

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Louisa Buck, "Elizabeth Peyton: paintings about love," *The Telegraph*, January 22, 2016

The Telegraph

Elizabeth Peyton: paintings about love

Her subjects and techniques may be wide-ranging, but Elizabeth Peyton's portraits all stem from love, says Louisa Buck



Left: Elizabeth Peyton, Two women (after Courbet), 2015; Center: Elizabeth Peyton, Isolde Enchanted Petitcreiu, 2015; Right: Elizabeth Peyton, Elias, 2015

Elizabeth Peyton is internationally known for her small, lusciously-painted and invariably pensive portraits of rock stars, film idols, friends and fellow artists which the American artist prefers to describe simply as “pictures of people”. Over the years her subjects have included Marie Antoinette, Kurt Cobain, Prince Harry and David Bowie as well as artists Jonathan Horowitz and Maurizio Cattelan, the dancer Michael Clark and the art dealer Gavin Brown; but whether living or dead, past or present, the starting point for these romantically rendered individuals is always Peyton’s emotionally charged relationship with them.

Never mind if she has taken their image from a book or a photograph rather than a live sitting, all are objects of her fascination or affection – or both. “I really love the people I paint. I believe in them, I’m happy they are in the world,” she declared in the *New Yorker* a couple of years ago. “I’m interested in people who are dealing with their feelings through art, or people who defined their moment in history.”

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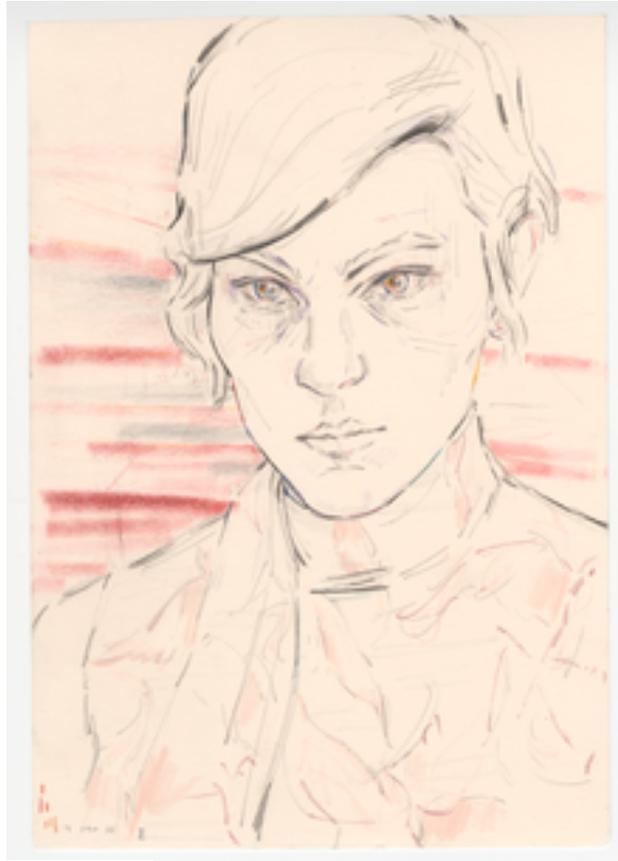
Elizabeth Peyton, Dan Kjær Nielsen, 2015-2016

Peyton has always been happy to mix up past and present. Her first exhibition was held in a room in the Chelsea Hotel in 1993 (visitors had to collect a key from the front desk to let themselves in) and consisted of idealised drawings of historical figures such as a young Napoleon Bonaparte, King Ludwig II of Bavaria and a charcoal study of Queen Elizabeth I delivering her first radio broadcast when she was still a princess.

Making figurative images of figures from European history and literature was almost outrageously unfashionable at a time when students everywhere were being told painting was dead, yet the show attracted wide attention and next year the young graduate from New York's School of Visual Arts started making paintings of more contemporary heroes, starting with the recently- deceased Kurt Cobain.

“Music is such an immediate way to contain emotion and love,” declares the artist whose musical interests encompasses Chopin and Punk. “You can't hold on to it – it's moving constantly – so it's tragic as it's happening. That's the kind of thing I want to communicate in my pictures.”

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Elizabeth Peyton, Dirty Pink Heron, 2016

As Peyton's current exhibition of new work at Sadie Coles reveals, this wide-ranging love of music both classical and contemporary as well as her passion for figures past and present continues to extend ever wider. There's an intense little oil portrait of Dan Kjaer Nielsen, drummer with Danish punk band Iceage, as well as a somberly-painted scene from Wagner's Ring Cycle of the giant taking Freya from the gods, while Peyton's mastery of watercolour is given full throttle in a pair of limpid portraits of Billie Holiday.

Among the strongest works in the show are those which demonstrate Peyton's range of techniques beyond the oils on board for which she is best known. These also include an exquisite colour pencil and pastel drawing of Céline's Phoebe Philo and a crayon study of the artist's pet dachshund Isolde. Another surprise is the way in which the loose lushness of her brushstrokes have been sharply pared down into the almost Matissean graphic economy of two large-scale black and white lino cuts, one portraying her tousle-haired friend Elias and another an anonymous pair of lovers.

For this is an artist who is not afraid to be unashamedly subjective in what she chooses to paint, or draw, or print – whether it is a pet, a lover, a couple of languorous ladies from a 19th century Courbet painting, a pop icon (her 2012 painting of David Bowie promises to become a classic) or a teapot full of overblown anemones. “They're all about love” she says. “Ultimately all great art is really about love.”