

Art in America

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Glimpses beyond the edge: in the large, colorful paintings of his two-decade survey, Peter Doig dissolves boundaries between figure and landscape, surface and image

Does Peter Doig's work really belong at Tate Britain, where he recently had his largest exhibition so far (a two-decade survey of some 50 paintings and as many works on paper)? I wonder, even though it's obvious why the U.K. would want to claim him and why it has a right to--he was born in Edinburgh, after all, and received his art education in London, where he lived for several years afterward. But in a deeper sense he seems to me to be a very un-British artist. Really, he is more a creature of the transatlantic triangle that connects Britain, North America and the Caribbean, and perhaps of the postcolonial construct that is the Commonwealth of Nations, than of Britain itself.

Doig's father worked for a shipping company, and this accounts for the artist's peripatetic youth. The family moved to the island of Trinidad in 1962, when the boy was not yet three years old, and remained there until 1966, when they moved to Canada--first to the province of Quebec, then to Ontario. In 1979, he arrived in London as an art student, first at Wimbledon, then at St. Martin's, but in 1986 moved to Montreal. By 1989 he was back in London to take a master's degree at the Chelsea School of Art. This time he stayed in the British capital for more than a decade and established a career there--now that he was finally, in his thirties, making a real commitment to his art. Since 2002, however, he's been living in his childhood home of Trinidad.

All of which is to say that Doig seems to have picked up some restlessness from his upbringing, a certain rootlessness--and perhaps therefore the tendency toward nostalgia that so often seems to inhabit his art. Somewhere along the way, he also acquired a sense of space that has nothing to do with anything else in recent British art, and that seems very much of the New World. "Everything in Canada," Doig once told an interviewer, "is on the edge of a wilderness" (1)--and the feeling that wilderness is nearby is something that is hard to come by in Britain.

So is Doig a Canadian painter more than a British one? Something of the sort has been suggested to me by more than one Canadian artist friend. When I asked for more specific pointers, beyond the general observation that Canadian modernism was above all concerned with landscape--as Doig is--I was told to check out the early 20th-century painter David Milne. Indeed, reproductions of Milne's works suggest an affinity. The two painters share a way of pushing an essentially decorative sense of mark-making toward an expressive intensity that feels alien to decoration and, through this contradiction, approaching the uncanny. (2) But how far can such comparisons be taken? It's equally clear that Doig is steeped in European modernism, and there are many places in his oeuvre where one is more tempted to speak of a blissed-out Munch or a Vuillard on acid than of any connection to a North American precursor.

Still, there is that special sense of space, not of course the "wide open space" of the Great Plains but something more mysterious and impenetrable. Whether or not or to what extent it can be attributed to any specifically Canadian artistic precedent, that sense of being at the edge of wilderness is everywhere in Doig's art, once you start to notice it, and no matter the ostensible location of the motif on which the painting is based. Take, for example, his several paintings of an eminently European and eminently cultural monument, Le Corbusier's Unite de Habitation in Briey-en-Forêt, in the northeast of France near Metz. Among these are Concrete Cabin (1991-92), Concrete Cabin II (1992), Cabin Essence (1993-94) and Briey (Concrete Cabin), 1994-96. High modernist architecture has been a recurrent subject in the art of recent years, amounting by now to a tired cliché, but it's hard to think of another artist who has approached this subject in quite the way Doig has. (3) These are not really paintings about architecture. They are more about the woods through which the building is glimpsed--and, even more, about the quality of glimpsing something. It's as if one were emerging from the forest for the first time to get one's first look at a building, experiencing it as an alien, almost ungraspable thing.



"Ski Jacket", 1994, oil on canvas, diptych, 116 x 138 inches, Tate.

Doig has pointed out to Richard Shiff that although the "Concrete Cabin" functions as the background in these pictures, he did not paint the trees over the building but rather filled the building in between the trees. It has no inherent unity but is composed of dispersed scraps that the viewer mentally unifies into a whole. (4) "Wilderness" here could be a name for the swarm of details through which one fleetingly grasps and loses the sense of order proper to man-made things, an order of which architecture, and above all modernist architecture such as Le Corbusier's, is suitably emblematic.

This swarm of details, representationally motivated (as in the forest foliage of the Concrete Cabin paintings) but somehow always exceeding a representational rationale, is a constant in Doig's paintings of the '90s. In other works, as Shiff points out, Doig uses snow to produce a "screen effect" (5) that similarly distances the ostensible subject. Ski Jacket and Cobourg 3+1 (both 1994) are examples of this, though in the latter the white screen of snowfall seems a facile gesture. But most often Doig does not avail himself of any such screen between the perceiver and the image; instead, the image itself is the screen. The shifting, transitory and luxuriant though at times almost lurid color and the mottled, buzzing surface texture disperse the image even as they form it. This self-dissolution

of the image leads to the intimation that there is something "beyond" it--if one could only somehow glimpse through its interstices, which are innumerable.

Doig insinuates that the image has a beyond--and that the image we encounter through painting is in this regard no different from the image of the world we could perceive at any time. In the titles of two of his paintings of 1993, *Blotter* and *Window Pane*, Doig pointedly alludes to his affinity for the chemical revelations of psychedelia, and many more of his paintings evoke such experiences just as vividly. The screen of ordinary perception seems to dissolve to disclose hidden realities, especially about the intertwinement of the subject and the object of perception. In *Reflection (What does your soul look like)*, 1996, one no longer knows whether the pond reflects the person or the person reflects the pond; *Figure in a Mountain Landscape* (1997-98) could as easily have been called *Mountain Landscape in a Figure*. The beauty of the painting lies in how the figure seems to have been seared away by the patches of color that describe him, so that the relation of scale between the figure and the surrounding landscape becomes transitive. Loomingly present yet distant and massive, the figure is the truly mountainous element in the painting.



"Lapeyrouse Wall", 2004, oil on canvas, 78 3/4 x 98 5/8 inches, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

No wonder Doig has exerted such an influence on recent painting. He has been able to paint ordinary, nearly kitsch subjects ("boats, water, weather, people copied from photos") in disarmingly alluring ways ("sweetie colors and snowy effects" (6)) that somehow, almost by the by, tend to accede to modernist pictorial criteria of flatness and materiality and avoidance of the anecdotal. These criteria remain in force despite the waning of modernism as an ideology. At the same time, he conveys a contemporary rather than a historicist sensibility, and a yearning for the unfamiliar rather than the known.

Doig's work of the last few years, however, registers a shift--the import of which remains hard to define since it may still be in progress--away from the quietly delirious, mutedly overelaborated manner of painting that served him so well throughout the '90s. One might say he's beginning to evade his own influence. It's hard not to see the change as connected with his move back to Trinidad in 2002. Trinidad is a curious and possibly uncomfortable choice for someone like him, despite his childhood memories of it--a place, as he says, where there are "very few writers, a few rock

musicians, and very few artists," (7) and where the white population is less than one percent of the whole: a place where he is marginal.

Pictorially, the general trend of Doig's recent work is toward the elimination of the screen. In his paintings since about 2004, and even more noticeably from 2006-07, the picture is no longer swamped by a multitude of details that in their very denseness constitute the image and dissolve it at the same time. There is a newfound clarity and openness. Shape has become more powerful than surface. Paint appears as a few translucent washes rather than an accumulation of countless small marks. And there is less emphasis on the perceiving sensibility, more on the thing perceived, however mysterious that thing might be. Figure is becoming more important than field--and, indeed, Doig is becoming something more like a figure painter than he has ever been. In his work of the '90s, the figure was mostly either absent, or--very distant or incidental--overwhelmed by its context. In *Figure in Mountain Landscape*, he could give the figure a dominating presence only by painting it as if it were something other than a figure--a mountain. When I first saw *Lapeyrouse Wall* (2004) at the Museum of Modern Art when it reopened that year, I saw something stiff and gingerly in the treatment of the central figure and much else about the painting that made me wonder whether Doig might be going academic. I needn't have worried. In his recent paintings, Doig engages the human figure with a newfound ease and directness, while still allowing it an enigmatic otherness. This is notably so of the eerily nebulous winged creature that looms in *Man Dressed as Bat* (2007), but also true of the seemingly more familiar figure of a boy shinnying up a palm tree at the left edge of an ethereal, mostly featureless untitled work of 2006, or the barely indicated yet forcefully present man emerging from the shadows between trees in *Untitled (Jungle Figure)*, 2007.



"Man Dressed as Bat", 2007, oil on linen, 118 x 137 ¾ inches, Private Collection.

"When you start out, you make a painting by adding," according to Doig--and this he did, more often than not, with a vengeance. "As time goes on you realize it's what you leave out that's important." (8) Of course, in a painting like *Man Dressed as Bat* nothing is really left out. Instead, the central figure is a massive presence that also feels like an absence, a powerful void at the painting's center. In Doig's earlier paintings, one has the feeling of trying to see through the screen of reality to another reality beyond it; this painting seems instead to be an incident in which one has direct contact with this other, uncanny reality that has probably been the object of Doig's fascination all along.

(1.) Quoted by Richard Shift, "Incidents," in the exhibition catalogue Peter Doig, ed. Judith Nesbitt, London, Tate Publishing, 2008, p. 26; originally in Paul Bonaventura, "A Hunter in the Snow," *Artefactum* 9 (1994), p. 12.

(2.) See, for instance, David P. Silcox, *Painting Place: The Life and Work of David B. Milne*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996; David Milne, ed. Ian M. Thorn, *Vancouver Art Gallery*, 1991; or Katherine A. Lochnan et al., *David Milne: Watercolours*, Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 2005.

(3.) Some of this work, for instance, though not Doig's, is on view in the current exhibition, "Painting the Glass House: Artists Revisit Modern Architecture," at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Conn., Mar. 9-July 27.

(4.) Shift, in Peter Doig, p. 38.

(5.) *Ibid.*, p. 29.

(6.) Matthew Collings's skeptical characterization of Doig's work is quoted by Shift, in Peter Doig, p. 28; originally in *Modera Painters*, Summer 2002, p. 21.

(7.) "Peter Doig and Chris Ofili in Conversation," in Peter Doig, p. 117.

(8.) *Ibid.*, p. 113.

"Peter Doig" opened at Tate Britain, London [Feb. 5-Apr. 27], and travels to the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris [May 29-Sept. 7] and the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt [Oct. 9, 2008-Jan. 4, 2009]. Doig will show his paintings in January 2009 in New York at Michael Werner and Gavin Brown's Enterprise.

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