

# Overview



Peter Doig, *Guest House*, 2002. Color sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with aquatint and drypoint. Paper size: 24-1/2 x 18"; image size: 15-1/2 x 10". Edition 25. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

## Peter Doig

Years ago, Peter Doig worked as a dresser at the Coliseum Theater in London, helping performers with their cumbersome period costumes. One evening, he and a fellow dresser tried on a couple of the costumes and walked onstage during the final performance of *Petroushka* — a photo taken just prior to their walk-on remained as evidence. "That picture was

on my studio wall for a very long time," Doig told me. "And then, a few years later, I began a painting of an old German stone-walled dam. There was a little gate at its entrance and for the longest time I tried to find some figures that would act as gatekeepers and animate the painting. I tried many different figures and groups of figures and none seemed quite right, but when I placed these two in position they somehow felt like they had always been there."



Peter Doig, *Carrena*, 2002. Color spit bite aquatint with aquatint and hard ground and soft ground etching. Paper size: 18-1/2 x 22"; image size: 9-1/2 x 14-1/2". Edition 25. Printed by Dena Schuckit

The painting, "Gasthof zur Muldentalsperre," was shown in an exhibition of Doig's work at the Victoria Miro Gallery in London in 2002. The show's catalog is titled "100 Years Ago," but none of the other works in the exhibition include costumes or anything else that obviously relates to times long past.

Both the catalog's title and its design are clues to the way Doig approaches his work. Each photograph in the catalog is printed a second time on the back of its page in a faint ink that looks like a stain coming through the paper. And the photographs do not show finished work. They were taken in Doig's studio with the paintings in progress—ladders, studio furniture, and so on, are included.

Generally speaking, painters don't like people outside their immediate circle to see unfinished work. In the studio they paint on a painting until it is finished, or has reached what critics call "stasis," the perfect moment of balance when nothing more need be done. Doig's approach is different. The stain that comes through the paper is a metaphor for his approach. He's not looking for stasis. He starts with a photographic image that seems telling or poignant to him, using it, he says, "like a map, a way of giving me a foot into a kind of reality I want." When he stops, it is at a stopping place, and after that he often sees something else that could lead somewhere and starts over with the same image or a variant of it. He's not looking for one perfect view, one

moment that encapsulates an experience. He is combining starting points and stopping places, external details and internal references in a kind of floating, dissolving loop of images. "Good painting is often about that moment when things are changing and therefore in motion," he says. And then he adds, "Imagery always moves now—but so it has for a while (100 years or so)."

Doig has said that he thinks of painting as "working your way across a surface, getting lost in it." There is an element of painstaking detail. And yet, as Roberta Smith has pointed out in *The New York Times*, there is also an unusual "combination of attention to and disregard for images." Figures dissolve in patterned surroundings, or are subsumed in dark or light. Sometimes they are eerily solarized or somewhat hallucinatory in color. Smith speaks of "generic memories," and Doig himself uses the phrase "collective reality" and describes a particular painting as "a memory, a flashback, or a dream."

Doig was born in Scotland, grew up in Canada, and has lived in London for the past twenty-three years. Through friendships and gallery affiliation he is connected to the art scene that centers on the YBA's (Young British Artists), but his work is different from theirs, restrained by comparison. He refers to his Canadian youth in some of his paintings, mainly the ones that show people on skis or in a snowy





Peter Doig, *House of Pictures*, 2002. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with aquatint, drypoint and scraping. Paper size: 18-1/2 x 22"; image size: 9-1/2 x 14-1/2". Edition 25. Printed by Dena Schuckit

landscape, a favorite subject of his in the '90s.

In 2001 the St. Louis Art Museum featured a painting of four figures in falling snow on a brochure for a show of Doig's work. Curator Rochelle Steiner, writing about that painting, says the snow gives it "a dual sense of familiarity and artificiality." She quotes Doig as saying that "snow somehow has this effect of drawing you inwards and is frequently used to suggest retrospection and make believe," and she points out that the snow partly obscures the image and separates the viewer from it. Doig has described this kind of thing as a "painter's trickery" (trees also provide this function for him). "I did a lot of paintings like that," he says. "Then I deliberately tried to make a painting without hiding behind a screen—to give myself more room as an artist."

One of the interesting things about Doig, to me, is that as an artist he has given himself a great deal of room. He hasn't bought-in to the current art fad for creating clear, quick identity tags. But, so far as "hiding behind a screen" is concerned, I don't see him getting away from that. If it's not falling snow or a thicket of trees keeping us back from a central image, it's a row of birds, a figure with its back to us, or some vertical drips. That sort of "trickery" (to use the artist's word) gives us the feeling that we're watching a movie and the film has been stopped. It's part of what makes a Doig a Doig, and not—for example—a Richter.

In reading whatever I could find that has been written about Peter Doig lately, I have noticed that almost every writer has compared him in some way to the German artist Gerhard Richter. One even called him "part of the post-Richter generation." I am inclined to think that this is simply because Richter is the fair-haired child of the art world just now, and he bases paintings on photographs and so does Doig. If there is more to it than that, it's got something to do with subject matter, not style. Both artists work with photographs that are mundane and unimportant in them-



Peter Doig in the Crown Point studio, 2002.

selves to produce paintings that seem consequential. But think about it: can you imagine Doig painting any of Richter's subjects, or Richter Doig's?

So far as style is concerned, the two artists aren't on common ground. "I'm not trying to make paintings look like photos," Doig says. "I want to make paintings using photos as a reference, the way painters did when photography was first invented." Doig wants what he calls a "craft feel, a handmade feel," and this creates a great chasm between him and Richter whose craft is high but is applied towards finish, the opposite of a handmade feel. The biggest difference between Richter and Doig, I think, is Doig's sense of humor. "In every painting I make there has to be an aspect of it I can laugh at," Doig says. Sometimes you can only find the humor if you're looking for it, but these paintings, for sure, are not serious the way Richter is serious.

Doig cares about subject matter. It is where he begins. He travels a good deal, and takes pictures that he puts into files that he uses like sketchbooks. Sometimes he works with scenes from films, images cut from magazines, photos found in junk shops, or albums from his childhood. He says he paints "ordinary and personal" subjects. He once told an interviewer that he doesn't think of his paintings as "at all realistic." They come mostly from "within my head."

He speaks enthusiastically about "old painters" like Constable and Courbet "who have abstracted landscape in one way or another." Old paintings, he says are "the painter's inheritance" and he is glad to build on them, though he doesn't "consciously borrow." He sees the historic painters he admires as trying to "get to grips with the 'actual' whereas I'm closer to trying to get to grips with the idea of it." All Doig's paintings have subject matter that provokes some kind of narrative—something seems to be happening. But the narrative is not linear, like most narrative art. Doig says his paintings "evolve over the course of a year or more and so don't have a unified feel or a specific time frame."

The subject of the etching, *House of Pictures*, for example, is a zoomed-in portion of a painting shown in several states in the studio photographs in Doig's "100 Years Ago" catalog. Doig told me he came upon this shop in Germany and photographed it. It had a large sign, "Haus der Bilden," and a row of windows behind which paintings were stacked, one leaning against another. The mysterious stacked pictures combined with reflections of the real world in the windows seemed to him to have something to do with the meaning of art.



Peter Doig, *Grand Riviere II*, 2002. Color spit bite aquatint with aquatint and drypoint. Paper size: 21 x 15-1/2"; image size: 14-1/2 x 9-1/2". Edition 25. Printed by Dena Schuckit

There are several windows in the painting and only one in the etching. The contemplative red-haired figure in the foreground is swathed in black in the painting and solarized in the etching, as if caught in the glare of headlights. Jonathan Jones, writing in the catalog for a recent group show that included Doig, suggests that a "hole in time" exists and "you can step through it in an art museum." A painting can take you somewhere else if you give it undivided attention for a while. Looking at *House of Pictures* in that way, I can imagine that the red-haired person is just about to disappear into that "hole in time."

And if I continue that line of thought, I can imagine that the two persons in *Guest House* are just returning from the other side.

The subjects of the other three etchings are tropical. One of them, *Carrera*, exists in a painting as the background for





Peter Doig with printers Dena Schuckit, Rachel Fuller and Case Hudson in the Crown Point studio, 2002.

**Peter Doig** was born in 1959 and received his M.A. from Chelsea School of Art, London in 1990. In 1993 he won first prize in John Moore's *Liverpool Exhibition* and in 1994 first prize for the Prix Elliette von Karajan; he was also short-listed for Britain's prestigious Turner Prize in the same year. He has shown in numerous group exhibitions including *Barclay's Young Artist Award*, Serpentine Gallery, London (1991); *Unbound: Possibilities in Painting*, Hayward Gallery, London (1994); *Belladonna*, I.C.A., London (1996); and *Twisted: Urban and Visionary Landscapes in Contemporary Painting*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands (2000). He has had solo exhibitions at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (1998); Victoria Miro Gallery, London (1994, 1996, 1998, 2002); Kunsthalle, Nuremberg (1998); Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York (1994, 1996, 1999); and the Berkeley Art Museum at the University of California, Berkeley (2000). His work appears in such major collections as the British Council, London; Tate Modern, London; and Provinzial, Dusseldorf. Doig presently lives and works in Trinidad.

#### **In the Crown Point Gallery:**

*Dreamdaying: New Etchings* by Peter Doig  
November 8 - December 31, 2002

Please join us in the gallery at a reception for the artist on Friday, November 8 from 6 - 8 pm.

#### **In San Francisco:**

New paintings by **Wayne Thiebaud** will be on exhibit through December 21 at Paul Thiebaud Gallery, 718 Columbus Avenue.

Visit **Crown Point Press** at the San Francisco International Art Exposition 2003, at Fort Mason Center, January 17 - 20.

#### **In New York:**

New gouaches by **Sol LeWitt** are on view at Paula Cooper Gallery, 534 West 21 Street, through November 30.

New paintings by **Mary Heilmann** are showing at Kenny Schacter's conTEMPorary Gallery, 14 Charles Lane (between West and Washington Streets), through November 24. This new gallery space was designed by **Vito Acconci**.

Recent paintings and daguerrotypes by **Chuck Close** can be seen at Pace Wildenstein, 32 East 57th Street, November 15, 2002 - January 11, 2003.

**Crown Point's** new editions are available for viewing at Pace Prints, 32 East 57th Street.

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