Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Anthony CHRISTIAN (London 1945 -)

Blue Plant Study

Pencil and white chalk on Arches paper washed blue.

1050 x 750 mm. (41 3/8 x 29 1/2 in.)

This large sheet was drawn in Paris in 1975, when Anthony Christian and his wife were living in the city for several months. As Paul Howard has noted of this period, 'In Paris, even Christian's drawing reached new heights as he made studies of his pregnant wife, of drapery and of plants and flowers he found in that City that had become so beloved to him.'3 The artist, in an unpublished autobiography, has recalled that 'I found Paris had magnificent art shops and I bought some large sheets of highest quality paper which I tinted, cutting them in four for portraits but using the whole sheets for anything I was inspired to do. I started producing the most God-sparked drawings of my life, meaning that I felt…a force, or energy that was outside of myself working through me as I drew. I saw things appearing before me, drawings of a beauty beyond anything I felt I could possibly be capable of producing…'

Among the works created during this fruitful Parisian interlude was a monumental drawing of Christian's pregnant wife Susan, on reddish-tinted paper, entitled The Rose Drapery and today in a private collection. The present sheet, titled by the artist Blue Plant Study, was drawn at about the same time as Rose Drapery, and was intended as a pendant to it. As Christian has recollected of Blue Plant Study, it was drawn from a flowering plant known as the honesty or annual honesty (Lunaria annua), and also known colloquially in America as a silver dollar and in Southeast Asia as a money plant. The plant, which can grow up to 90 cm. high, is distinguished by its large oval leaves, with delicate purple flowers

in the late spring and early summer replaced, in mid to late summer, by translucent silvery round seedpods, which are often used in dried floral arrangements.

In his memoirs, Christian has written that, 'Although I had always had them around in the London apartment, I had never thought of drawing the dried flower called Money Plant, or Honesty. But now that drawings seemed to pour out of me by a higher hand than my own, having found some Honesty soon after we had arrived in Paris and bought some to make us feel more at home, I became obsessed with drawing it. I made two or three studies to see what "the hand" might produce and was so impressed I finally took the leap to see if I might create what would be a pair to the Rose Drapery, but on a sheet I had tinted a lovely soft blue-grey.

Even though I felt that energy working through my hand, something that could only ever be understood by another artist and even then one from probably another age, still I felt moments of nervousness as I watched one beautiful study after another appearing on my paper while realizing the slightest "wrong" line would ruin the entire drawing. But those moments were short lived, and most of the time I was simply in the almost blissful space of someone who knows he is in the process of creating something sacred. At the end of quite a long day working without a break, I had a small space left in the left hand bottom corner and couldn't resist adding a study of a maize that I'd bought, that still had its leaves attached and then, filling the smallest space left just to finish off with a coup de grace as I felt by this point my hand could do anything, I added a stalk of wheat almost as a signature, and the drawing was at last complete. It became known as "Blue Plant Study" and did indeed join with the Rose Drapery in helping to form a small core of what I believed for many years was what Kenneth Clark had asked me for: "One of the greatest collections of drawings made by a British artist in this century." I felt quite confident he would be more than satisfied, it just never occurred to me at that moment that I wouldn't return to England in time to show him before [he] died. Shifting sands was a term unknown to me at that time.'

Both of the large drawings Rose Drapery and Blue Plant Study, which are of similar dimensions, were among the significant drawings and paintings - dating from throughout his career – that Anthony Christian never sold and always retained for his own collection, and which for several years were exhibited in his house-cum-studio in Bali.

Artist description:

A supremely gifted artist, Anthony Christian has spent almost all of his career outside the usual confines of the art world, and has only rarely shown his work in galleries. Born in London in 1945, he began painting and drawing at a very early age, copying the work of the Old Masters from illustrations in books belonging to his mother. At the age of ten he was given permission to paint copies at the National Gallery in London; still to this day the youngest artist ever to be granted this privilege. While he was painting at the National Gallery – his work there culminating in a copy of Phillips Wouwerman's 1646 Cavalry Battle, a massive canvas larger than the artist himself at the time – Christian also studied anatomy at the Victoria and Albert Museum. His precocious talents led to a number of newspaper articles devoted to the young prodigy, and he continued to study at the museums until the age of sixteen, when he began to seek and receive commissions. Within a few years, Christian had developed a successful practice as a portrait painter, living and working in Rome and Tangier before returning to England. Exhibitions of his drawings and landscape paintings were held at the Upper Grosvenor Galleries in London in 1969 and 1970, and led to more portrait commissions. Another exhibition of drawings, at the Hazlitt Gallery in London in 1972, also proved highly successful.

During the 1970s Christian lived and worked in Paris, Tuscany and Morocco. By now a renowned

portrait painter who had been very successful in this field for several years, and who counted numerous society, establishment and cultural figures among his patrons, he eventually gave up painting portraits on commission in favour of painting only what interested him; interiors, still life subjects, figure studies, nudes and landscapes, as well as portraits of close friends. Much of the decade of the 1980s found the artist living in New York, where in 1985 a number of his drawings were selected and hung by Andy Warhol at the New York Academy of Art for the benefit of the students there. Since 1986, however, Christian has very rarely exhibited his work in galleries, at most only once every ten years or so. An inveterate traveller who has lived in seventeen countries, he continued to enjoy a nomadic lifestyle, and resided for long periods of time in both India and Bali in Indonesia. He now lives and works in Yorkshire.

In a monograph on the artist's work, published in 1991, one writer noted that 'Anthony Christian possesses the extraordinary capacity to create with equally dazzling facility – and, more important, evident deep emotion – portraits, still lifes, nudes, interiors, drapery studies, compositions and landscapes. Although he no longer accepts portrait commissions, he still paints many portraits, of his wife and friends…Last but by no means least, Christian is a supreme draftsman.' Indeed, from a relatively early age, the artist established a reputation as a formidably gifted draughtsman. As an article in Vogue magazine, at the time of an exhibition of his drawings in London in 1972, commented, 'Anthony Christian…is a new world's child who makes old world portraits with a precocious facility about which he is extremely and passionately prickly and proud. "I believe", he says fiercely, "in the technique of the Renaissance masters. Just because we are living 400 years later doesn't mean we are necessarily better. I love and revere Leonardo, Michelangelo and Rembrandt and, personally, I think Matisse can't draw."'