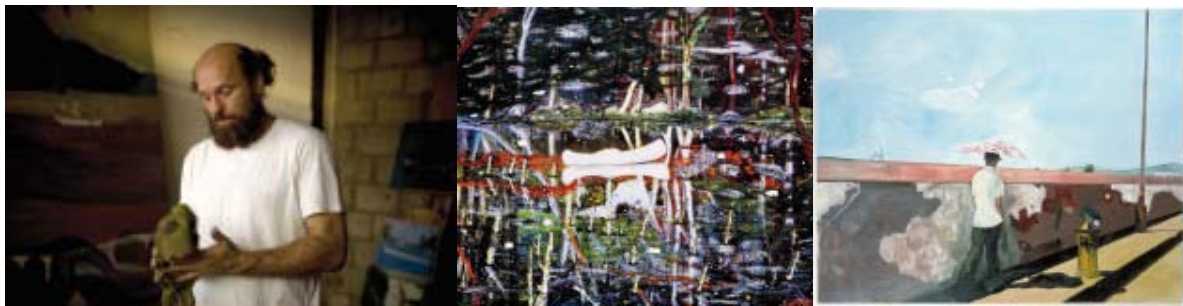


ART WORLD

Friday, 04 July 2008 15:34

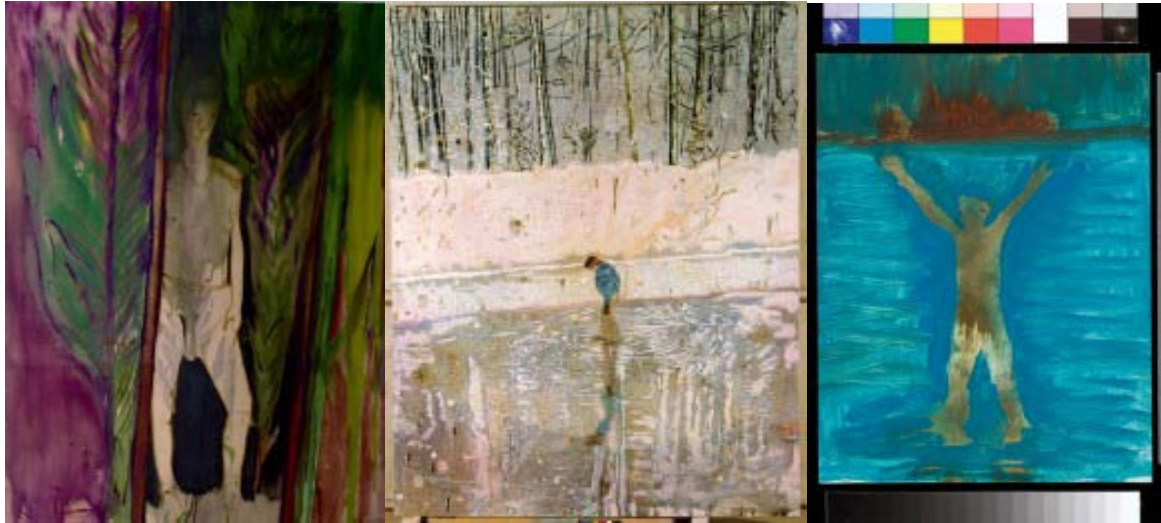
Peter Doig - Modern Romance *Words: Morgan Falconer Portrait: Alex Smailes*



Famed for his enigmatic snow scenes, Peter Doig is now exploring fertile new ground in Trinidad. Yet, he says, he still finds painting “nerve-wracking”



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I meet Peter Doig in an old, genteel hotel in Toronto. It's just before Christmas, and he has had a long drive into the city from his parents' home on the outskirts of town. We chat idly at first while we eat. We talk about his rush to finish new canvases for his retrospective at Tate Britain and, like old crones, we discuss the weather. Snow is banked up on the streets outside and he remarks how such sights are novel for his children, who he has brought back to Canada for the holidays. And then, when we finish eating, I turn on a Dictaphone and say something stupid

"I understand you've started to paint more scenes of Tahiti?"

Mercifully, he laughs, but I'll remember in future that Peter Doig is not Paul Gauguin. Unlike the great French post-

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impressionist, he is a happily married man who, in 2002, just happened to take his young family – four daughters and a son – to live not in Polynesia but on the Caribbean island of Trinidad. At first, this might sound a strange move for a leading contemporary artist, but Doig lived there for a time as a child, and Chris Ofili also moved there from London in 2005 (the two regularly go kayaking together in the wild north of the island). And yet there is something about a modern painter starting out for an island paradise that makes the matter somewhat more than one of relocation; something, also, about Doig's personality as a painter that makes his move to such a romantic redoubt more significant still. For there are surely few contemporary painters as romantic as himself: in an age when the medium is freighted with irony and anxiety and self-justifications, Doig's pictures are silent, wonderstruck, contemplative affairs which have prompted comparisons with the likes of Munch, Bonnard, Beckmann, Van Gogh and, yes, Gauguin.

So maybe one can understand why he didn't rush to paint when he arrived.

"I was trying to avoid it," he says. "I think in a country like Trinidad there is a lot to take, a lot that seduces you. And, as an artist from abroad, there are a lot of things you can lay claims on that you don't really understand. But I suppose I've been trying to paint it by proxy, by finding images that reminded me of it."

"I've found that things creep in," he adds, of those recent pictures – and in a sense this is about the best explanation one can arrive at to explain the look and feel of Peter Doig's paintings. Artless and unsatisfactory as it is, it was the best he could offer himself. He's easy and open in conversation; he speaks with a muted Canadian accent which makes him hard to place; and now, in his late 40s, he's slightly avuncular and professorial (a bushy new beard helps). Yet throughout our conversation he breaks into laughter as I try to tease out his rationales. "It's best not to write about my pictures!" he jokes. The problem is that Doig doesn't stride up, confront and resolve his subjects so much as edge nervously around them. For many years he employed photographs as sources for his pictures, though he tells me that he has been trying to move away from that. Other inspirations can come from memories, a glimpse of a figure in the street, almost anything. He describes one recent picture he has been working on, *Man Dressed as Bat* (2007), as "a large painting of a very small sculpture made by an artist I know in Trinidad. It's a sculpture of a man dressed as 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."

It's no surprise that he's a slow worker: only four major paintings tend to leave his studio each year. An assistant might speed things up, but he cherishes his privacy and would rather do without. Nevertheless, his stock has risen: New York's Museum of Modern Art has acknowledged him with the purchase of a series of major pictures, including *Lapeyrouse Wall* (2004); his auction record soared to £5.73m last February, when *White Canoe* (1991) was sold to anonymous bidder at Sotheby's, breaking the auction record for a living European artist; and, in critical terms, it's arguable that Doig has become the most significant painter to emerge in Britain in the past 20 years.

So he can afford to bide his time. He hasn't had a solo exhibition of new work since 2004, and the largest body of work to emerge from his studio recently has been a series of posters he produced to advertise the screenings of *Studiofilmclub*, a film society he helped establish in Trinidad's capital, Port of Spain. They are jaunty, slapdash designs, quite unlike his usual pictures. Chris Ofili staged an extraordinary show of new canvases at David Zwirner's Gallery in New York last autumn, proving what a little island isolation can do to progress an artist's work, and Doig

was also meant to have two shows in the city around the same time, but he cancelled them. "I just wasn't ready," he says. And that can only give Tate Britain's retrospective added import: it is the most comprehensive retrospective of the artist to date, with over 50 canvases on view, many drawings and two rooms of new pictures from Trinidad.

Peter Doig was born to Scottish parents in Edinburgh in 1959. His father was an accountant for a shipping firm and his childhood was scattered: there were spells in various locations across Canada, and there were the years in Trinidad. His association with London dates from when he was 19 and, lured by the punk music scene, came to study in the city. It was in London that he met his future wife, who formerly worked in the fashion business. He left only for a spell in Montreal in the late 1980s, returning again in 1989.

When Doig first came to London he chose to study theatre design. His father always had a regard for painting, and hung the house with pictures by local artists from Trinidad when the family lived on the island, but Peter had absorbed his mother's affection for the stage and he worried about his job prospects with a degree in fine art. But he soon switched to studying painting, heedless of the consequences: "I think, internationally, the atmosphere was sympathetic to contemporary painting, but in London there was still a disregard for it."

There was, he says, a lot of provincial "lyrical abstraction", but the more serious galleries eschewed British painting altogether in favour of the Pop Conceptualism that would eventually become the style of young British artists like Damien Hirst. Doig could have cleaved to the orthodoxy, but instead he became a contrarian, painting what he describes as "homely, folksy" pictures. Asked to contribute to one exhibition, he offered a picture of two deer (Red Deer, 1990). No one wanted to exhibit in the same room.

"It was a challenge, but it was just a personal thing," he says. "There was no stage, you know? No-one was exhibiting this stuff. It's interesting to think of it now, because the paintings have become known, and yet they were kind of undercover – no-one wanted to buy them."

It's fair to say that Doig floundered as a painter in the 1980s; it wasn't until a decade later, after he'd digested disparate influences, from Philip Guston to Jim Nutt to lesser-known Canadians like Paterson Ewen, that he hit his stride. Hence the Tate show kicks off relatively late in Doig's evolution, with pictures like Hitch Hiker, from 1989–1990 (the medium is described as oil on postal bags. Those were hard times.)

If his earlier paintings were premised on a gravelly folksiness, Hitch Hiker changed something, let out something romantic and melancholic. Doig himself accounts for the change by saying that he wanted to find a way to find a way to "let the viewer in". Again, the explanation sounds simplistic, but it points to the overriding issues in his pictures in the ensuing years. Lank tendrils dangle in the foreground of 1990's Okahumkee (Some Other People's Blues), screening the steamer which looms towards us, and in pictures throughout the 90s Doig would play with similar screening devices.

Looking at his evolution, one might describe him as a landscape painter, of sorts, yet he has always been reticent about painting his surroundings. He finds it easier to derive imagery from a location when he himself is many miles away – he first painted early 90s snowy scenes like Blotter (1993) in London, for instance. One could settle for a broader umbrella, and label him a figurative painter, yet that doesn't seem a perfect designation either: "I've been

grappling with making figurative paintings in the last seven years,” he confesses. “Before, when I did have figures in my paintings, they were sort of half-seen, or screened. It’s not a natural thing for me to do, and it feels difficult: I’ve got to invent a way to do it each time.”

Indeed, nothing comes easily. “I read an article about Chuck Close recently,” Doig continues. “He was talking about how he works prescribed hours. He can put a day in – kind of nine to five – and he said, something like, that waiting for inspiration was for amateurs. That’s fine, but I’m absolutely the opposite. Maybe I’m an amateur, but I do have to wait for things to happen on the canvas. It’s nerve-wracking. You don’t really know how a painting is going to finish.”

Before I left for Toronto I looked over some previous writings on Doig’s pictures and was struck by how useful his explanations of his working process were, no matter how unadorned. In contrast, the lengthy ponderings of even top-flight thinkers seem redundant. There doesn’t seem to be a secret that needs uncovering: when I ask what prompted him to move from the lush, textured

surfaces of the paintings he produced in the 90s – canvases that seem to have a warm bloom across them like a beautiful mould – to the flatter, looser, more painterly style he employs today, once again, he has no complex rationale.

“I think it was just an attempt to escape mannerism,” he says. “I felt that the things people liked about those paintings were the surfaces – the layering, the way you can look through at things – and I wanted to break that formula. I also just wanted to explore.”

If there is an appealing uncertainty hovering about the source and intention of Doig’s pictures, a similarly interesting riddle surrounds the question of his significance. In earlier times one might have been able to locate his importance in some formal innovation, some avant-garde breakthrough, but those years are gone and one is left with the conclusion that Doig’s achievement is to have found a new rhetoric to revitalise the figurative tradition in painting. Although he has undoubtedly given new validity to the Romantic mood in painting, he’s wary of it, and he seems more concerned that nothing – style or subject – should yield itself up easily from his pictures.

When I ask him about one emphatically Romantic picture – Echo Lake (1998), which draws heavily on an earlier work by Edvard Munch – he explains that his intention was less to address the Scandinavian melancholic than to find a voice through which to express an experience.

“That painting had a lot to do with water, and ideas about sound travelling across water,” he says. “It came from a film still that I made, and the landscape it showed reminded me of this painting by Munch called Ashes [1894]. But it wasn’t something that I noticed at the outset; it was an observation I made during the making of the painting, and then I started looking more at Munch’s painting to try and resolve problems.”

And when, finally, I dare bring up the subject of Gauguin once again, he starts to talk about Red Boat (Imaginary Boys), a picture from 2004, and how comparisons between that painting and Gauguin’s work had prompted him recently to take up the subject once more.

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"I went back to it in order to treat it in a different way," he says. "This one is very reduced, it's kind of like a watercolour, kind of melting, more mysterious. There are more holes in the painting, less to grab on to."

More, in other words, to set the searchers off in pursuit.

Peter Doig is at Tate Britain 5 Feb–27 Apr, and will tour to ARC/Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris 26 May–14 Sep and Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Germany, 8 Oct–11 Jan 2009

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