

SMH COLUMN 136: 15 September 2007

Peter Godwin
Louise Bourgeois

One of the greatest mysteries in the world of contemporary art is why a few utterly unlovable artists are picked up and turned into superstars at an early age, while their more talented peers languish in the wilderness for decades. For some artists this is a cosmic injustice and an abiding preoccupation, but it does them no good to keep dwelling on the subject. One could be cynical and argue it is the way of the world that the froth floats on top while anything more solid sinks to the bottom. One might complain about the philistinism of curators and critics, or simply say that success in art is no more predictable than a throw of the dice.

All of the above may be true but it often comes down to how one defines success. Sigmund Freud said it was a matter of "fame, money and the love of women" – and so it is for most people, allowing for a little flexibility in the gender department. But this is not always the case for artists. For every careerist, eager to be in all the right shows and collections, there is somebody else battling with a recalcitrant canvas, setting themselves unlikely problems that nobody else would ever recognize. Success for such artists lies in finding a way to reconcile two colours, or to create space within a composition.

Throughout a long but almost invisible career, Peter Godwin has epitomized this kind of self-contained artistic identity. Godwin did not have a solo exhibition until 2002, when he was already in his fifties. That show, at Defiance Gallery in Enmore, was an instant hit. The current exhibition at Defiance is his fourth, and it sold out before a single glass of wine had been sipped on opening night. Over the past few years there has been such a snowballing effect among collectors that gallery director, Campbell Robertson-Swann, swears that this time he had sixty clients trying to buy sixteen paintings.

This may sound like a press release, but it is simply the truth. Clearly, Peter Godwin is doing something right. Clearly he is making art that appeals to a wide range of people. I gave him the Mosman Art Prize in 2004, and thought that he had the outstanding work in the Best of the Year show at the S.H.Ervin Gallery in 2006, and in this year's Sulman Prize. But even though the private collectors are queuing up, and the work has been seen in a range of venues, not a single public gallery has thought to reserve a painting. This is such a familiar story that I inwardly groan to repeat it, but those

artists whose talent is most obvious are often the last to be appreciated by the curators. Wake-up guys! The prices are rising.

In many ways Godwin is a terribly old-fashioned artist. He paints still lifes and interiors in the unfashionable medium of egg tempera, which he has found to be a convenient half-way house between oils and acrylics, for although it is water-based it handles like an oil-based medium. The rapid drying and slightly chalky surface enables Godwin to apply layer upon layer of diluted paint to obtain translucent effects. He works back into low-keyed planes of colour, scratching and scoring the surfaces. Perhaps his greatest pleasure is that tempera allows him to paint in a way that feels like drawing.

Although each work contains recognizable subjects – a table top, a chair, curtains, cupboards, shells, a dead bird or squid – these paintings have powerful abstract dimensions. One sees this most vividly in the two largest pictures in the show, *Red Screen/Curtain I* and *II*. The screens are a rich, deep red, like the patina on a piece of antique Chinese furniture, but there are also echoes of Matisse's *Red Studio*. They are divided into rectangular panels, against which one perceives the outlines of an easel. A series of very free white wisps of paint represent the patterns on a curtain, cascading downwards like a vine.

In another work, *Cabinet with shells*, the same patterns appear in blue-black on white, and vice versa. This time they resemble the silhouettes of birds or the branches of trees. The same curtains appear in *Harpsichord on Blue and White Ground I* and *II*, where at first glance the open lid of the musical instrument resembles a window or a picture frame, while the support could be a painter's maulstick. Tom Roberts had a harpsichord in his Sydney studio so Godwin is in good company.

All these ambiguities are productive because the artist doesn't want us to take in an image with one quick look. The loosely painted objects and recessive space require the viewer to pause and puzzle over each painting. Godwin slows down our gaze, and with time we gain a fuller appreciation of the way each picture is put together.

Beyond this point it would be futile to multiply descriptions and explanations. Godwin's work represents a very pure meditation on the nature of visual experience. When he is asked about his paintings he might mutter something about space, or even time, but it is obvious that for this artist the absorbing thrill of the work lies in the doing, not the theory. He relishes the incremental increases in expertise, the enhanced abilities of the eye and the hand that emerge over a sustained period of labour and concentration. In Godwin's case that period has lasted for decades

but it is only in the past five years that he has felt confident of the results he is achieving. Few of his peers have been so stubborn or so demanding on themselves, but it would be an excellent policy if more artists learned to walk before they sought to fly.

Louise Bourgeois is another artist for whom fame and fortune arrived at an advanced stage of her career. Born in Paris in 1911, she is perhaps the most celebrated late developer in world art, although it would be more accurate to call her a late discovery. For while she may have been making work in the 1930s, and exhibiting sporadically for decades, it was not until the early 1980s that she was noticed by the art institutions. By that stage she had been a *New Yorker* for more than forty years, and was hailed as a great American artist. Over the past two decades her works have appeared in all the major exhibitions and collections, including a show at Sydney's not-so-major Museum of Contemporary Art in 1996.

Vasili Kaliman tells me that Bourgeois hasn't left the house in the past ten years, but is still making work with the same passion and fluency, not to mention the same obsessions about sexuality and the experiences of her childhood, which find expression in various surreal guises. Bourgeois is known as a sculptor but her exhibition at the Kaliman Gallery consists of prints, drawings, and *Ode a l'Oubli* (Ode to Oblivion) (2004), a 36-page "fabric and colour lithograph book".

While the graphic works have some of the mysterious quality of Outsider art, with their repetitive forms and the depiction of the body as a battleground for pain, anxiety and sexual desire, *Ode a l'Oubli* is a fascinating collection of small pictures made largely from scraps of fabric, napkins, bits of curtain, and other fragments that Bourgeois has had lying around at home for years. Most of the works are based on geometric patterns, recalling the artist's early studies as a mathematician, but there are others that have more organic associations. Two contain sentences: "I had a flashback of something that never existed", and, "The return of the repressed" – which would be a good name for Bourgeois's biography.

The series has an attractive decorative quality, shot through with flashes of meaning – warning signs that there is more to this work than meets the eye. As if we needed reminding.

Finally, I see a lot of shows by promising artists but rarely have the chance to discuss them. I can't, however, resist mentioning Lucinda Chambers's exhibition, *Birds & Trees*, at Charles Hewitt's. In reproduction these pictures seem like skilful but painfully realistic studies of birds, but to see them at first-hand is to discover a very

delicate touch with the brush, and a taste for discreet fantasy. Look closely, and the odd branch of a tree may contain a tiny camera crew, or a pair of lovers painted with almost microscopic care. For anyone with some knowledge of the kinds of birds and trees Chambers depicts, there will be secondary levels of meaning that belie the apparent simplicity of her theme. So while these paintings affect a simplicity and straightforwardness to rival Peter Godwin, they are as full of hidden trapdoors as one of Louise Bourgeois's drawings. Perhaps it's true that women are deeper – or at least more secretive – than men.

(1,475 words)

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Peter Godwin
Defiance Gallery, until 29 September.

Louise Bourgeois
Kaliman Gallery, until 29 September.

Lucinda Chambers: Birds and Trees
Charles Hewitt Gallery, until 18 September.

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