

# ARTFORUM

## **Peter Doig: Arts Club of Chicago - survey of the artist's paintings and works on paper made since 1991**

Oct, 2003 by Matthew Higgs

For much of the past decade, the painting and subject matter of Edinburgh-born artist Peter Doig appeared at odds with the art world's prevailing taste. Taking their (painterly) cues from such unfashionable and unlikely precedents as Edward Hopper, David Milne, Edvard Munch, and James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Doig's melancholic works--invariably landscapes--were anathema to the visceral theatrics and conceptual endgames of much '90s art. However, Doig's persistent engagement with painting's potential to describe or imagine pictorial realms outside of, or just beyond, those of our rational world can be seen as both prescient and increasingly pervasive: Echoes of his folksy and often unrepentant romantic "realism" can be found in the work of his near-contemporaries Verne Dawson, Kai Althoff, Daniel Richter, Elizabeth Magill, and Laura Owens, among others.

Doig paints exclusively from photographic sources: snapshots, film stills, postcards, travel brochures, album sleeves, and so on. Walking through the Arts Club of Chicago's survey of his paintings and works on paper made since 1991, one soon becomes aware that Doig uses photography as a surrogate for preparatory drawings and that his compositions are thus entirely determined by the restrictive and particular frame of the viewfinder. Doig is attracted to compositional tableaux that reverberate with the apparent artlessness of the New Topographic photography of the late 1960s and the 1970s--and in particular William Eggleston's vernacular images of the American South. Doig's paintings are commonly set amid communities and neighborhoods on the fringes of metropolitan centers. In describing a milieu that is neither strictly suburban nor exactly rural, Doig, like Eggleston, conjures up a territory that seems permanently suspended in a state of in-betweenness: a neither-here-nor-there where time has been not so much slowed down as arrested. Like Eggleston's South, Doig's Canada, where the artist spent his formative years, ultimately comes across as simultaneously banal and exotic, familiar and unfamiliar.

Pinto, 2000, is a painting of a typical roadside scene: a horse lazily munching on grass in an otherwise empty field. The distant and surrounding landscape is barely acknowledged, tentatively sketched in thin

washes of autumnal-hued oil paint. A notably unremarkable image: Were it not for its scale--some seven by eight feet--and self-conscious painterly effects, it could for all intents and purposes be an Eggleston composition. Similarly, *Girl in White in Trees, 2001-2002*, betrays its snapshot origins. Seen from below and caught in the flare of a camera's flash, a young girl stares down expectantly from the entanglement of branches in the tree she has just climbed, her sense of achievement photographically preserved as if by a proud parent. Only, something seems amiss: The image would appear to have been shot--Blair Witch fashion--in the dead of night, rendering the girl's bleached-out presence ghostlike and sinister.

Doig takes considerable license with his translation of photographic sources. Nature's complexity and density are often reduced to a graphic scheme. Any sense of naturalism is then further obscured or even obliterated by the skeins of painterly glitches and strange chromatic shifts that are Doig's signature. *Figure in Mountain Landscape, 1997-98*, derived from a period photograph of the Canadian painter Franklin Carmichael (1890-1945) at work, is positively acidic, typical of Doig's hallucinatory palette. The hooded, monkish Carmichael is seen from behind; beyond him we see the epic view he is trying to enact on the small canvas that rests before him on an easel. In Doig's version of this image, the painter's somber cloak has become a solarized field of neon pinks, the landscape beyond a vista of sulphuric yellows and tungsten whites. *Untitled, Silver Pond, 2001*, which depicts a scarcely observed figure atop an iced-over pond, is essentially a monochrome: Painted entirely in silvery grays, it looks like a photographic negative--its dull, metallic, mirrorlike surface perversely suggestive of Andy Warhol's oxidized "piss paintings." When figures appear in Doig's works--as in *Untitled, Silver Pond* or the work on paper *Surfer, 2002*--they do so furtively, trespassing the image. Seen from a distance or front behind, the characters who populate Doig's paintings can seem incidental or incongruous, like the two gatekeepers in *Gasthof zur Muldentalsperre, 2000-2002*--guardians of a path that leads to a distant dam--who are dressed in comical theatrical attire, as if members of the chorus of a long-forgotten opera or movie extras with walk-on roles.

Despite their apparent familiarity, Doig's paintings remain stubbornly aloof. "Though normally reticent about explaining his work, in a recent interview the artist expressed a desire to establish a "numbness" in his paintings, to create images that might ultimately remain "questionable" and "difficult, if not impossible, to put into words." That Doig is so successful in this aim is both a testament to the slippery integrity of his work and an astute acknowledgment of language's fragile interpretive limits. COPYRIGHT 2003 Artforum International Magazine, Inc., Gale Group