

# ARTFORUM

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## Peter Doig

### GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE/MICHAEL WERNER GALLERY

In a roundtable in these pages one year ago, Peter Doig became the fall guy for several participants' vexations with the big bad art market. One had to feel a little sorry for him in the reckoning: One of his paintings, through no doings of his own, breaks auction records for a work by a living European artist, and he gets pitted against no less a luminary than Giovanni Battista Tiepolo as quintessential of what art historian James Meyer called the market's "overestimation of the contemporary." Economies, art and otherwise, are of course worlds different now, and the point that Doig's work (like any contemporary artist's) has not had the kind of critical assessment afforded by the long view is a reasonable one. Even so, his being made to epitomize the contemporary seems unfair, imputing as it does a trendiness to paintings that are plainly unfashionable, even old-fashioned. As demonstrated by a pair of recent shows, which came on the heels of a traveling midcareer retrospective organized by Tate Britain and which constituted his first significant outing in New York in nearly a decade, Doig's sights are fixed firmly on the past. This has long been the case, and many of the canvases at Gavin Brown's Enterprise continue to call up his modern predecessors. The face pictured in *Portrait (Under Water)*, 2007, channels Gauguin's *Yellow Christ*; the figures in *Dark Girl* and *Untitled (Jungle Painting)*, both 2007, are evocative of Munch's alienated sylphs and Kirchner's stalklike subjects, here transposed from street to tropics. In 2002, Doig moved from London to Trinidad, where he had spent several years as a child, and the relocation has added a mnemonic dimension to his work, which has always been very much about mediation; his practice now involves filtering not only art history and source material (usually photographs) but his own memories. He has said about the Caribbean island, for example, "I suppose I've been trying to paint it by proxy, by finding images that reminded me of it." The undertaking often assumes form on the canvas as a solitary figure, shown in some sort of apparent psychic strife, in a fantastic if recognizably equatorial landscape: a slab of a man dwarfed by the tower of audio speakers on which he stands (*Maracas*, 2002–2008), a figure on whom cloisonné blooms from an overhanging tree collect (*House of Flowers [See You There]*, 2007–2009). The all-over mottling that often screens his paintings from a decade ago has been confined to certain areas or has disappeared entirely, resulting in a new compositional frankness—if no added points of entry for the viewer.



Peter Doig, *Man Dressed as Bat (Night)*, 2008, oil and distemper on linen, 9' 10" x 11' 5/4".

Doig's effects are often wizardly: He can make oil look like diaphanous watercolor, distorted pictorial scale register as naturalistic, abstraction slide smoothly into figuration and vice versa. (That it's not easy—several studies testify to how laborious his draftsmanship was, for instance, in getting the angle of a man's torso right—comes almost as a surprise.) Many of these works are epically sized, seeming to combine several paintings in one. *Untitled (Ping Pong)*, 2006–2008, shows a man playing table tennis versus a nonexistent opponent against an abstract, gridded backdrop, itself set against a doleful, aqueous landscape; spatial resolution foils narrative incongruity. The standout at Gavin Brown's Enterprise was *Music of the Future*, 2002–2007, a washy nocturne of teals and turquoises depicting Trinidadian nightlife along a shoreline. The exhibition uptown at Michael Werner Gallery was much smaller, its mood more subdued though just as moving. The few landscapes on view suggest Doig's surroundings are all *luxe et calme*, while the colossal *Man Dressed as Bat*, 2007, and a pendant painting, *Man Dressed as Bat (Night)*, 2008, verge on the ominous. Based on a small sculpture of a local carnival character, this figure appears, in overlapping, cool veils of oil on the unprimed linens, to be metamorphosing from human to bat to butterfly to ectoplasmic specter—a perfect allegory for Doig's art of transformation, in which beauty is always a possibility but never a sure thing.

—Lisa Turvey