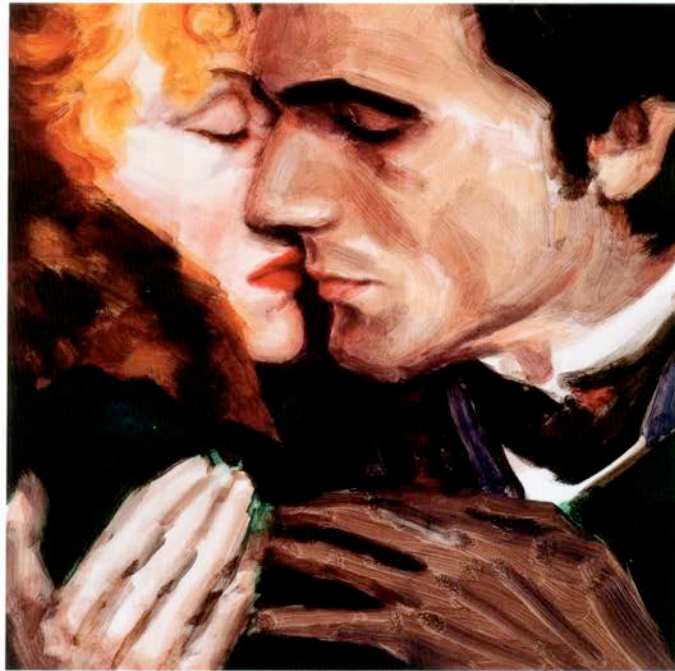


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Walter Robinson, "Elizabeth Peyton," *Whitewall*, Spring 2008

whitewall



THE UNSEEN WORLD OF CONTEMPORARY ART

SPRING 2008

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ELIZABETH PEYTON

*INTERVIEW BY WALTER ROBINSON
PORTRAITS BY SLAVA MOGUTIN*

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The following conversation took place in early December 2007 in the second-floor office of Gavin Brown's enterprise on Greenwich Street in Lower Manhattan.

WALTER ROBINSON: *So, from the beginning, you wanted to be an artist?*

ELIZABETH PEYTON: Yes — even as a young, little person.

WR: *Did you grow up here in New York?*

EP: No, I grew up in Connecticut, in a small town.

WR: *And then you told your parents you wanted to go to art school.*

EP: Yes, but we were a pretty creative family, so it wasn't a surprise. I was even encouraged.

WR: *So you came from an artistic family?*

EP: Yeah. My mom paints, and my dad wrote a lot when I was growing up. But he never published his writing. My parents had a candle shop.

WR: *You went to the School of Visual Arts, right? Did you hook up with some people there who are still your friends?*

EP: Yes, one friend, T.J. Wilcox — we met in school and we're still really good friends. Douglas Blau was my teacher and I still see him a little.

WR: *It's interesting that T.J. Wilcox and Doug Blau aren't painters.*

EP: Well, you can love people's work. It doesn't have to be anything like your own. I love Rirkrit Tiravanija so much and his work isn't anything like mine, but I think we have a spirit in common.

WR: *Your portraits of young men are especially striking for their androgynous quality. You have turned to a new kind of hero — one that's more like Donatello's statue of David than most portraits of men. It's quite an interesting subject for an artist, unlike anything anybody else is doing.*

EP: I was never thinking about masculinity or femininity. It was more about a particular kind of person and what they do or did with their lives.

WR: *You're interested in painting artists?*

EP: Yeah, people who make things. You know, musicians, artists.

WR: *You were born in 1965, during the sexual revolution, when men grew their hair long and dressed more like peacocks. There was an opening up and casting off of gender roles. Does that have something to do with it?*

EP: Actually, I was reading a lot of Oscar Wilde when I was young, and I think I got it from there. Something that was bigger than being male or female, like being a human was more universal. Not being held back by certain ideas of what you should be, and for myself that was really important, too.

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WR: *So, no football players?*

EP: I have painted some soccer players. It's really emotional what they go through, soccer players. I like sports. Sports is another place where people are being sort of bigger than what they are. And you have to be very creative to do that.

WR: *So your pictures are emblems of creativity?*

EP: I don't know. I do want to single out certain moments, to emphasize something. But it's kind of what I want to see, also. I would like a picture of this so then I make a picture. When I started there weren't pictures of Napoléon that I wanted to see. You really can't find them. There are a lot of stories you can read, but actually seeing pictures of it — they just don't exist. So I thought, "I'll just make them myself."

WR: *Did you conjure them up out of your imagination?*

EP: Yes, and from photos and from other paintings.

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WR: *You gave them a quality that you were looking for.*

EP: Well, I made them exist. There's the story of King Ludwig of Bavaria, who could never pass by the bust of Marie Antoinette that he had on his terrace without caressing her face. I wanted to see a picture of that.

WR: *We hear a lot of talk about how figurative painting is out of fashion or that it's not avant-garde. But it has such a strong presence in the contemporary art world. There are so many figurative painters working.*

EP: Well, it's got to be a good painting — it doesn't matter what it is. Figurative painting doesn't really matter so much as a thing of interest in itself. But on the other hand, human beings are very avant-garde and are as worthy a contemporary subject as anything else. It's not necessarily an old-fashioned idea. Are people old-fashioned? No.

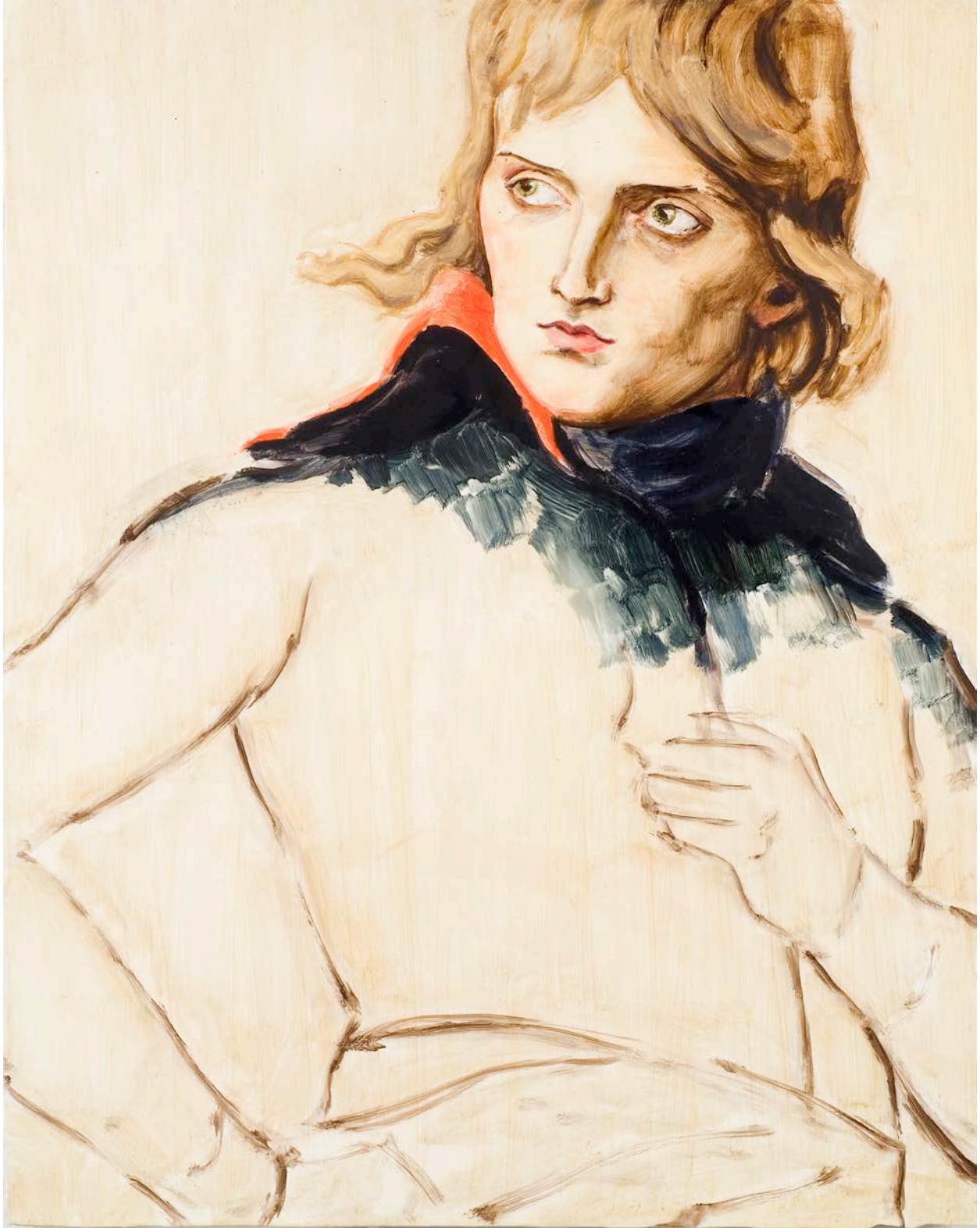
The only other thing that makes it different is it's accessible. People know who people are and people love people and people need people. So things that wind up in those paintings are a little more immediate. But it has to be good painting to even read that way, right?

WR: *The funny thing is that there's a lot of figuration in the world. The New Yorker is full of illustrations by commercial illustrators. So you wonder what sets John Currin or Lisa Yuskavage or so many other artists apart from that. It must be something special and inventive.*

EP: Well, you know, painting is different because it takes time



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and it's a removal from all that culture that's around us or life that's all around us. It's like rescuing part of it and putting it over here, with even more thought. It's about why anyone would feel like they needed another picture of a person. A painting can be the location for so many other ideas, even other than the person. Whereas photos and illustrations and all that, pretty much what you see is what's there. A painting is a much more concentrated idea; it's so many ideas put into one thing.

WR: Your pictures shift seamlessly between a real world and a personal world and what seems to be a celebrity world. The same way people can relate to Oprah in the way that they can relate to their neighbor. Except they probably like Oprah better.

EP: Right, yeah, because they spend so much time with her. I mean, they are all people who are in your life.

WR: I saw the portrait you did of Eminem. Do you personally like your subjects?

EP: I wouldn't spend time on anything that I didn't love. There's one picture I made of Eminem when he was five; it's from a record cover. He is in this Indian headdress made out of paper, and he looks so fierce, not like a cute little boy with colored paper on his head. And he had blue war paint on his face. I like that idea, that people have something in them even when they're a child, but because they're children they can't articulate it. They can't find a way out of what they're feeling until they're older and can express themselves. I felt a lot for him.

WR: Let me ask you about your painting format. Art is so often big these days. Does that bother you at all, since you make smaller works?

EP: It doesn't really bother me what other people do.

WR: Well, if it's smaller it's more intimate.

EP: Yeah, and it's easier to take around with you.

WR: Yes, you can carry it on a plane.

EP: I like that about it. There was this great documentary called *The Rape of Europa* — did you see that?

WR: No, but that's the story about how the Nazis stole all the art of Europe, right?

EP: Yeah, and there's a lot on American soldiers rescuing the paintings after the war. There's one scene with a soldier with the *Lady with an Ermine*, the Leonardo painting. Even in the hands of this American soldier it just looked so spectacular, and it's this tiny little thing and the length that people have gone to save these tiny little things is so great. It made me cry. And the workers at the hermitage stayed in the freezing cold museum protecting the artwork through several winters while the Germans occupied St. Petersburg. It was so heroic. And they did it for art.

WR: And you did your own version of *Lady with an Ermine*, which was a hit at the 2004 Whitney Biennial. What are you working on now?

EP: I just finished a painting of a scene from *The Age of Innocence* with Michelle Pfeiffer and Daniel Day-Lewis about to kiss.

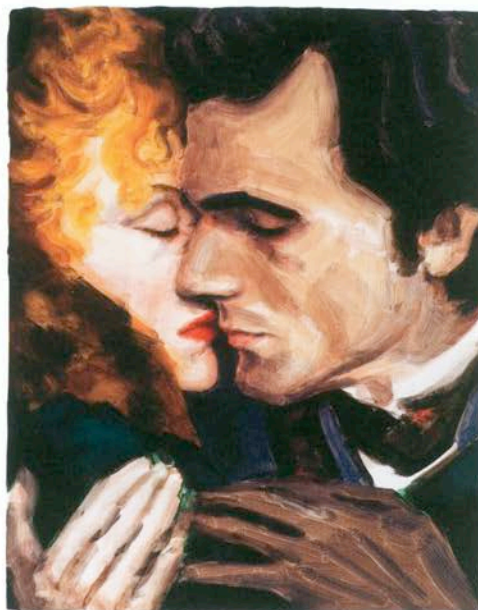
WR: Last question. Do you have any worries?

EP: Just about making art, you know, that the last thing I did was the last good painting I'll ever make — that could cause some worry. But I sometimes think, even if I can never make anything again, or I die tomorrow, I've made a couple really nice paintings. So I'm free in a way.

A solo exhibition of Elizabeth Peyton's new work will open in April at Gavin Brown's enterprise in New York. The first exhibition to focus solely on the artist's photos, opens next summer at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, and will be accompanied by a special limited-edition artist's book. A survey of the artist's work from 1991 to the present will open at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in October before traveling in the U.S. and Europe. The first monograph on her work, epistemously titled, was published by Rizzoli in 2005. In addition to exhibiting at Gavin Brown's enterprise, Peyton shows her work at Regen Projects in Los Angeles, Neugerriemstetter in Berlin, and Sadie Coles HQ in London. She's also been doing the cover illustrations for BookForum.



Elizabeth Peyton
Lady with Ermine
1489-90 (After
Leonardo da Vinci)
2003
Oil on board
12 x 9 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Gavin
Brown's enterprise, New York



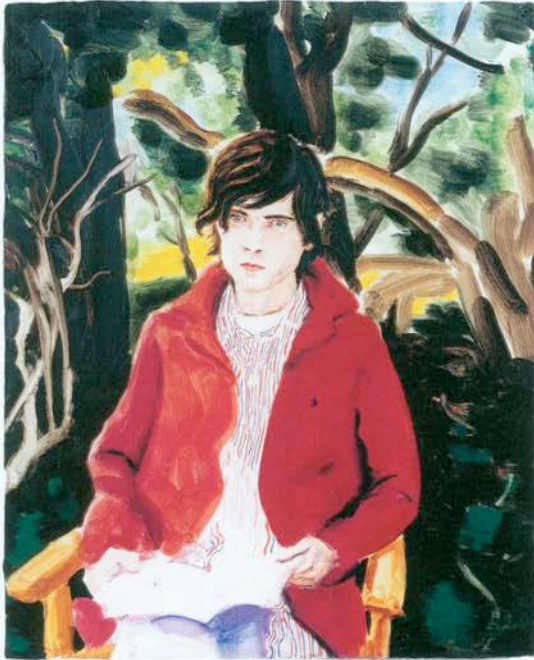
Elizabeth Peyton
The Age of Innocence
2002
Oil on board
14 1/2 x 10 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Gavin
Brown's enterprise, New York

Elizabeth Peyton
Little Em (Eminem)
2002
Oil on board
12 x 9 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Gavin
Brown's enterprise, New York

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Elizabeth Peyton

Nick reading Moby

Dick

2003

Oil on board

15 x 12 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York

“PAINTING TAKES
TIME AND IT’S
A REMOVAL FROM ALL
THAT CULTURE
THAT’S AROUND US
OR LIFE THAT’S ALL
AROUND US.
IT’S LIKE RESCUING
PART OF IT AND
PUTTING IT OVER
HERE, WITH A LITTLE
MORE THOUGHT”



Elizabeth Peyton

Julian with a broken

leg

2004

Oil on board

14 x 11 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York

Elizabeth Peyton

Green Nick

2003

Colored pencil on

paper

6 x 6 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York

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