

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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Pierre Bonnard & Peter Doig

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Pierre Bonnard: The Late Interiors

Metropolitan Museum of Art: January 27 – April 19, 2009

Peter Doig: New Paintings

Gavin Brown Enterprises: January 17, 2009 – March 14, 2009

Michael Werner Gallery: January 17, 2009 – March 14, 2009



Pierre Bonnard, "The White Interior," 1932. Oil on canvas, 43 1/8 × 61 3/8 in. (109.5 × 155.8 cm). Musée de Grenoble

"Painting," Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) once declared, is "the transcription of the adventures of the optic nerve." He further advised, "Before you add color, you must see things once, or see them a thousand times." *Pierre Bonnard: The Late Interiors* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art features about 80 paintings, drawings and watercolors (more than half loaned from private collections) from 1923 to 1947. That Bonnard's exhibition follows Morandi's retrospective (see the *Rail's* November 2008 issue for full discussion) offers a coincidental comparison of each artist's philosophy of the process of seeing: the time and immersion, constant reinvestigation and patience required for the color relationships to emerge, shift and transform.

Color for Bonnard takes on a vibrating, almost blinding and hallucinatory quality in comparison to Morandi's quietly muted, earthen hues. Inwardly radiating color, as in "Dining Room with a Garden" (1934-35), drenches interiors with warm light, often collapsing figures into their backgrounds, creating a sense of absence through a faint presence. Delightfully, curator Dita Amory takes Bonnard's luminous notion of color into consideration with the installation. For example, a drawing gallery is tinted with a glowing avocado, which creates a vibrating sensation in one's peripherals when viewing "The White Interior" (1932) on flanking wall. Amory's cohesive selection and dense installation evoke a warm intimacy that is resonant with the private informality of Bonnard's domestic scenes.



Peter Doig, "Man Dressed as Bat," 2007. Oil on linen, 118 x 137 3/4 in.

Like Morandi's works, Bonnard's arrangements are commonplace subjects: he painted the rooms that he inhabited, often with exterior garden views, capturing dining room table still lifes and his wife Marthe's everyday activities. The transformation of subject into painting is fantastical—it is a translation of memory, recreating images with an otherworldly recollection that evades sentimentality yet remains deep with feeling. The cadmium orange halo behind Marthe's head in "Lunch" (1932) imbues a day-to-day meal with a sense of mystery and fleeting reverence. In "Work Table" (1926), Bonnard depicts a dog and a cat on a sofa. The cat's eyes are faintly and clumsily painted, its ear murkily receding into a foggy wall. Bonnard's painting process links multiple layers of memory to the accumulation of paint, weaving almost knitted surfaces or, as he put it, "a painting is a series of marks that join together..." Working from loose sketches and watercolors, he painted largely from memory, concerned that the painting be distinctively separate from the initial, often distracting, experience of reality. As a result,

many canvases evince well-worked surfaces from his protracted efforts to color his recollections and feelings about a scene.

While there seems to be no clear legacy of Bonnard's distinctive style, various formal aspects of his work call to mind the Abstract Expressionist painters. The composition of the watercolor and gouache in "The Bathroom" (1945) and the muted blues and pinks in a 1940 painting of the same name anticipate Richard Diebenkorn's abstract *Ocean Park* series. The patchy, arid application of paint in the cadmium red tablecloth of "The Corner of the Dining Room Table" (1932) recall the thin touch of Mark Rothko's early color field paintings.

The contemporary influence of Bonnard's palette is also often difficult to determine. Contemporary painting, such as Daniel Richter's acid-like color and Ryan McGinness's recent fluorescents, often employs the look of Bonnard's heightened chromatic combinations yet don't necessarily use color with his intent. Rather, these colors co-opt those of CMYK commercial printing. The acerbic color in paintings by Graham Nickson and Ron Milewicz overemphasize observed atmospheric conditions, times of day and seasons, while also risking decorativeness. This suggests the question: are Bonnard's extremely personal color sensibilities redolent of what has now become the blaring glitz, boldness and decoration characteristic of advertising? This would be a travesty, since his paintings, which so are vibrant in reproduction, when seen in the flesh, pulse with a gentle luminescence that can be achieved only through a pigment suspended in binder and applied to a substrate.

Since 1960s and '70s-era psychedelia, experiencing Bonnard's colors may remind some of tie-dye hues or a drug-induced trip. Painter Peter Doig, who is a guest commentator in the Met's audio tour, discusses Bonnard's palette by aptly distinguishing between the otherworldly and the hallucinatory: "He manages to use colors that are exaggerated, but don't look...psychedelic. They exist within the realms of a reality that we can understand...he's using his imagination. And he's trying to paint things that he's remembered or things that he can see in his head. And I think if you think about what things look like when you try to remember them, they don't look like photographs. They don't look like reality."

Peter Doig also has two concurrent large-scale exhibitions hanging at Gavin Brown Enterprises downtown and Michael Werner Gallery uptown, less than a dozen blocks

from the Metropolitan. And while Doig's current work reflects his recent relocation to Trinidad and the unaccustomed imagery this has inspired, the paintings lack material presence. The canvases in these galleries are murky, thin (the surfaces almost appear stained) and compositionally flat, leaving a feeling of aesthetic (as well as geographical) estrangement from his prior brightly chromatic, lush, multilayered, dripped and splattered canvases. Doig recently commented on this shift, "I think it was just an attempt to escape mannerism...the things people liked about those paintings were the surfaces... and I wanted to break that formula. I also just wanted to explore." This work by contrast reads often as underpaintings, lacking the material engagement of Doig's previous efforts or of Bonnard's Met show.

However, one element in Doig's oeuvre remains consistent, primarily in the Gavin Brown exhibition: his penchant for the Modernist grid. In "Untitled (Ping Pong)" (2006-08) and "House of Flowers (See You There)" (2007-09), for example, Doig employs this geometric structure as a backdrop that seems more arbitrary than in previous works, such as the basketball court boundary lines in the 1999 canvas "The Heart of Old San Juan" or his early *Concrete Cabin* series depicting Le Corbusier's architecture. In the Michael Werner exhibition, his self-conscious exoticizing of his subjects in the context of the environs and culture of Trinidad is more apparent. In "Man Dressed as Bat" (2007), Doig uses dulled acidic yellows, greens and purples to depict a creature that appears to be part butterfly, part human. Based on a sculpture by a Trinidad artist of a man dressed as a bat, its original source—a traditional carnival costume—is twice removed, similar to Doig's practice of using photographic references. However, the carnival costume is neither of Doig's time nor is it depicted in any recognizable fashion. Doig's pointedly surreal imagery and romanticization of imagery not part of the 21st century stands in contradistinction to Bonnard's interiors, which were closely representative of a contemporary space in the early 20th century.

This romanticization of exotic cultures and the Other in Doig's work seems an obsolete throwback to Gauguin's depiction of nude Tahitian woman. Peter Brooks discusses in *Body Works* how Gauguin sought to paint Tahitian woman in order to escape Western perceptions of the body, only to appear misguided, racist and ultimately suckered by the Tahitians, who were playing into his idea. Doig, less concerned with the "contemporary," consciously adopts this time period of exiled artists in exoticism, playing at what Gauguin did two centuries earlier. In a globalized world conscious of

cultural hegemonies, such works as “Man Dressed as Bat” appear more culturally manufactured product than painting.

An affinity for a dreamlike, hallucinatory, and foreign realm created by painting is what Bonnard and Doig do share. However, Doig’s work has overtly addressed the psychedelic, as in the 1993 paintings “Blotter” and “Window Pane” (referring to brands of LSD), in which he encrypts the reflections in a pond with distortions of color and pattern. In addition, splatters and drips characteristic of Doig’s earlier paintings correspond to the optical-mental experience of taking such psychoactives, something Doig describes as “like being absorbed in the landscape.” Still, it could be said that both artists employ psychedelics ideologically, as Dave Hickey defined in “Air Guitar,” disconnecting “both the signifier and signified from their purported referents in the phenomenal world—simultaneously bestowing upon us a visceral insight into the cultural mechanics of language, and a terrifying inference of the tumultuous nature that swirls beyond it.” One may also say that Doig and Bonnard similarly utilize source material for purposes of distance from the original subject or experience. Doig uses reference or found photography, whereas Bonnard worked from sketches and memory. Doig has interestingly said that a painting he has completed “may not have had hundreds of hours of work on it, but it’s had hundred of hours of being looked at,” which seems reminiscent of Bonnard’s earlier statement, perhaps an inversion of what Bonnard had meant, judging by his often overworked surfaces.

Even though both bodies of work seem to inspire an inward seeing of outward experience, an imaginative response to the visual stimuli of reality, Pierre Bonnard’s work suggests that reality in its most discrete, routine moments need only be transformed by memory, imagination and feeling into animate meditations on color. A writer I admired as a teenager once replied when I asked why he didn’t write fiction, “Why fiction? Reality is interesting enough.” What I didn’t understand was that his autobiographical narratives were fictions that expressed truths. And Bonnard, although recording his experiences from reality, painted fantastical, yet truthful fictions based on his firsthand knowledge. Peter Doig’s latest work, however, is more reliant on fictional and disconnected portrayals of cultures than individually experienced truths.