

PRESS RELEASE

OLIVIER DEBRÉ



**1 JUNE – 4 AUGUST 2023
SIMON LEE GALLERY, LONDON**

GUIDED EXHIBITION WALK-THROUGH: 3 JUNE, 10:30 AM

PRIVATE VIEW: 6 JUNE, 6–8 PM

LONDON GALLERY WEEKEND: 2 JUNE, 9:30 AM–8 PM, 3 JUNE, 10 AM–6 PM, 4 JUNE, 11 AM–5 PM

‘A painting, however far removed from what it is agreed to call the representation of the world, remains an image of it.’

– Olivier Debré

Simon Lee Gallery is pleased to present its inaugural exhibition of works by French lyrical abstract painter Olivier Debré (1920–1999).

Spanning two gallery floors, the exhibition explores the artist's fervent colour-field paintings produced from 1980 to 1999, the pinnacle of Debré's practice, when he deftly captured the emotional experiences of natural phenomena and the outside world.

It was after witnessing the horrors of the Second World War that Debré pivoted away from his architectural training at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris to focus on painting, seeking inspiration and refuge in the natural world. His visual language and painterly approach drew on the immediacy of working en plein air, and he coined the term 'signes' to reference the primordial mark-making that characterises his spontaneous responses to his environment.

The exhibition's canvases, made by Debré in the latter part of his career, evidence his desire to capture the power and wonder of the sites he encountered by the use of luminescent, fluid backgrounds punctuated with strong accents of colour, which played an increasingly important role in the expressive quality of Debré's works following 1947, putting him in conversation with artists such as Jules Olitski and particularly Mark Rothko, who he befriended in New York in the 1950s.

Debré's harnessing of colour is evident in *Bleu Coule de Loire, Touraine* (1988), a work that will be on view. Here, Debré takes influence from the gushing currents of the Loire river – a muse for the artist, who travelled extensively but who called Touraine, in the Loire Valley, home. Soft washes of powder blue are interjected with impasto ripples of dark green and ultramarine, resulting in a dynamic composition that exudes the life of the river. Debré described of his process: "When I am like the wind, like the rain, like the running water, then I am part of nature and nature passes through me," an approach that can be understood through the works that form this exhibition.

The sense of touch also became key to Debré's practice as he shifted to painting canvases on the floor, moving over them like part of the landscape as they took shape. The sights and sounds of places around the world – from the Imperial Palace of Tokyo to Beijing's Forbidden City, the Yemeni desert, and the fjords of Norway – continued to feed his creativity.

These works of the 1980s and '90s contrast the artist's early monochrome works, which were informed by the prismatic compositions of Picasso, who Debré visited many times at his studio at Rue des Grands-Augustins in 1942, and which convey the war's destruction. Instead, the exhibition's paintings signal a rebirth in their vibrancy and rich hues, conjuring the universal human sensations that are provoked by the relentless life force of nature, while evincing an artist in his creative prime.

NOTES TO EDITORS

Coinciding with the gallery's exhibition is the Opéra Bastille's re-staging of the prize-winning ballet *Signes*, opening on the 21st of June, 2023. Originally created in 1997 for the Opéra de Bastille, *Signes* has become an iconic work in the Paris Opéra repertoire. It was born out of Debré's desire to build on his monumental public commissions and create an all-encompassing work that captures the emotive evocations of Mona Lisa's famous smile, while exploring how we are able to understand smiles as a gesture as young children, even before any conception of language. Choreographer Carolyn Carlson took Debré's flamboyant painted sets and costumes as her starting point, using them to represent different places in the world as various emotional states, setting her dancers in motion to an original score by René Aubry.

About Olivier Debré

Olivier Debré was born in Paris in 1920. He is recognised as a central figure of the lyrical abstraction movement, along with Hans Hartung, Pierre Soulages, Serge Poliakoff, Nicolas de Stael, and George Mathieu. In 1939, he joined the Ecole des Beaux-Arts to study architecture under Le Corbusier. After the war ended, Debré became part of a new generation of expressive painters belonging to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Paris. During this time, Debré's paintings were heavily influenced by Japanese calligraphy. In the early 1950s, Debré painted with a knife and his work carried a palette of muted colours. This gave way in the 1960s to intense, vividly coloured compositions that express the emotional experience of natural phenomena.

Debré was the subject of major exhibitions during his lifetime. In 1967, he represented France at the Montreal World Exhibition, in 1977 the National Museum of Wales held a retrospective, and in 1995 he had a retrospective at the Jeu de Paume in Paris. During the 1980s, he expanded his practice to the theatre, receiving commissions from the Hong Kong Opera and the Opera House of Shanghai for painted theatre curtains. His work is held in major international collections, including the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris; the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Philips Collection, Washington D.C.; and the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. The Centre de Création Contemporaine Olivier Debré opened in March 2017 in Tours, France. The CCCOD is joining forces with the Centre Pompidou to present the exhibition "Olivier Debré: La figuration à l'envers" from 14 April, 2023, to 25 February, 2024.

About Simon Lee Gallery

Founded in London in 2002, Simon Lee Gallery represents artists of diverse generations whose practices explore a wide range of media, from sculpture and painting to video and photography, and who share a broad interest in an exploration of the conceptual. Aiming to provide a significant international audience for its artists, the gallery also regularly punctuates its programme with historical exhibitions and curated group shows, which present shifts in contemporary art practice and thought, whilst broadening the dialogue with artists outside of the gallery's core programme. In addition to its UK activity, in 2012 the gallery opened a space in Hong Kong, which introduced its artists to a wider public in Asia, with a fully independent programme.

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Image: Olivier Debré, *Bleu Coule de Loire, Touraine*, 1988, oil on canvas, 180 x 350 cm (70 7/8 x 137 3/4 in.).
Courtesy of the estate of Olivier Debré and Simon Lee Gallery. Photo: Sebastiano Pellion di Persano.

For further press information, images, and interview requests, please contact: chloe@simonleegallery.com