94"x116"

2. Christopher Le Brun, Rider with Shadow, 1984, Oil on Canvas, 210x213cm

INTRODUCTION

In 1986 Mark Tansey produced a painting entitled *Forward Retreat.* In sepia-coloured grisaille technique it depicts the reflection of four men on horseback in a filthy pool littered with debris, both cultural and mundane. Gilt picture frames are scattered with apple cores, broken urns, totem poles and discarded African sculpture among other things. As you study the painting you notice that the riders, three of whom stare intently through binoculars in the direction from which they have come, are actually mounted back to front on the horses. Still further inspection reveals that one is a polo player, two are first world war soldiers, German and French perhaps and the third American, dating to the second world war. Evoking ideas of the heroic progress of modern art, the avant-garde, appropriation and eclecticism and the decline of civilisation itself, the painting appears to comment on the situation of art (bearing in mind that what we see is all in reflection) in the closing decades of the Twentieth Century.

Using works such as *Forward Retreat* by Mark Tansey (like a lot of his work it contains a multitude of art historical references) and the work of Christopher Le Brun as reference points this thesis aims to explore some of the issues surrounding contemporary painting. In particular, notions of tradi-

tion and rupture, figuration and abstraction, approaches to the picture plane, appropriation and revivalism, the endurance of painting as a medium of expression and the ideological implications of its representational modes.

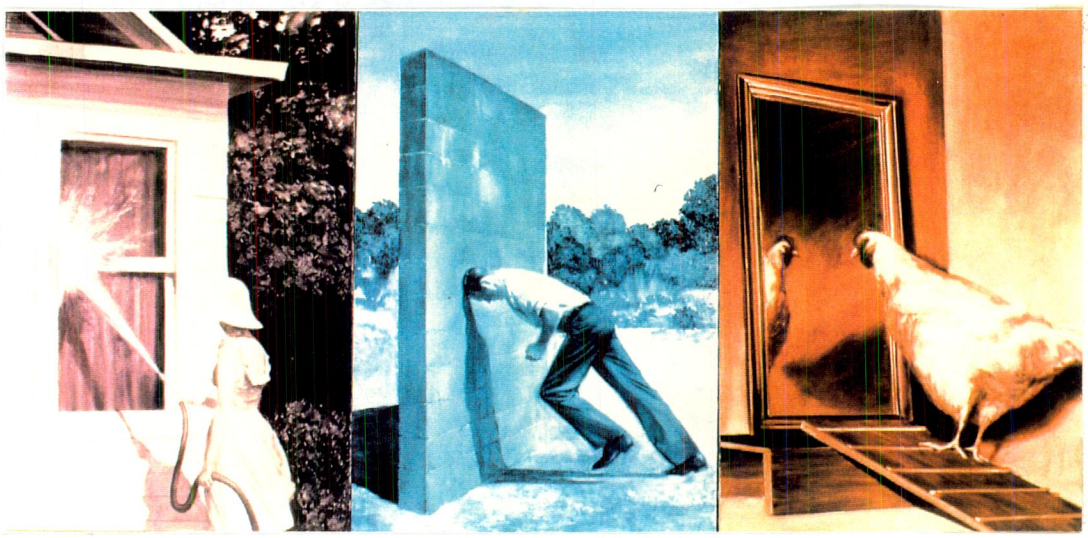
The history of art has traditionally been perceived as progressing in a linear fashion, producing a succession of stylistic innovations with each responding to its immediate predecessor. Postmodernism however is seen to represent the abandonment of this sense of progress. Lyotard speaks of "a sort of sorrow in the zeitgeist'" resulting from a disappointment that the expected emancipation of mankind never materialised from the modern project. In the quote above he describes Postmodernism as a condition of forgetfulness, a repression of the past, which leads to its repetition rather than its being surpassed.

The work of Mark Tansey and Christopher Le Brun, as painters within Postmodernism and specifically within the revival of figuration, can be analysed in this context in terms of their relation to Modernist and pre-Modernist movements in art.

In the critique of modernism presented in many of his paintings, Mark Tansey seems to locate the work of Paul Cézanne as the starting point of Modernist abstraction, that was to lead eventually to the "death of painting". Traditionally the picture plane had been conceived as either window or mirror, but with modernism came a third approach, the canvas as flat, painted surface. According to Hubert Damisch:

> Modernism in painting is signalled by replacing the superimposition of preparations, undercoatings, glaze, transparencies and varnishes with a completely different craft founded on flatness, juxtaposition of the strokes, simultaneous contrast...
>
> (Damisch, 1985, p.205)

The effect of this new craft was to emphasise the presence of the artist whereas hitherto the function of preparations, glazes and so on had been to conceal the hand of the artist. "Ars est celare artem'" (art is to con-



3. Mark Tansey, A Short History of Modernist Painting, 1982, Oil on Canvas, 58"x120"

ceal art). Within the classical system of representation when painting is assigned the role of mirror, the subjective viewer - implied by the painting-as-window axiom - disappears, and the world seems to represent itself without the intervention of an artist. By suppressing all evidence of the representational apparatus painting secures its claim to the possession of truth. John Ruskin believed that the task of the artist was to evacuate from the space between viewer and image everything that would impede the registration of visual truth. Or in the words of Marin:

> The material elements of the representation - and precisely the traces left by the painter's work, by his transformative activity in the painting - have to be erased or concealed by what the painting represents, by its 'objective reality'.
>
> (Owens,1982, p13)

Mark Tansey's witty assessment of this situation can be seen in the triptych of 1982 *A Short History of Modernist Painting*. The first panel depicts a woman spraying a window with a garden hose, the second a man butting his head against a flat brick wall and in the third a chicken examines its reflection in a mirror. What began perhaps with Cézanne's realisation of the ontological status of the brushstroke became via Clement Greenberg's prescriptions for painting, for Tansey and many others as empty, futile and ultimately self-destructive an exercise as banging ones head against a wall.

According to Greenberg, Modernism was engaged in a quest for the 'essence' of the medium. In order to render itself 'pure', painting was to jettison everything that was not exclusive to itself as a medium. What remained essential he conceived in purely physicalist terms and consisted of"the ineluctable flatness of the support". This was said to be the only condition that painting shared with no other art. One result of this self-imposed austerity was to effectively banish content from painting altogether. Representation and illusion were held suspect as being contradictory to flatness and content lost out because the purity of painting would allegedly

4. Mark Tansey, End of Painting, 1984, Oil on Canvas mounted on Movie Screen, 80"x54"

have been ruptured by contagion with any other 'orders of experience'.

Greenberg referred to the phenomenon overtly in his essay *The Avant-garde and Kitsch* but saw it as a 'dissolving' rather than banishment. "Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature can not be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself". (Greenberg, 1965, p.6) It is indicative of the sway Greenberg's ideas held that by the time Susan Sontag wrote *On Style* it was considered quite gauche to refer to there even being any opposition between form and content at all. She states that the work of art does not 'contain' a certain amount of content embellished by style, but wonders what is left of the notion of content once the antithesis of form and content has been transcended. One might be tempted to venture that what remained was an art described approvingly by Geldzahler (that "sub-Greenbergian hatchet man of late Modernism" according to Fuller) as "artists' art" limited to "simple shapes and their relationship"' with "no anecdote, no allusion, except to other art, nothing outside art itself that might make the viewer more comfortable or give him something to talk about".(Fuller, 1980, p.58)

From Greenberg declaring that 'descriptive art is pretty well finished' it was less than two decades to the magazine *Art Forum* declaring in 1970 that painting was dead, or if not exactly dead, then inconceivable - a display of histrionics that Tansey satirises in *End of Painting* where a cowboy painted on a mounted movie screen shoots his own reflection in a mirror. Over several decades artists had been involved in a project of progressive depletion of the old fine art pictorial conventions, with each reduction heralded as another breakthrough until the whole process of aesthetic renunciation ground to a halt altogether with those ultimately austere final movements of late Modernism, Minimal and Conceptual art. According to Peter Fuller "the great promise in the origins of Modernism had reduced itself to the pornography of despair". (Fuller, 1980, p.17)

5. Mark Tansey, Occupation, 1984, Oil on Canvas, 56"x80"

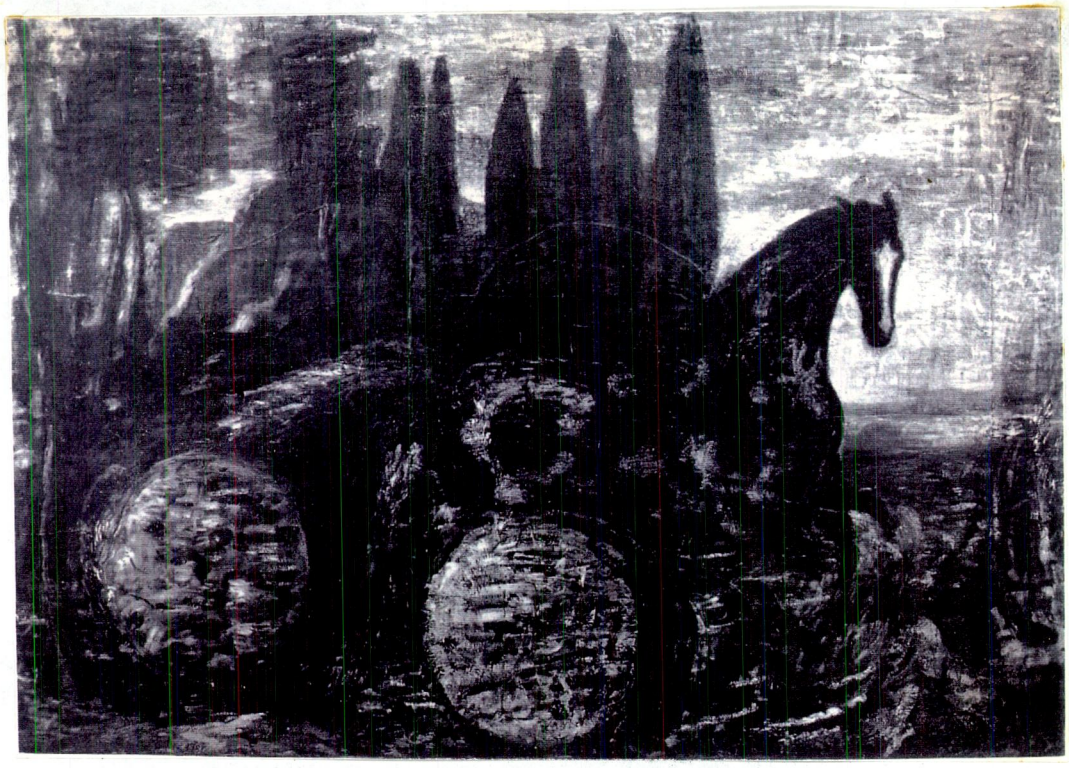
Craig Owens has used the phrase 'anti-modernism' to describe the Postmodernist ethic, arguing that it represents an abandonment, betrayal even, of the ideals of Modernism. With the trajectory of modernist and formalist innovation reaching a dead end, originality and novelty ceased to be essential requirements for new art. The notion of an immanent linear development of art was abandoned and within this context artists such as Tansey and Le Brun sensed that the formalist prohibition against representational painting had lifted. Tansey states:

> My pictures began really as a result of...the death of painting in the mid 1970s. It was a time when the formalists' prohibition against representation seemed to no longer have authority and anything was possible...
>
> (Sims, 1990, p.4)

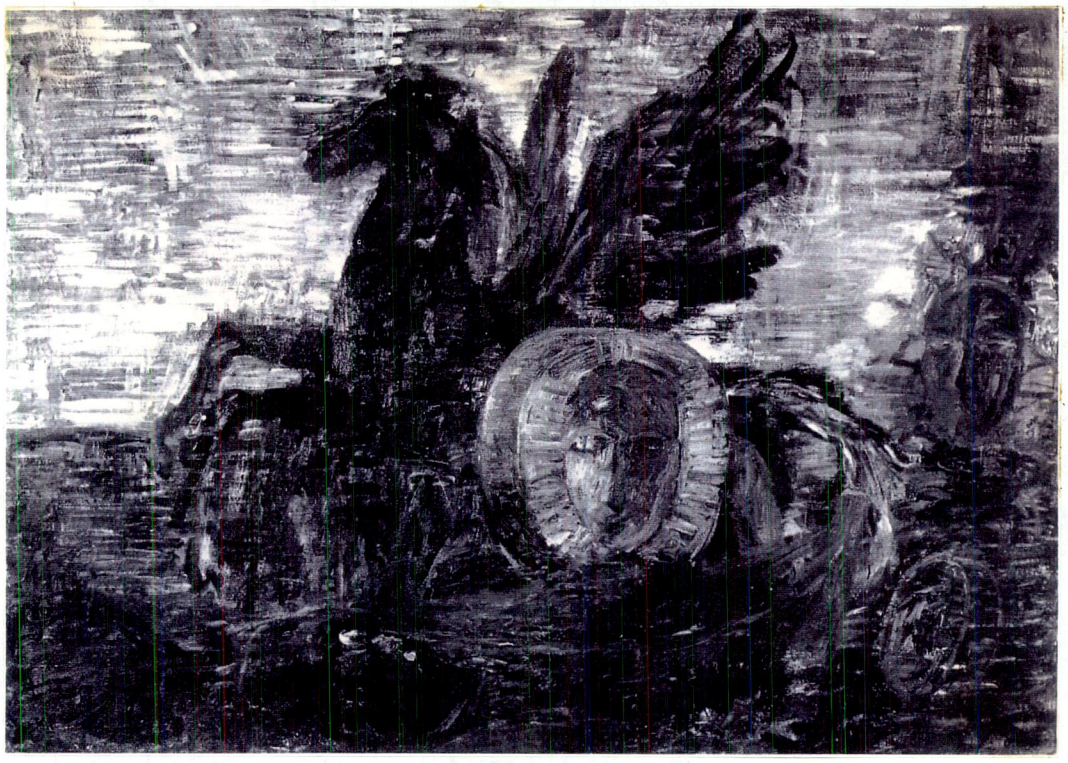
Similarly Le Brun, though he draws much of his inspiration from the expressive vein of abstract expressionism, speaks of "a type of modernity" responsible for a closing of the picture plane and producing "an awareness and set of obligations that have become established and oppressive". He goes on to say however, that it has:

> had the unintentional consequence of making the world of depicted interior space a forbidden territory, but one that is none the less irresistible, like a field under snow without a footprint. The implication being that this is a place that no serious artist goes.
>
> (Nowlin, 1992, p.8)

In a 1984 painting by Tansey titled *Occupation* a group of first world war German soldiers stand around a New York street corner. Taking literally the military metaphor of 'the avant-garde' Tansey implies that the formal obligations of Late Modernism command a compliance akin to the dictates of an occupying army. When Modernism is considered in this light, renunciation of its requirements begins to appear subversive. One man's



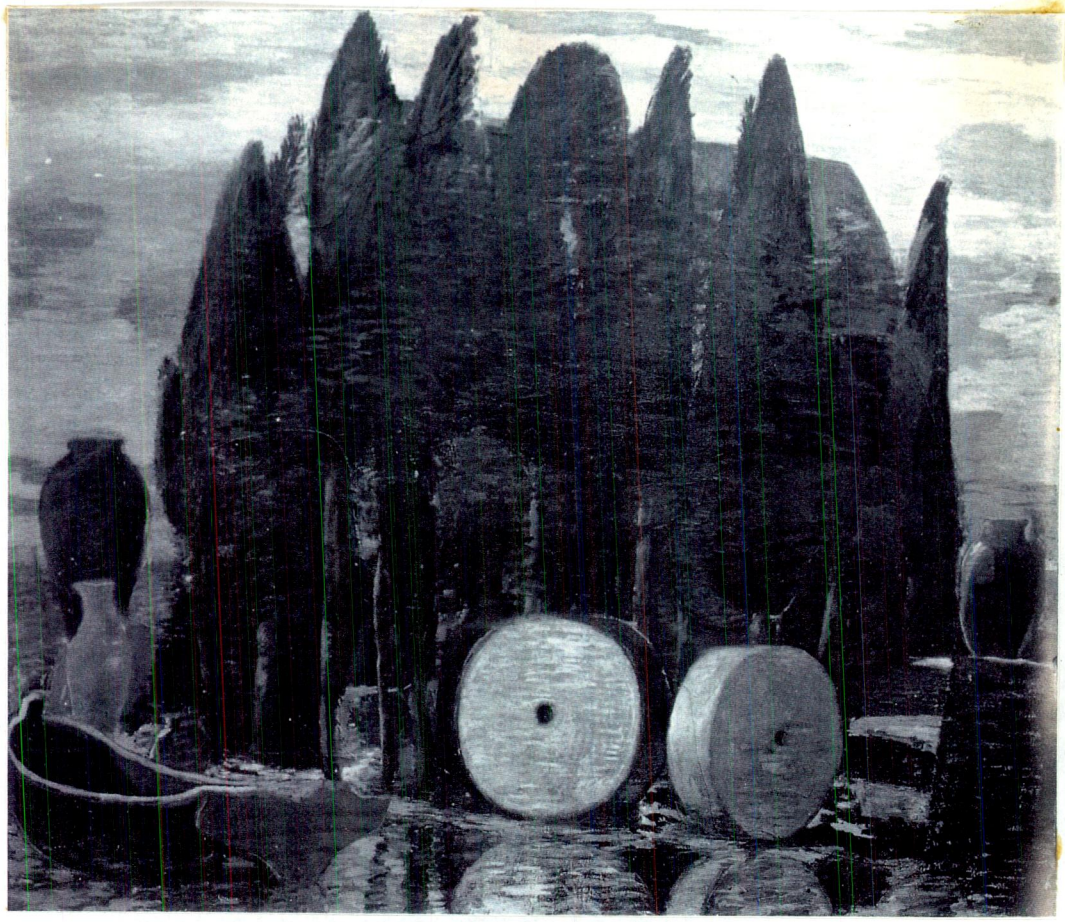
6. Christopher Le Brun, Arion, 1981, Oil on Canvas, 213x305cm



7. Christopher Le Brun, Xanthus, 1981, Oil on Canvas, 213x305cm

subversive however, is another's reactionary and, for some critics at least, the renewed emphasis on figurative painting represented a retrogressive step, heralding an era of unprecedented conservatism in art. Traditionally modernism had represented a challenge to the authority vested in dominant cultural modes and conventions but the feeling was that by the late 1970s Modernism had itself become a dominant cultural mode, its transgressions had become ritual, had lost the power to shock and perhaps had renounced even the potential to produce an alternative reality anyway, with its increasing insularity and vacuousness. In this atmosphere there was a reappraisal of artists such as Hopper, Bomberg, Kitaj, Freud, Bacon and so on.These were painters who had continued working outside the expectations of post-war abstraction and succeeding movements in a figurative tradition, and who had throughout that time been considered reactionary but were now hailed almost as subversives who had been driven underground by the forces of Late Modernism.

This phenomenon whereby authoritarianism is proclaimed anti-authoritarian and anti-authoritarian critique is stigmatised as authoritarian is described by Baudrillard as general cultural implosion. The reversal of things into their opposites enmeshes contemporary artists such as Tansey and Le Brun in a double bind whereby the Modernist imperative to transgression can be neither embraced nor rejected. If it is obeyed then the norm is upheld, if it is rejected it is simultaneously confirmed. Tansey's use of an illustrational style, so comprehensively outlawed under Greenberg, is either particularly subversive or particularly reactionary depending on where you stand. Le Brun in turn, as seen from the opening quote, is able to describe his stance with words such as 'hubris' and 'audacity' and as representing a challenge to 'a stifling orthodoxy'. For a critic such as Robert Rosenblum however, writing in the introduction to a volume entitled *New Art* , Le Brun is just another reflection of a whole condition of "neo-ism, revivalism and retro-



8. Christopher Le Brun, Painting 1980, Oil on Canvas, 213x209cm

spection" that characterises art in the 1980s. As Lyotard describes it, the return to figuration (as one aspect of Postmodernity) represents not so much a breaking of tradition as a forgetting, a repressing, and consequently, a repetition of the past.

Tansey and Le Brun are both sufficiently thoughtful as artists to be fully conscious of these conflicting forces. Tansey, in paintings such as *Triumph of the New York School* and *Occupation* alludes to them overtly and wittily, allowing the manner in which he conveys his ideas to become part of the discourse. Le Brun, ever more earnest, eschews irony, content perhaps for his work to embody the paradoxes of progression and regression. When asked in an interview with Stewart Morgan did his acceptance of picture space that came about with the horse paintings of the early 1980s, such as *Arion* or *Xanthus* , represent a move forward Le Brun replied by questioning whether the notion of going forward by extending the formal devices could be said to develop the medium of painting as much as exploring its expressive limits by holding it static in a tradition. This, he claims:

> generates a tension against [painting's] 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.
>
> (Morgan, 1982, p.49)

Authority, he explains is not just an aesthetic quality but means "trying to understand the wisdom of traditional form, how that oppresses, yet also preserves openness."

Their ambivalent relation to tradition brought Tansey and Le Brun together in an exhibition of nineteen international artists at the San Fransisco Museum of Modern Art in 1986. Under the title *Second Sight* the artists were grouped on the basis that they all "regard the creations of their forebears as aids to meaning, as a way of broadening their frames of reference"

(Curator Graham Beal in the catalogue essay). This broadening of the range of models from art history that artists can draw upon is a fundamental characteristic of Postmodernism. Art history has opened up to a greater degree than under Modernism, with its emphasis on innovation and forward progress.

One aspect of the broadened frame of reference within Postmodernism is the proliferation of appropriation as an art practice. The act of appropriation presupposes the impoverishment of the appropriated image within late Twentieth Century culture, and allows the artist to reconstruct a new meaning. (Marin speaks of all representation as being appropriation, in that the artist transforms things in the world into his representations of them that are then claimed to represent the real things adequately). Le Brun speaks of his search for references that will "spark a leap from the present into the past, and from the arena of painting to its metaphoric or analogic realm of emotion." (Nowlin, 1992, p.12) Of his work *Painting 1980* Le Brun says, "I did a painting of things once considered beautiful - stone, a boat, a wheel, vases - now abandoned by culture..." (Cooke, 1985, p.95) He uses such images in an attempt to convey the enigmatic, but laments the sapping of meaning and vitality from these images in contemporary culture. Aware of this phenomenon, he selects images of things he describes as abandoned by culture, whose meaning has migrated, become absent, precisely because they have 'a sting of dislocated content'. He then views the finished paintings, with all their multiple layers and hazily defined forms amidst a mass of brushstrokes, as a sort of psychological reservoir.

Tansey's style of painting, diametrically opposed to that of Le Brun, also reflects the dislocation of images in a mass media age. While commenting on the contemporary condition, his paintings evoke Nineteenth Century academic art, early photography, cinema and television and magazines and illustration of a bygone era. In reflecting on the present clothed in

the conventions of the past, Tansey is returning very specifically to a tradition long disdained within Modernism - that of the allegorist. Lyotard considers allegory to be a fundamental impulse within Postmodernism as a whole. The appropriation of images immediately renders the artistic act allegorical. The allegorist lays claim to images and interprets them, transforming the image into something other.

The use of allegory was banished under Modernism because it was antithetical to its emphasis on the present. According to Lyotard's analysis, the two basic impulses of allegory are an appreciation of the remoteness of the past and a desire to redeem that past for the present. That these impulses drive the work of Tansey and Le Brun in particular, and operate within contemporary painting practice in general, from the German Neo-expressionists to the Italian Trans-Avant-Garde, Scottish figuration and so on, is undeniable. This relationship to tradition and the past has lead to Postmodernism being viewed as a betrayal of Modernism, and it is claimed that in the process a belief in the future has been replaced merely with nostalgia.

*

In a footnote to his essay *The Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, that lauds artists such as Cézanne, Picasso, Braque, Kandinsky and Mondrian for deriving their chief inspiration from the medium, Clement Greenberg castigates Surrealism as a reactionary tendency because of its attempt to restore what he describes as 'outside' subject matter. Another aspect of the Postmodern in painting has been just such an attempt to reinstill content after its evacuation from painting by Greenberg and his followers. For artists like Mark Tansey the move represents a reaction against the austerity of late

9. Mark Tansey, White on White, 1986, Oil on Canvas, 78"x138"

Modernist art. Ironically however, Thomas Lawson in his essay *Last Exit; Painting* argues that it was Minimalism that cleared the ground for the reintroduction of content. "The Minimalist artists subverted Modernist theory, at that time most ably articulated by the followers of Clement Greenberg, simply by taking it literally", he claims. Their absurdist extremism, in producing objects that could refer to nothing but their own making, functioned to dramatise the situation and so "re-injected a sense of distance, and a critical discourse was once again possible". (Lawson, 1981, p.41) He goes on to say that it is no coincidence that this generation of artists - Judd, Smithson, Morris etc. - reintroduced the idea that "an artist might be more than a sensitive person with talent, might in fact be both intelligent and articulate, might have something to say." According to Craig Owens, the writings of an artist like Robert Smithson testify to an eruption of language into the field of visual arts, which is coincident with, if not the definitive index of, the emergence of Postmodernism. As painting became increasingly 'pure' the desire for content increased and often took the form of accompanying texts which Owens says "testify to a mounting sense of loss". Foucault placed the threshold between Classicism and Modernity at the point where language ceased to intercept with representations and "to provide a spontaneous grid for the knowledge of things". If we consider this banishment of the linguistic element from painting and the denial of referentiality as being symptomatic of Modernism, then Postmodernism might be said to be characterised by the reintersection of language and representations. For his part Tansey speaks of painting as "a conjectural field or place of inquiry" (Danto, 1992, p.128), and for Le Brun it is "a field of rhetoric". (Morgan, 1982, p.50) In his introduction to the Seattle exhibition Paterson Sims stated of Tansey, "His art has then aimed to reinsert the philosophic and intellectual enquiry extracted from painting with the emergence of abstraction and formalism in the Twentieth Century". The position for an artist such as Christopher Le Brun however is

significantly more complex. Le Brun speaks of painting as being "a mutual project of discourse as well as touch. It must speak;" he says "otherwise its just optics"(Morgan, 1982, p.50) and yet he insists at the same time on the autonomy of the painting, denying that though the forms in his work are often figurative, they do not refer to anything beyond themselves. Thus the content of his work as such, is much less clearly defined, being described, for example, by Lynn Cooke as deriving from "the act of eliciting a visionary apparition from formless brute matter." (Cooke, 1985, p.98) Mario Cutajar is slightly more forthcoming:

> The significance of Le Brun's rediscovery and recovery of Symbolism is manifold. For one thing, it corrects abstraction's forced divorce from meaning and does so without burdening it with the vulgarity that currently passes for 'content'.
>
> (Cutajar, 1992, p.17)

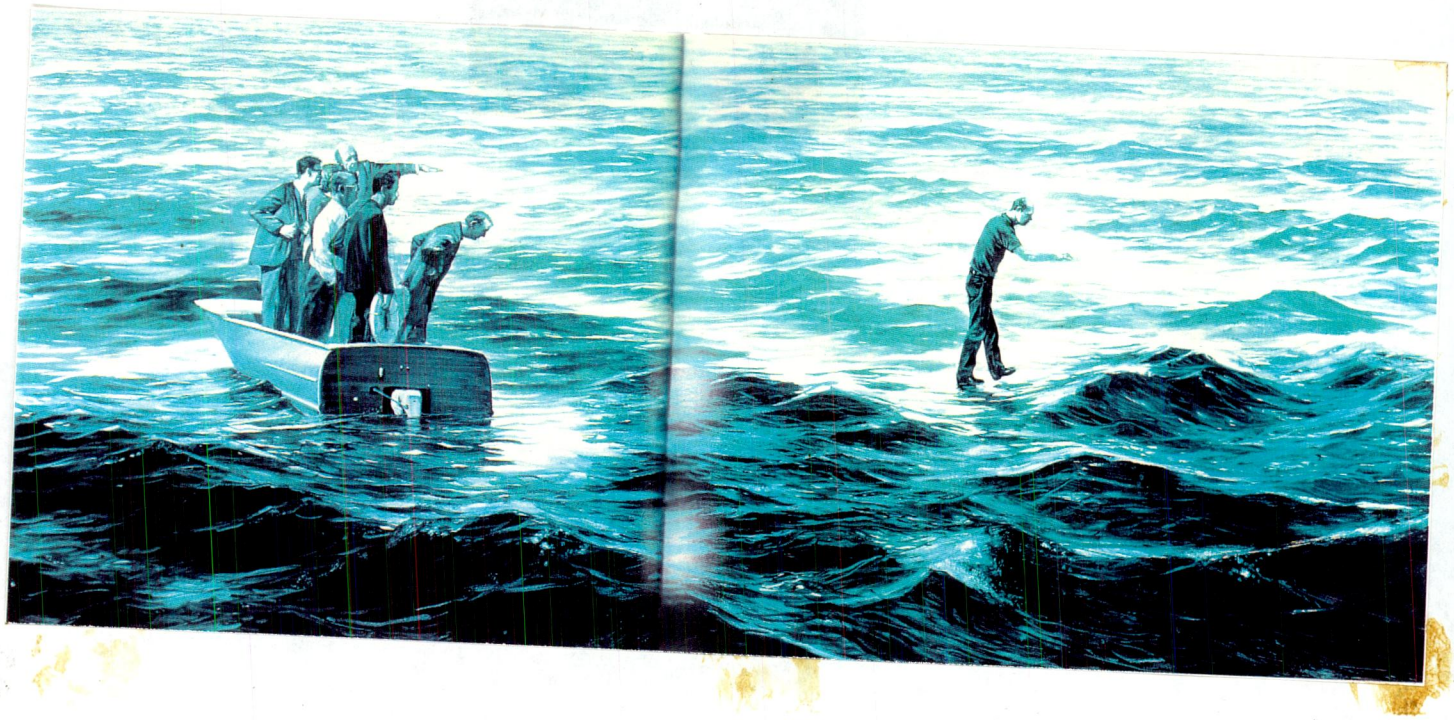
The precise nature of this reintroduced content however is still elusive. Le Brun himself is hardly more helpful, stating:

> 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.
>
> (Morgan, 1982, p.49)

Perhaps in his vacillation between figuration and abstraction, external and self-referential motifs, Le Brun is embodying in his work the threshold between Classicism and Modernism that Foucault outlines, and in his Postmodernity is straddling the two.

In a cheeky piece of subversion Mark Tansey stakes his claim to reintroduced content with his 1983 painting *White on White*. Named after Malevich's early piece of minimalism, a white rectangular shape upon a white surface, it refills the canvas with imagery as zealously as the Russian emptied it seventy years earlier. Feeling that there was no longer any justification for the restrictions that had served to isolate subject matter from art practice, Tansey stated "Pictures should be able to function across the fullest

10. Mark Tansey, Triumph of the New York School, 1984, Oil on Canvas, 74"x120"



11. Mark Tansey, Myth of Depth, 1984, Oil on Canvas, 38"x89"

range of content. The conceptual should be able to mingle with the formal and subject matter should enjoy intimate relations with both." (Danto, 1992, p.134)

*

> Western civilisation is not the first civilisation to turn around and question its own foundations, but it is the one that has gone furthest in doing so. I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency...The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticise the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.
>
> (Clement Greenberg, 1961)

Although Postmodernism as the term implies, represents the end of Modernism, there are certain aspects of it, such as the self-critical tendency that Greenberg identifies with Modernism, that lend a sense of continuity. What has been widely celebrated as a return to figuration in recent times, after the ascetic years of Modernist abstraction, represents in many instances in fact a critique of representation, rather than its affirmation. The German Neo-Expressionists and Italian Trans-Avant-Garde in their return to figuration are, according to some critics, not engaged in an attempt to recover a tradition so much as to declare its bankruptcy. Though undoubtedly allied to the neo-figurative movement, Christopher Le Brun is at pains to distance himself from this tendency in contemporary art, with its notions of 'bad' painting, 'kitsch' quotation and wholly ironic intentions. In the vacillation between subject matter and abstraction, Le Brun sees his work as performing a continual appraisal of the relative value of these representational modes, but his affirmation (as seen in the opening quote) of belief in the pos-

sibility of developing within the classical tradition sets him somewhat apart from continental colleagues. He has greater empathy with German painting however, where, he says, the persistence of the genres of landscape, figure and history has enabled a rigorous argument from a formal base similar to that found in his own work. The work of the Italians he feels lacks the tension that derives from this strong feeling for formal values. "Those artists" he says, "don't have the background of formal theory from Roger Fry to Clement Greenberg that has dominated English-speaking criticism in this century." (Nowlin, 1992, p.9)

The form his work takes and its conception as being, in part at least, an investigative tool of representation places Le Brun's art well within the prescriptions of Modernism that Greenberg outlines above. Mark Tansey however, with his overt antipathy to Greenbergian ideology, seems to reflect more the tendency within Postmodernism to ridicule the Avant-Garde as described by Lyotard:

> You know that in the field of art for example, and more especially in the plastic arts, the dominant idea is that the big movement of avant-gardism is over. There seems to be a general agreement about laughing at the avant-garde's, considered as the expression of an obsolete modernity.
>
> (Lyotard, 1989, p.10)

In paintings such as *Triumph of the New York School* which, echoing Velasquez, depicts the aftermath of an imaginary literal battle between the European Avant-Garde, represented by Picasso, Dali, Matisse and so on, and the American Abstract Expressionists with Pollock, Rothko, De Kooning et al. ranked behind their leader, Greenberg, and *The Myth of Depth* in which Jackson Pollock, in familiar drip-painting stance, walks on water while being observed from a boat by Greenberg and other Abstract Expressionists, Tansey is wholeheartedly adopting this heavily sarcastic position, a sarcasm that represents perhaps, following Barthes, the contemporary condition of truth.

Lyotard also says that the Avant-Garde has always been involved in "a long obstinate and highly responsible investigation of the presuppositions implied in modernity."(Lyotard, 1989, p.10) Like René Magritte before him, Mark Tansey has been engaged in just such an investigation, using representational means in order to question the logic and limitations of representation. The literalism that both painters employ, rather than abstraction, to undermine representation, would fall foul of Greenberg's strictures on account of not being 'characteristic methods of a discipline' as determined by him. Michel Foucault, in his essay on Magritte said:

> in order to deploy his plastic signs, Klee wove a new space. Magritte allows the old space of representation to rule, but only at the surface, no more than a polished stone, bearing words and shapes: beneath, nothing. It is a gravestone."
>
> (Foucault, 1983, p.41)

Tansey also allows the old space to rule and utilises the Magritte-like pictorial devices, such as scale dysfunction, surreal juxtaposition and the disconnection of word and image, to produce paintings that are perhaps also effectively "gravestones", debatably serving more to subvert than to entrench painting "more firmly in its area of competence".

Chapter One Mark Tansey

> But an object of art is artistic only in so far as it is not real...But not many people are capable of adjusting their perceptive apparatus to the pane and the transparency that is the work of art. Instead they look right through it and revel in the human reality with which the work deals.
>
> Ortega y Gasset (Sontag, 1982, p.146)

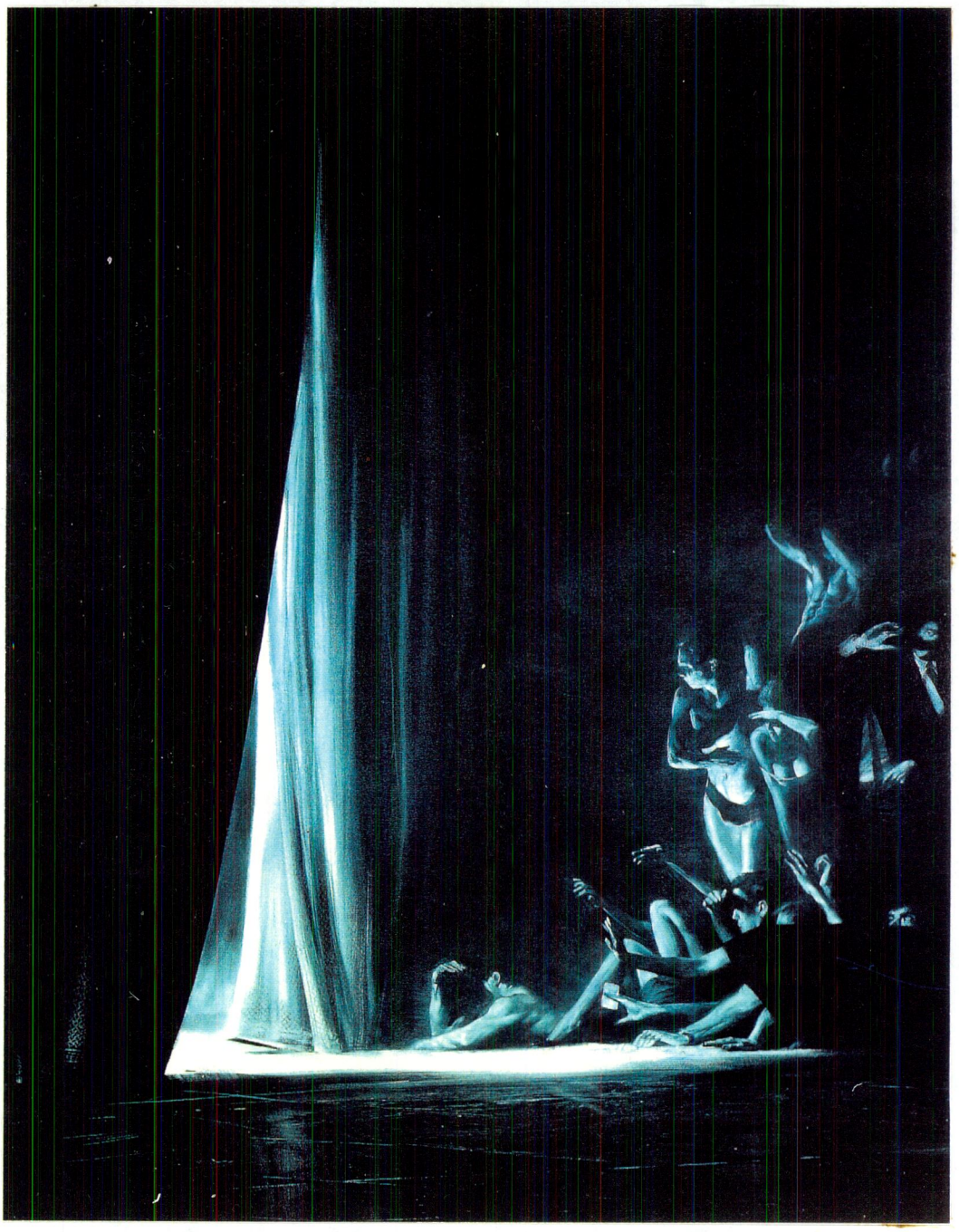
The paintings of Mark Tansey are executed in a monochromatic style that appears to hark back to the early decades of the century and beyond even to Nineteenth Century academic art, recalling the compositional conventions of French Salon history painting in particular. Tansey employs a painting technique called grisaille, whereby an even coat of paint is applied over the whole canvas and then progressively wiped away, working in and out of the middle tones in the manner of the Old Masters. The effect produced recalls early photographic images and also evokes the space of film and television. The style is cool, neutral, superficially transparent, drawing the viewers' attention not to itself but through the pane to what it depicts.As in the work of the Social Realists, whose style Tansey's is akin to, formal values are minimised in favour of content. Because of the paintings' relation to

photography it appears as if, as in the classical conception of the painting-as-window reality has transposed itself to the canvas, unaided by the hand of the artist. The paintings' look of having been mechanically reproduced appears to testify to the truth of what they show. Tansey's skill as a painter lies in one sense in his ability to disguise his human presence in the work. This represents a repudiation of Greenberg's idea of Modernism's use of art to call attention to art, and marks in effect a return to the maxim "ars est celare artem". Paradoxically, the painterliness required to achieve this draws attention to itself in an era where such qualities have been perhaps abandoned or lost in much other contemporary painting. Tansey's use of grisaille and frottage techniques, the latter borrowed from Max Ernst, involves the idea that anything capable of carrying paint can function as a brush. Objects are pressed into the paint surface to produce a textured mark which has a direct relation to the object in the world (Tansey realised the tools in *The Bricoleur's Daughter* , for instance, by pressing and scratching the profiles of his own tools into the paint) and has certain physical parallels with the production of photographic images. Tansey speaks of his touch as being "equivalent to light... scraping off the paint to let the white ground show through" (Sims, 1990, p.7). As with Magritte, the literal style is the most effective means of conveying clarity of thought. In its flat, descriptive didacticism it is ideally suited to conveying visual information; it is, after all, the style of textbooks. The style combines a remarkable surface lucidity with a lyrical handling of paint. This painterliness and Tansey's use of what might be termed a photorealist style in order to emphasise content rather than as a formal exercise, separates Tansey from the photorealist tendency whose transposition of photographs into paint allowed little scope for such painterliness, imaginative conception or aesthetic transformation.

The use of monochrome, quite apart from its affiliations with other media, increases the effect of transparency in Tansey's painting by inclining

the viewer to ignore the decorative aspect and "look right through" the painting to its content and perhaps even to "revel in the human reality with which the work deals". Gerhard Richter, another painter who has worked monochromatically, finds it suitable for mediation because of its inconspicuousness and tendency to not trigger emotional response. This unemotional surface is a feature of Tansey's work and has lead to it being described as reflective art, and like the film work of Robert Bresson, it has been accused of being cold, remote and over intellectualised. Generally in reflective art the form of the work is emphatically present, the idea being that the effect of the spectator being aware of the form retards emotions and promotes reflection and the use of intelligence. Perhaps it would not be going too far to venture that, in the context of several decades of abstraction, Tansey's highly realistic monochromatic paintings actually perform a Baudrillard-like reversal and draw attention to their form by being unfashionably conventional, and so elicit a reflective response. Certainly, Tansey speaks of his employment of monochrome in the late seventies as being a reaction against the "formalist insistence on the narrow present of pure colour sensation." (Danto, 1992, p.128)

One might describe Tansey's art as being disingenuously styleless, the painterly equivalent of Roland Barthes "zero degree of writing". In fact, to extend the comparison, one might consider Tansey's works as being "painterless paintings", visual equivalents of the authorless texts Barthes speaks of in *The Death of the Author*. In its effort to withdraw to evacuate the space between painter and viewer as Ruskin would have it, Tansey's style would appear to aspire to stylelessness. Its very mundanity represents a dissent from Modernist innovation. There is however, probably no such thing as a truly styleless art. Any manner of delivery represents consideration and so implies stylistic contrivance. "Nevertheless" says Susan Sontag "the notion of a styleless, transparent art is one of the most tenacious fan-



12. Mark Tansey, Veil, 1987,Oil on Canvas, 64"x50"

tasies of modern culture. Artists and critics pretend to believe that it is no more possible to get the artifice out of art than it is for a person to lose his personality. Yet the aspiration lingers - a permanent dissent from modern art, with its dizzying velocity of style changes." (Sontag, 1982,p.138) For Greenberg the ambition of stylelessness, aspiring to obviousness of intention, total sincerity, inevitably rendered art either expressionistic, where it became guilty of forcing feeling, or inert.(One suspects he would feel Mark Tansey's paintings fall into the latter camp.)

In the case of Mark Tansey the employment of what is probably the closest thing to a styleless style does not represent any attempt at sincerity or obviousness of intention, but rather is invariably ironic and frequently complex. He is perhaps alluding to this situation himself in his painting *Veil,* which depicts a group of figures shielding their eyes from the light falling on them through a parting in a curtain. Whilst possibly also an allusion to the inhabitants of Plato's cave, the painting might be interpreted as referring to Walt Whitman's conception of style as a curtain before the work. In the preface to *Leaves of Grass* he states "I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains. I will have nothing in the way, not the richest curtains. What I tell I tell for precisely what it is." (Sontag, 1982, p.138) In riposte Sontag responds, "To conceive of style as a decorative encumberence on the matter of the work suggests that the curtain could be parted and the matter revealed; or, to vary the metaphor slightly, that the curtain could be rendered transparent." It is these very issues surrounding the notions of transparency and style that Tansey's adoption of a monochromatic illusrativeness exploits.

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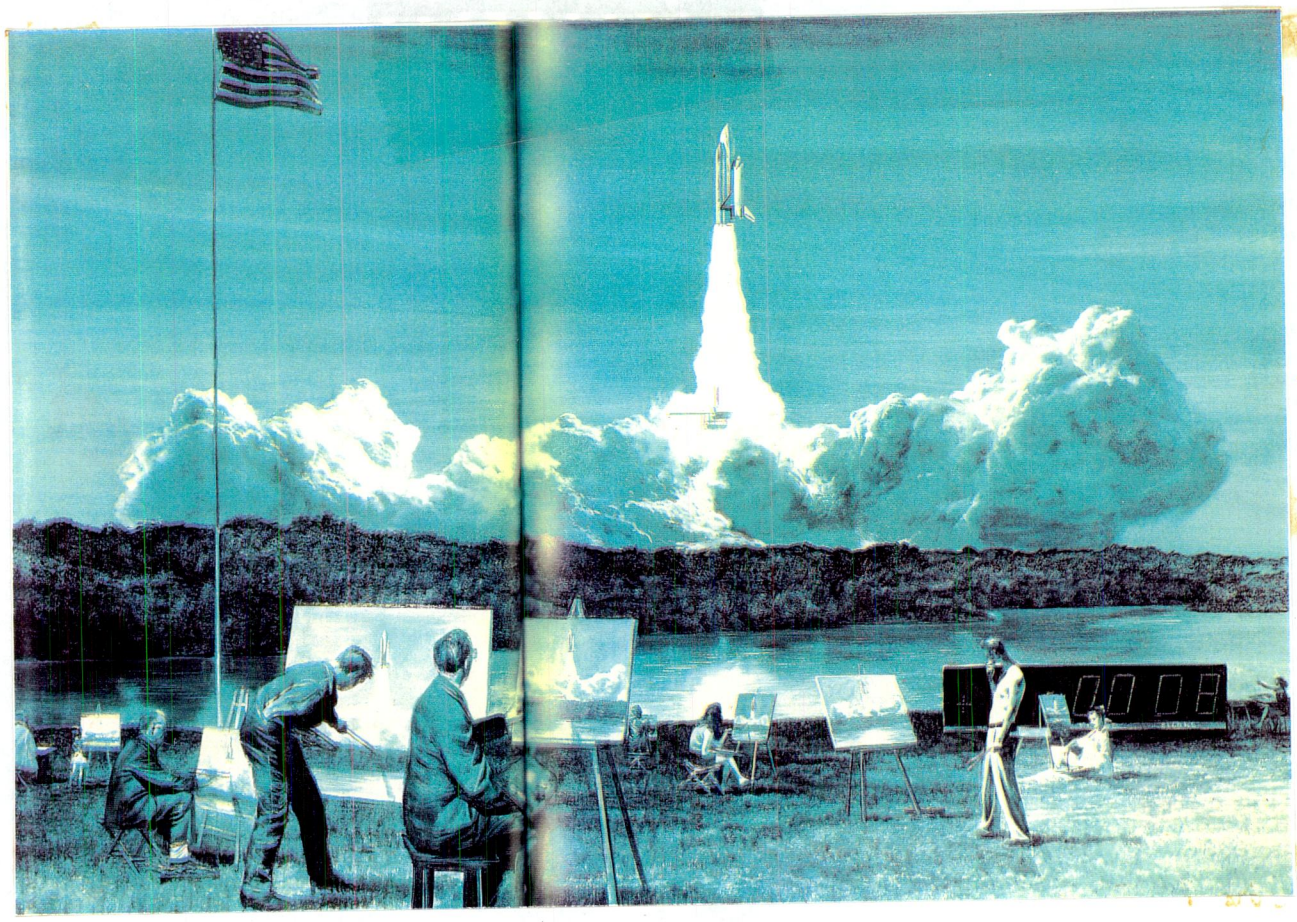
13. Mark Tansey, Still Life, 1982, Oil on Canvas, 62"x46"



14. Mark Tansey, Action Painting II, 1984, Oil on Canvas, 76"x110"

In a number of paintings Tansey's style actually forms part of the narrative, form becomes content as it were. *Triumph of the New York School*, for example, describes the aftermath of a stylistic battle ostensibly between the early modernism of the school of Paris and that of the American Abstract Expressionists, but the manner in which the scene is rendered adds a third contender - Tansey's own monochrome illustrational style, and its presence in the New York art world of the Eighties implies the triumph of Tansey over Greenbergian formalism. Similarly in *Mont St. Victoire* we see that icon of the abstract tradition, the mountain Cézanne contemplated while experimenting with representation, being rendered in an essentially academic realist idiom that Cézanne had rejected less than a century earlier. The choice of such an outmoded style by Tansey, however, is prompted by more than a desire to spit in the eye of Modernism. It allows him a tremendous compositional freedom in the combination of otherwise disparate elements. He states:

> Because this simple but versatile syntax was shared by art, fiction and photographic reality, it made possible another level of pictorial fiction where aspects of each could commune. That a painted picture no longer had to pretend to non-fiction, no longer had to be a cage for the real, made it possible to think in terms for a conjectural field or a place of inquiry. The picture could work as a hybrid form equidistant between the functions of painting, illustration and photography.
>
> (Danto, 1992, p.128)

This "communing" of disparate elements within the "simple but versatile syntax" of Tansey's style means that if one is looking through the pane that is Tansey's picture plane expecting to "revel in the human reality", one's expectations will be confounded. Beneath the suave and placid surface that pretends to complete transparency lie treacherous waters. The seeming straightforward visibility is in fact a brilliantly disarming camouflage, a magical mechanism lending the semblance of reality to flagrant fantasy. The paintings have the same studied artlessness of works by Magritte such

15. Mark Tansey, The Innocent Eye Test, 1981, Oil on Canvas, 78"x120"

as *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* which, beneath the literal surface, explode into paradoxes and conundrums generated by the conflation of time and space and opposing semiotic conventions. Monochrome implies the coherence of the photographic moment, producing a "seeming" unity that allows a wide variety of temporal and spatial disparities to be upheld. Three paintings in particular refer to this overtly, *Still Life* and *Action Paintings I* and *II*. In the first Tansey depicts, in a manner redolent of Hopper (picking up perhaps on a strand of American Modernism overshadowed by the heroics of Abstract Expressionism) a painter at an easel displaying the still life canvas she has just completed. As we see it the subjects of the study are being removed, flowers falling from the vase to the bin. *Action Painting* develops this theme, with an outdoor easel painter squinting casually along her brush at a dramatic car accident, a scene which is already frozen in perfect detail on her canvas. It contains a triple-coded framework that conflates photographic time (the crash itself seen in stop action); the time taken to create an image by hand (the artist painting the crash); and the time it took Tansey, the painter, to make the work. *Action Painting II* is a variation on this, repeating the pun of the title on Pollock et alii painting methods, with a group of Sunday painters recording a shuttle launch. An oversize digital clock emphasises the temporal disparity, with only eight seconds since lift-off and all the canvases fully realised with the scene. Spatial conflations permitted by Tansey's style include; the placing of First World War German infantry in contemporary downtown Manhattan (*Occupation*); the juxtaposition of the mythical American Indians of picture books with Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (*Purity Test*); the meeting of Eskimos and African desert nomads in a blizzard/sandstorm (*White on White*); the mingling of the Princess of Wales with Einstein, Mandlebrot and Plato's Zeno (*Achilles and the Tortoise*) and for Greenberg and the Abstract Expressionists to confront Picasso, Derain, Apollinaire, Bonnard, Leger and so on on a battlefield that includes

armoured cars with horses, swords, spears and what looks like, a stampeding herd of buffalo (*Triumph of the New York School*).

Another aspect of Tansey's style is that it cultivates an air of datedness that lends his fictions the look of historical realities. It is as if the events in a painting such as *The Innocent Eye Test* actually took place, as if fifty or so more years ago a group of scientists did confront a bull with Paulus Potter's painting *The Young Bull* and Monet's *Haystack* and observed its reactions, and this is a photograph/illustration of the event from a contemporary journal. It is a kind of style-retro belonging to a more innocent era, before that of mass communication and the proliferation of images, and so retains a certain old-fashioned honesty. In paintings such as *Doubting Thomas* and *Conversation* the style serves to elevate the anecdotal into the realm of timeless myth, the photographic aspect lending the scene its connection to the once-lived and the monochrome removing it from that world.

Roland Barthes makes a distinction between the "readerly" text - that which offers the reassurance of recognised conventions; and the "writerly" text - that which disturbs the reading relationship by transgressing or negating those conventions. In his use of a monochromatic, illustrational style as a vehicle for the incongruous, Mark Tansy collapses this distinction as it might apply to painting. His surface offers the reassurance of mimetic conventions but his rhetoric has more in common with the "writerly" text in that it transgresses those conventions by confounding the viewer's expectations. The work has the charm of being at once "readerly" and "writerly". As René Magritte did before him, Tansey uses reassuring representational means as a tool in an investigation where abstraction has long been held to be the more appropriate lever. Aware of the critque in the early Eighties, that representational painting was complicitous with conservative institutions, that it was retrogressive and uncritical, and that the grammatologist and rhetoriti-

cian were supplanting the visual artist in the task of destabilising the act of reference, Tansey has struggled to maintain the "writerly" import of his work.

The conspicuously illustrational style Tansey has appropriated conveys the sense that a text is to be recovered from his paintings, and since 1990 he has been using screen printed text as a feature in his work. Functioning as cross hatching, it is used literally to render the landscape figuratively, frequently appearing as rock strata in paintings such as *Valley of Doubt* and *Constructing the Grand Canyon* . The latter sees deconstructive philosophers such as Derrida, Foucault and De Man busy hewing the famous chasm from textual rock - actively constructing a natural feature that was formed by a process of destruction. By the use of screen printed text, which he reworks while still wet to produce the effects of texture, Tansey literalises Derrida's notion of the text "under erasure" and echoes Robert Smithson in *A Sedimentation of Mind: Earth Projects* when he suggests "The strata of the earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text... (Owens, 1992, p.40). This not only reflects the structuralists' view of reality as linguistic while dramatising the conceptual conflict between representation and text, the mechanically reproduced and the hand-painted, but it also functions formally to reaffirm the flatness of the canvas. The latter being, according to Greenberg, essential to the success of all pictorial art:

> The Old Masters had sensed that it was necessary to preserve what is called the integrity of the picture plane: that is, to signify the enduring presence of flatness underneath and above the most vivid illusion of three dimensional space. The apparent contradiction involved was essential to the success of their art, as it is indeed to the success of all pictorial art.
>
> (Greenberg, ,1961, p.309)

*

16. Mark Tansey, A Short History of Modernist Painting, 1979-80, Oil on Canvas, 72"x72"

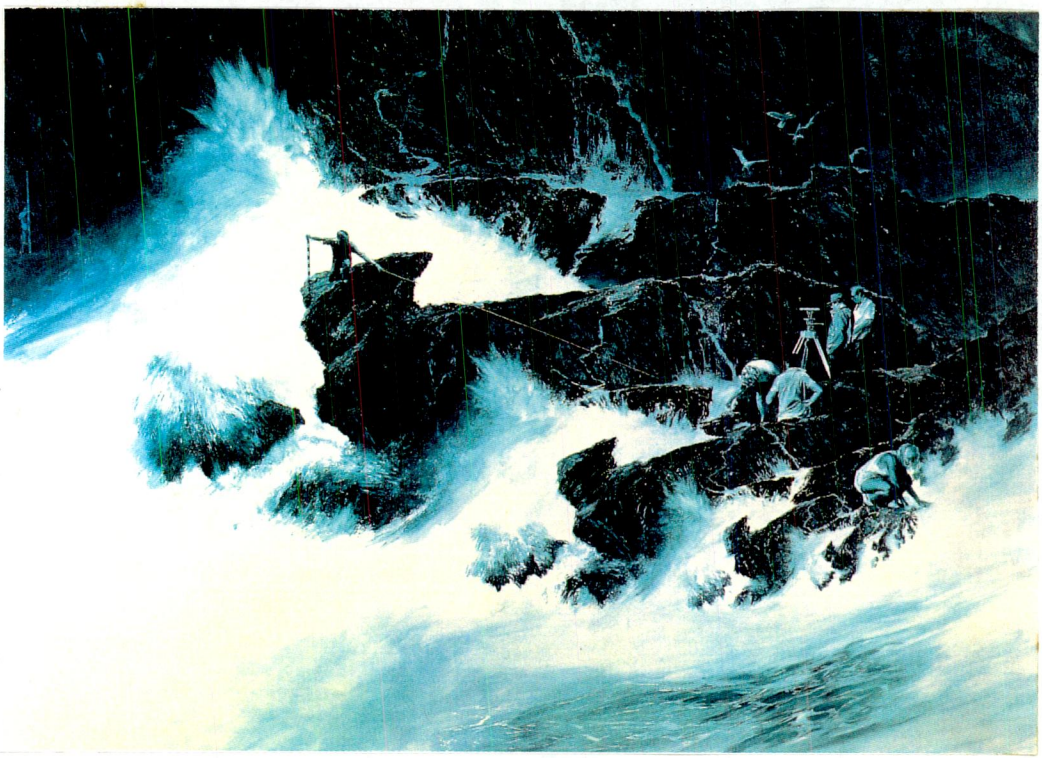
The arrival of screen printed text in Tansey's work is further evidence, if any were needed, of his position as a contemporary allegorist. Craig Owens could have been referring specifically to Tansey's work when he stated:

> The blatant disregard for aesthetic categories is nowhere more apparent than in the recipricocity which allegory proposes between the visual and the verbal: words are often treated a purely visual phenomena while visual images are offered as scripts to be deciphered.
>
> (Owens, 1992, p.57)

In his working methods which involve the creation of voluminous files of images (an image library which becomes he says "a field of inquiry, a place of bringing images and ideas together...the collection is just large enough to be beyond control, beyond memory." (Danto, 1992, p.131)) he is fulfiling another criterion of the allegorist. According to Walter Benjamin "It is the common practice of allegory to pile up fragments ceaselessly without any strict idea of a goal." (Owens, 1992, p.56). The tendency towards the ironic, the manipulation and transformation of fragments and the confusion of genres, the crossing of aesthetic boundaries which Tansey employs in his work are all also, according to Owens, symptomatic of the allegorical impulse. By regressing into the history of images in order to comment on the present Tansey is returning to a situation in art history that pertained at the turn of the century. He is approaching Modernism from both sides, effectively stepping back in order to leap forward. Nineteenth Century history painting produced images of the present cloaked in the garb of the classical past, Tansey's classical past however, seems to exist between the pages of the *National Geographic* and *Popular Mechanics* from the mid decades of the century - an era of comparative optimism, innocence and belief in progress, coinciding with the height of American cultural hegemony. For a painter such as Poussin, myth and religion provided the intellectual schemata that offered legitimation for a delight in paintwork, but for a painter like Mark Tansey,

17. Mark Tansey, Triumph Over Mastery II, 1987,Oil on Canvas, 98"x68"

18. Mark Tansey, Robbe-Grillet Cleansing Every Object in Sight, 1981, Oil on Canvas, 72"x72"

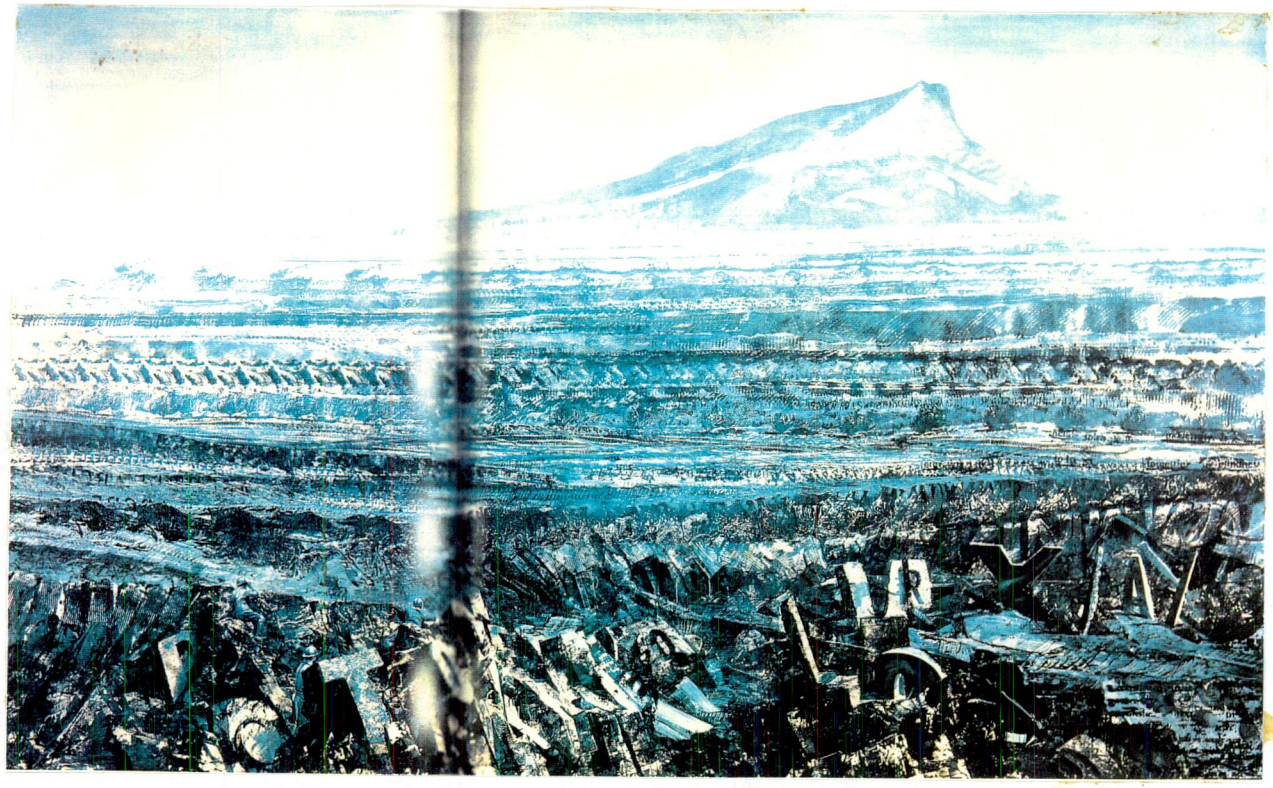


19. Mark Tansey, Coastline Measure, 1987, Oil on Canvas, 87"x122"

20. Mark Tansey, Purity Test, 1982, Oil on Canvas, 72"x96"

whose pictures were born as a result of the death of painting in the mid-Seventies and whose "first problem or the problem that I was concerned with was what to do a picture of" (Sims, 1990, p.4), that was hardly a potential avenue. Instead the concerns for which his paintwork is a vehicle carry the burden of the Twentieth Century and the crisis of representation. His work deals with the aftermath of this, the myths of Modernism, the disputes surrounding it and the succeeding philosophical ruminations on the contemporary ("Postmodern") condition.

Tansey's pictorial rhetoric fashions what are almost moral tales about the world of representation. Often it is ironic as in, what he considers his first important work, *A Short History of Modernist Painting* of 1980. On fifty-two panels he describes allegorically the different transformations that the picture plane has undergone within Modernism, being flattened, broken, trimmed and so on. These are alluded to with images derived principally from the magazine *Popular Mechanics* which lends the painting a nostalgic air. Tansey felt it was an appropriate source because he saw a parallel between its ethos of self-improvement and that of Modernism. After all the heroic practical efforts and investigations of Modernism, allegorised with digging, cutting, drilling, shooting, windows, mirrors and telescopes, the painting concludes with the image of a blind man. The end of enlightenment is implied, the abandonment of optimism, a belief in the future leading only to confusion and nostalgia in Postmodernism. The sense of despair with the idea of progress also pervades work such as the rather histrionic *Triumph Over Mastery* which depicts children playing on crumbling classical ruins with an apocalyptic urban backdrop, and *Triumph Over Mastery II* which sees a man on a ladder whiting out Michaelangelo's ceiling with a paint roller, the cowering classical figures of the *Last Judgement* now running from the depredations of Twentieth Century developments in art. The implied critque of Modernism, with the Abstract Expressionists bearing the brunt of



21. Mark Tansey, Valley of Doubt, 1990, Oil on Canvas, 87"x144"

it, is obvious, as the painter also obliterates his own shadow. (In much the same way Tansey implies in *Triumph of the New York School* that Greenberg has succeeded in prohibiting even nature from naturalistic depiction, to the extent that the puddle he stands in does not carry his reflection.) The painting contains the added irony that the obliterating white paint of the shirtless workman actually represents, in terms of Tansey's painting process, the removal of paint from the canvas rather than its addition to it.

Just as he mocks the notion of the innocent eye in *The Innocent Eye Test* and *Purity Test*, Tansey expresses his lack of faith in the Modernist attempt to limit referentiality and meaning in the paintings *Robbe-Grillet Cleansing Every Object In Sight* and *Coastline Measure*. The former depicts Robbe Grillet, that meticulous documentor of things external, on his hands and knees endeavouring fruitlessly to scrub the "meanings" off a landscape littered with rocks which turn out on closer inspection to be various monuments, objets d'art, vehicles and items of bric-a-brac. *Coastline Measure* alludes to the formalist ideal of restricting the pictorial reading of a work to its formal properties, as fruitless a task, according to Tansey, as attempting to measure a turbulent shore awash with breakers with a twelve inch ruler, tape and yardstick. Such a coastline is constantly fluctuating with the ebb and flow of the tide, the rise and fall of the waves and the gradual effects of erosion. (Ironically however, Tansey's cliff face, swell and spume, being merely figments of paint, will never move one iota.) As Kitaj commented "You can't make a mark on a canvas that's not redolent of something you know outside the painting." (Shannon, 1981, p.17) In this case the marks by Tansey are fiercely referential and once again the form of the work forms part of the narrative in that these signifiers make up a work that is unashamedly allegorical.

The progression from *Mont St. Victoire* of 1987, one of Tansey's most ambitious pieces of subversion to *Valley of Doubt* (1990) seems to

chart a progressive epistemological despair. The former builds on Plato's metaphor of the cave with Cézanne's and Derrida's fascination with modes of representation, and presents a progression of dualities (presence/ absence, male/female, reality/illusion), presumably ironising the role of these oppositions in Modernist representational modes. The depiction of the talisman of the abstract tradition in Tansey's deviously illustrative style represents a reversal of the controlling structures of representation, which is one part of the critical project of deconstruction.

The moment of Cézanne's innovations before the mountain, of which Foucault said:

> Henceforth similitude is restored to itself - unfolding from itself and folding back upon itself. It is no longer the finger pointing out from the canvas in order to refer to something else. It inaugurates a play of transferences that run, proliferate, propagate and correspond within the layout of the painting, affirming and representing nothing.
>
> (Foucault, 1983, p.49)

has run, via the excursions described in Tansey's *Mont St. Victoire* and elsewhere, to the situation that prevails in *The Valley of Doubt* : the landscape before Cézanne's mountain is no longer one of olive groves and sun baked stucco, but a plain littered with fragmented text, tracts, trenches and military paraphernalia, a bleak and beleaguered semiotic battleground. In its intersection of the visual and the verbal the painting could almost be an illustration of the situation described by Robert Smithson in his essay *A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art*:

> In the illusory babels of language, an artist might advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate himself in dizzying syntaxes, seeking odd intersections of meaning, strange corridors of history, unexpected echoes, unknown humours or voids of knowledge... but this quest is risky, full of bottomless fictions and endless architectures and counter-architectures... at the end, if there is an end, are perhaps only meaningless reverberations.
>
> (Owens, 1992, p.40)

Chapter Two Christopher Le Brun

> To equate my paintings with symbolism, conscious or unconscious, is to ignore its true nature.. People are quite willing to use objects without looking for any symbolic intention in them, but when they look at paintings they can't find any use for them... People who look for symbolic meanings fail to grasp the inherent poetry and mystery of the image.
>
> René Magritte (Gablik, 1976, p.11)

Like Mark Tansey, Christopher Le Brun is a painter who matured in a period when painting was seen as outmoded or decadent, and, like Tansey also, he has ambitions to revitalise it, making it an experimental medium again. The tendency to regress into the history of images in order to move forward is also a shared characteristic. Le Brun derives his chief inspiration from Böcklin and the Symbolists overlays this with the legacy of Abstract Expressionism and an awareness of Modernist formal theory. In spite of this he sees himself as continuing in the tradition of independent English artists that runs from Blake and Turner through to Francis Bacon. The suffused light and enigmatic imagery of his work lend it some of the visionary quality of the former painters, and places Le Brun more widely within the Northern Romantic tradition documented by Rosenblum that runs

22. Christopher Le Brun, Headland, 1978, Oil on Canvas, 244x137cm

from Friedrich through Palmer and Munch to Rothko.

Unlike Tansey, whose paintings were born of an antipathy to the legacy of Abstract Expressionism, Christopher Le Brun emerged directly out of that tradition. He worked for a time under John Hoyland at the Slade and on graduating in 1975 was working in an entirely abstract manner. Over the next few years he gradually shifted towards a personal form of figuration with the appearance of objects such as horses, trees, columns and knights in his paintings. He worried for a time about the dichotomy in his practice, the simultaneous involvement with abstraction and figuration, but by the end of the decade seemed to have reached some form of resolution by juxtaposing both aspects within a single canvas. In a painting such as *Headland* a dialogue takes place in the work between the abstract shapes and colours of the lower half and an arcadian landscape in the upper section. Implied perhaps is the recognition that the illusion above was rendered from the raw materials below, though the illusion is never allowed to be complete, the viewer being reminded of the surface and so prevented from passing through to a world. Greenberg stated that Modernist painting had not abandoned the representation of recognisable objects in principal but rather the representation of the kind of space such objects can inhabit. It is these ideas Le Brun is playing with in a painting like *Headland* .

The impetus for his use of indistinct forms can perhaps be traced to Guston who performed the original betrayal of Greenberg's ideals by introducing to his work what he described as "near-forms, entities nearing completion but never quite distinct."(Cooke, 1985, p.99) Greenberg had been quite clear on this issue. He stated:

> All recognisable entities exist in three-dimensional space, and the barest suggestion of a recognisable entity suffices to call up associations of that kind of space... and by doing so alienate pictorial space from the literal two-dimensionality which is the guarantee of painting's independence as an art.
>
> (Greenberg, 1961, p.310)

In his tentative figuration then Le Brun can be seen to be following directly on from Guston and, in the light of the above, one can understand how he came to describe the world of depicted interior space as "a forbidden territory, but one that is nonetheless irresistible, like a field under snow without a footprint."(Nowlin, 1992, p.8)

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Le Brun enters this "forbidden territory" with none of the insousiance of Tansey, primarily because, although he rejects certain aspects of late Modernist dogma, he is fundamentally sympathetic to the forces that originally motivated it. In an interview he quotes Maurice Denis's statement of 1890, that "A picture, before being a horse, a nude or some little genre scene, is primarily a flat surface covered with colours arranged in a certain order" and points out that the use of the words "before" and "primarily" rather than "while" and "also" is symptomatic of an over-emphasis on the objective character of painting within Modernism that led to pictorial values in painting, its ability to represent and recall, being almost driven out. He speaks of the "prison of modernity" as a self-awareness and a set of obligations that have become established and oppressive, and goes on to say that:

> This self-awareness, achieved by barring the picture space and throwing us back on ourselves, has made the self-forgetfulness, the possession of inspiration so increasingly rare and difficult; it has been achieved at the cost of an entire way of thinking.
> (Nowlin, 1992, p.8)

This way of thinking is one in which painting deals in metaphysical and ethical truths. Such an ambition links Le Brun closely with Abstract Expressionism, not so much the aspect of it championed by Greenberg how-

ever, but rather the expressive/romantic vein of American abstraction that was itself rooted in European symbolism and naturalism. Abstract Expressionism brought to a head what was, for Greenberg, the fundamental schism in Modernism - that between Cézanne/Cubist-derived abstraction and an essentially literary, expressive tradition that includes Expressionism, Symbolism and Surrealism. The conflict can be traced back through Berenson to Kant's distinction between "interested" and "disinterested" art, i.e. between an art of involvement such as Van Gogh's and an art of detachment such as Cézanne's. Greenberg, like Kant and Berenson, favoured the latter tradition and so tended to emphasise the formal achievements of Abstract Expressionism over the expressive aspects that underpinned the work of Rothko and Pollock, for example. Resisting this, Rothko, Newman and Gottlileb formally stated "There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing. We assert simply the subject is central." With his gestural painting and emphasis on the role of qualities such as intuition, patience and courage in his work, Le Brun appears to be continuing in this tradition, stating himself:

> You stand now before one painting. It is not rendered unauthentic by referring outside itself to the sensual world of nature, thought and reflection; nor is this ironic. Associativeness is the engine of painting's effect upon us.
>
> (Nowlin, 1992, p.12)

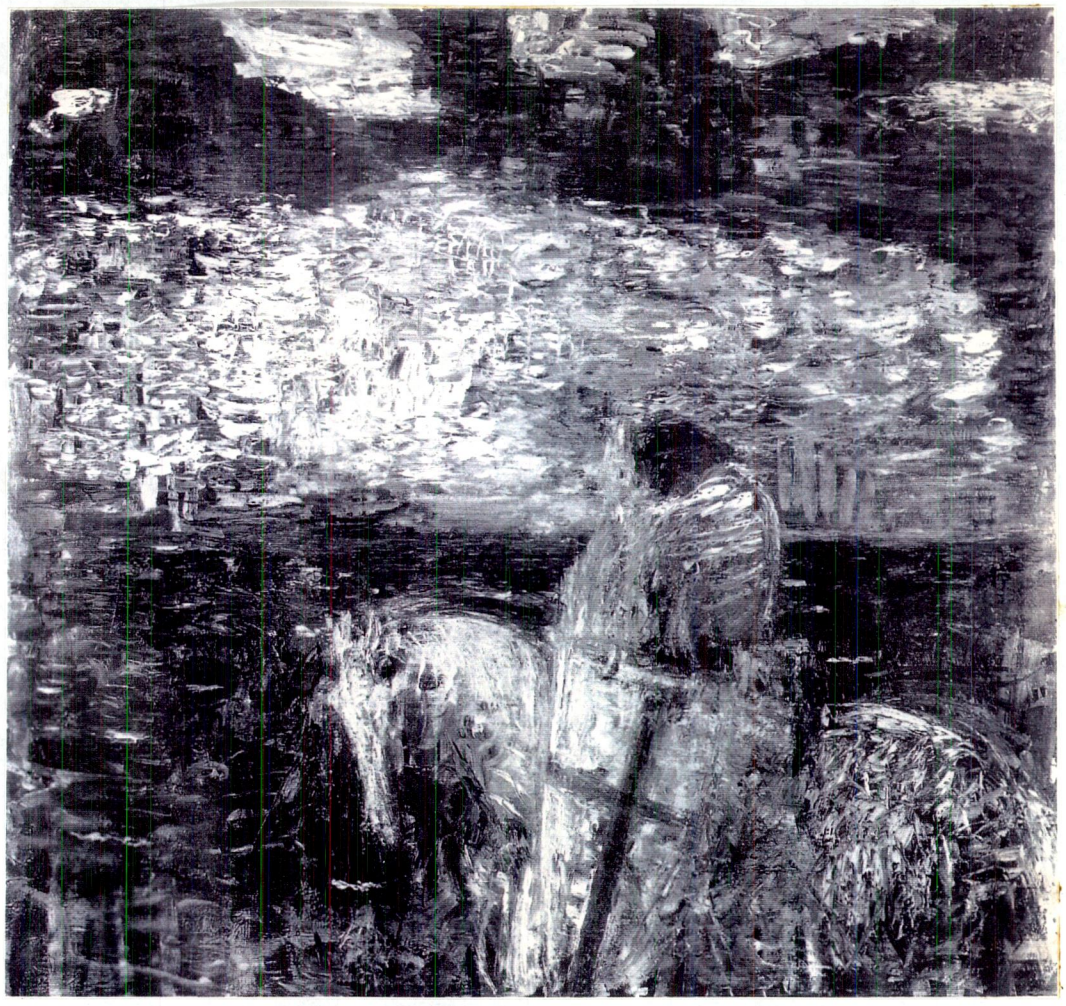
He might be said to be continuing in what Fuller describes as the heroic but largely unsuccessful attempts of the classical generation of Abstract Expressionists to find a new means of painterly expression, rooted in the body of the artist as subject rather than in perceived anatomy (as in Renaissance art) or in the anatomy of perception (as in Impressionism for example). According to Fuller's argument the search for a way forward in painting from Abstract Expressionism's "magnificent failure" was occluded by the rise of "anaesthetic dogma and practices".(Fuller, 1980, p.22) Le Brun is

attempting to resume within Postmodernism this search for a way forward; he has not given up the desire to reunite abstraction with its roots in intuition. The fact that his goal is mainly emotional or revelatory qualifies him as a romantic, but the effect of his knowledge of formal precepts has made him aware that a painting is always slipping into its other identity as object. Thomas Lawson, speaking of the ground-clearing effects of severe formalism, notes that some artists continued "as if the ground had not been opened up in front of them, even adopting some of the superficial characteristics of the very modes that were rendering their practice obsolete and moribund." (Lawson, 1981, p.41) With his admiration for the achievements of Abstract Expressionism Le Brun might be said to be falling into this trap. His reflectiveness as an artist however, has fostered an awareness of his position, the distance between him and those heroic figures and the consequences attendant on this interval. He has said:

> There's a bad faith in my generation, a split - our relationship to the subject has become more complex. By temperament I am an aspirational or visionary painter after Turner and Blake, but that avenue is closed theoretically and practically. It's a cultural dilemma, not a personal one - sometimes I wonder if Postmodernism isn't pathological in its dilemma between the abstract and the figurative.
>
> (Cooke, 1985, p.96)

*

The proliferation of appropriation, kitsch quotation (that began with Pop Art, a cynical expression of disdain for the Abstract Expressionist's aspirations to the sublime), revivalism, nostalgia and a generally ironic attitude within Postmodernism is a reflection of the "bad faith" in Le Brun's gen-



23. Christopher Le Brun, Sir Bedivere, 1983 Oil on Canvas, 228x243cm

eration. His belief that the Classical tradition still contains the potential for further development distances him from many of his contemporaries in that generation. He argues that the proliferation of appropriation represents a denial of this potential and a misunderstanding of the nature of artistic language. He asks:

> Am I appropriating a language when I speak it? Or am I inhabiting, or dwelling in it? Appropriation, no; quotation, no; citation, yes; celebration, yes; association, yes.
>
> (Nowlin, 1992, p.12)

Although Le Brun was bracketed originally with Neo-classicists such as Mariani in the Eighties he professes to have more in common with figures such as Anselm Kiefer, whose potential cultural material he appears almost to envy. The nearest counterpart in British culture for many of the German's themes appears to be, for Le Brun at least, King Arthur and a mythical lost England. The fact that he does not ground his art in the specifics of a real historical and cultural situation however, separates him from Kiefer and from more rhetorical and cynical British colleagues such as Terry Atkinson or Ian McKeever. The interest in a remote, legendary world, that owes much to the Nineteenth Century revival of myth and folklore, can be seen in paintings such as *Sir Tristram* (1984), *Sir Bedivere* (1983) and *Rider with Shadow* (1984) for example, which, along with his classically derived mythical imagery such as Pegasus the winged horse, have given rise in some quarters to Le Brun's reputation as a Romantic revivalist or Neo-Symbolist. Rosenblum, for example, rejects the idea of a continuity in such Postmodernist work, suggesting instead that it can more appropriately be viewed in terms of historical retrospection. "The big historical break in continuity took place in the 1960's and anything younger today is likely to be self-consciously retrospective rather than part of the same tradition." (Rosenblum, 1991, p.47) Elsewhere the idea not so much of a continuity, but of a cycle, has been optimistically proposed. Mario Cutajar sees in Le Brun's

recovery of symbolism the possibility that modern art, initiated by Symbolism, has completed a cycle and is in the process of regenerating itself. For commentators such as Owens and Jameson however the occurrence of such retro-style, particularly the recourse to classical myth, represents a withdrawal from reality and history into the realm of subjective fantasy. Just as Greenberg suggested (*The School of Paris:1946*) that Matisse and others hid their disillusionment with the spirit of progress by insisting on the physical pleasures of the medium, keeping their work discontinuous with life, Jameson speaks of the rise of nostalgia within Postmodernism as the inability to cope with the idea of the present and as a retreat from history and even a repudiation of the notion of historicity itself. As Baudrillard puts it, "When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia proliferates in the form of myths of origin and signs of reality, simulations." (Easthope and McGowan,1990, p.255)

On being questioned about the fluctuation in his work between mythological subject matter and an almost pure abstraction, Le Brun stated:

> I don't use the word mythological... It implies an image that finds its meaning in its role, where as I find the meaning of an image in its appearance. Therefore I would rather describe these changes as moving between motif and abstraction because the subject matter is not necessarily represented by the motif or object depicted."
>
> (Nowlin, 1992, p.10)

Such pronouncements by Le Brun have left critics divided over the motivation for his use of mythical imagery. Stephen Bann, for example, describes the content of the paintings as not reflecting "a mere arbitrary decision about subject matter, but a necessary mode of psychological identification" (Bann, 1991, p.11), whereas Stefan Schmidt-Wulffen asserts the opposite:

> Le Brun has not cultivated a tendency towards the mythological. Pegasus was at first a mere horse which owed its existence to some tree-tops demanding a complement. According to the complementary rules of this painting game, the animal body required a second, vertical accent. This became a wing. These paintings

tell nothing of trees and wings.

(Schmidt-Wulffen, 1988, p.6)

Lynne Cooke also eschews the mythological associations, distancing Le Brun from a type of Postmodernism which she says is characterised by a kleptomania that plunders the art of the past in a vain effort to convey eternal truths by nothing more than the mere fact of citation. Le Brun she says, "does not illustrate his images; generated during the process of painting they are figments of a painted world with no independent existence." (Cooke, 1985, p.97)

Le Brun himself speaks of having an anxiety about the image and how its implications and meaning are always beyond complete understanding for the artist:

> There is no end to the connectedness of things recalling the world. But not to paint something because of the implications, that would be very poor. All those things that are easier to avoid because they are too loaded or too specific - the figure, the face, the eye - are threatening to the integrity of the picture. There is danger here, yes, but there is also concentrated meaning of inexhaustible complexity, which is a painter's inheritance.
>
> (Nowlin, 1992, p.10)

Le Brun's solution to the "danger" of images that are too specific or too loaded is to employ imagery that is literally and metaphorically unspecific. His forms are indistinct, emerging or dissolving into layers of abstract paint. The paintings are resolutely enigmatic, and certainly do not allude to any recognisable specific contemporary cultural or political situation. Heidegger, a philosopher Le Brun admires, stated in *The Origin of the Work of Art* :

> The art work is, to be sure, a thing that is made, but it says something other than the mere thing itself is, allo agoreuei. The work makes public something other than itself; it manifests something or other; it is an allegory. In the work of art something other is brought together with the thing that is made.
>
> (Owens, 1992, p.62)

Le Brun appears to strive against this aspect of the art work by employing imagery that seems to disallow any allegorical, discursive or symbolical reading. Yet Cooke argues that it would be misplaced to read the images as nominal subjects around which to make the painting (as Susan Rothenberg employed the motif of the horse, for example), because their significance lies in the fact that they exist only in the realm of fiction. This prevents the paintings being read in terms of a mimetic relationship with the external world, and their semi-abstract nature prevents them from being fully illusory and so, she says, from providing solace or romantic escape from the present. The device of referring to a fictional reality represents an attempt to use figuration, and simultaneously escape its consequences, and so achieve the aspiration of minimalist work: to refer to nothing but itself. In so doing Le Brun affirms the rift between the fictional and the actual. The tentativeness of the paintings' representational means points to their actuality, their physicality in paint. In terms of Foucault's distinction, the relation is one of similitude rather than resemblance. The latter presumes a primary reference that classes copies on the basis of the rigor of their mimetic relation to this reference whereas with similitude such a reference anchor is abandoned, in Le Brun's case because it never existed in the real world, it was a fiction:

> Things are cast adrift, more or less like one another without any of them being able to claim the privileged status of 'model' for the rest. Hierarchy gives way to a series of exclusively lateral relations.
>
> (Foucault, 1983, p.9)

Such a description evokes the atmosphere of many of Le Brun's paintings, with their melancholic jumble of references; horses, trees, boats, shields, wheels, urns, columns and so on. Perhaps this sense of the past as impossibly remote is the only one in which Le Brun's paintings might be said to be allegorical. Though one critic unconvincingly argues:

> Le Brun's wing, incidentally like Anselm Kiefer's, is not only a symbol of artistic inspiration in bad times but a kind of abstract

> metaphor for the mystical, 'feathery' act of painting itself. Are both asking whether painting can once again become 'angelic'?
>
> (Kuspit, 1986, p.132)

The classical references only serve to emphasise the distance between that time and this. For Thomas McEvilley such quotation and allusion to the past in contemporary culture has parallels with the Alexandrian age which followed the heyday of the Greek democracies. The inner imperative of Greek art and culture turned toward its past. He argues that while it was not possible to regain in all innocence what had been sacrificed of tradition to the Modernist impulse during a "giddy" period of innovation, it was possible through quotation to enter into a new relationship with the past. Thus Le Brun's burial of a fictive classical column beneath a welter of brushstrokes functions in much the same way as Ian Hamilton Finlay's column on a Scottish hillside, with both invoking an estrangement that has been said to mark the beginning of modernity. According to Foucault:

> The threshold between Classicism and Modernity... had been definitively crossed when words ceased to intersect with representations and to provide a spontaneous grid for the knowledge of things.
>
> (Owens, 1992, p.50)

Using classical imagery as a vehicle Le Brun appears to emphasise this point in his focus on the pivotal nature of paint as a referent, as the point of transformation.

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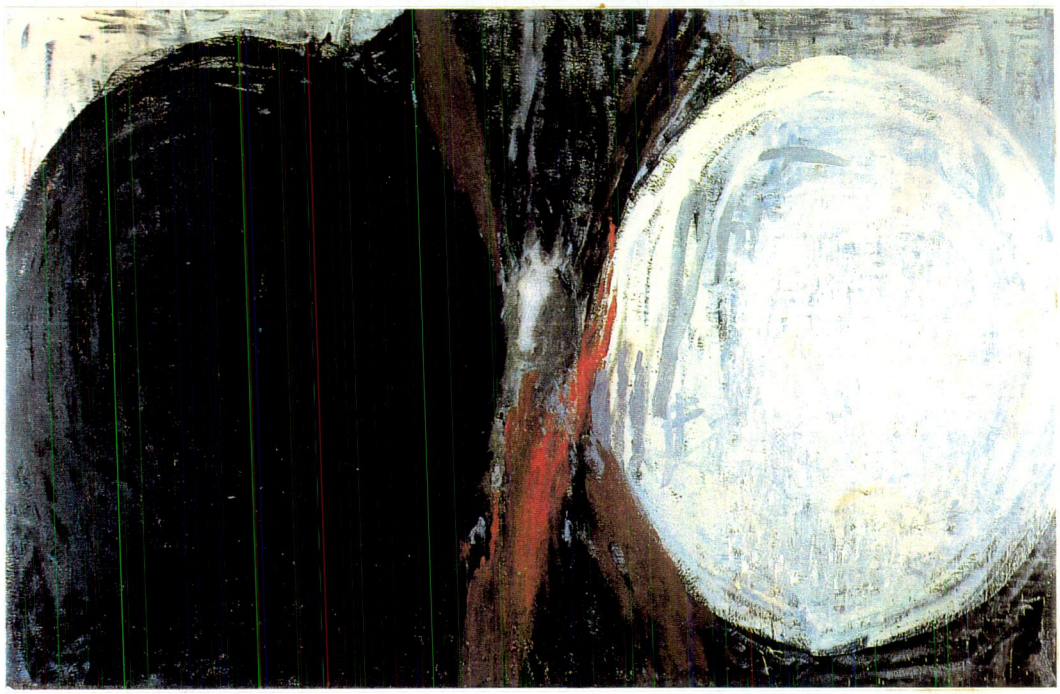
For Susan Sontag "content" in art serves as "the pretext, the goal, the lure which engages consciousness in essentially formal processes of transformation." (Sontag, 1982, p.146) According to this formalist argu-



24. Christopher Le Brun, Union, 1984, Oil on Canvas, 243x381cm

25. Christopher Le Brun, Portrait of L as a Young Man, 1984-5, Oil on Canvas, 198x173cm

ment, meaning as such is divulged through form or style, and in this context a comparison has been made by Lynn Cooke and Stephen Bann between Christopher Le Brun's work and that of the French film-maker Robert Bresson. Of his film *Lancelot Du Lac* , Le Brun says it was, "a film for the sake of an image. It stayed with me, this idea: an image for its own sake in a mysterious relationship to time and meaning, just its splendid, complex musicality of form."(Nowlin, 1992, p.11) Like Le Brun, Bresson has worked with mythological and historical themes but makes no attempt at convincing historical recreation or even at a seamless fiction; naturalism and artifice coalesce in his films in a manner analogous to figuration and abstraction in Le Brun's paintings. A similar analogy could perhaps be drawn between the way Bresson refrains from having "acting" as such in his films (preferring, after the manner of Brecht, that actors report their roles rather than "be" them) and Le Brun's refusal of full figuration, preferring instead to create indistinct forms.

In a reflective art such as Le Brun's or Bresson's the promotion of a consciousness of the form of the work in the viewer creates an emotional distance; emotional involvement is postponed and the use of intelligence invited. In art, form shapes content mainly by the use of symmetry and the repetition of motifs. Hence we see the double motif of the circle in *Union* , the two arms of the wreath in *Victory*, the drummer and his shadow in *Portrait of L as a Young Man*, the rider and shadow in *Rider with Shadow*, the two wings of Pegasus and so on, and of course, the repeated motif of the tree that pervades Le Brun's work. The effect of this is that while Le Brun's imagery is evocative and undeniable nostalgic, the emphasis on the form of the work retards these emotions at the same time they are aroused. "If nothing is far or remote," says Le Brun, "how can there be thoughtfulness?" (Nowlin, 1992, p.10)

There is a recognition in Bresson's films of the impossibility of

penetrating behind the surface to reveal intentions and motivations governing behaviour. As Le Brun does with the painted image, Bresson speaks of the possibility of the film image meaning so many things that it becomes in effect meaningless or at least irreducible to any exhaustive definition. Le Brun, excusing his obfuscation in quoting Heidegger, suggests that "meaning is where the interpretations lie thickest", and that:

> There cannot be a specific interpretation of these images, and should there be one, it would immediately lose all value. But the process of interpretation is part of how a painting comes about... After all, this is a thing of the mind as well as the body, appearing as if beyond its curtain of physical presence, with an intention that is absent but compelling.
>
> (Nowlin, 1992, p.11)

Furthermore Le Brun emphasises that the process of painting is central to the generation of meaning. His paintings are produced over a long period and contain numerous layers that are subsequently obliterated. This produces a series of over-paintings that have been likened to the numerous positions that contemporary artists must adopt, evoking Raymond Bayer's statement:

> What each and every aesthetic object imposes on us, in appropriate rhythms, is a unique and singular formula for the flow of our energy... Every work of art embodies a principle of proceeding, of stopping, of scanning; an image of energy or relaxation, the imprint of a caressing or destroying hand which is the artist's alone.
>
> (Sontag, 1982, p.148)

"So this continual obliteration... must be central to any possible meaning" says Le Brun. It seems appropriate that meaning then lies hidden in his paintings beneath an impenetrable surface, questioning perhaps the misleading obviousness of the leitmotif by making present that which is absent. It has been suggested that in producing objects that defy attempts to use them as illustration for a unitary interpretation Le Brun is subverting the tendency in post-industrial culture to give identity ontological precedence over

the act of experience. If there is ultimately any import then to Le Brun's work it is concerned with the essential opacity of art, and, as Magritte would have it "the inherent poetry and mystery of the image."

Conclusion

> Radical artists now are faced with a choice - despair, or the last exit: painting. The discursive nature of painting is persuasively useful, due to its characteristic of being a never-ending web of representations.
>
> (Lawson, 1981, p.45)

Writing on the resurgence of figuration and the re-emphasis on content in painting, the anti-formalist Marxist critic Peter Fuller expressed the ambition for an art that could break the monopoly of established reality. According to his analysis Modernism had failed and resulted in "the pornography of despair" because the formalist renunciation of expressive possibilities rendered art incapable of creating any alternative reality that could compete with the prevailing one.

Le Brun for his part, having his roots in Abstract Expressionist aspirations to the sublime, speaks of his ambition for painting to regain a sovereign role from where it can speak authoritatively "of metaphysical and ethical truths." The crux of painting for Le Brun lies in the act of reconstituting the subject that the viewer must perform before his works on account of the absence of detail and lack of description in them. It is a paradox and an

act of faith he says which establishes "a fiction which stands against and withstands other fictions." (Cooke, 1985, p.99) In this context he regards "fictions" as agents of change in contrast to myths which are agents of stability.

According to Craig Owens, Modernism's formulation of the problems of representation was derived from a religious terminology that embodies, expresses and transmits otherwise inexpressible truths. As Richter states:

> Abstract pictures are fictitious models because they illustrate a reality that we can neither see nor describe, but whose existence we can infer. These we describe with negative concepts: unknown, inconceivable, infinite, and for millenia we portrayed them in surrogate pictures as heaven, hell, gods and devils.
> (Tate, 1991, p.112)

Postmodernism on the other hand is characterised by its resolution to use representation against itself to destroy the absolute status of any representation. Owens argues that Modernist and Postmodernist works can be distinguished according to their relation to the "truth content" of art, its claim to possess some truth or epistemological value. The Postmodern impulse in the visual arts tends to undermine any attempt of images to refer to a reality, whether it is the surface of things as in realism, or some ideal order lying beyond appearance, as in abstraction. The traditional function of realist painters, to make faithful renditions of reality, was co-opted in the Nineteenth Century by photography. The project was then taken over in the Twentieth Century by Modernist abstraction, as evidenced, for example, in the title of Hans Hofmann's book *Search for the Real* . Minimalism then attempted to eliminate the gap between the artwork and the real altogether. Accordingly, the cover of the MOMA catalogue for *The Art of the Real* (1969), a show promoting artists such as Stella, Noland and André, reads, "Today's real makes no direct appeal to the emotions, nor is it involved in uplift, but instead offers itself in the form of the simple, irreducible, irrefutable object." It

is an index of how things have changed that a book of the same title was published in 1983 but concerns instead the work of nine contemporary *figurative* painters, and contains in the introduction the statement:

> One of the shared assumptions in the work of these artists is that our relationship to the physical world, a relationship that is perpetually in danger of being destroyed by inattention, can be salvaged.
>
> (Strand, 1983, p.9)

According to Mark Tansey the problem facing the contemporary artist is to find other functions for representation beside capturing the real. He explains:

> In my work, I am searching for pictorial functions that are based on the idea that the painted picture knows itself to be metaphorical, rhetorical, transformational, fictional. I'm not doing pictures of things that actually exist in the world, the narratives never actually occurred. In contrast to the assertion of one reality, my work investigates how different realities interact and abrade. And the understanding is that the abrasions start within the medium itself. I think of the painted picture as the embodiment of the very problem that we face with the notion of "reality". The problem or question is which reality?
>
> (Danto, 1992, p.132)

At the end of his essay *What is Postmodernism?*, Jean-François Lyotard urges "Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name." (Lyotard, 1984, p.82) He argues that it is the artist's obligation not to reinforce reality (the mass-media have taken on that task) but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. Similarly in *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes has argued that the refusal to assign an ultimate meaning to the text (and to the world as text, is a truly revolutionary activity. In his investigation of the abrasion and interaction of different realities, Mark Tansey might be said to be fulfiling the obligation of which Lyotard speaks - that of producing a feeling of disturbance in the hope that it might be followed by reflection. As argued above, his use of incongruity in the

guise of the conventional denies the viewer the reassurance of the realisation of the evoked conventions. He is effectively producing what Foucault describes in *Les Mots et Les Choses* as "Heterotopias":

> There is a worse kind of disorder than that of the incongruous, the linking together of things that are inappropriate; I mean the disorder in which a large number of possible orders glitter separately, in the lawless and unchartered dimension of the *heteroclite* ... Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that... This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the fabula; heterotopias... dessicate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of language at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilise the lyricism of our sentences.
>
> (Foucault, 1983, p.4)

Many of Mark Tansey's recent paintings, such as *The View from Mt. Hermeneut* and *Valley of Doubt*, for example, seem to reflect on the Postmodern condition that Lyotard diagnoses as that of a culture in which the grand narrative has collapsed. Antonio Gramsci observed that a period lacking in such certainty is racked by a plethora of morbid symptoms - the rise of scepticism and cynicism and a nostalgic impulse to recover an undifferentiated past. Jameson argues that Modernism, with its grounding in a sense of shock and alienation, related to real historical time, but that this has given way in Postmodernism to the codes of pastiche which eclipse the sense of time and history. A variety of historical moments are simulated but without there being any necessary connection to the "original" moments themselves. The notion of a linear progression has been abandoned and there is a tendency to ridicule the avant-garde and to liquidate its heritage. Annette Bonjeau, for example, in her introduction to a recent catalogue of the French "figuration libre" painter Gérard Garouste, writes:

> His aims are multiple and each more pertinent than the next: to bring art out of the avant-garde impasse by rejecting the dictatorial criteria of novelty, to consider modern art as a great era in the history of art, although limited to the end of the Nineteenth and the beginning of the Twentieth Century...
>
> (Obalk, 1989, p.1)

McEvilley identifies the tradition of the new with dynamic democratic societies and suggests that a resistance to it is characteristic of stagnating totalitarianism. The above quote is one instance which exemplifies Baudrillard's phenomenon of a general "cultural implosion" and reveals the "double bind" that ensnares the contemporary artist - rejection of the "criteria of novelty" leaves the artist open to accusations of being retrogressive, whilst upholding formalist ideology can be characterised as "dictatorial". Tansey might be (and has been) accused of the former, with his work being dismissed as regressive on account of its seemingly nostalgic surface[1], his mockery and rejection of certain aspects of Modernism, the fact of using painting as a medium at all and his general ironic tone and scepticism. Lawson has identified ours as an age of scepticism and claims that as a result the practice of art is inevitably crippled by the suspension of belief. He states:

> The artist can continue as though this were not true, in the naive hope that it will all work out in the end. But given the situation, a more considered position implies the adoption of an ironic mode. However, one of the most troubling results of the cooptation of modernism by mainstream bourgeois culture is that to a certain degree irony has been subsumed. A vaguely ironic, slightly sarcastic response to the world has now become a clichéd unthinking one. From being a method that could shatter conventional ideas, it has become a convention for establishing complicity. From being a way of coming to terms with lack of faith, it has become a screen for bad faith.
>
> (Lawson, 1981, p.45)

The fact that Tansey's adoption of an ironic mode is only one of several

[1] In direct response to this he has argued that behind the label nostalgic or retrograde is the valorising of a narrow sense of the present. He says that the word Postmodern is, in its most obvious sense, a temporal designation and that if Postmodern practice is attempting to break from Modernism, why has the notion of the narrow present not been questioned?

devices employed in his work rescues him from the full impact of this criticism, and it could readily be argued besides that his irony is more a way of "coming to terms with lack of faith" than a "screen for bad faith".

With his emphasis on "strong feeling and belief" and continuity of the classical tradition, Le Brun suffers from neither bad faith nor the lack of it, but instead probably falls into Lawson's category of artists who continue as though the practice of art was not crippled by the suspension of belief. A sense of melancholy and nostalgia undoubtedly pervade his work. In 1982 he stated:

> 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, an of despair. Painting is anachronistic. That's why it's hopeful.
> (Morgan, 1982, p.50)

Such sentiments mark his work as distinctly Postmodern, and in the sense of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe this represents the failure of the Modernist movement of resistance to the impulse to return to the Greek ideal in art. Le Brun's emphasis on the notion of "motif" rather than "subject" in his paintings and the autonomy of these figments of paint evokes Baudrillard's world of self-referential signs which no longer refer to something outside themselves - a presence whose absence they mark - but rather serve to mask the absence of any exterior or basic reality. When this becomes the case Baudrillard claims that nostalgia proliferates in the form of myths and simulations. In terms of the Alexandrian parallel, Le Brun's return to Symbolism and Abstract Expressionism can be likened to the poet Theocritus's adoption of Sappho's dialect - expecting his audience to recognise the allusion as a foundational content in his work. It is a practice that embodies, according to Jameson's critique, the broader inability of the contemporary individual to engage with realities of, or to accurately represent the experiences of, the present.

On his hopes for painting, Tansey states:

> Given that the painted picture is a declassified medium (in Marshall McLuhan's sense - a medium that is no longer the dominant conduit or voice of power, unlike television or film) it can take on new functions. One of these can be as analogue to other representational media - in understanding the limits and sensitivities of one as it relates to those of another. We can use the painted picture as a way of studying its own modes of references, its range of sensitivity and insensitivity, its deceptions, by way of offering insights into the analogous functions of, for example, film, photography and television. I'd like to get a sense of the painted picture as a medium vital in its free range of reference and content... the area that is as yet least explored and most in need in rethinking is the realm of representation.
>
> (Danto, 1992, p.135)

Such aspirations identify Tansey as being not so much a Postmodern painter as a second generation conceptual artist - continuing in the tradition of artists assuming the critical project as subject matter. His is a type of work that Douglas Crimp spoke of as "posing as painting". According to Lawson, "It is painting itself, that last refuge of the mythology of individuality, which can be seized to deconstruct the illusions of the present. For since painting is ultimately concerned with illusion, what better vehicle for subversion?" (Lawson,1981, p.45)

In a sense then Mark Tansey's work can be said to be diagnostic of the Postmodern condition, where Christopher Le Brun's is merely symptomatic.Lyotard has identified two modes within the Postmodern (McEvilley and Lacoue-Labarthe make essentially the same distinction). One is essentially nostalgic, with an emphasis on "the powerlessness of the faculty of presentation, on the nostalgia for presence felt by the human subject, on the obscure and futile will which inhabits him in spite of everything." (Lyotard, 1984, p.79) The other is essentially inventive, with an emphasis on "the increase of being and the jubilation which result from the invention of new rules of the game, be it pictorial, artistic or any other." (Lyotard, 1984, p.80) He places the German Expressionists, Malevitch, and De Chirico in the

former camp, on the side of melancholia as he puts it, and Picasso, Braque, Lissitsky and Duchamp on the side of *novatio* .Two further names can be added to Lyotard's "chessboard of the history of avant-gardes" - in the melancholic camp, Le Brun, and in that of innovation, Mark Tansey. For the past fifteen years Tansey has been engaged in an analysis of representation and in an investigation of "realities" that Owens says is characteristic of the best contemporary art practice. As Richter stated:

> Paintings are all the better, the more beautiful, intelligent, crazy and extreme, the more clearly perceptible and the less decipherable metaphors they are for this incomprehensible reality. Art is the highest form of hope.
>
> (Tate, 1991, p.113)

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