



Time Out New York / Issue 697 : Feb 5–11, 2009

Art Review

Peter Doig

The Turner Prize short-lister returns for his first New York show in six years.

By Howard Halle

Michael Werner + GBE (Gavin Brown's Enterprise), through Mar 14



Ping-Pong

Photograph: Courtesy Gavin Brown's Enterprise And Michael Werner Gallery, New York

I've always thought of Peter Doig as something of a guilty pleasure, even though the 49-year-old painter's mixture of figuration and abstraction, reverie and factuality, has won him a renown since his 1994 New York debut as a freshly-minted Turner Prize nominee. Back then, *The New York Times* opined that Doig was a potential heir to Gerhard Richter, "trying to fuse the strands of Mr. Richter's split career—his photorealist works and the frozen gestures of his abstractions."

I wouldn't put the two in the same sentence, though Doig does base his paintings on photos. If he reminds me of anyone, it's R.B. Kitaj, the late School of London fixture and American expat with whom Doig shares a penchant for primitivist draftsmanship and thinly applied color—though not, thankfully, the same pretensions to creating a form of contemporary history painting. Kitaj's output, of course, never enjoyed anything like the five-fold jump in auction prices that Doig's experienced between June 2006 and February 2007, when his *White Canoe* fetched a record £5.7

million. But as a fellow critic said to me of that sale, “Ten million for a Doig? Are you kidding?”—a sentiment I would second along with this assessment of Doig’s 1996 New York show : “He still walks a thin line between genuine strangeness and kitsch.” Actually, he loses his balance quite often, though that hasn’t stopped me from enjoying his work.

Twelve or so years on, Doig’s concurrent exhibitions at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise and Michael Werner reveal him to be in fine form, while the scale and number of pieces indicate that he could have moved to a big-fish outfit like Gagosian a long time ago. Assuming it’s been his choice, the fact that he hasn’t is to his credit, though it also lessens the risk of overexposure. Indeed, the travel time between galleries serves him well: It blurs the memory of his sometimes formulaic if paradoxical blend of allegory and formalist first principles.

At Werner, the work suggests what would happen if Whistler mugged Rothko in a back alley. Two large canvases feature the same figure of a winged character on a color-field backdrop divided by a horizon line. Titled *Man Dressed as Bat* and *Man Dressed as Bat (Night)*, respectively, both are fairly crepuscular. In the former, the central image is rendered in ochre against a twilight of blues, grays and maroons that seems to caress the top of a mountain range. In the latter, a curtain of black has descended, leaving only a narrow strip of glowing blue, as if the figure had suddenly alighted by a luminescent stream deep in a dark grotto. Doig pulls out all the painterly stops, ravishing the eye with veils of pigments and masterful drips. One could quibble with whether these paintings should have been called “Man Dressed as Butterfly”: The matter-of-factness of the titles (and Doig’s skills) keeps the work from sliding into cheap lyricism, while also reminding us that Doig began with a snapshot of a costumed individual.

The feeling that Doig is seating us in the front row of a theater of self-reflexivity is even more apparent at GBE. Landscape is a recurring theme, and if the pageant of verdancy on display is as oddly tropical as it is evergreen, that speaks to the artist’s peripatetic origins: Born in Scotland, Doig lived in Trinidad as a child before moving to Canada. He went to art school in London and remained there until 2002, when he moved back to Trinidad. The meeting of northern reticence and equatorial effusiveness is a hallmark of Doig’s oeuvre, as is the sense of abundant sunshine shadowed by personal gloom.

These qualities are especially evident in a pair of compositions, *Ping-Pong* and *House of Flowers (See You There)*; both picture a lone shirtless man backstopped by the grid of a cinder block wall. In *Ping-Pong*, moody blues suffuse the image of a paunchy middle-aged guy playing table tennis against an opponent who isn’t there. In *House of Flowers*, the subject looks younger and Trinidadian, though it’s hard to tell because he’s depicted as an ectoplasmic silhouette, oblivious to a shower of pink petals from a tree limb. His body literally absorbs them like an amoeba gobbling lunch.

The takeaway, I think, is that while Doig is an aesthete, he wants us to know that he’s equivocal about it. I’m not sure I find his ambivalence convincing. It’s more like he wants to make sure we don’t hate his paintings because they’re beautiful. But they are, and sometimes that’s something one cannot help.