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THE SAATCHI GALLERY

**MORGAN FALCONER ON PETER DOIG AT GAVIN'S BROWN ENTERPRISE
AND MICHAEL WERNER, NEW YORK**



Peter Doig, 'Man Dressed as a Bat', 2007



Peter Doig, 'Man Dressed as Bat (Night)', 2008

When I met up with Peter Doig shortly before last year's retrospective, he explained that one of the works in the

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show would be "a large painting of a very small sculpture made by an artist I know in Trinidad. It's a sculpture of a bat, which is an old carnival costume, though it looks more like a butterfly. I'm painting a picture of the shadow of it." That picture, 'Man Dressed as a Bat' (2007), has now been joined by its pair - a night scene of the same figure on the sea shore - for a two-gallery survey of recent work; and together, the two are probably the finest pictures in a very good show, pictures with a commanding grasp of technicalities - of rich hues and pale washes - and pictures heavy with persuasive emotion. They're typical of Doig's slow-filtered art: the motif has been transformed by being shifted about through various registers and, finally - and perhaps tellingly - it has reached the literal margins of Doig's current home in Trinidad. It's a brilliant conceit, and one that transforms the motif into something else, something reminiscent of that grand old idea of the owl of Minerva, the creature of wisdom who only spreads her wings at dusk. But it's still a dark and anxious picture, and one wonders why. Does Doig feel as if he's aging? It's unlikely: he will reach fifty this year, but carries himself like a man much younger; moreover, with so much time left in him, he has made himself one of the most admired painters of his generation. Instead, after looking at the rest of the pictures in this show, one might speculate that that motif is Doig as an artist - alone, forced to the edges, and fearful.



Peter Doig, 'Portrait (Beard)', 2007

This new show contains many more pictures than hung in the final rooms of the Tate last year, and, in sum, they add up to a substantial report card on the painter's years in Trinidad. There is no lack of beautiful pictures: there are folkish portraits of island characters, like 'Portrait (Beard)' (2007); and fantastical, roseate views of boats on the water: 'Pelican Island' (2006) is half-full with water the colour of tomato juice, pendulous leaves hang from above, and in the distance a boat floats by. Doig has said that it took him some time before he could feel comfortable with painting Trinidad: he didn't want to seem like a colonial naïf in the mould of Gauguin. Time having passed, though, he now often lets himself relax into the language of modern primitivism: his colours are lush and flat in smaller pictures like 'Saut d'Eau' (2006), the forms abstract. But in larger pictures, like 'Ping Pong' (2008), he mixes motifs in such a way that they jar, and cut across that primitivist nostalgia: a coal-dark figure with somewhat Western features plays table tennis in a pair of white shorts; livid green grass suggests an exterior setting, yet behind the table is a grid of blue and black rectangles, like a Modernist abstraction. 'House of Flowers (see you there)' (2008) is another odd arrangement: here again, jazzy brickwork provides much of the backdrop, while foliage from a tree hangs down and pink blossom rains on the pale, almost albino colouring, of an Asian figure.

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Peter Doig, 'Untitled (Ping Pong)', 2006-2008
oil on canvas, 94 1/2 x 141 3/4 inches

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Peter Doig, 'House of Flowers (see you there)', 2007-2009
oil on canvas, 118 x 78 3/4 inches

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Peter Doig, 'Music of the Future', 2002-2007
oil on linen, 78 3/4 x 118 inches

Pictures like this attest to Doig's ingenuity as a composer of pictures, but they also mark his limits, for no matter how startling they seem, how clear the line between Gauguin's South Seas and Doig's Trinidad, they show how Doig has struggled to find an iconography which vividly articulates his life there. 'Music of the Future' (2002-7) is symptomatic: in the one scene of busy life in Trinidad, Doig sets his easel at the other side of a river from the bustle, observing the figures at a distance. It's Seurat's 'La Grande Jatte', redone by a man who can't quite imagine himself among the revellers on the river-front. It's no accident that the finest pictures in this show should be those like 'Man Dressed as Bat', in which he seems alone, looking away from the island. By contrast, if you look at the pictures Chris Ofili has produced in Trinidad, since he settled there a few years back, you find no such troubles: if anything, Ofili has been boosted by the island imagination, he's found a place for himself within the racial economy of the region's motifs, and found the means to relate these to the themes that fired him during his years in London. Ofili's best recent pictures have the heat of human bodies, Doig's best have the cool of seclusion; but even at their best, the latter don't seem too comfortable.

Morgan Falconer

Peter Doig: New Paintings
Both shows until 14 March
Michael Werner Gallery

New York



Morgan Falconer is a journalist and critic. After an age spent immersed in 1920s New York as a graduate student, the result now props up his computer, and today he writes about contemporary art and culture for a variety of publications including the Times (London), Art World, Art Review and Frieze.

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