

CULTURE

## DIFFERENT STROKES

Long-time partners as well as painters, Christopher Le Brun and Charlotte Verity take quite distinct approaches to art. But both share a penchant for pastels and their works, like them, rub along really rather nicely side by side. That much is apparent in what is, unbelievably, only their second joint exhibition



By Alastair Sooke

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‘People are often baffled because I say I don’t know what I’m doing,’ the British artist Christopher Le Brun, former president of the Royal Academy of Arts, says with a laugh. ‘They think I’m being ironic. But I develop the paintings as I go along.’

We are surrounded by 13 of Le Brun’s recent [abstract](#) pictures – mostly buttery affairs with textured surfaces, seemingly animated by mysterious internal combustions of light, and enlivened further by intense, scribbled passages of chromatic cross-hatching – on display at The Gallery at Windsor in Florida.

This elegant exhibition space, with [a Japanese air](#), occupies the first floor of the clubhouse of a 472-acre private residential community, with a golf course, stables and polo grounds, on a barrier island between the Indian River and the Atlantic. And Le Brun is outlining the difference between his approach, when painting, to that of his wife, Charlotte Verity, who’s also an artist and alongside whom he’s now exhibiting.

The couple met at London’s [Slade School of Fine Art](#) during the 1970s and have been married for four and a half decades. Yet, apart from a smaller show at Lyndsey Ingram’s Mayfair gallery last year (in which Le Brun exhibited only prints), *Left Hand, Right Hand* is the first time they’ve shown together.

The loving title of their new exhibition alludes to their respective dominant hands, as well as their varying visions. The leftie, Le Brun, says that he’s ‘hooked’ on the ‘precariousness’ of attempting to express on canvas ‘emotional truth’, while Verity – a figurative artist who depicts commonplace [plants encountered in her garden](#) (‘Never bought!’ she tells me, emphatically: ‘If someone gave me a bunch of flowers, I wouldn’t paint it’) – is, according to her husband, ‘much more excited by the discovery of the truth of what she sees’.

‘You always say that you make it up, whereas I look very carefully,’ chips in Verity, whose still presence corresponds to the calmness of her compositions. This insistence on close observation is everywhere apparent within her room inside the exhibition – the first that visitors encounter, and, Le Brun says gallantly, sotto voce, ‘the best’.

Against muted, often banded backgrounds of soft, pastel colours, which call to mind work by Agnes Martin (or, perhaps, Euan Uglow, once a famous tutor at the Slade), Verity presents seemingly levitating arrangements of flowers and foliage: orange nasturtiums and azure forget-me-nots; a graceful gathering of budding roses, like a conclave of whispering pixies; the dark, spiky leaves of a spray of holly, silhouetted like fluttering bats against grey and dusky pink.

Fuzzy white roses in full bloom, seen from above, appear like the 'cloud-capp'd towers' of some fairy architecture; Verity painted them from the window of her cramped former studio on an upper floor of the family home in Camberwell, south London – which she and Le Brun swapped recently for a Somerset farmhouse, so she'd have more space to work.

Verity, who says that she relishes the 'risk' of painting such stereotypically 'female' and 'amateurish' subject matter, is no botanical artist: her 25 delicate pictures in the exhibition (including nine monotypes) aren't quasi-scientific illustrations of plant specimens at all. Yet, despite their soft-focus passages, they contain a sense of precision – thanks, in part, to her crisp, calligraphic rendering of branches and stems (traditional Chinese painting remains a source of inspiration, along with the still lifes of Giorgio Morandi) – as well as a poetic understanding of fluctuating seasonal rhythms. In *Betula Weeping* (2009–14), she captures the translucent, twisting-in-the-wind quality of a weeping silver birch's yellow canopy, painted from within (ie, with the artist's back against its trunk).

Natural cycles are apparent, too, in the paintings of Le Brun, who says that he shares with his wife 'an underlying love of landscape and nature'. In by far the show's biggest work, *Phases of the Moon IV* (2024) – an epic, 12-panel piece, almost 22 feet across, saturated with the spirit of JMW Turner ('You can't be an English painter and not think about Turner all the time,' Le Brun tells me with conviction) – a faint lunar disc, above a field of scratchy, vertical stripes of mauve, purple and blue, appears to arc slowly across a sky. This switches from light to dark and back to light, and thus becomes, Le Brun explains, 'a sequence of night and day'.

Even this grand vision, though, only emerged after a white mark in an earlier, related painting reminded him of the moon. Now that he's 73 years old, has his painting entered a new 'phase' of its own? Yes, he replies: 'It's more complicated, and probably more joyful, too... As soon as I got to 60, something shifted, and I suddenly felt less burdened. The playfulness of art has become key.' He grins, like a gleeful child. 'I want to share my pleasure in painting.'

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*'Left Hand, Right Hand', featuring Christopher Le Brun and Charlotte Verity, runs at The Gallery at Windsor, Vero Beach, Florida, until 25 April. Visit [windsorflorida.com/gallery](https://windsorflorida.com/gallery).*