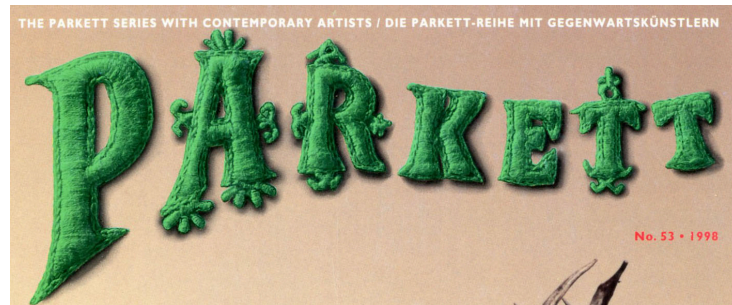


# GLADSTONE GALLERY



Elizabeth Peyton

## IN PRAISE OF HANDS

## Elizabeth Peyton's Painting



ELIZABETH PEYTON,  
*LORD DOUGLAS IN CAIRO, 1998,*  
watercolor on paper, 7½ x 6" /  
*LORD DOUGLAS IN KAIRO,*  
Aquarell auf Papier, 19 x 15,2 cm.

PHILIP URSPRUNG

I waited until the museum attendant was out of sight, then I went right up to a small work by Elizabeth Peyton—an oil painting on board—and did something I normally never do. I gently brushed the back of my hand across the surface of the painting, touched the raw edges of the wooden board and fingered the

*PHILIP URSPRUNG* is an art historian and teaches at the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zurich. He is currently completing his postdoctoral habilitation with a thesis entitled *Grenzen der Kunst: Happenings und Land Art in den USA*. He lives in Zurich.

solidified runs of chalky, white ground that had oozed over the edge. Best of all I would like to have unscrewed the picture from the wall and weighed it in my hand, to have looked down on it at arm's length, to have held it up to the slanting light from the window so that I could gaze at the reflected light bouncing off its opalescent surface. How else could one properly understand the stunning technique employed in its making or fully relish the pleasure of pursuing the subtle course of the layers of color? Under its protective glaze the paint is sometimes thick, like enamel, applied almost like nail varnish, sometimes thin and liquid like a wash. In some places



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the ground gleams through, in others it is as though various layers of paint and color repel each other. Sometimes the colors meet abruptly, as in *cloisonné*, at others they merge unchecked.

Yet I only have a vague recollection of the subject of the painting. Was it the portrait of a pale youth with blond curls, melancholy eyes, and raspberry-colored lips? Did he have dark hair? Had he been a singer with an English group, or could it have been a portrait of Princess Diana as a teenager? I cannot even recall the colors. Were they bold violets and mauves or harsh blue/yellow contrasts? In my mind the colors and subjects of the paintings are just a blur, despite their explicit titles—*LADY DIANA READING ROMANCE NOVELS* (1997), *DAVID HOCKNEY, POWIS TERRACE BEDROOM* (1998) or *SWAN (LEONARDO DI CAPRIO)*, 1998. I can remember the How much more clearly than the What; above all I remember the compact objectivity and the tactile surfaces of these little pictures.

By alerting viewers to their sense of touch, Peyton impinges on the traditional dominance of the sense of sight as the highest authority in matters of artistic judgment. In view of the prevalent economics of visual reproducibility, this attitude is disconcerting, to say the least, and raises a number of questions. Is Peyton's insistence on the physical presence of the hand the outcome of a critique of the supposedly noncommittal, disembodied, abstracting (male) view which regards itself as the arbiter of artistic taste? Is it a symptom of a nostalgic, even regressive artistic approach that yearns for the late-modernist notion of painting as an "act" (Harold Rosenberg)? Or is the fascination I feel at the sight of the surfaces of her paintings related to the fascination with pre-modern "uniqueness" and "authenticity" registered by Henri Focillon in the forties in his essay "In Praise of Hands": "Is it not admirable to find living among us in the machine age this determined survivor of the 'hand age'?"<sup>1)</sup>

At least as many questions are raised by Peyton's choice of subjects—mainly young stars from the global stage, from pop music and the art world. Are Peyton's portrait-miniatures—citing the iconography of absolute rule—telling us that modern art is ultimately aristocratic in origin and has none of the

democratic roots we so often hanker after? Is the artist criticizing or affirming the complex heritage of art today? Is her idolatry of aristocratic icons such as Louis XIV, Ludwig II of Bavaria and Prince Harry an ironic critique of political correctness that has, in some places, already ossified into orthodoxy? Or is she saluting the—in my view dubious—return of modernistic, subjective, authoritarian norms such as "beauty," "taste" and "quality," which were surely overthrown long ago and whose reappearance has been evangelized by Dave Hickey and other apostles of beauty?<sup>2)</sup>

The questions raised by Peyton's paintings in themselves bear witness to the fact that her work is firmly anchored in contemporary art-critical discourse. She is fully aware of the limitations of this discourse and the limitations of the art world—as she herself has said: "The things surrounding me are not really going to affect people as a song could: People don't have access to art as I have access to records and books."<sup>3)</sup> One of the themes of her work is the fact that the monumental world-images of the Baroque age, even the individual pursuit of aestheticism which the dandies of the late nineteenth century were the last to enjoy, are now no more than memories. Yet the utopia of pure aestheticism still lingers on in the fairy-tale aura that surrounds contemporary stars whose private lives are so interesting because they are a domain where fantasy can run free, and which neither the stars nor the public have entirely at their command. In Peyton's hands, painting takes on comparable characteristics, that is, it is a domain which may not entirely be controlled. She fluctuates between utopian claims to universal relevance and her consciousness of the limitations of an artform past its prime—and it is this very dualism that generates the sheer excitement of her art.

(Translation: Fiona Elliott)

1) Henri Focillon, "In Praise of Hands," in: *The Life of Forms in Art*, transl. by Charles B. Hogan and George Kubler (New York: Zone Books, 1989), p. 169.

2) Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon. Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993).

3) Elizabeth Peyton: "We've been looking at images for so long that we've forgotten who we are," Interview with Francesco Bonami, in: *Flash Art*, vol. 24, no. 187, p. 86.