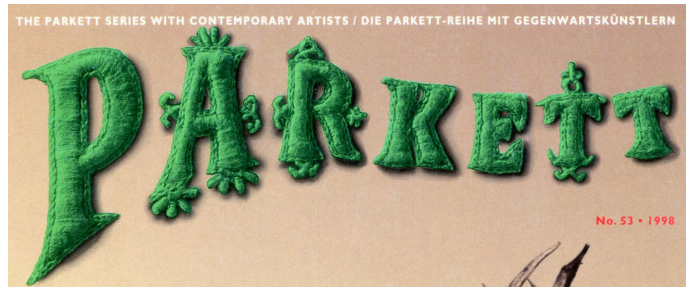


GLADSTONE GALLERY



ELIZABETH PEYTON, JARVIS, 1996, watercolor on paper, 10 x 7" / Aquarell auf Papier, 25,4 x 17,8 cm.

Elizabeth Peyton

A Tender Trap

LISA LIEBMANN

The seduction appears to be complete. Elizabeth Peyton's lusciously painted, glamorously effete portraits of idols and friends—those vanquished angels from the pages of history books and photographers' contact sheets—not to mention her poignant, charming drawings, have over the last couple of years elicited something like a collective swoon of rapture from their beholders. How sorely we must have needed Peyton's lovestruck, louche odes to the fleeting perfections of *la jeunesse dorée*, framed so adoringly by *la vie de bohème* and its attendant characters. We've felt this way before, of course, some twenty-five years ago...

As do many things these days, Peyton's portraits carry our thoughts back to the late sixties and early seventies (early adolescence in my case), when English Aestheticism in all its forms last enjoyed a significant revival, and an all-embracing hippie-Pop enthusiasm for the Pre-Raphaelites—druggy, lush, and androgynous, yet somehow removed from human touch—was followed (or was it sparked?) by an earnest, scholarly reconsideration of Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater, and Aubrey Beardsley. In the art-for-art's-sake lexicon of my teenage years, an all-consuming love for the British *fin de siècle* was followed by a searching reexamination of the more or less modernish "Bloomsberries"—both literary and visual—and of their decorative spin-offs in the Omega Workshop design. A taste for Vanessa Bell and Vanessa Redgrave (cool in *Blow Up*, hot in the movie version of *Camelot*) affected everything from neo-Arthurian rich-hippie dresses by Thea Porter to Olde English folk tunes by the of-late-lamented English rock band

Traffic, whose lead guitarist-singer, Stevie Winwood, looked like the reincarnation of a Burne-Jones ephebe.

Peyton's male odalisques and *hommes blessés*—whether the devastating horizontal expanse of PIOTR (1997) or the reedy depictions of a normally sturdy-looking David Hockney—all partake of this double-barreled Aesthetic Movement revival. Peyton, furthermore, is not alone in such enthusiasms, although she gives them a distinctive, and perhaps distinctively female lover's gaze. This violet-tinted bacchante's worldview may well draw some of its art-historical and literary color from the example of Virginia Woolf, and the antics of her time-traveling, gender-switching Orlando (recently revived for the screen by Sally Potter, starring the cultish androgyne, Tilda Swinton). Other contemporary maestros of the lilt-ing touch have focused on other precedents: Jane Kaplowitz's *schwach* paintings of mid-century decorators and *Death in Venice* characters; Billy Sullivan's plummy, impatiently rendered demimonde; and Karen Kilimnik's graphic paeans to Kate Moss and the sixties modeling sensation, Twiggie. All these waifish archetypes were released, like the bulls of Pamplona, by Nan Goldin's photographic portraits of wasted friends.

Peyton's penchant for things British must also be seen in terms of a larger contemporary cultural phenomenon. Although it should be pointed out that not all her sources and affinities derive from this. When considering her society portraits, I am reminded of the Dutch-born Parisian artist Kees van Dongen, whose nacreous twenties renderings of sloe-eyed, elongated temptresses posit a liberated International Style of zombie beauty. Then there is the more claustrophobic precedent of Marie Laurencin, whose fussy-looking *femmes d'intérieur* suggest a forebear for

LISA LIEBMANN is a writer and critic. She is the co-author, with her husband Brooks Adams, of the text for *Young Americans 2* (London: The Saatchi Gallery).

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Elizabeth Peyton



Peyton's canny-female mode of elegy. This genre, it should be remembered, has a long history in portraiture that reaches back to the breathtakingly successful Madame Elisabeth-Louise Vigée-Lebrun, who worked for nearly all the European monarchies during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—viz. Peyton's MARIE-ANTOINETTE drawings.

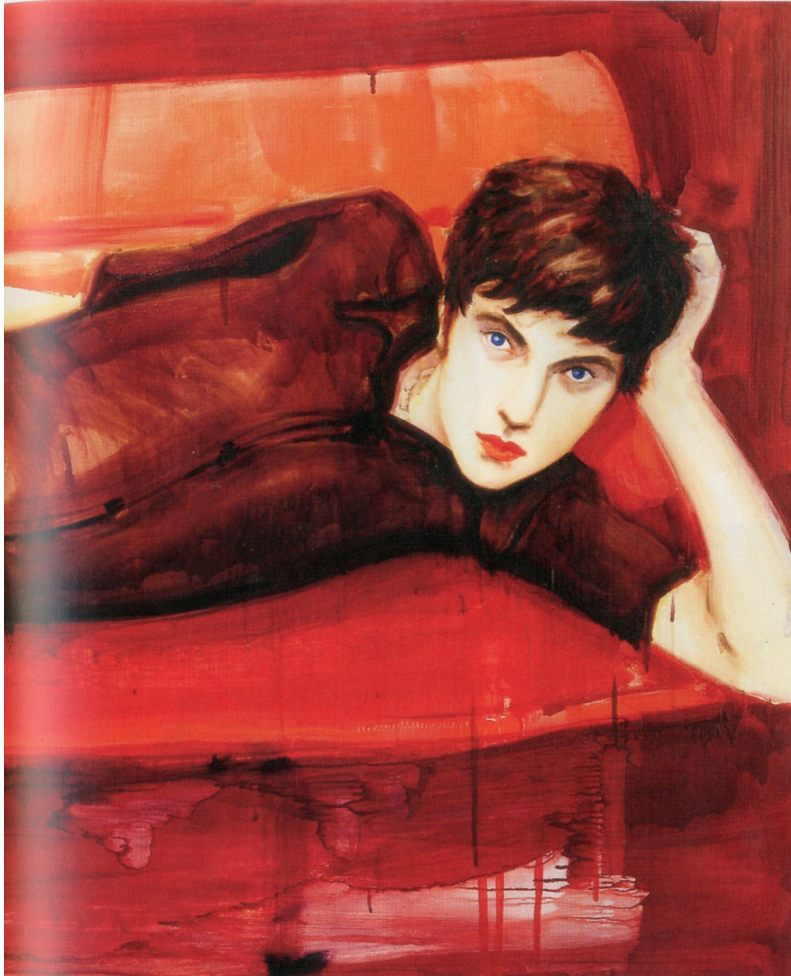
But it still is the sceptered isle, from Walter Sickert to Britpop, that seems to exert a particular pull on Peyton's work, if only in iconographic terms. What other artist would risk a fracas with the English tabloids by daring to paint Prince Harry so soon after Diana's death? Who but this same artist would take

David Hockney's images from the early days of gay lib and subsume them into her own "adoring" work? Peyton's strikes are preemptive, and her acts of love take archer's aim. Her intimist icons galvanize their surroundings, and nary an English lad is left standing.

Peyton's brush is her most potent weapon. The brushwork is her ego, and recently it has taken leaps in both scale and bravura. She is unafraid to push fat daubs of paint across small canvases (particularly along their edges) and to let these imbalances hold as strengths. Sometimes her scruffy slightness is reminiscent of Gwen John.¹⁾ But the juicy textures

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Elizabeth Peyton



ELIZABETH PEYTON, PIOTR, 1996,
oil on canvas, 38 x 86" /
Öl auf Leinwand, 96,5 x 218,4 cm.

increasingly suggest Howard Hodgkin's swooshing, clotted colors that are his memories of bohemian cadres and friends in the salons of Bloomsbury and Notting Hill. Likewise, Peyton expresses emotion in the movement and saturatedness of her wonderful, nightclubbish colors—her pinks with reds, purples, browns, oranges, and greens.

If Hodgkin, friend to Hockney since the swinging sixties, has emerged as a surprise avatar for the carnal qualities of Peyton's painting, Alice Neel might prove to be a homegrown source for an acute form of figuration. For example, a painting such as Peyton's LIAM AND NOEL IN THE 70S (1997) recalls any num-

ber of the feisty Neel's great child portraits. Peyton may, after all, belong to an American Scene tradition that started with John Singer Sargent and Robert Henri, continued through Walt Kuhn and Edward Hopper, and on to Neel. There is plenty of grit and grit here: Peyton's fey young things may be but her momentary subjects. She, however, is the wielder of the brush, the powerful one, the still point of the turning room. Her art, as intimated in the title of her recent picture-book, may well "live forever."

1) Gwen John, sister of the Victorian society portraitist, Augustus John, an artist-member of the Bloomsbury group, was known for her casually intimate, *echt-bohemian* portraits and interiors.

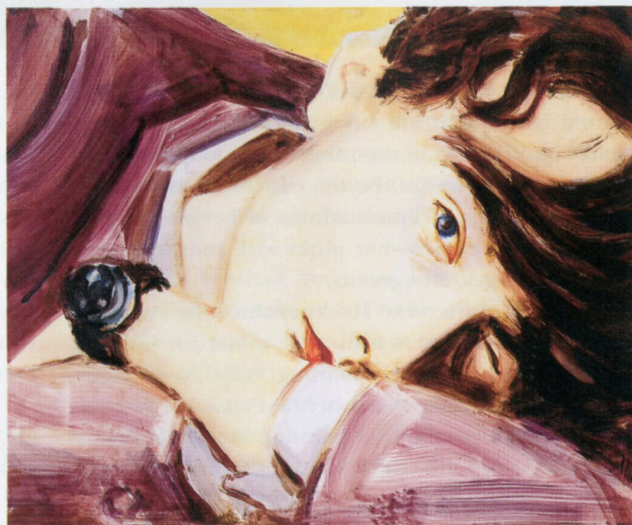
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Elizabeth Peyton



*ELIZABETH PEYTON, DAVID HOCKNEY, 1997,
ink on paper, 11 x 8½" /
Tusche auf Papier, 27,9 x 21,6 cm.*

*ELIZABETH PEYTON, JARVIS, 1996,
oil on masonite, 11 x 14" /
Öl auf Sperrholz, 27,9 x 35,6 cm.*

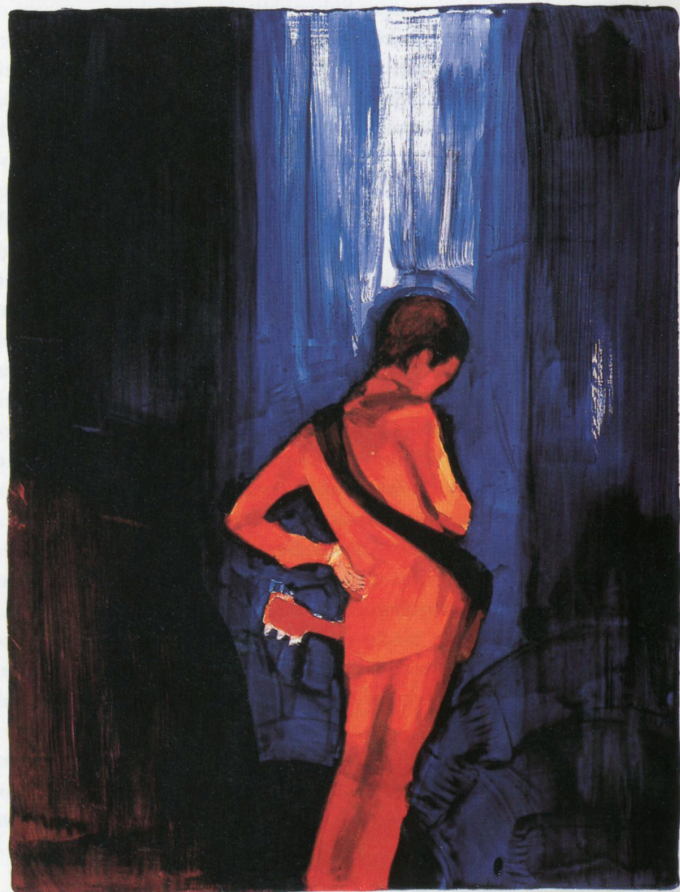


GLADSTONE GALLERY

Elizabeth Peyton



ELIZABETH PEYTON,
STEPHEN MALKMUS, ROSELAND BALLROOM, 1997,
color photograph / Farbphotographie.



ELIZABETH PEYTON, ROSELAND, 1997,
oil on MDF, 12 x 7" /
Öl auf MDF-Platte, 30,5 x 17,8 cm.