

Peter Doig at Michael Werner

Art in America, Sept 2003, by Lilly Wei

Raised in Canada and Trinidad, Scottish-born Peter Doig makes pictures that have a slightly seedy air about them, an uneasy preoccupied ambiance that hints at secrets lurking beneath the surface or just beyond the edges. Most of the works in this show were made in 2002, and all are on paper, done variously in watercolor, oil, ink and pencil. The colors are usually dimmed down, sometimes runny at the edges, sometimes wrung out, both harsh and attenuated, with a blurred nod to Vuillard, Munch and possibly Kirchner. The images often appear in series, recycled, reconstituted, or as studies for more elaborate paintings.

The "House of Pictures" suite, for instance, features a black-hatted, orange-haired girl seen purposefully from the back, always in the same hunched-over pose. In each case, she wears a belted black coat, and her garish spiky hair is the focal point. In three instances she stands in front of a framed painting, but her head bends downward, a portrait of withdrawal or grief, even if yet can't see her face. She is staring at the floor--or at nothing--rather than the art, as enclosed in her thoughts as she is in her coat and the composition. Another series centers around the repeated figure of a child, presented in different states of being. Balancing like an apparition on the high, webbed branches of a tree, sometimes closer, sometimes farther away, this elusive young girl is either whited out, blackened into a sooty silhouette or delicately delineated. The question is: is she appearing or disappearing? Another curious sequence, "Gasthof," is based on a dapper 19th-century military man and his older, prosperous-looking, top-hatted companion.

Mostly, though, Doig's subjects are landscapes with a few figures, including scenes from his parents' Canadian farm; a suffer emerging from a smeared and patterned sea; a solitary long-haired, bearded man (the late rock singer Berry Oakley) edged by a ruddy penumbra, seated in a canoe; and a brushily sketched hunter with his dog. Other works are more tropical, reflecting Doig's Caribbean connection, airily depicting houses, beaches, boats, fishermen, palm trees; two show a striding half-

naked man, a latter-day Robinson Crusoe, dragging a bundle the title is Pelican--
through the sand. Doig uses personal snapshots, newspaper photos, stills from
movies, album covers and other found images as source materials. Slightly off-key,
off-color, his haunted images and their implicit narratives--intimations of Hollywood
B movies with an indie twist--elliptically interrogate the sites of fiction.

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