Wendy Weitman, "Elizabeth Peyton," *Print Quarterly,* 2012

PRINT QUARTERLY

# Elizabeth Peyton

Wendy Weitman

Sabine Eckmann, Beate Kemfert, Hilton Als, David Lasry, *Ghost: Elizabeth Peyton*, edited by Sabine Eckmann and Beate Kemfert, exhibition catalogue, St Louis, MO, Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, 28 January–18 April 2011; Rüsselsheim, Stiftung Opelvillen, 9 February–15 May 2011, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011, 168 pp., 91 col. ills., €48.

When Elizabeth Peyton began exhibiting in the early to mid-1990s, painting was in another of its notorious declines. Not only was Peyton a painter, but she worked on a notably small scale and her subject-matter, portraiture, was among the most traditional. Moreover, and perhaps most unsettling, her paintings were expressively rendered and captivatingly beautiful. The art world took notice.

PRINT QUARTERLY, XXIX, 2012, 1

This unusual and seemingly conventional work sparked controversy. Peyton, along with a couple of compatriots, returned vanguard attention to the visceral appreciation of painting. Influenced by the grand tradition of European and American portraiture from Ingres to Hockney, her popular realism articulated the essence of a generation, much the way Andy Warhol – a figure Peyton acknowledges as a seminal inspiration – did for his.

Peyton's earliest portraits are historical figures she admires – Napoleon and Louis XIV among them. In the mid-1990s she added contemporary celebrities to her roster, most notably rock stars such as Kurt Cobain, Sid Vicious, and others whom she believes have had powerful, influential careers. More recently she turned to those around her, friends and colleagues, many of whom are also artists, whose beauty has affected her own life deeply. Peyton typically shows her subjects young and in close-up, and usually titles her works with their first names only, drawing the viewer into her own intimate perceptions of Spencer, Mark, or Klara. She works primarily from photographs; some she plucks from the mass media and others she takes herself. Her gestural style encompasses broad brushstrokes and drips of paint or watercolour that enhance the sense of a fleeting moment captured. Peyton intensifies this expressive approach with luscious colour. Her harmonies are rich and unexpected, imparting a jewel-like quality to these images of languorous, beautiful people.

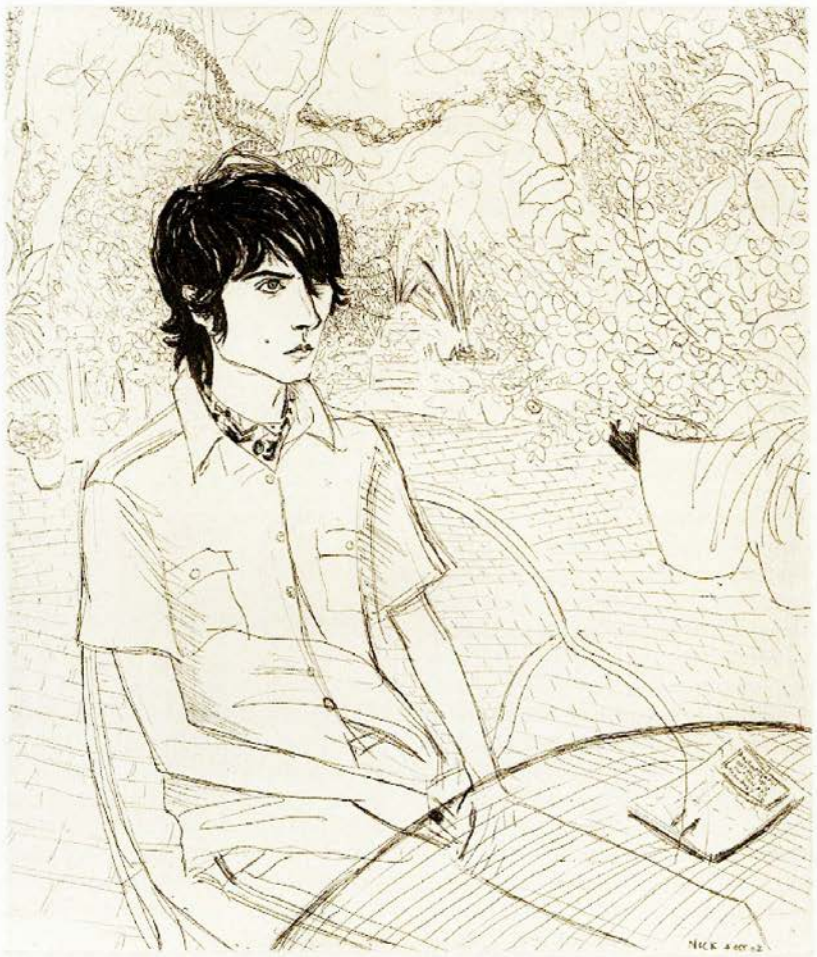
In 1998 Peyton began making prints and she has become an active printmaker since then, completing roughly 35 etchings and dozens of monotypes as well as a few lithographs and woodcuts. This body of work is the focus of the impressive, large-format catalogue *Ghost: Elizabeth Peyton* that accompanied exhibitions at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum at Washington University in St. Louis and the Stiftung Opelvillen in Rüsselsheim, Germany. A new body of etchings is nearing publication as well. Her first print, *Oscar and Bosie*, was a lithograph prompted by an invitation to contribute to the special edition of *Parkett* and immediately revealed her natural affinity with the medium (fig. 98). Her fluid watercolour technique translated easily into lithography's liquid tusche, from which the youthful, amorous couple emerges. Depicting Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas (known as Bosie), Peyton featured the subculture of a past century with a glamorous and androgynous timelessness. The figures' faraway stares, characteristic of Peyton's contemplative poses, contribute to the work's melancholy and somehow evoke the pair's doomed futures. The artist revealed her source for this image, citing the film *Wilde* as

98. Elizabeth Peyton, *Oscar and Bosie*, 1998, lithograph with pearlescent dust, 578 x 622 mm (Photo courtesy Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York).

her inspiration.[1] She read several books about Lord Alfred Douglas as well and, contrary to the accepted cliché that he brought about Wilde's downfall, she commented, 'there was something very special and beautiful about Bosie and that he and Wilde were very in love…'.[2] When asked why she chose this image, which already existed as a painting, for the lithograph, Peyton responded, 'It would be nice to have a picture of two men in love reproduced 60 times.'[3]

With this first print, Peyton signalled her facility with printmaking. She made several more lithographs over the next few years, including a series of five in large editions that hang in two Manhattan hotels, pointing to her interest in merging public and private spheres. These images, of Princes William and Harry, and John Jr. and Jackie Kennedy, are similar in their sensuous handling of the medium but depict more recent public figures. Sadly, Peyton abandoned lithography after this series. But in 2002 she turned her attention to etchings and monotypes. Her first suite of etchings comprises six images of seated figures, each posed diagonally against a stark, blank background. The sketch-like scratches resemble her approach in earlier pencil drawings. While the sitters' bodies and clothing may be loosely defined, certain other areas – the face, hair and beautifully delineated scarf in *Rikrit*, for ex-

1. *Wilde*, directed by Brian Gilbert, performed by Stephen Fry, Jude Law, Vanessa Redgrave and Jennifer Ehle. BBC, Capitol Films and Dove International, 1997.
2. Elizabeth Peyton: Artist Questionnaire, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, artist file.
3. Ibid.



99. Elizabeth Peyton, *Nick in L.A.*, 2002, etching, 254 x 203 mm (Photo courtesy Two Palms Press, New York).

ample – are carefully and thoroughly represented, reminiscent of Ingres's masterful pencil drawings. Peyton also completed a single etching at this time, *Nick in L.A.*, distinctive for its elaborate background setting (fig. 99). Matisse's early etchings also come to mind when viewing this group and *Nick in L.A.* in particular, with its surfeit of quickly-drawn plants and lush foliage. A portrait of the British artist Nick Relph, seated in the garden of the Chateau Marmont hotel, this etching also inspired Peyton to continue working from life as opposed to photographs. 'He sat very still', she commented.[4]

Peyton collaborated with New York's Two Palms Press for these etchings and has worked there ever since. She completed her first body of monoprints with Two Palms as well and continued the practice of working from life as opposed to photographs. In this catalogue's generous and informative interview between co-curator Beate Kemfert and the artist, Peyton reveals what both the medium and the workshop environment offer her, as well as the ways printmaking has affected her overall practice. For example, when discussing how she began making monotypes at Two Palms, Peyton remarked, 'it's a way of working very quickly with paint that you can't do in any other way... Because I wasn't living in New York [in 2002 when she

4. Elizabeth Peyton, 'A Conversation with the Artist', in *Elizabeth Peyton*, edited by M. Higgs, New York, 2005, p. 253.
5. Elizabeth Peyton, 'Ghost Impressions', in *Ghost: Elizabeth Peyton*, op. cit., p. 111.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.

began making prints at Two Palms] I was inviting people to come and sit for me, and that's when I first started painting people from life…it was really the print studio that started me doing it, because there I worked very fast, because of the way things have to happen there.'[5] When asked about the difference between making a print or a painting of one of her sitters, Peyton replied, 'There is also a lightness about printmaking sometimes…A monotype is made in a few hours, or a day, and it dictates a different – more of an open – kind of structure and brushwork.'[6] In another revealing exchange Peyton compared her working process for etchings to that of monotypes: 'It's [etching] more of a quiet drawing process than the more active, painterly monotype process. Maybe it's more intimate feeling and, to try to convey a person with just a line, more condensed in a way.'[7] The interview is nicely bookended by photographs of Peyton and various sitters in the workshop.

Peyton has pursued monotype more than any other print medium and this catalogue illustrates nearly 50, ranging from her first attempts in 2002 to some of her most recent work. She excels at the sinuous brushwork that is the medium's most distinctive feature. Closest to her watercolours, the monotypes also exhibit Peyton's brilliant use of colour. Among her earliest, *Nick in Red and Green*, of 2002, presents a casually elegant, androgynous figure in three major tones, the red and green of the sitter's shirt and the black of his hair. The white of his skin, pearlescent against these bright hues, is punctuated by Peyton's signature red lips. A few years later, Peyton completed *Michael (One)*. Large in scale at nearly 38 by 30 inches, the image is again divided into three major colour zones, the black of the figure's clothing, the luminous pale blue of the background wall, and his tanned skin tone. Here facing the viewer, his red lips exert a magnetic pull. Peyton's recent monotypes show a more sombre palette and a new interest in negative space as the white of the paper becomes an increasingly significant compositional element. Her brushstrokes are even more vigorous now as she shifts toward a looser, more abstract structure. She is also exploring an exciting new arena, focussing on historic cultural figures and even fictional characters, from Georgia O'Keefe and François Truffaut to Wagner's Tristan and Isolde.

Several catalogues devoted to Peyton's work have appeared in the past few years but few discuss her prints, making *Ghost: Elizabeth Peyton* a very welcome addition to the literature. The publications on her paintings and drawings seem to follow a similar picture-book design, no doubt the artist's preference. Dominated by large colour plates, often without captions and page numbers, many of these earlier catalogues compromise reader-friendliness for aesthetic impact. Texts are reserved for the margins, with essays concentrated in the front or back, usually accompanied by a list of works and a bibliography. The design of *Ghost: Elizabeth Peyton* is in keeping with its predecessors and boasts rich full-page reproductions, with blank facing pages in most cases, except where cognates are shown. Helpful brief captions and small page numbers, though, are included here. After a brief Foreword the reader is immediately immersed in the images, absorbed in their seductive colour and captivating faces. Essays are interspersed; nearly a hundred pages in, the reader comes upon the first short essay, by critic Hilton Als. Most of the rest of the text appears in the back of the book. The interview discussed above comes next, followed by another long run of images and the remainder of the text. All texts appear in English and German since this book accompanies both exhibitions.

Co-curator Sabine Eckmann's important essay begins with a brief history of modern portraiture and its concerns with celebrity in the context of a burgeoning leisure class. She discusses Baudelaire's ideas surrounding modernity and dandyism and links Peyton's unique approach to portraiture and beauty with his thinking. She further highlights Peyton's 'democratization of portraiture', stressing how public familiarity with her subjects enhances the accessibility of the work. She also notes Peyton's source materials – public photographs, film stills, as well as illustrations found in literature and her own snapshots – as a feature in this 'democratic re-configuration'. Eckmann examines Peyton's approach to beauty, distinguishing the beauty of her art from the beauty of her sitters. She writes,

> Her form of emotional realism does not merge subject matter with beauty, but brings both into a dialogue. It is not so much the person she portrays that is beautiful, but the brushstroke, colors, and linear treatment through which she portrays them, and through which she reveals her compassion for them. In that sense, beauty materializes itself outside of or alongside the social context.[8]

Eckmann concludes with a detailed reading of a few of Peyton's recent prints, identifying distinctive features that reveal a new direction in Peyton's work – the introduction of still lifes, a greater abstraction in her brushwork, a new emphasis on figure/ground volumes, and even a change in her titles, which now include last names and references to her source material. This close analysis of specific prints is illuminating and would have been welcome earlier in this

8. S. Eckmann, 'Daystar', in *Ghost: Elizabeth Peyton*, op. cit., p. 149.

9. Verbal communication from the artist, courtesy David Lasry, 21 October 2011.

insightful essay as well. Certain questions about Peyton's printmaking, however, remain unanswered by this catalogue. It would have been interesting to learn why she abandoned lithography, which seemed like a natural medium for her or how she compares the complex etching techniques she uses with master printer Craig Zammiello with the directness of monotype. Have other artists of her generation embraced monotype this seriously? As it is unlikely that another catalogue on her prints will appear for some time, this seems a bit of a missed opportunity.

Eckmann's scholarly essay is followed by a charming and revealing piece by David Lasry, founder of Two Palms Press, offering a wonderful window into a day in the workshop with Elizabeth Peyton. The book closes with the List of Artworks and a biography. The list is arranged by medium: monotypes, lithographs, etchings and woodcuts. Unfortunately, no explanatory head note is included, which creates some confusion. It is not indicated whether the list represents a catalogue raisonné of Peyton's printmaking to date, but this author inquired and established that the lists of editioned prints are comprehensive to date.[9] The list of monotypes represents a selection for these exhibitions and is not meant to be complete. The documentation in these sections is not consistent, with some entries including sheet and image dimensions and others not. In the latter cases the reader does not know what the dimensions represent. That is particularly problematic with the etchings where sheet margins have been cropped from the otherwise beautiful reproductions. This is a loss as plate marks and margins often highlight the 'etching' quality of the work. These small details are in the 'irritating' category but hardly detract from this otherwise impressive volume.

The exhibition's title, *Ghost*, is particularly well chosen, referencing the paler, second images often obtained after printing the first run of a monotype. Peyton frequently reworks her 'ghost' images, generating exciting variations on a theme. The opening of the book beautifully illustrates this practice with a series of three monotypes, *Flowers and Books (Camille Claudel,* Vertumnus and Pomona, 1905), from 2010. This luxurious book is the first major presentation of Peyton's prints and an important contribution to the understanding of her overall work. It is also gratifying to see such a capacious monograph devoted to the printmaking accomplishments of a young artist. Hopefully this is a trend that will continue.