



Christine  
ARVEIL

## PEINTURE EN MOUVEMENT

Christine Arveil apporte une nouvelle dimension à la peinture contemporaine. Imprégnée par les traditions de l'Orient, elle a, par sa maîtrise éblouissante des techniques de vernissage, réussi à créer des compositions inimitables qui reflètent à merveille le monde secret des passions et des sentiments. Le chatoiement des couleurs et le changement continu des tons en fonction de la luminosité font des œuvres de Christine Arveil une peinture en mouvement d'une beauté et d'une profondeur remarquables.



### painter of movement

*Christine Arveil brings a new dimension to contemporary painting. Infused with Eastern traditions, she has succeeded through her dazzling mastery of varnishing techniques in creating inimitable compositions that wondrously reflect the secret world of passions and sentiments. The shimmering colors and the continual change of tones that vary according to the ambient light make Christine Arveil's works moving paintings of a remarkable beauty and depth.*

**Thierry Vankerk-Hoven**  
Consul General of France in Boston

Covers: *One Cannot Sleep Quietly (On ne peut plus dormir tranquillement)*, details  
Copal varnish and pigments in alcohol over gesso on wood, 48 x 29 in. (122 x 73cm)

# CHRISTINE ARVEIL

## WEIGHT OF LIGHT

CARNEY GALLERY  
Fine Arts Center  
Regis College

January 18–February 18  
2005

## foreword

Welcome to *Weight of Light: Recent Works by Christine Arveil*.

I take great pleasure in presenting this exhibition for three reasons in particular. The first is the strength of the work itself. Arveil's magical balance of pigment and varnish combines total mastery of craft with the unbridled creativity of an immense imagination.

Second, this significant publication will serve as an important contribution to the study and appreciation of Arveil's work. On behalf of Regis College, I would like to acknowledge those who had a special role in planning and preparing our catalogue. Pieranna Cavalchini, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Curator of Contemporary Art, provided an important assessment of Arveil's achievements. I am grateful to the essayists, all representative of the visual and performing arts, for their thoughts on Arveil's technical excellence, intellect, and vision: David Walter, conductor and professor, National Conservatory of Paris and London's Guildhall School of Music; Sharon Que, sculptor; Keith Hill, instrument maker; and Elatia Harris, arts consultant and teacher.

There is a third reason why *Weight of Light* is very special. The catalogue magnifies the impact of Arveil's work and allows Regis to make a greater contribution to its ongoing efforts to promote the work of women artists.

Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to Christine Arveil for her unfailing professionalism and for sharing her talents with Regis.

**Rosemary Noon**

*Curator, Carney Gallery  
Director of Communications and Cultural Affairs  
Regis College*



*Angel* (Ange), 2003  
Violin varnish and pigments over gesso on wood, 37 x 20 in. (95 x 52cm)

## PRELUDE

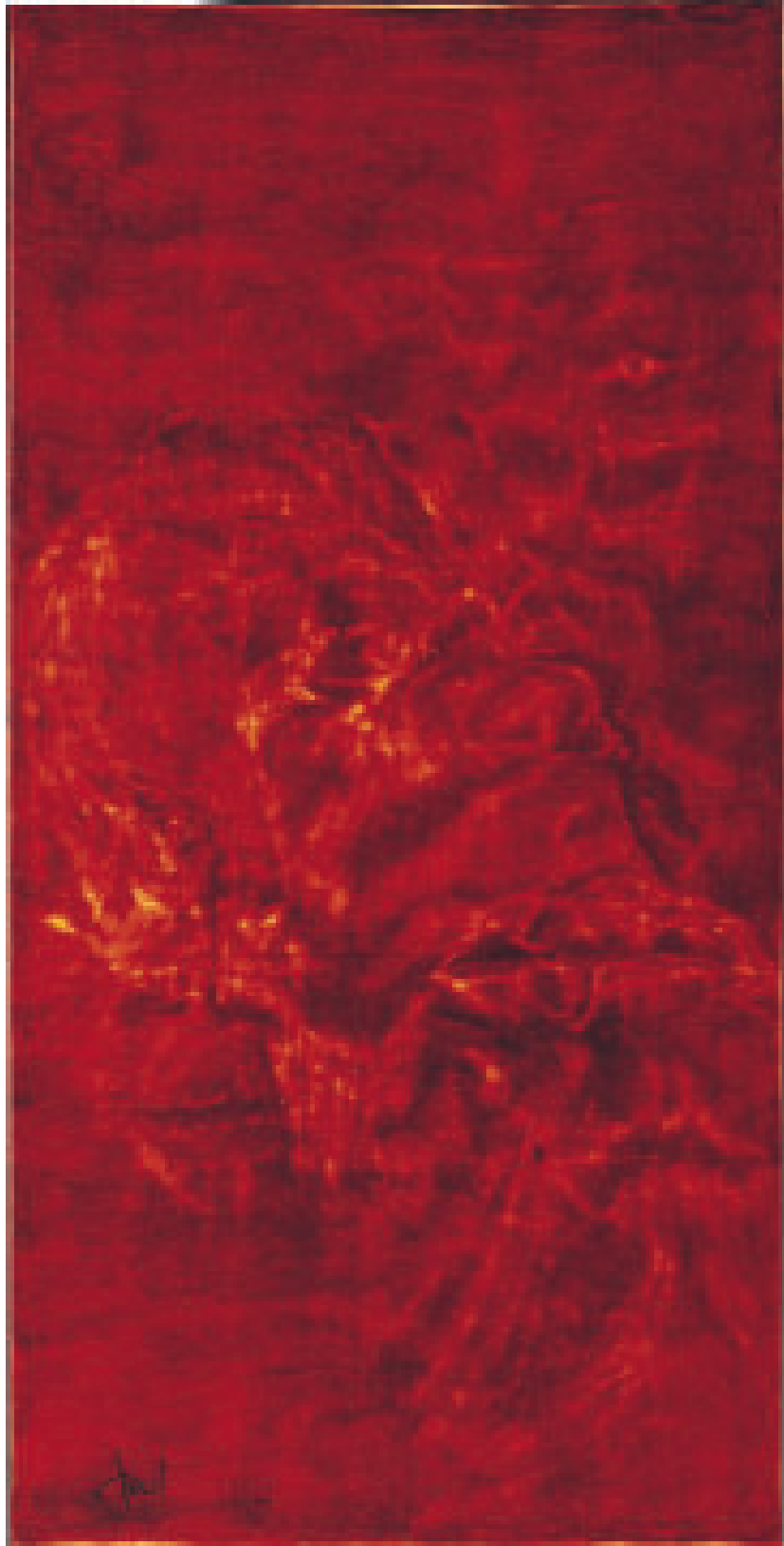
Looking at *Ténèbre* and *Blue Icon*, and thinking of Christine Arveil's entire body of work, I am struck first by its incredible diversity. Then, by its authenticity. The third and supremely powerful feeling it produces is one of depth beyond sounding. And among the countless strata, one finds the persistent expression of torment.

In the double mask of *Ténèbre* there is no intimation which way the artist will go tomorrow. Neither the left eye nor the right directs the viewer to any peaceful prospect, and the gagged mouth is mute. Yet it is peace towards which the artist is questing, translating this quest into visual terms as an act of self-liberation. When I look at *Blue Icon*, the panel seems to me pure prelude. The germ of what will be tomorrow is there, still formidably veiled, balanced between threat and hope.

Arveil's entire creation affirms a giant question mark; it moves us to know our own doubts and errors, and is not for seekers of spiritual certitude. In the domain of spirituality—spindled by millennia of institutional jails so that it is difficult to speak of it intelligently—Arveil's efforts project her immensely forward. There, and in the domain of creation. So far forward that there are only questions. She is ahead even of her own perceptions, and quite without certitude.

**David Walter**

*Professor of Oboe, Paris Conservatory  
composer and conductor*



*The Price of Freedom (Le prix de la liberté)*, 2004  
Violin varnish and pigments on wood, 47 x 24 in. (120 x 60cm.)

## conversation in the studio

*Pieranna Cavalchini:* It seems from your writings that you had no choice but to paint. So many forces conspired to stop you from painting, yet you couldn't stop.

*Christine Arveil:* Absolutely true. And worse than that, I tried to stop painting many times, because I tended to think that life would be easier, morally and in other ways, without painting. Several times I sold all my materials—my colors, my brushes, my papers. I even went back to university for an MBA. But in the end it was impossible.

*PC:* In the studios where you worked, your teachers were from diverse backgrounds. So in a way, you learned to approach the subject from many different viewpoints. One of your teachers was from Argentina, if I remember correctly.

*CA:* Right. And one was Chinese. But even the French ones were odd in a way. I learned gold-leafing from this eccentric guy with a studio in a completely remote part of Paris, which took days to find. He was seventy years old, and really belonged more in the eighteenth century than in the twentieth. I guess I am attracted by big personalities.

*PC:* You mean outstanding minds?

*CA:* Yes. I am much more comfortable with outstanding, unusual minds. Always. I always felt that Man Ray, Max Ernst and Giacometti—especially Giacometti—were really my closest neighbors. I read everything that they wrote. I spent my first twenty years living with virtual remote people who were the huge personalities of the various centuries—and perhaps it created a sort of standard for me.

*PC:* It was Luis Ansa who taught you to draw?

*CA:* He taught me to paint, and how to use the old varnishes. Something that I realized only later is how very gifted he was with his hands. He said that he could take—and I have seen him do this—a huge brush you use for painting walls and paint a thin line with it. Total control of the body! I came across this again in my study of Chinese calligraphy, and it became very important to me. Luis would drink forty cups of coffee a day, working with copal dissolved into 99-proof alcohol, with an emulsion of linseed oil into that—it was the most unstable medium possible, and he could paint whatever he wanted with it.

*PC:* And after Ansa?

*CA:* It was the time of the first Gulf War. I was involved in the peace movement in Paris. We decided that the best thing we

could do at that time was to know these cultures better, and to talk about them. So, we put together lectures, meetings about Muslim women and various cultural issues. I started to learn about Arabic calligraphy and about North African contemporary art. I worked mainly with Abdallah Akar, a contemporary painter from Tunisia who is a philosopher too in that tradition.

*PC:* What did you learn from Akar?

*CA:* First of all, a way of looking at the world that is completely different from the one we have. One day, Akar and I were on the tenth floor of the Arab World Institute, on the balcony looking at the Paris rooftops. Suddenly he told me, "Look, the world is full. Every element is connected to every other. There is no emptiness whatsoever." It was an almost hallucinatory experience. Suddenly, I saw Paris before me like a giant jigsaw puzzle. I felt it rushing at me, and I felt crushed by this huge connectedness of the world, a total contradiction of the Chinese notion of emptiness versus fullness.

*PC:* It was a moment of awakening?

*CA:* Yes. And for its political meaning, it was essential to me. We need to understand how we see, how each of us sees the world differently. Some of us see the world as interconnected: a completed jigsaw puzzle. Others see it as discrete areas in a solution of continuity. Visual art is extremely efficient in teaching us this. I learned that borders are just a chance encounter; and that the painting is always virtually continuing into the infinity of space. So I am very uncomfortable with frames, with anything that encloses a painting. I am not interested at all in Mondrian and I am much more comfortable with Barnett Newman. Mondrian framed everything into right angles—it is another kind of prison—whereas Newman's monumental works are perfect.

*PC:* Let's talk a little about your varnishes, how you began to study them and where that study took you. Because your interest in varnish actually connected you to the world of music, which has had a huge impact on both your life and your art.

*CA:* I came to the United States, to the University of Michigan community in Ann Arbor; to work on violin varnishes, at the invitation of the renowned violin-makers Curtin & Alf. Joseph Curtin is a longtime friend who knew my work and my research in European varnishes and Chinese lacquer. This started my "violin period." I actually worked on highly com-



plex violin varnishes for several years before retaining, as I do now, just the technique and its spirit in my paintings.

But my close relation to music came much earlier: I've spent more time at concerts than in museums, and I have lived my entire adult life with musicians. For instance, I've exchanged more than one thousand letters with the oboist David Walter, who provided a note for this catalog. In Paris in the 1980s and '90s, not a week passed without something I would follow in contemporary music. Always live music. I vividly remember days with the composers Edison Denisov and Betsy Jolas, as they were working on new scores with friends—people who are now world-class soloists. Or listening to György Ligeti, Michael Levinas, Pierre Boulez... And later on in Detroit, I was around jazz people.

Music is one of the things I try to translate into painting. Don't get me wrong: I do not mean illustrating; I feel that music, sculpture, literature, and painting have a common underground stream and I am interested in trying to return to it. Can we possibly visualize a complex prime emotion before it fits itself into a definite medium: pouring some music roots into visuals, for instance? Literature also has a big sound component for me. I collect recorded voices of writers. All of this rolls together.

*PC:* How do you prepare your bases? Where does the base preparation end and painting begin? Are there two phases or one?

*CA:* This is a fundamental question. There is only one phase. Maybe the essential part of the work is in the bases, in what lies underneath. So, on the wood panels I have two different approaches, either the raw wood or the gesso. I make my own gesso.

*PC:* Do you age it?

*CA:* I work it, so that ultimately it has some characteristics of aging. And then the first coats of varnish are incorporated with the base and they become the base, and maybe every subsequent coat just incorporates with the base. As soon as the varnish is too thick and begins to stand out separately, it becomes...uncomfortable.



Photograph: Al Fisher

PC: What percentage of your work is erasing?

CA: Oh, 80 percent. And I do not use brushes anymore.

PC: How do you do it, then? With your fingers?

CA: No. Back to what Luis was saying, when the brain is precise enough, anything can—

PC: —can be used.

CA: Yes. Even for the very fine details, I use this big rag. It makes no difference. It's like cleaning; I try to be casual, to hide the most dramatic aspect of the work. Actually, erasing/cleaning represents an intimate, violent contradiction. Erasing is a destructive, violent act. Cleaning tries to be the positive aspect of the same phenomenon. When I feel hurt, I clean for hours, slowly, in a total silence. No music, nothing. Cleaning is an attempt to heal the removing, the erasing.

I haven't found the balance yet, how not to put my work at risk unnecessarily.

PC: Risk is at the heart of your creative process.

CA: I agree. I seek out the risk. I see abstraction as the pure incarnation of movement and risk, and I am learning anew all the old lessons about control. When I approach a painting with solvent, the whole surface will move tremendously, in a way that is hard to control. There is always that spot that is beyond control. However, letting chance guide the image...it doesn't satisfy me. I don't want that casual dreaming disguised as "freedom." I don't want, you know, the comforts of abandon. To me, that is hiding. I prefer to bounce against the strength of the unknown without removing myself from responsibility for the result. And if you like risk, varnish is the perfect medium.

PC: So in a way it was varnish that brought you to abstract painting?

CA: Varnish is something you cannot capture. You cannot capture the recipe to begin with. You cannot capture the materials. You cannot capture the light, because it is changing all the time. And it doesn't stay in one place.

PC: Was that a way of avoiding a frame? By using a material that is constantly changing, is that another way of avoiding a specific geographical space?

CA: That is interesting. Yes, very probably. It is a material that requires an enormous amount of control and technique, yet it is always sort of running in front of you.

PC: Is it also a part of the work that—however you look at it, in different lights or in different directions—it will shift. It stays alive. The color shifts.

CA: Yes, tremendously.

PC: It is hard to photograph. The images are elusive.

CA: Yes, fantastically so. There can never be any dictator on that. Nobody can take power over such a painting or such a varnish. It will always take back its freedom.

PC: What about color? Do you consider yourself a monochromatic painter?

CA: It's only apparent monochrome. My palette consists actually of complex combinations of many pigments. If I am not painting, then I am writing fictions to pacify the painting—late-ly, fictions about lava simmering in a volcanic fault. This environment stands for an extreme feeling of atmospheric intensity—for movement and heat. One of those times, years ago, when I sold all my colors, I started to paint only with black china ink ground on a stone. You know, they say that in Chinese painting all colors are contained in black. Without color in front of me I developed a perception of it that was like a hallucination of color: I would sense heat before color, and it was the heat of color in motion, advancing or retreating like lava flowing bright or cooling to gray. I kept this sense when I returned to using pigments.

PC: Well, this all makes sense: you have total control of your medium. You can do pretty much anything with it. Look at that green [in *Ange*], how marvelous.

CA: You see how it can change from green to blue?

PC: Yes. As you know, I hate artificial light. I know that is not a popular point of view—but I just can't stand it! I think the work is so much more beautiful in natural light. You see so much more with it.

CA: I was struck that the very first time you entered my studio, you looked around and said, "Don't turn on the light because you are usually painting at night." You were really the first person ever to understand that. I cannot start in daylight. Too many disturbances. So, the light that starts the work is the sun going down. The last beam of the sun really striking.

PC: You know something? I only just rediscovered it—how extraordinary the north light is for looking at things.

CA: For me, it tends to be too depressing. I like the fire of the sun. The last fire of the West. And you see here, in the green painting, we have the sunbeam on it.

PC: It brings it to life. It is like a stone shining. I know what a painting conservator would say about such strong light. You're not going to find yourself in the same situation as many contemporary artists, with collectors calling you to ask if you can restore the work because the paint has shifted or faded. So much contemporary work is ephemeral. Your works are going to stay the way they are for a long time—is that correct?

CA: Right—for a long time, like any varnish on a violin.

PC: So, the application of varnish is a kind of act of freedom.

CA: Look at this painting I am working on, *Homage to Modigliani*, for example. It is just a layering of coats. I started to shape an image, and then came the problem of realism. I have no interest in representational imagery per se, but in how to capture the beauty of a sketch, either in drawing or in painting—that freshness. I care very much about Modigliani and something in the sudden apparition of this figure, something in the setting of this figure of a girl...I could sense, maybe, what Modigliani might have been feeling in his relationship to painting.

PC: But you want more?

CA: Yes. Or I am afraid to be too casual with the eyes that viewers lend me. You work on the apparition of a personality...and then go over it again, not intending to destroy it, to throw solvent at it, but to search out where the expression of the soul could be in this painting, to elaborate upon this apparition of a soul, without being glued to its reality. This is really difficult, as it never stays in one place.

PC: Is that why you take many months to finish a work, if not years?

CA: Yes, probably. I think the work is never just an image. Sometimes, I will spend the entire day just looking at an image, until I can feel it inside me. And at that point when I feel it really strongly, it becomes very vivid and very precise, until the painting is completely detached from whatever I could ever think or feel. At that point it has so much complexity that I cannot master it with my brain alone. It is complex enough that it can stand without me.

PC: That is pretty terrific. Besides Modigliani, which other artists do you think of as friends?

CA: For me, Rembrandt is as real and present as somebody shouting out loud in the back room of an inn in Amsterdam. All those people from the past are so alive, they are completely real. Last week in DC, I spent as much time in front of Rothko as with Vermeer. For me, the mystery of what is happening in Vermeer's backgrounds is incredibly important. They are abstract. The way he uses shadows is so interesting.

Yes, maybe in the feeling that comes out of all those works, my eyes are sort of inflating every tiny little detail. I see details and details and details. I almost lost my sight at one point in my life. I was wearing thicker and thicker glasses. This is a big fear because my sight is going up and down all the time.

PC: Does that have to do with the fact that you concentrate so?

CA: Yes. I know now—because I have seen very competent ophthalmologists—that it is only psychological.

PC: Psychological?

CA: Yet it lets me see many, many layers at a time. So actually, I don't even know if people see what I see in my paintings. This is how I was able to restore the precious old violins—because I can distinguish one layer of varnish from another. I am convinced that we all have a defect that gives us interesting abilities.

PC: I think you are right, absolutely. Except that I wouldn't call it a defect. I would call it a strength.

CA: Sometimes yes, often not.

PC: So you are constantly thinking about layers—composing and decomposing an image?

CA: I think so, yes. Translating the intensity of a feeling. I don't yet know quite how to do it, because intensity is the interesting thing. It is not the image. It's not even the colors. Somehow, it's the heat level.

*Pieranna Cavalchini*

*Curator of Contemporary Art  
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston*

## EVERY SERIOUS SUBJECT IS INFINITE

The art of Christine Arveil and mainstream contemporary art do intersect, but not in the area usually understood as painting. Rather, for the uncanny way it reveals itself only with changing light and time, Arveil's painting belongs among the conceptual and temporal arts. This is painting that needs time to happen, as a musical composition needs it, time to unfold in its truth and entirety. It needs changing light not just for the enhancement of pleasure, but for being accurately understood, as a musical interpretation needs a correctly tuned hall to work its cumulative effect.

"Every serious subject is infinite," Bernard Berenson wrote. That considered, we might ask how does Arveil's painting reward our sustained attention? We do not so much see these paintings as see into them, into the layers of fine violin varnish suspending rare hand-ground pigments. But it is not their technical aspect that compels us to seek them out; it is their effect on our minds and souls. For this is an art of allusiveness and mystery. Images arise in it and subside, like passages in whale song. Even a sharply contoured image is fugitive, a bright thought surfacing—can we hold onto it? No—it will be different next time, a ghost image, a mask of itself.

Arveil's painting has a long reach, and will be with us in the dark, when our eyes are at rest. Perhaps its power lies in our deeply sensing its kinship to the processes that shape our own lives: the layers of years that both form us and wash us away; the suspension of rare image in the volatile medium of memory, and the way we surface, are seen, and are not seen again.

*Elatia Harris*  
writer and painter



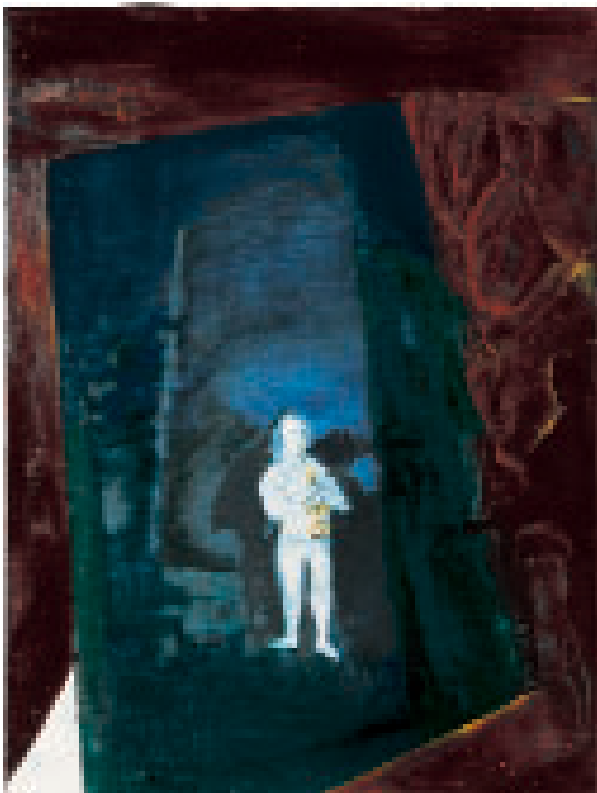
*Fate (La Parque)*, 2003  
Pigments in marine and violin varnish over gesso on wood, 37 x 53 in. (94 x 134cm)

## traveling a path to a place we don't know

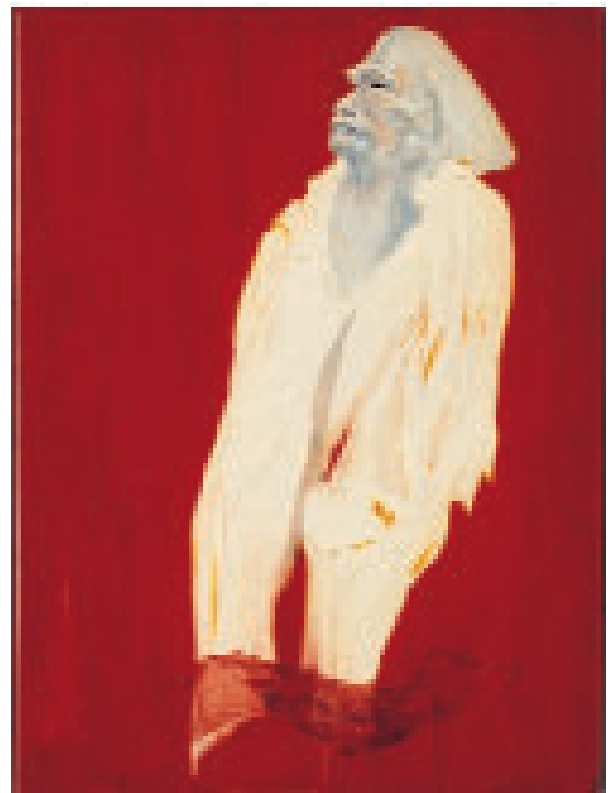
The information waiting to be gathered from a painting of Christine's will never present itself in a crisp sound byte. We have to trust our instincts to be drawn into its depths, and enjoy it like music—the unfamiliar piece that slowly becomes our favorite.

We follow the artist in reverse, on a path to a place we don't know, layer by transparent layer. Sometimes forty layers are applied to convey both what we do know and what eludes us. Each painting is more than a point in a continuum. It is itself a continuum, encompassing past, present and future.

**Sharon Que**  
sculptor



*The Young Violinist (Le petit violoniste)*, 2001  
Chipolin, violin varnish and pigments over gesso on wood  
31 x 24 in. (80 x 60cm)



*Nevermore (Plus jamais)*, 2004  
Pigments in gums, balms and natural resins on wood  
39 x 28 in. (100 x 70cm)

## THE VISUAL EFFECT OF VARNISH

If I were giving a lecture about Christine Arveil, I'd start by remarking that because a starved soul can never produce culture, Christine's work reveals her soul to be—shall we say?—corpulent.

Sensory in the extreme, Christine's work deals in strong emotion. It arouses in me an intense feeling of sobriety, refreshment, glory, and richness all at once, for like that of the very best painters—Rubens, Rembrandt, and Monet, among a few others—it has the power to create meaning purely through visual effect.

How? That is, indeed, the question. Continuing to lecture, I'd urge my audience to consider closely Christine's technique, for they shall have seen nothing like it. The word paint, used as a noun, implies pigment ground to varying degrees of fineness in a drying vehicle. But what do you say when the painter uses varnish as the vehicle for paint? Varnish, Christine's ultra-demanding medium of choice, has unusual properties which are part and parcel of her technique, of her entire esthetic.

Varnish is a totally different product from the oil and thinner or resin that make it up. When properly constructed, a varnish once applied should both flow and stay in place. It should appear to have great depth even if only one very thin coat is used. It is colored in the brown range but has no pigment. It dries slowly but sets up rather rapidly, and needs to be sanded between coats to insure proper adhesion of the next coat. It is, altogether, a material that requires years of study and experimentation to handle with mastery.

The lambent, spiritual quality in Christine's painting is one of constant change in visual effect. This is because the visual effect of varnish changes every moment throughout the day, with the angle of the sun, with the clouds that modify the light that strikes the surface of the work. In this constant creation of new meanings her work is unique.

*Keith Hill*

*instrument maker and art historian*



*Icon (Icône)*, 2001–2002  
Sepia and violin varnishes over gesso on wood  
28 x 20 in. (70 x 50cm)



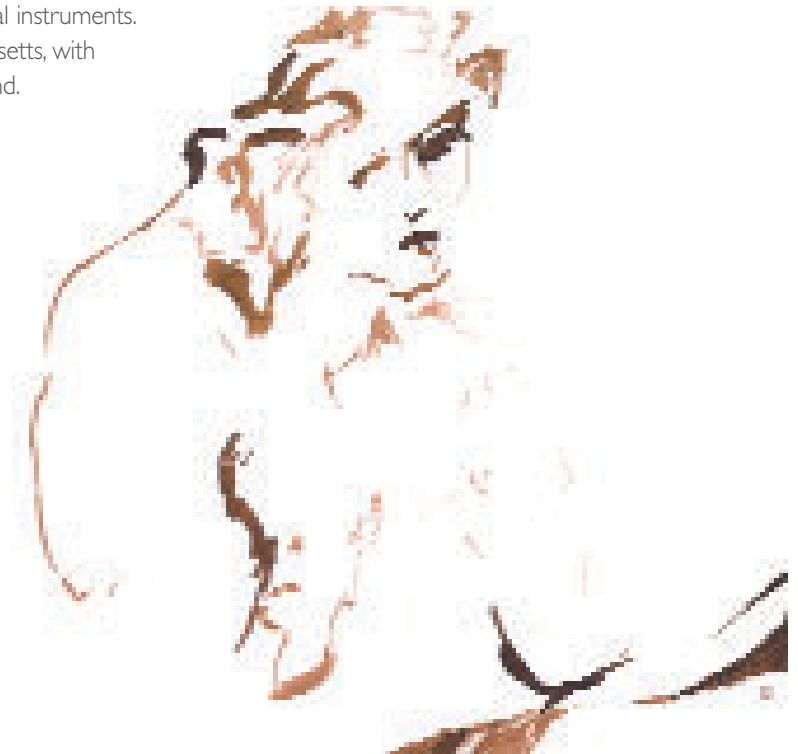
*Breach (Jeune homme bleu)*, 2002  
Pigments in violin varnish over gesso on wood  
38 x 22 in. (96 x 55cm)

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

After completing a classical education in art history and ancient languages, Christine Arveil studied painting in Paris, with masters in both the Chinese and French traditions. There, she opened her first studio in 1984, writing a dissertation on J. F. Watin, the important eighteenth century varnisher, and exploring the expressive potential of varnish as a medium for her own abstract painting.

Throughout the 1980s, Arveil made an intensive study of Chinese calligraphy and was, in 1987, the only Westerner to exhibit in the Japanese Embassy in Paris Calligraphy Show. In the next decade, she studied Arabic calligraphy, lecturing in Paris on its history and links with contemporary art. Her continuing experience with varnish had by this time made her an expert in restoring the finishes of antique musical instruments, and in 1997 she was invited to the University of Michigan community of Ann Arbor to restore rare violin finishes. She began to lecture about the art of varnish that was key to the creation of historic violins of the great period, and further developed its possibilities in her personal art.

Arveil's work is exhibited in both the United States and Europe, figuring in private collections of art and musical instruments. In 2001, she settled in Charlestown, Massachusetts, with her husband, master bow maker Benoît Rolland.



*Job, Youth (Job jeune), 1996*  
Sepia and reed pen on rag paper; 10 x 9 in. (25 x 22cm)





*The Old Man (Le vieillard)*, 2001  
Violin varnishes over gesso on wood, 28 x 20 in. (96 x 55cm)

Publishing a catalogue is a moment of clarification. All that had struggled to find a path to daylight suddenly comes to life, filled with sense. Memory is important: I want to thank all the friends and collectors, in France and the United States, who helped the adventure for many years. *Merci à tous.*

## acknowledgements

I am grateful to Regis College for inviting my artwork. There, I found kindness and true dedication to art. Rosemary Noon and Steve Hall created a perfect space for the paintings in a remarkable human environment and architecture. Elena DeFelice and Paul Leahy brought a professional quality to the book all the while preserving the artistic intentions. Amelia Aubourg was our voice. My meeting with the president of Regis College, Dr. Mary Jane England, was a powerful moment: her determination and belief in her mission is elating.

No such beautiful encounters could have happened without my friend and talented artist Elatia Harris. Her tremendous work shaped directions with elegance, found the right words.

The texts in this catalog reflect lifelong friendships, passionate art conversations, and memorable encounters. The care and meaningfulness with which the authors unfolded their understanding of my work is deeply moving to me. Each page offers ground for my next body of work. I cannot emphasize enough how important was the dialogue with Pieranna Cavalchini. She knows to make sense of art processes even within the burning time of creation, a talent is a cornerstone for the progression of art. Valuable support was given by the team at the Isabells Stewart Gardner Museum.

The photo session with Al Fisher was memorable: in his studio is a lifetime of photography. The violin maker and photographer Oliver Radke, visiting from Germany, assisted him greatly.

Heidi Harvey, with Fish & Richardson LLP, most graciously offered the first copyrighting of my work.

Supporting my work and endeavors is a tranquil and confident strength that steers the ship through all waters: my husband Benoît Rolland whose talent reaches so many art forms.

Thank you all.

*Dedicated to Sonia and Damien for their confidence in the future.*

**Christine Arveil**  
*studio@arveil.net*



*Tenebra (Ténèbre)*, 2003  
Pigments in violin varnish over gesso on wood, 16 x 10 in. (40 x 26cm)

