

Derived Interview

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Original interview of Peter Doig by Robert Enright, with Mr. Enright's questions and my own responses

Robert: One of the many things you've said that interest me is that your paintings "were like taking pictures with van Gogh film in the camera".

Dave: Hah! I like that quote. I never actually said that, but I quite like it. It's about seeing the world the way a painter sees it, which is quite different I think than the way a photographer sees it. It's an imaginative phrase too, because we know that van Gogh painted so quickly sometimes, and that what we see in his paintings was truly what he saw, and the way that he saw. He was a painter that really was about transcribing the visual experience.

How does your family feel about the fact that they are in constant danger of being fodder for some as yet unmade painting?

That's a good question. I've never asked Karin how she feels about it. I have only made a couple of paintings of her, but dozens of sketches, and usually while she's reading the paper at a coffee shop. She is definitely sketch-fodder for me! (Laughs) She usually looks up and notices that I'm sketching her and then apologizes for moving. Normally I don't mind the moving because it keeps me on my toes. I'm usually just sketching gestures loosely anyway, so the movement is good.

What was interesting about Matisse was that he constructed an entire world. It was as if he were living inside a fiction of his own making. Maybe that gave him sufficient distance from it.

I'm not really sure why you bring that up, but I would agree with you. I think any good painter constructs a world of their own making. I think that's *why* we paint. I read a commentary on Matisse once that remarked on the astonishing fact that he lived through two world wars and numerous horrific world events and yet never depicted any of it in his paintings. He was never political. Of course there's the great quote of his about wanting to offer a "comfortable chair" and a place "without trouble" for the viewer. I suppose that was his way of responding to the world around him.

Last night in an onstage conversation with Bruce Ferguson at the Art Gallery of Ontario, you mentioned Matisse's Bathers with a Turtle. It must be a painting that painters are entranced by because Eric Fischl has also cited it as a preoccupation. He admitted the grotesque head of the middle woman and the way Matisse paints the hand gesture of the woman who leans down to entice the turtle.

Again I'm a little stumped by your line of questioning, since I've never even heard of Bruce Ferguson, and frankly, that is one of my least favorite Matisses. The figure on the left always looked to me like she was munching on her own hands and she's just so freakish I can't stand it. I can't get past that one part of the painting.

It's as if he were a painterly Frankenstein. It's almost monstrous.

Exactly!

You've said that you want to get a certain awkwardness in your work, a "homely look," you call it. Is that deliberate or are you aiming for something that would look less awkward?

Awkward and homely are vastly different objectives, and frankly, I've never attempted to make a homely picture. Awkward is not a word I've ever used, but I can see how it applies to my paintings, and sure, I could even subscribe to it. I have referred to my painting as "meat fisted" before, because I think my brush strokes might appear clumsy or brash or unschooled, and yes, maybe awkward is an apt word even. I don't try to make pretty paintings, but that doesn't mean I'm aiming at homely. I copied Picasso's *Self Portrait with Palette* a few years ago, when I was still an infant painter. I learned more from painting the background of that painting than any other painting I've copied. I really could feel Picasso pushing that paint around. It was so muscular and so rough. I swear he pushed brushes against their hairs and just shoved and mashed the paint all over the place. I really tried to emulate that, and then I just found myself pushing and mashing paint all of the time afterward.

Is it that photography holds you to a more realistic and mimetic world?

Huh?

Most of the critics, including Rudi Fuchs and Kaspar Koenig, talk about your paintings as having a certain sense of menace. Do you take that as an accurate reading of the way the images can look to people? Do they seem that way to you?

That is so cool! (Slaps knee incredulously) Do those guys really talk about my work?! Yeah, I would say that is an accurate reading. It isn't a conscious effort, but I see it, and certainly it is only natural that anyone's paintings would reflect their psyche. I am a notorious introvert, and a fairly somber fellow, given to frequent thoughts of death and bad luck, so how would you think I would paint? A fellow student once commented that I made pictures of places "where people were". I always liked that description. That there might be some menace to the piece is certainly possible.

Let me give you a specific example. I look at Echo and my initial reading is that this figure has come down to the lake to hear his voice echo. But then you realize the man is a cop – you see the police car with its flashing lights behind him – and what started out as a notion that a man has come down to the lake edge to engage in some sonic play turns out to be a possible tragedy. You sense this cop is looking for a floating body.

I don't have a painting called Echo. I did do this one painting of a face, and then I started to realize the appearance of another face just to the side and behind that one, sort of looming in the darkness. I began to develop it, first as a skull (remember, I am given to thoughts of death) (laughs) but then decided that was kind of cheesy so I fleshed it out a little more, but all the while keeping it in the darkness. I sat with this painting for several months just looking at it trying to figure out what it was about and then I decided to name it "Judas Whispering into Jesus' Ear". That kind of has that menace thing you're talking about, and how the meaning of the image can unfold over time. I'm still not sure if I'm done with that painting.

You have the suggestion of a synaesthesia because in the studies for Echo, you get a visual echo in the doubling of the body.

My poor education is showing, almost as much as your lack of knowledge about the names of my paintings. I have no idea what synaesthesia means.

You use doubling a lot. Is it a device or did you just spend so much time at the water with its reflections that a doubled world became natural to you?

Good question. I never thought that I used it because of the time I spent growing up around the Wilson River, but maybe that plays a role. I certainly was a river rat as a kid. As for the use of reflections in my pictures – I don't consider these as any kind of "double world". The reason that I'm drawn to views of water is that I like to have vast areas on the canvas that I can play with different textures on. When I have a scene with big chunks of water, then some near ground with grasses, and then far ground or distant mountains, and lastly a bit of sky – I can play with the relationships, the sizes and the textures and the warm/cold contrasts to try to get big forms that work together that I can treat differently. Does that make sense? William Dyas Garnett said that landscape was a "great place to push paint around" and that is really what I'm after right now. I fully understand how very very young of a painter I am, and I don't pretend to fully understand exactly what the hell I'm doing! (Laughs) The landscape, the water – it's all a way to push paint around and see what I can do.

The way you play around with perspective is intriguing. With Birdhouse you can't tell whether the house is hanging on a tree branch or if it's a full sized cabin perceived through a foreground scrim of trees and branches. It's almost impossible to locate yourself, in looking at the piece.

I'm not sure, but you might be talking about a painting called "Phil's House", which was based on a photo I took of my neighbor's house through a window that was covered in rain water. In that painting you really can't even tell there's a house in the picture! Perspective is evident, I think, only from a great distance or if you blur your eyes or have been drinking a lot. All of a sudden you can see that some of the marks appear to be right on the surface, which were the rain drops on the window. When you perceive those marks in that way, suddenly the rest of the picture plunges back and you get a sense of great depth. Until you perceive those marks in that way it's just a purely abstract picture.

But the building behind a dense screen of foliage or trees is a trope for which you seem to have a special fondness.

Yes, I suppose that's true. I have done a couple of paintings of my own house in that manner, and oddly enough, I have a painting in progress on my studio wall right now of another neighbor's house. The neighbor just up the hill from me, across my street, cleared out a bunch of underbrush and trees this summer and suddenly I could see his house from my front yard for the first time. His house is probably forty feet above mine, up a steep slope, and I was just smitten with this image of his red house perched way up there, and the dark tree trunks flanking it, or really "presenting it" like curtains on the sides of a stage. Perhaps its part of that whole "menace" thing that you glommed onto earlier. The idea that there is something mysterious and "out there" about the houses I paint. When I was I kid I used to get spooked pretty easily by houses. I had a paper

route for a little while and I used to be scared to death of going up to these dark houses early in the mornings. Wow, I never thought about that in relation to these paintings until just now.

Do you do it to confound yourself and the viewer? It's a lovely way to create a pictorial mystery where you can't quite place yourself in the space. To be floating as opposed to being anchored.

I'm certainly not trying to confound anyone! Hell, I can barely figure out what I'm doing half the time. I'm damn near unconscious when I paint. I'm lucky I don't pass out. I read once that Soutine was sometimes found passed out next to his paintings from the sheer exertion of emotional energy. I think that's so cool.

How do you otherwise generate pictures? I look at a piece like House of Pictures and wonder how the picture comes to be. And who is that red haired figure? Is that from Munch too?

Hmmm. I have that one small painting with a red haired face, kind of floating on a black ground. Is that the one you mean? It is untitled at the moment. Any way, the face is loosely based on my own, despite the fact I don't have red hair! As far as how I generate pictures, that's a tough question. I get a ton of energy when I paint outdoors, and really some of my best work has been done outside in front of the motif. Painting quickly and like I said, sort of unconsciously. I constantly hear Joseph Mann telling me to "hurry up!". My latest struggle is finding something that generates enough interest to spark the painting. I can drive around for two or three hours looking for something, then bam, set up my easel and crank something out in an hour that I absolutely love. It's the finding that is so hard, not the painting. That just comes naturally if the motif is good. My latest challenge is to paint from photographs with the same energy and fluidity and spontaneity and abandon as I do outside. It's very hard with a small, flat, static image like a photograph!

So in House of Pictures, 2001, one figure with red hair occupies the right hand side of the picture and then, next to it, just the hair is sketched in within the dirty lavender wash. Do you do the figure first and then its echo is generated out of the making of that figure? This idea of images stuttering across the surface is one that you often use.

Actually I don't even paint figures that often. Right now I'm working on a figurative piece based on a sketch of Karin from a coffee shop. The figure is definitely "stuttering" as you call it. The figure and surrounding area are all being developed simultaneously, each responding to one another. This is the most typical way I develop a picture.

But then you draw in what is a green picture frame?

Well if you are referring to that yellow stripe I just added on the right-hand side of the picture, that was in response to a lack of light the picture had. I had begun the picture as a study of Bacon, using an all-over red scheme with a central figure of some ambiguity. I began to develop the window on the right and to consider it as a source of light for the picture, but I didn't want to make it a straightforward light mechanism, considering so much of the rest of the picture was fairly abstract. So I added the yellow strip beside the window to generate light on that side of the canvas and to imply a light source.

You literally put a picture together. This methodology you described wouldn't be uncharacteristic?

Certainly not. At least this is the way I build pictures in the studio, which is completely different than the way I build pictures in plein air. In the studio it is truly a construction project. This is also due in large part to the way I manage my painting time. I paint mostly in one hour chunks early in the morning, before heading off to my day job. So each day when I return to a painting there is something there for me to build on and respond to. It's a slow and methodical process, and depending how I feel each day, the results can be very different. Many days I don't even paint, but just look at it and think about what it needs and drink coffee. In plein air it's all slap dash and quick, very much like a sketch. Usually I finish in one go outside as well; seldom do I return another day to the painting, and if so, it's usually in the studio using photographs or sketches to finish it and then it turns into a studio painting!

There is a certain sense of unease in your work. You never quite know what you're looking at, which makes your painted world inexplicable.

Well my own *real* world is a bit uneasy, and as I mentioned before I think any painter will transcribe the feelings of his own world onto the canvas; it's unavoidable. I do find the world a little scary and violent. I'm not enamored with those thoughts, but rather troubled by them. So even if I'm painting a bucolic scene, even if I *set out* to paint a bucolic scene, eventually my fear and melancholy will work their way in!

Why do you return so often to themes in your work? I think of the "Driftwood" series, which, when I first saw them, made me think of Eric Fischl's drawings of figures on the beach. Especially the particularly intimate arrangement of your two figures.

The themes I most often return to are nature based and unpopulated with figures. My sketches are often filled with figures, but that is a result of circumstance rather than a conscious development of a theme. My sketches are often performed during outings with Karin, like at coffee shops as I mentioned earlier, or during my lunch break at work, when I will go to a park and sketch; so there are often figures incorporated into those drawings.

But you return to that theme, too. There must be at least six variations on the "Driftwood" theme.

I'm not sure what you're talking about.

We fill in the information with the photograph, don't we, but we can't do that with the painting, which has to generate the information.

I think it's the opposite really. A photograph gives you everything. Power lines, cars, trash, graffiti – it's all there even though you didn't see it when you took the picture. All you thought was how beautiful the sunset was and you snapped the shot. Suddenly you see all this peripheral stuff that "wasn't there" when you were looking. This is why I love painting. It's only the stuff I remember. None of that peripheral stuff.

In the "Briey" interiors, you move back from the same perspective and do multiple renderings of that interior space. They're all rendered very differently. One of the

studies is minimal, pastellated and pulled back; in another, there is a more insistent grid. This dialogue between an insistent sense of structure – there are times when you put in geometric lines to accentuate that – and the remarkable looseness of the work is something that interests me.

I think structure is important to a good picture. Composition and rhythm is something that was drilled into me in my early education with Mark Andres. The better and more sound the structure is, the more loose the paint handling can be within it. Pure chaos doesn't work – you need a solid framework to hold it together.

But the beautiful suffusion of colour in Driftwood (Yara), where the watercolor itself drifts, is as close as you get to Turner. It works, but it has almost no structure.

Not sure what painting you're talking about, but it's true, I have done several paintings where I nearly abandoned structure altogether. Some of the early paintings I did of the Columbia River from Sauvie Island were that way. In retrospect I would say they more closely resembled the style of late Monet than Turner. My fascination with water and reflection overwhelmed the paintings to the point that I neglected good composition. I felt that they failed in that way, however I found some of them beautiful.

So in one version of Grande Riviere, your rendering of the horse makes me think of David Milne – it's more white space than animal – and then you do an almost not-there drawing with three marks. It's very pale and has hints of Joseph Beuys.

You must be referring to the painting *Girl and Horse*, where I only painted the shaded side of the horse and allowed the background color (mostly white) to fill in the lit side. Not many people see the horse in that painting. I didn't intend for it to be a "trick on the eye" in that way. To me the horse was plainly obvious, and was meant to be.

Let me ask you about one of my favourites of your drawings – one that also reminds me of Beuys – called Man Dressed as a Bat. It's a kind of operatic Beuys. Where in the world did that image come from?

Hmm, I'm trying to think of what drawing you might be referring to. I'm sorry. I can't think of anything that might even resemble a man dressed as a bat.

So many of these works have a clear autobiographical connection. They're cared-for. Do all the drawings have some connection to your imaginative and personal life?

I have a confession to make. All of the drawings have a direct, 100% connection to my life! I draw *from* life. My imagination requires some starting point from which to launch, and that starting point is a visual impulse. I've always felt ashamed that I couldn't draw purely from imagination.

The girl in the tree is taken from a photograph one of your daughters took of one of her sisters. I'm not sure why, but I've got to say that that picture causes some unease.

I don't have a daughter.

I'm intrigued to hear you say "floating" because were I to describe the sense of space in your work, it wouldn't be perspectival but closer to something like the Floating World, an aesthetic that comes out of Oriental cultures.

Well I do often use techniques other than traditional mathematic perspective to imply space. Some of my recent paintings have abandoned horizon lines altogether and have become fairly ambiguous, although still rooted in landscape. However unlike the Asian method of "stacking" images to imply the bottom as near ground and top as far ground, I am using the more western techniques of texture and color intensity.

But the painter in Figure in Mountain Landscape, a 1998 oil on paper work, is rendered as if he were the scale of a Goya giant who happens to be sitting in the landscape rather than striding across it. He's suspended and you can't read the scale of the space around him.

You might be talking about the painter in my self portrait *What? Caught Painting*. In that I am painted in an interior space, but the way I treated the light behind and above me gave it a sense of being kind of set in space, I think. Which does impact your perception of the scale of the figure.

As a Canadian critic, my inclination is to place you in a tradition that is not only pictorial but psychic, as well. It goes back to the solitary figure in the landscape – it's not surprising that Margaret Atwood would do a response to your work in the catalogue for the drawing exhibition – and what that represents as a psychic emblem for the way we are at odds with nature. Is that a legitimate way of reading those works?

Yes, I would agree with that. However there aren't many figures in my landscapes, but the idea of us being at odds with it certainly is in my mind. I think many of my paintings display an air of unrest, which we touched on earlier. I often employ man made structures into the pictures as much for a pictorial "foil" against the organic shapes, but also as a narrative element that allows for a personal relationship. The structures take on the 'psychic emblem' as you refer to it, implying a sort of dialogue between man and nature.

The Art Gallery of Ontario has your drawings on exhibition at the same time as they're showing David Milne. They go to some delicate lengths in pointing out the similarities between your work. How do you react to that?

Honored at the comparison, of course. Although I don't have any drawings on display at the Art Gallery of Ontario that I know of. David Milne is really a combination of two of my favorite landscape painters. He shares the paint handling and simple palette of John Marin and the mysterious and spiritual quality of Arthur Dove.

There's also the question of rendering, of using the space that is not filled in. An early piece like Dragnet does that; it's as much about what's not there as about what is there.

I'm doing that more and more lately in fact. I have been leaving some canvas exposed and some of the under drawing as well, and creating spaces or forms from those empty, spare spots. This may sound strange, but I've really been responding to Basquiat lately. The idea of Basquiat as a landscape painter is utterly absurd, but what I'm responding to is his simplicity and honesty with color. How he created these wonderful simple flat

spaces, that also read as having two or three distinct levels of depth to them. All with the simplest and purest of colors and virtually no evidence of draftsmanship (in the traditional sense).

You're looking at him as a painter and not as a nature painter. So the subject matter is not the thing about him that interests you.

Precisely! I appreciate what Basquiat was saying, but honestly, I don't usually gravitate to art that is so heavily message-driven. I have always concluded that all paintings fall into one of two classes: communicative or decorative. The folks who I look at are almost exclusively in the decorative camp: Matisse, Soutine, Van Gogh, and then there are the guys whose work has an emphasis in the communicative camp, but is so wonderfully decorative: Beckmann, Guston, and Basquiat. But it is always the decorative part that gets me!

That's the sense you have about yourself when you say you're not a landscape painter, even though landscape turns up in much of your work? You're more of a psychic-scape painter?

I might say that's a bit overstating my power! But I'll take it.

But your work is never hallucinogenic?

Hey, what are you implying, pal?! No, but seriously, I do occasionally drink a beer or two while I'm painting, and if things go really well and I'm just so pleased with myself after a painting session, I may smoke a pipe – a tobacco pipe! That's my little treat after I nail a good painting.

Rudi Fuchs attributes to you an aesthetic intentionality in saying that you come out of a period of decades of fierce argumentation about what painting was and that you determined you would deliberately paint in a "fragile" way.

While there may be occasional passages of fragility in my work, I would say I paint in exactly the opposite way: brutal. I mash and push and wrestle the paint onto the canvas for the most part. It's usually an extremely physical process for me. Catharsis, probably.

I wonder, too, if the fragility is a product of what you can't get rather than what you intend to get. Sometimes it's about a failure of technique rather than control over it.

Again, I think you nailed it but replace the word fragility with brutality. It's an UTTER failure of technique. I have NO technique!

Fuchs also talks about Gerard Manley Hopkins, the poet who wrote "glory be to god for dappled things," which idea you have a little fun with in the Ooty Boathouse. You have colour lozenges across the entire roof.

Sorry, can't help you there.

Do you have a large picture archive?

I'm beginning to develop one, but it certainly isn't large. I have a drawer in the studio that is stuffed with photos and clippings, and a ton of stuff that I've shot and downloaded to the computer but not printed yet. When I get ready to start a couple of new paintings, I usually troll through the images I have on the computer and print up several to work from.

There are at least three versions of Guest House, one of which looks like you're playing with the idea of carnival, and in the third one, a watercolour, the figures are beginning to dissolve. Is that a natural progression for the studies – that each time you teach yourself something that will make it easier to make a larger painting?

I seldom actually do studies, however I have taken to painting the same image multiple times lately. The idea is that another element of the same image can be explored, whether it's using different colors or handling the paint differently, or changing the scale to see how different that can feel. Each is its own painting and none were intended to inform the next one.

Why did your family move so much?

I lived in the same house for twenty two years. We did move every summer down to our rustic little cabin in the woods near the Wilson River, if that's what you mean. It was a fantastic way to grow up. For three months every year I had the run of several hundred acres of forest with two great friends. We built forts, swam, hiked, and basically got to be kids every day for the whole summer. Very Huck Finn. Thank god my parents didn't put me into soccer camp or some crap like that.

Does Port of Spain seem like home?

Never been there. Nope.

You mention film a fair amount and I gather it's a medium that continues to occupy portions of your imagination.

I have a great love of film. I was just telling Karin the other day that film, along with short stories or poems, are these wonderful art forms that in two hours can literally change the way you look at life, and really effect you for the rest of your life. It's amazingly powerful. I must say that since discovering my painting skills, it has enhanced my experience of viewing films as well. I am terribly aware of composition now, whereas before I was oblivious to it. Sometimes I'll see a scene and swear the director must have been a painter!

Have you seen Friday the 13th all the way through yet?

You know, I may have watched that when I was a kid, but I can't remember. I was never one for that genre. The trite formulaic scripts bored me.

If you look at the poster you did for The Big Lebowski, you choose an image that you've already worked in a piece like Metropolitan. In some ways, the posters are you trying to affirm the events of your own autobiography.

I'm completely lost.

So when you talk about the posters being the product of what you call “ugly thick layers of oil paint,” you’re referring to a deliberate anti-aesthetic?

Yeah, like some of the topics we’ve covered so far. I definitely avoid a slick and polished approach to applying paint. My brush strokes will not likely ever be called beautiful. The approach is not a deliberate act or a shtick or something, however. It’s just the way I apply the paint. It just seems right to me. I think I mentioned before how my transcribing of Picasso’s *Self Portrait with Palette* informed me of a way to paint that said it was OK to be aggressive and uncontrolled.

You said last night, and you’ve said it before, that painting is a “hopelessly romantic” thing to do and yet you’re still doing it. Why?

I’m a hopeless romantic! I desperately want painting to have relevance today. I believe it does, but to a diminishing number of people. It’s my response to culture shock as well, where teenagers are celebrities, politicians win based on advertising and sound bites, wars are fought on false pretenses and lies, and oddly, people don’t seem to care.

Maybe it was that essay you did on Duchamp when you were only 17 years old.

I think that was on Walt Kelly. A very Duchampian comic artist, though!