

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Peter Schjeldahl, "Peyton's Place," *The Village Voice*, March 25, 1997

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Peyton's Place

Elizabeth Peyton
Gavin Brown's Enterprise
558 Broome Street
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BY PETER
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for sparing trumpets and drums when they seem even remotely called for. Peyton is so much like so many

in the job description of current pop renown. She presents her idols (who include nonfamous, wearily gorgeous friends on the Downtown scene) with unabashed adoration, giving them kissy lips and swoony eyes, but takes no pains to promote them as especially happy. Faulty decision-making may come with the human territory she sur-

Singer Sargent or, occasionally, the rapture of a Willem de Kooning. What matters is not who she paints and loves (the two verbs being one for her) but how she paints and loves them: with rigor that has ethical bite.

Peyton's pictures range in size from about three feet on their long sides down to the proportions of a cigarette pack. Blocky board or canvas supports give the works presence as bluntly handcrafted objects. (Understandably bolted to the wall at Gavin Brown, they are some of the most achingly stealable things you ever saw.) Physical smallness is a feature that Peyton's work shares with that of other Anti-Baroque: a passive-aggressive gesture, it seems to me, that rejects any possible coziness with architectural spaces in favor of close-up, complicitous intimacy with lone viewers.

I know that I'm missing a lot of Peyton's appeal by being unfamiliar with her subjects. Telling me this is my response to the one picture whose subject I recognize: Elvis Presley as a boy of 11 or so, formally posed with his mother. She is a comfortably attractive woman, faintly chic in a 1940s mode. They appear against pink and orange floral wallpaper that, in Peyton's rendering, is almost punishingly lovely. Elvis seems a skinny, soft, cosseted lad, oblivious to his already tell-tale feature of droopy, not-yet-bedroom eyes.

I hesitate to mention the Elvis painting's tacit Madonna-and-Child motif and poetic overtone, so subtly does the association insinuate itself. Peyton's devout technical panache puts her in communion with so much classical painting history so effortlessly that it's almost embarrassing. It is as if Velázquez peered over her shoulder at Gavin Brown's young son Max (a ravishingly sweet portrait) or Rubens tagged along for a gander at the band. Simply, she speaks those old guys' language: paint and more paint, paint to start with and paint for dessert.

Again, Peyton's art, taken at its own apparent self-estimation, is hardly monumental in reach, though its grasp is prehensile. She contentedly provides sidelights and grace notes to already evanescent phenomena of popular culture, teasing forth wispy visions of an immature sublime: the quaking souls of overnight sensations. One could easily underrate her, however.

In a more satisfactory civilization than ours, Elizabeth Peyton's fabulously charming little paintings of rock stars and other subjects of her melting esteem would be items of entry-level, training-wheels art taste. Peyton might be a latter-day Marie Laurencin or Raoul Dufy if, like them, she worked in the shadow of a Picasso or Matisse. As it is, the painting field today lacks towering figures to give it relative scale, and we can only estimate the scope of Peyton's talent: bigger than a bread box, smaller than the Matterhorn.

For sure, it is a real talent. It has been lighting people up here and in England—home of most of Peyton's fave musicians, at present notably the group Oasis. (I take no notice of new music and so phoned my daughter at college for a briefing. Oasis plays "ambient mellow" stuff, she said. "Druggy pretty people listen to them." My daughter talks without commas.) Peyton's slam-bang-*cloisonné* way with dashingly brushed, nail-polish-intense oil glazes—given to pink and purple audacities—enchants at maximum speed. You will find yourself loving it before your intelligence can clear its throat, let alone pronounce either approval or disapproval.

From Connecticut, Peyton studied at New York's School of Visual Arts, an institution all but officially proud of not nurturing painters. What doesn't kill, strengthens: Peyton's indulgence in pleasures of paint feels roughly self-reliant. She practices beauty without license and dares the beauty police to sue. At 31, she is young for a painter while perhaps oldish for a devotee of teen idols. Pretty much everything about her contributes to an air of breezy singularity, by turns snarky and inspired. She is an urbane number whose qualities may add up only in the rapid reckonings of happenening style.

I, for one, will be pleased if Peyton achieves a truly fashionable pitch of success. Do you realize how long we have gone, since the notorious days of 1980s hype, without a new painter on contemporary culture's front burner? I rather suspect that Peyton's vogue will prove to be just another modest boomlet in the recent vein of Ellen Gallagher or Nicole Eisenman. Meanwhile, given New York's tradition as a capital of both paintings and fashions, I'm not

other artists that specifying her uniqueness, keen as it is, needs precision. She is a Warholian, regarding pop culture as a zone where fame and beauty turn molten and flow together to yield tones of celebrated good looks and good-looking celebrity. But the cast of her fandom is quirkier than Warhol's, closer to the girlish, somewhat spooky obsessions of Karen Kilimnik. Peyton's efficient limnings of personality recall the illustrational flair of our local Constantin Guys (only better), Billy Sullivan, hoisted into high art by an idealizing bent like that of Alex Katz. Imagine a Katzian world of enviably beatific citizens that, unlike Katz's, does not exclude tragedy.

Peyton suggests that to be tragic is



Punishingly lovely: Elizabeth Peyton's *Gladys and Elvis* (1997)