

## NEVILL KEATING PICTURES:

### **Peter Godwin:**

In a 1990 article in the *New Yorker*, Dan Hofstadter described the School of London artists – notably R.B.Kitaj, Leon Kossoff and Dennis Creffield, as “dungeon masters”.<sup>1</sup> An accomplished exercise in cultural anthropology, this piece helped introduce American audiences to an eccentric tribe of painters that seemed to revel in dinginess and squalor. These artists eschewed the huge studios of their New York counterparts and the teams of busy assistants. They never had to waver between the easy way and the hard way: difficulty was an essential component of each and every work, the very pulse of art.

It may have been an exaggeration – an attempt to stir impressions of dank, dark London buried in many an American psyche - but there was a core of truth to this tale. The British artists *were* different. They seemed like dedicated, old-fashioned amateurs compared to the market-savvy masters of New York. It is a small irony that Britain would quickly become known for a new generation of artists that took media and marketing to heights even Andy Warhol never scaled.

At first glance Peter Godwin may seem like a refugee from the School of London. His still lifes and interiors are dark and expressive, his surfaces heavily worked. Here is a beast as unlikely as the Platypus – an Antipodean dungeon master – an artist whose paintings bear the scars of many painful revisions. Like Frank Auerbach, whom he admires, Godwin is happy to erase and redo a drawing numerous times until it feels right. He recognises no objective scale of values by which a work may be judged a success or a failure. The artist must be the sole arbiter, his own most vehement critic.

It may be surprising to learn that Godwin’s studio is not located in a convict-built basement in Tasmania, but on an outcrop of bushland on the New South Wales central coast. Sunlight pours into this open pavilion-like structure, parrots fly in to assess his work in progress. By day and night the bush is full of snarling, chirping, grunting life. When Godwin turns away from his easel he can look down upon a panorama of ocean and foreshores.

This apparent disjunction between the nature of Godwin’s painting, and the setting in which he paints, makes us suddenly aware of the sensual, pleasurable nature of his pictures. These are not the works of an introvert or misanthrope, but of an artist with a great

enthusiasm for the world around him. One might say a “lust for life”, if the phrase didn’t smack of Irving Stone rather than Van Gogh.

Godwin is swiftly becoming recognised as one of Australia’s most accomplished painters, although the museums lag behind the private collectors in the scramble to acquire his works. In a scenario that echoes the delayed-reaction triumphs of William Robinson, the great Queensland landscapist, Godwin was already in his fifties before he emerged as a force in Australian art. Like Robinson he spent much of his career as an art teacher, putting everything into the job, making occasional paintings and lithographs that were sold through a minor suburban gallery. It was a low-key existence, but it was enough. For Godwin it was most important to feel that he was making progress in his work. Setting challenges and solving problems provided all the satisfaction he required.

His current Sydney dealer, Campbell Robertson-Swann, who had long admired Godwin’s contributions to annual staff and student shows at the National Art School, says that it took six years to persuade him to hold an exhibition. When the artist finally succumbed to Robertson-Swann’s persistence in 2001, the show sold out in a flash. Every subsequent show has done the same, with the queue of disappointed collectors growing longer and longer. The only buyers that have been slow to act are the public art museums that previously refused to buy anything by William Robinson until the prices had gone sky-high. The curators may not be smart but at least they are consistent.

When Godwin is asked why he waited so long to have a solo show, he finds it hard to explain. “I suppose I didn’t want to show until I felt my paintings were solid,” he muses. “I could’ve had exhibitions, but I just didn’t want to. I wanted the work to be like a brick wall, so no-one could touch it.” In retrospect he feels that he acted like a dilettante, treating painting as a strictly private affair.

The unique character of Godwin’s work springs partly from his addiction to egg tempera. He says this time-honoured medium enables him to paint in a way that feels very much like drawing on a lithographer’s stone with a crayon. It handles like an oil-based paint but its fast-drying properties allow him to quickly build up layer upon layer. Godwin will scratch back into the surfaces, creating thin, meandering lines that break up the dark recessive planes he uses as a backdrop.

These paintings have strong abstract elements but with the aid of a title the objects they contain are easily recognizable: chairs, easels, squid, tribal masks from New Guinea, a lemon, a skull, a dead bird,

even a harpsichord. Several pictures are dominated by a swathe of blue and white cloth painted in free arabesques. Light streams through a window, marking out a vivid white rectangle.

The subjects are both important and unimportant. While one could imagine these paintings furnished with an alternative repertoire of props, Godwin loves to paint things that are old and familiar. He keeps returning to the same motifs because he finds there is always another way of approaching them, something to add to his store of perceptions. If he is not as dogged as Giorgio Morandi it is because he expects to reach an end one day and move on to a different subject. Among the bric-a-brac in his studio there are small improvisations on various Old Master paintings, such as Fragonard's *The Stolen Kiss*.

It is easy enough to discern Godwin's admirations and influences: Chardin, Zurbarán, Matisse, Picasso, Braque, and the Scottish-born painter, Ian Fairweather, are all part of the mix. Pinned to the studio wall is a postcard of Picasso's last self-portrait with wide, staring eyes and an outline of the skull beneath the skin. Nearby is a reproduction of Zurbarán's immaculate still life, *A Cup of Water and a Rose on a Silver Plate* (c.1630), from the National Gallery.

Godwin works somewhere in the interstices between the object and art history. He is conscious of those past masters who have brought an original slant to the painting of a still life or interior, but finds that each object has its own peculiarities in the way it occupies space and responds to light. A Mendi mask or shield from New Guinea's Southern Highlands acts like a lurking presence in these paintings. Godwin is aware of the influence tribal art exerted on the early Modernists and enjoys that sense of continuity with artists such as Picasso and Braque, but he also wants us to recognise the abiding strangeness of these artifacts. A spirit mask taken from its original context and displayed in the studio is like a black hole in the fabric of bourgeois comforts. It is as though the artist wants to pay homage to a more primal form of life that exists on the margins of our artfully contrived ideas of civilisation.

Godwin respects the power of these tribal presences but knows that he and his work are rooted in the bourgeois world. He accepts that painting is one of the abiding touchstones of our culture, a measure of evolving taste and intellectual receptiveness. He understands how its wellsprings spread deep and wide, into the past and the mysteries of other 'exotic' cultures. Yet he also believes that for a painter to bring his work to the highest pitch of achievement, he must concentrate on those things that are close to home. For the artist it is the quality of the experience that counts, not the quantity of pictures or the variety of subjects. In his sunlit studio in the

bush, Godwin has peered into the dark, secretive life of objects. Focusing on those motifs with which he has formed an intimate, long-term acquaintance he savours the thrill of continuous discovery.

(1,380 words)

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<sup>i</sup> Reprinted in Hofstadter, Dan, *Temperaments: Artists Facing Their Work*, Alfred A. Knopf Inc, New York, 1992.