Dodie Kazanjian, "peyton's place," *Vogue,* October, 2004

VOGUE

peyton's place

Painting rock stars and other idols with an obsessive admiration, Elizabeth Peyton has made a hopelessly out-of-date style of art cutting-edge. Dodie Kazanjian looks into the artist's controversial work. Photographed by Irving Penn.

Elizabeth Peyton paints in the basement. It's a very ordinary basement, in an ordinary house in a small town on the North Fork of Long Island. A narrow window near the ceiling lets in a dim, watery light. "I like working down here," she tells me in her soft but oddly confident little-girl's voice. "In the studio I had in New York, I could never work until the late afternoon, when the sun had gone down. Here, I'm not bothered by how beautiful it is outside. I like to disappear a bit."

Pinned or taped or tacked to every available inch of wall surface are images she has painted or may want to paint someday: Napoleon, King Ludwig II, Kurt Cobain, Keith Richards, Princess Diana, Prince Harry, Harry (her dog), Marc Jacobs, David Hockney, John Kerry. On a small tabletop easel is her unfinished painting of Kerry, based on a 1971 news photo of him testifying before Congress on the Vietnam War. "I love that defining moment when you see all the seeds of what people believe in later in their life," she tells me. "I think he's fantastic, a very intelligent man. I even feel passionate about him."

Peyton, a 39-year-old gamine in jeans and an oversize, untucked white shirt, projects an understated but stylish nonstyle that is at odds with her reputation as a painter of small-scale, lusciously colored, intensely stylized pictures of people whom she unabashedly admires, dreams about, even loves. Her reputation is sky-high these days. She was one of the stars of this year's Whitney Biennial; her riveting self-portrait was used on an exhibition poster and on ads for the hugely popular show, and it has been accepted by the Whitney for its collection. There is a waiting list for everything she paints. Together with her contemporary John Currin, she is credited with making figurative

SOMETHING TO SMILE ABOUT

Peyton, OPPOSITE, says she looks for a "person's time in their face—especially the particular moment when they're about to become what they'll become."

Sittings Editor: Phyllis Posnick.

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CAUGHT IN THE ACT
this page: Peyton's Pierre Calling His Mom (Pierre and Camille) (2003); opposite, L.A. (E.P.) (2004), a self-portrait, an experience that gives her the chance to "look at me in the same way I look at other people, giving me the 'me treatment,' " she says.

Courtesy of Elizabeth Peyton and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, NYC.

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"In all her work, there's a sense of immediacy," a curator says, "a sense that the person is within your own fingers' reach"

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Kurt Sleeping (1995). "She is doing the universe on the head of a pin," an admirer says.

painting, and especially portraiture, key elements for a generation that until recently looked on both as hopelessly out-of-date. "Her pictures have a freshness that really speaks of this moment," says Laura Hoptman, who put Peyton in two shows at the Museum of Modern Art before moving in 2001 to the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh. "The ambition is very large, but the scope is very small. She is doing the universe on the head of a pin."

Gary Garrels, one of MoMA's top curators, places her in the tradition of Andy Warhol and David Hockney as a portraitist. "In all her work, there's a sense of immediacy," he tells me. "It's the sensuality of it, a sense that that person is within your own fingers' reach. We're living in a period of tremendous cynicism, and to me, her work is exactly the opposite of that. She allows that kind of romantic, utopian ideal of complete identification with another person—about losing yourself in someone else."

Not everyone agrees with these estimates. Garrels himself knows people who "loathe" Peyton's work, which they consider "sentimental kitsch." The critic Jack Bankowsky, reviewing her contributions to the Whitney Biennial in *Artforum,* wrote, "It is my fondest hope . . . that Peyton's star turns won't come to stand for our times." I myself have heard her work described as lightweight, "pretty," and as saccharine-sweet as the gushings of an obsessive teenage girl—another symptom of the youth culture that disfigures our time. Others complain that her subjects, male and female, all tend to look alike—thin, effete, androgynous creatures with flowing hair, red lips, and too-bright clothes. Whether what she does can be called portraiture is debatable. She doesn't accept commissions. "When I was 21," she says, "I tried to do that, but it was always a disaster."

By general agreement, a great portrait shows us profound truths about both the sitter and the artist, and Peyton's don't do that. In one sense, they are all self-portraits—idealized images that reflect her feelings about the people she chooses to paint. She seems to love every one of her subjects—"That's why I paint them," she says. "I could never do the Windsors, for example, because there's something so evil about them." Peyton's occasional naiveté is deceptive; she knows exactly what she wants and can be quietly persistent about getting it.

To me, whether or not what she's doing is true portraiture hardly matters. Peyton's work, with its straight-from-the-tube chromatic richness, makes a compelling argument for the validity of paint on canvas, which can still do so many things that photography cannot. Photography is the portrait medium of our time, and recent portrait photographs by artists such as Rineke Dijkstra and Thomas Ruff have been getting bigger and bigger in scale, lifesize or larger. Peyton's small, jewel-like pictures have a one-on-one intimacy that few photographs can muster. The emotion they radiate may be Peyton's, but her fearlessness in evoking it lets it be ours as well.

David Hockney, Powis Terrace Bedroom (1998).

Peyton doesn't even call herself a portrait artist. "When someone asks me what I do, I say I make paintings of people," she says. We have moved outside to a table in the backyard garden, where argumentative birds are in full, sweet cry. "I always painted people, even as a child. When I was little, I was fixated on certain people—ice skaters, gymnasts, John McEnroe. I really like sports figures a lot, for being better than what is humanly possible."

Peyton was born in 1965 in Danbury, Connecticut, the youngest of five children, three of them from her father's previous marriage. Her parents, who had a small candle-making business at home, were interested in the arts; abstract paintings by her mother hung on the walls. "They were very supportive of my making art, I think because they had so badly wanted to do that when they were young." She did a lot of drawing as a child. (Having only two fingers on her right hand because of a birth defect, she learned to draw with her left.) One of her childhood memories is of spending hours at her grandmother's "very intimidating" house, poring over the pictures in a "beautiful, oversize full-bleed photo book" about Queen Elizabeth, from her coronation up through the sixties. Peyton's grandmother was an eccentric Francophile who had an indirect influence on her fascination with French history and literature.

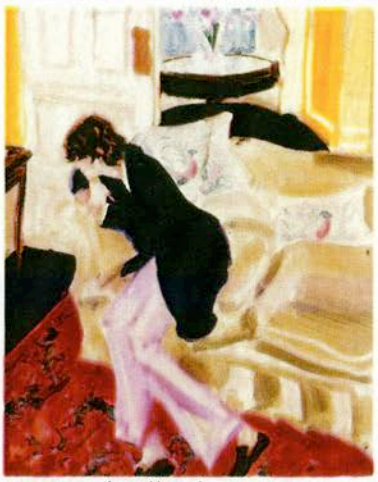
"I used to paint my friends as characters in novels I was reading," she goes on to say. "I read Proust when I was in my early 20s, and it changed everything. I learned something about time, time collapsing. I felt that you could see a person's time in their face—especially the particular moment when they're about to become what they'll become. They just shine, and everybody around them can feel it. There's something I want to say about people and art and time. It's never changed, what I'm interested in. It just keeps growing."

At the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, which she entered straight out of high school, the emphasis was on conceptual art, postmodern theory, and postminimal irony. Peyton kept right on painting her irony-free pictures of people—friends and fellow students as characters out of Balzac or Proust. "None of the teachers liked my work, but I didn't mind that at all. I loved the work of artists like Jeff Koons, Cindy

"He was such a bully, not some nicey-nice painting person," Peyton

Sherman, Robert Longo, and Richard Prince, even though I wasn't ever going to make work like theirs. I was impressed by their stardom. That was a time when everyone seemed like stars."

In 1987, the year she graduated, Peyton had a one-person show at the Althea Viafora Gallery in SoHo. It attracted little attention, and she didn't show again for six years. She got a job as an assistant to artist and teacher Ronald Jones. After three years of that, she became a researcher at PhotoReporters, supplying images to magazines. It was an ideal job for an artist who works mainly from photographs. Peyton made her official debut at the Chelsea Hotel in 1993 with drawings of Napoleon, mad King Ludwig II, Oscar Wilde, and various dandies and flaneurs in history and literature.



Torosay (Tony) (2000). Each of Peyton's pictures is like an act of love.

By then, she was married to Rirkrit Tiravenija, the Argentine-born Thai artist who has since become internationally famous for his temporary installations, which invite the viewers to become active participants. Her boyfriend at the time introduced her to Rirkrit at a party. "Rirkrit smiled at me, and I thought he seemed really nice," she tells me. "Then I ran into him on the street, and a month later, I saw him at an opening. He looked at me, and I said, 'How are you?' He said, 'I'm fine, but I need a green card.' And I said, 'I'll marry you.' We were never separated after that. We got married three weeks later."

Rirkrit showed at the 303 Gallery, where Gavin Brown was then working. Brown, who had done Peyton's show at the Chelsea Hotel, was in the process of breaking away to start his own gallery. "Elizabeth's work was so clearly apart from the rest of the world," Brown tells me. "I felt if you had Elizabeth with you in your gallery, you would be set apart from the rest of the world, too. Here was a voice that was so clear and had so little to do with the pointless dialogue in the New York art world." To Peyton, Gavin Brown seemed like a gift from Heaven. "He gave me such hope that it was possible for me to be an artist," she says. "He was the first person who understood what I was interested in, to know that it was more than just pretty-picture-making. Gavin seemed to understand that it wasn't just painting I was interested in, it was more a sense of my time and history and the power of art, and what it could do to inspire other people and culture. We were both incredibly ambitious, without being conscious of it. I had no idea really how ambitious I was, but I just had a feeling that he would be the best person for me. He was such a bully, not some nicey-nice painting person. Meeting him

says. "Meeting him was huge, like Brian Epstein and the Beatles"

was huge, like Brian Epstein and the Beatles." The Beatles? Well, a healthy ego has never hurt a rising reputation.

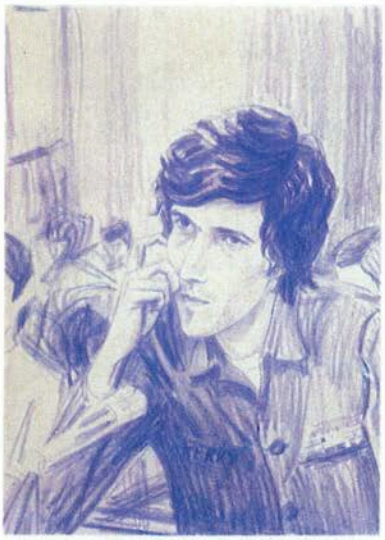
In her first show at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in 1995, she moved into time present with a series of paintings of rock star Kurt Cobain. How did that happen? "I had been away in Germany, and when I came back, I heard his voice on the acoustic album that was put out about six months after he committed suicide, and I thought, Oh, my God, I can't believe this man was alive at the same time I was. I was so moved that this person had existed and made what he'd made. He was the first person kind of my age, who was American, that I really, really identified with and wanted to paint." Roberta Smith, reviewing this show in the *Times,* called the paintings "beautiful in a slightly awkward, self-effacing way."

Peyton has painted a number of rock stars since then, including Keith Richards, Sid Vicious, Johnny Rotten, and Morrissey. "There's an emotional quality in music that I want my paintings to have," she tells me, "a kind of immediacy and accessibility. I often think how transcendent it is that I love the Beatles and you love the Beatles. That can collapse a lot of barriers."

Peyton is as interested in celebrity as Warhol was, and for many of the same reasons: to go beyond the art world, to utilize the energy of popular culture. But she has also painted many pictures of nonfamous friends, and of people (mostly men) who, for one reason or another, have triggered her rapt attention. What's constant in all these images is not accurate likeness, or even personality, but a kind of obsessive, fanlike identification. Each of her pictures is like an act of love.

Laura Hoptman's 1997 "Projects" show at the Museum of Modern Art, which showcased Peyton's paintings along with those of John Currin and Luc Tuymans, persuaded a lot of doubters to take her more seriously. The critic Peter Schjeldahl, who quipped in the *Village Voice* that her talent was "bigger than a bread box, smaller than the Matterhorn," went on to say, "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 moved out to the North Fork three years ago with Tony Just, an artist she met in 1999—she and Rirkrit were no longer living together. (The two, who remain close friends, are now getting a divorce.) Elizabeth has painted Tony again and again, awake and asleep—so many sleeping pictures that she made a book of them called *Tony* *(continued on page 391)*



John Kerry Testifying to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 1971 (2004).

PEYTON'S PLACE

(continued from page 363)

Sleeping, which includes a lot of her photographs on which the paintings were based. "It's a pleasure to paint or photograph someone when they're not looking. The person isn't self-conscious, and neither am I. Otherwise, it's like, 'I love you; I love you; I think you're the best thing I've ever seen.' It can be very embarrassing." Chrissie Iles, the curator who put Peyton in the recent Whitney Biennial, says, "Elizabeth is one of the key figures in the current art scene in the sense that she pioneered a new approach to portraiture in a style that is almost impossible to replicate. You now get younger artists influenced by her approach, and you realize just how difficult it is to paint like she does."

When I go out to see her a second time, we meet for lunch at a restaurant on the wharf in Greenport. Elizabeth's short, light-brown hair is still wet—she swims for a mile every morning in Peconic Bay. She's wearing white slacks and a colorfully embroidered top by Marc Jacobs, who collects her work. I ask how it feels to have her painting become so widely accepted.

"It's kind of no fun," she says with a self-deprecating laugh. "It's more fun when you're going against things. It makes you want to make abstract paintings." Although there's little likelihood of her going abstract, Peyton has been breaking new ground lately. When I asked her to be part of a *Vogue* portfolio of artists doing self-portraits a year ago, her first reaction was to say no. Aside from a couple of small drawings, Peyton had never done herself. "I always felt I didn't need to, that I was so much in my pictures," she tells me. But then she changed her mind. "It was a really good moment," she remembers—the "moment of becoming" that she looks for in all her subjects. "Soon after you suggested it, I knew I was going to be in the Whitney Biennial, and I had this daydream—wouldn't it be great if I could make a picture of myself for that moment?" Tony took a Polaroid of her at the Maritime Hotel, looking directly at the camera, and that's what she painted. "It gave me a chance to look at me in the same way I look at other people, giving me the 'me treatment.' I suppose I was just looking at myself with a lot of respect and love."

For her show at Gavin Brown's last spring, Peyton did something else she had never done before. She rented a studio in the city and painted a number of friends (including Gavin and Rirkrit) from life instead of from photographs. Peyton found she "loved that challenge," and to my eye, the results were much closer to real portraits, more direct and less idealized. She recently broke her rule against taking commissions, doing a watercolor portrait of Sofia Coppola for Marc Jacobs, who used it in the ad campaign for his Essence perfume. Peyton's portrait of Jacobs hangs in the "Elizabeth Peyton wing" of his Paris apartment, along with half a dozen more of her paintings and drawings. "It's women like Elizabeth who inspire me," Jacobs told me, "women who are alive today and play a creative role in the world."

Last spring, she was somehow moved to do a painting of a tree near her house in the country, and this led to her taking some classes in landscape painting. What's next? Abraham Lincoln, of all people. "I made some paintings of him the other day," she tells me. "I discovered he looks a lot like Cameron Diaz." Let's hope not.

It turns out that what Peyton does isn't as limited or as "light" as people used to think. She's not afraid of beauty—"If something is beautiful," she says, "it should transcend time." Nor is she afraid to trust her intensely personal vision to reflect and become part of contemporary culture. "I make a ton of bad work. But I like the things I've been making lately a lot. It seems so simple, what I'm painting about. I just want the work to be as large as possible, and as good as possible—to take it the whole way, as far as it can go." □