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Peter Doig. London

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of pure colour, which is all the more apparent when one compares his work with Bevan's not always successful wrestling with difficult close high-keyed green and purple tonalities in his 1915 Devon landscapes (nos.84 and 85).

Such omissions reflect what seems an unfortunate rigidity of outlook on the part of the main curator, Robert Upstone, as reflected in his catalogue introduction, in which he confidently states that the Group's work 'was soon overtaken by the abstraction of Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism and the authentic modernism of David Bomberg, Jacob Epstein, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and others' (p.9). This apologetic tone seems closely related to the strange but apparently widely held assumption that 'authentic' modernism is only to be equated with geometric abstraction, and is somehow incompatible with that profound awareness of ambivalence and ambiguity which so fuelled and fascinated Sickert and his followers.

Wall text and catalogue alike bristle with inverted snobbery, constantly lecturing the viewer on class and gender, and frequently lapsing into political correctness. David Peters Corbett seems oddly out of tune with the world of Sickert's wonderful 1906 *Noctes Ambrosianae* (no.14), whose rollicking music-hall audience he interprets as 'a demonised version of the crowd, as if the communal suggests a sort of frenetic energy or virulent alien life' (p.35). Lynda Nead writes of Camden Town with strikingly little sympathy for the area, while one wonders what Nicola Moorby means when she claims that Malcolm Drummond's *Girl with palmettes* (no.51) 'is vividly described but not emotionally characterised' (p.114). Upstone also writes of 'the heightened colours' of Gilman's *In Gloucestershire* (no.92) which in reality is a careful exercise in close-toned, low-key landscape (p.163). Such cavils apart, this major exhibition happily suggests the start of a wider and long overdue revival of interest in these painters beyond the loyal ranks of dealers and collectors. It now needs to be followed up by a sequence of one-artist retrospectives, accompanied by catalogues exhibiting the type of scholarly apparatus they deserve – a mark of respect sadly missing from the accompanying publication of the present show.

Some individual comments follow:

No.80: I can see no reason whatsoever to accept John Lessore's assertion that the lettering on Sickert's picture of Bayswater underground station of c.1916 was added at a later date by its owner, Roger Fry (p.42). Lessore clearly does not know Sickert as well as he thinks he does, particularly his liking for such stencilled lettering, evident in many other pictures.

No.82: The display label for Gilman's delightfully fresh 1912 sketch of Romney Marsh in oil on board misdescribes it as 'oil on canvas'.

<sup>1</sup> Catalogue: *Modern Painters. The Camden Town Group*. Edited by Robert Upstone, with contributions by Fiona Baker, Wendy Baron, Krzysztof Cieszkowski, David Fraser Jenkins, Richard Humphreys, John Lessore, Helen Little, Nicola Moorby, Lynda Nead, David Peters Corbett, Richard Shone and Matthew Sturgis. 184 pp. incl. 102 col. ills. + 22 figs. in col. and b. & w. (Tate Publishing, London, 2008), £24.99. ISBN 978-1-85437-781-4.

<sup>2</sup> R. Shone: 'Text and Image: Camden Town painting and contemporary fiction', in *ibid.*, p.44.

## Peter Doig

London

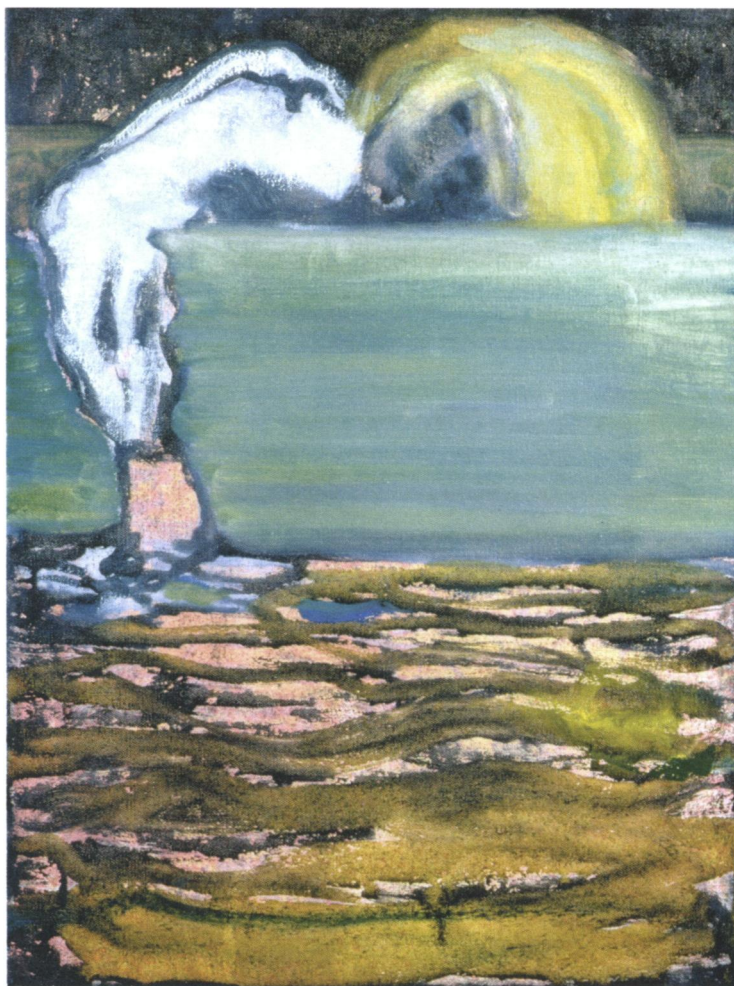
by PAUL BONAVENTURA

PETER DOIG FIRST came to prominence in 1993 when *Blotter*, his haunting painting of a teenage boy standing on a frozen pond gazing down at his own reflection, won first prize in the John Moores Liverpool Exhibition at the Walker Art Gallery. Since then the artist's much imitated work has attracted widespread critical acclaim, and he is one of a small group of influential artists – Gerhard Richter, Luc Tuymans, Marlene Dumas, Chris Ofili, Alex Katz, Elizabeth Peyton – who are generally credited with stimulating the current resurgence of interest in figurative painting. A chance to survey Doig's work is offered in *Tate Britain's* exhibition of his paintings and works on paper from the last two decades (to 27th April).<sup>1</sup>

Born in Edinburgh in 1959, Doig was brought up in Scotland, then in Trinidad and subsequently in Canada, to where his parents moved in 1966. He returned to Britain in 1979, studying painting at Central Saint Martin's School of Art and Chelsea School of Art. After a one-month residency in 2000 at CCA7, Trinidad's first multipurpose, contemporary arts centre, Doig went back to Port of Spain with his family to live and work. In spite of the fascination of the island's people

and scenery, Doig found himself wondering whether he might end up creating paintings more redolent of the world he had just left behind. The sinuous, loosely handled canvases that he had made in London regularly harked back to the Canada he had left in his late teens, and it seemed natural enough for him to assume that a similar state of affairs might once again prevail. Against the odds, most of the paintings that have emerged from his Caribbean studio are suffused with the imprint of his adopted home.

It was while he was at Chelsea that Doig began to produce the kinds of poetic paintings for which he is best known, freely mixing manipulated photomechanical imagery with invented motifs. His canvases look palpably finished yet they retain what might be described as a contingent quality, which keeps alive the possibility of change. This morphogenic property imparts to the work a dynamism that is uncommon in contemporary painting, and finds its roots in the art of Gauguin, Munch, Matisse and the Canadian landscape painters of the 1920s. *Friday 13th* (p.109; Fig.85) and *Ooty boathouse* (p.146), with their impressionistic palettes and asymmetrical compositions, declare an additional debt to the Nabis and call to mind Maurice Denis's famous utterance that a picture, before being a horse, a nude or some kind of anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.



85. *Friday 13th*, by Peter Doig, 1999. Linen, 35.6 by 27.9 cm. (Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin; exh. Tate Britain, London).

## Juan Muñoz

London

by TONY GODFREY



86. *Lapeyrouse wall*, by Peter Doig, 2004. Canvas, 200 by 250.5 cm. (Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin; exh. Tate Britain, London).

Doig's imagery is habitually gleaned from existing pictorial sources, which the artist absorbs and reinterprets on the picture surface. The resulting paintings, by now highly personalised, are phantasmagorical, none more so than *Blotter* (p.66). Doig puts pictures into our heads in such a way that they become as much ours as his. Self-generated images are the finest images that any of us will ever experience, and it is a testament to the artist's achievement that his pictures fit comfortably alongside them.

One of the highlights of the Tate exhibition is *Gasthof zur Muldentalsperre* (p.88), a luscious painting of two spectral figures that the artist completed before his move to the Caribbean. It relates to other treatments of the same image, developed from a photograph of the artist and a friend in costumes from a production of Stravinsky's ballet *Petrouchka*, and presents the viewer with a record of many of the motifs that recur throughout the 1990s: the human figure in isolation, the shape-shifting landscape, the starry night sky, the becalmed canoe, and even the polychromatic, checkerboard wall.

Like Honoré Daumier, whose painting *L'amateur d'estampes* provides the template for *Metropolitain* (*House of pictures*) (p.91), Doig is an incurable storyteller. However, unlike Daumier's political and social satires on life in nineteenth-century France, Doig's narratives are without beginning or end, their manifest surreality heightened by his trademark combination of meandering line and hallucinatory colour. Trying to disassemble their content serves no useful purpose, and we are better advised to think of them as fragments from films. Doig is a confirmed cineaste, organising weekly film screenings at CCA7 and creating unique, handcrafted posters to advertise the programme. These posters permit the artist to give free rein to his imagination, and some of the movie-inspired ideas find themselves taken up in the canvases at a later date.

Port of Spain is a bustling, commercial centre, but the work of the past six years evokes

an altogether different aspect of Trinidadian life. The Hopperesque intensity of *Metropolitain* (*House of pictures*) and *Lapeyrouse wall* (p.90; Fig.86) gives way to a brooding, rural unease in the extraordinary (*Untitled*) *jungle painting* (p.105), *Pelican* (p.93) and *Fisherman* (p.142). The foliage that features in these paintings, mirroring the lush fecundity of the equatorial rainforest, has an eerie, triffid-like quality about it. In *Fisherman*, the shaft of light that illuminates the ghoulish bird killer throws the vegetation on either side into dense shadow, further amplifying the sense of some unspoken danger.

Doig's use of shadow and other devices to evoke a disturbed and disturbing atmosphere is highly accomplished, even in small paintings such as the *Girl in tree* series (pp.95, 138 and 139) and the *Maracas* works on paper (pp.144). On the face of it, the *Maracas* pieces appear to depict primitive pyramidal structures or pagan idols, but actually originate in the huge sound systems that spring up on the weekend at Maracas Bay, a great, sweeping beach on the north coast of Trinidad where Port of Spain's youth goes to swim, drink and dance. The manner in which the artist inventively refashions his subject-matter to alter its actual and emotional content is constantly absorbing, and represents a triumphant vindication of art's vivacity and continuing significance. Truly, painting today gets no better than this, and although the Tate's retrospective is too dense with loans and sometimes poorly installed, Doig's mid-career retrospective is an unalloyed success.

<sup>1</sup> After its London showing, *Peter Doig* tours to ARC/Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris (29th May to 7th September) and the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt (9th October to 4th January 2009). Catalogue: *Peter Doig*. Essays by Judith Nesbitt and Richard Shiff and a reprinted conversation between Peter Doig and Chris Ofili. 144 pp. incl. 100 col. + 40 b. & w. ills. (Tate Publishing, London, 2008), £24.99 (HB). ISBN 978-1-85437-800-7; £16.99 (PB). ISBN 978-1-85437-782-5.

IT IS APPROPRIATE that the first major retrospective devoted to the work of the Spanish sculptor Juan Muñoz, who died in 2001 aged forty-eight, would be shown at Tate Modern (to 27th April), where his last substantial installation, *Double blind*, was on view in the Turbine Hall at the time of his death.<sup>1</sup> Seen as one-off sculptures or installations in the context of larger mixed exhibitions, Muñoz's work was always striking: in the 1992 *Dokumenta*, for example, two of his life-size 'skittle' figures (bronzes that above the waist look like human beings, but below are merely a semi-globe) were propped up against an exterior wall; a year later similar figures were hung high in the trees at the re-opening of the sculpture park at Middelheim, Antwerp; and for the 1996 Copenhagen exhibition *City Space* he installed in the concourse of the main railway station a life-size sculpture of a female dwarf in a box next to a miniature townscape and railway set. Typically, all these works played on our response to figures that were not like 'normal' human figures but to whom we still related to some extent as fellow humans.

However, if Muñoz's work was strikingly effective in these one-off contexts, it left unanswered the questions 'Does it survive when seen en masse?', and 'Does his work have an underlying vision that unifies and gives complexity to these one-off manifestations?'. Tate Modern's exhibition and its accompanying catalogue ultimately fail to answer those questions.<sup>2</sup>

What we see in the fifteen rooms of this exhibition is a mix of drawings, small sculptures and installations that seeks to manipulate the viewer's sense of scale and 'human-ness'. In one room there are one hundred identical grey men, each bearing a grinning caricature of an Asiatic head (Fig.87). They are just less than life-size, but have no feet. As people wander around and through this crowd, they too start to look odd, even monstrously oversized. In another room a terracotta dwarf stands beside three tall terracotta columns. In a third a stage is laid out with a patterned linoleum floor; there is nothing but a drum on the stage; inside a prompt-box is a papier-mâché dwarf. Each work has one clear idea, is overtly theatrical and sets out to charge both the fictive space and the viewer's space with tension. Although this is sometimes achieved, it does begin to feel repetitive. At times the core idea of a work is of a striking banality: two men seated on chairs suspended on the wall with a line of little men cast in bronze on a wire going from the mouth of one figure to that of the other. Muñoz's failing was that he was often too literal. The tension between the viewer and the not-quite-human sculpture runs between alienation and sentimentality.

No doubt this is a popular show: in that favourite word of today's museums, Muñoz's