

# PETER DOIG

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## CONTENTS

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<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>FOYER</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>ROOM 1</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>ROOM 2</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>ROOM 3</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>ROOM 4</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>ROOM 5</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>SOUTERRAIN</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>INFORMATION / CATALOGUE</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>ROOM PLAN</b>	<b>16</b>

## PETER DOIG

November 23, 2014 – March 22, 2015

***CAUTION: Please do not touch the works of art!***



***Whenever this symbol appears on the exhibit labels, it means you will find the work of art discussed in detail under the corresponding number in this guide.***

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## INTRODUCTION

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### PETER DOIG

Peter Doig was born 1959 in Edinburgh and currently lives in Trinidad, London and New York. He is one of the most important artists of today. His often very large canvases are characterized by the differentiated handling of their paint medium, an intense and subtle palette, and pictorial inventions that draw upon art history, popular culture and the artist's private collection of visual sources. Doig endeavors to make his pictures appear timeless, insofar as he disallows all clear statements and seeks to evoke a mood, a feeling or an atmosphere—perhaps the hardest task of art. He thereby explores his ideas first of all in prints, experimenting with forms, colors, subjects and materials in order to arrive at the desired effect. A selection of these works on paper can be seen in the second part of the exhibition, downstairs in the Souterrain gallery. In them we find many of the motifs from the oil paintings presented on the ground floor. The layout of the exhibition follows the central themes in Doig's oeuvre.

The exhibition was curated by Ulf Küster.

**1 • *100 Years Ago (Carrera)*, 2001**

Peter Doig's pictures of canoes have become icons of contemporary painting. *100 Years Ago (Carrera)* shows a man in a canoe on the open sea in front of an island on the horizon. The composition is determined by the flat handling of color and shapes; in a sense this is a new kind of color field painting in the tradition of Henri Matisse and American post-war art. The forceful impact of its large planes is softened by the subtle palette and eased by the modulations in paint texture. The picture thereby acquires a dreamy, elegiac mood that seems infused with melancholy. The loneliness of the individual, lost in time and space, is reinforced by the island motif—we are looking at the prison island of Carrera, off the coast of Trinidad. We might also think of the motif of the Island of the Dead, however, as lent shape in art history above all in the Symbolist pictures by Arnold Böcklin. It is these subjects reminiscent of myth, translated into contemporary painting, that have established Peter Doig's international fame.

**2 • *Gasthof zur Muldentalsperre*, 2000–02**

For this painting Peter Doig looked back to photographs. The motif of the Muldentalsperre dam, for example, is taken from an old German postcard. Doig reproduced the dam decorated with colored stones and initially intended to show two gatekeepers in front of it. He then came across a photo taken ten years earlier, at a time when he was working as a dresser at English National Opera. He and a friend had put on some costumes for fun and posed for the camera. Through its combination of the colorful dam and the bizarre figures, the scene takes on the air of a strange, lost world. Bathed in a nocturnal blue, it might be the memory of a dream—an impression strengthened by the areas of swimming, translucent washes of paint.

**3 • *Pelican (Stag)*, 2003**

In a tropical landscape, a man wades along a shore through shallow water—a mixture of colorful, transparent hues. A waterfall of pale blue gushes in the background and flows in thin, trickling streaks out of the picture, as it were. The abrupt shift between abstract marks and motifs generating spatial depth is disorienting and obliges us find our bearings within the picture. We search in vain for the pelican mentioned in the title. The subject refers to a scene that the artist observed on a beach in Trinidad, where he watched a local grappling with a large pelican. He supplemented his memory of the incident with the postcard motif of an Indian fisherman dragging a net behind him. In *Pelican (Stag)*, this recollection of a first-hand experience, the photographic reality of the postcard and the presence of the liquid paint medium are all interwoven and create a multi-layered association of narrative and painting.

**4 • *Figures in Red Boat*, 2005–07**

An impressive representation of heat and humidity, and at the same time a picture in which time seems to have stood still. The composition enralls us above all through the virtuoso handling of its colors, which present an endless wealth of exquisite nuances as they flow one into another. The familiar motif of a boating party appears distanced and unreal. Although the deindividualized figures lend the picture a spatial structure, they tell us nothing about the place or time in which it is set. On a pictorial surface within which palms materialize as if out of nowhere, and in which the water merges seamlessly with the sky, the red boat with its intangible passengers hovers on the edge of figuration, between dissolving and reflecting planes of color.

**5 • *Metropolitain (House of Pictures)*, 2004**

Talking about the origins of this painting, Peter Doig recalls: “I was in Chicago for an exhibition and I saw the Daumier painting, *The Print Collector*, a painting of someone looking at prints. I was quite drawn to this male figure looking and the expression on his face. There wasn’t much detail; a lot of it had to do with body language. Back in London I made a painting based on the same idea [...]. It was a combination of the Daumier painting and a gallery I’d seen in Vienna called *Haus der Bilder* [“House of Pictures”] that was full of different types of paintings, landscapes, genre scenes, portraits. The Daumier painting reminded me of this shop front in Vienna and provided me with an entry point to this other world. So I tried to piece together my own version. [...] *Metropolitain (House of Pictures)* was a questioning painting. How does one interpret what you do?”

**6 • *House of Pictures*, 2000–02**

Peter Doig began this painting in London and completed it shortly after his move to Port of Spain, Trinidad. It shows a figure standing in front of the dark windows of an art gallery called *Haus der Bilder* (“House of Pictures”). The painting is one of the monumental landscape-format canvases of the early 2000s that began with *100 Years Ago* (ROOM 4). Built up out of several long horizontal bands of color terminating at the bottom in a red segment of circle, and punctuated by the dark rectangles across the center, it shows Doig turning away from a primarily symbolic, expressionistic pictorial language and towards an increasingly abstract and geometric style of painting. The composition is based on a setting that the artist discovered and photographed in Vienna, and into which he has introduced a figure that likewise goes back to a photograph. This combination of personal observations by the artist and his simultaneous exploration of the potently symbolic themes of looking, of picture and window and of inside and outside, constitute the particular fascination of this painting.

**7 • *Blotter*, 1993**

The person at the center of the picture looks like a boy, but is in fact the artist's brother at the age of about 28. Peter Doig deliberately wanted to avoid a portrait, however; of more importance was the representation of a feeling of loneliness. The small figure seems lost within the large composition, and his downcast gaze reinforces the sense of solitude and of being lost in thought. The melancholy character of the scene is further underlined by the finely nuanced colors applied in a differentiated manner. Doig refers in this context to a painting by Gustave Courbet, whose handling of white particularly impressed him and which was a direct source of inspiration for the palette of this work (the painting in question is *Poachers in the Snow* of 1867, likewise on display at the Fondation Beyeler until January 18, 2015). *Blotter* is also based on an LSD trip that the artist experienced at the age of 14 (more about this can be found in the interview conducted with Peter Doig by the curator, reproduced in the exhibition catalogue).

**8 • *Reflection (What Does Your Soul Look Like)*, 1996**

Peter Doig, who spent much of his childhood in Canada, draws powerful inspiration from its landscape. This painting seems rooted in a fall or winter situation of the kind typical of Canada. Doig plays here with distance and pictorial depth. By reintroducing the edge of the pond at the bottom of the canvas, he incorporates the viewer into the scene: we become the counterpart of the person of whom we can only see the feet at the top of the picture and the reflection. Cropped figure and viewer are connected via the motif of the pond surface, which also mirrors the autumnal colors of the surroundings. Reflections recur regularly in Doig's work (e.g. in *Echo Lake*, 9 •). They are interrogations of the theme of image and duplication that revolve around (self-)awareness and distorted self-perception, and as such touch upon painting itself as well as upon humankind.

**9 • *Echo Lake*, 1998  
*Swamped*, 1990**

The two works *Echo Lake* and *Swamped* are based on movie stills that Peter Doig has translated into paintings. Each makes reference to a closing scene from the 1980 American horror classic *Friday the 13th*. The artist is not interested in the unexpected shock delivered at this point in the film, but concentrates upon the calm but nonetheless ominous atmosphere. In *Swamped*, a boat carrying the main female character, apparently safe at last, is floating alone in the morning on a lake. It is a motif to which Doig would later return—albeit in a very different way—in *100 Years Ago* (1 •). Here, however, he is still working in an expressionistic style, using intensive colors and condensing forms to their essential character, so that it is almost impossible to recognize anything of the original image.

*Echo Lake* has likewise been altered and thereby alienated from its source. The layout, for example, is reversed (strictly speaking, the policeman should be standing on the left), indicating that Doig explored the subject first of all in a print and then used this as the starting point for his painting. The artist has also transposed the scene to nighttime (in the film the sky is blue), through which he creates a gloomy, uneasy atmosphere. The policeman's cry is made to seem helpless and alone; it remains unanswered—a silent scream as so famously pictured by Edvard Munch.

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**ROOM 3**

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**10 • *Concrete Cabin II*, 1992  
*Cabin Essence*, 1993/94**

Peter Doig's paintings of Le Corbusier's *Unité d'habitation* housing unit in Briey-en-Forêt in northeast France are magnificent commentaries on modernism. Looking through the forest's natural and confusing latticework of trees, we see—apparently bathed in sunlight—the geometrically engineered structure of a building that exemplifies one of the most important construction concepts of modernist architecture. Doig has regularly pointed out that the invisible presence of the battlefields of the First World War, which raged in this region, somehow lurks behind the viewer's back as a chilling threat.

These two paintings belong to a series of pictures that invite the viewer to look through a sort of screen, in this case the mesh of trees. This screen both keeps us at a distance and at the same time draws our eye onwards to the scene beyond, and so makes us engage intensively with what we see.

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**ROOM 4**

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**11 • *Untitled (Jungle Painting)*, 2007**

Between tall tropical bushes, a person emerges like a ghost from the dense foliage. Next to the strong colors of the jungle, his pale figure seems strangely unreal and lifeless. Looking more closely at his legs and scantily clad torso, we can make out indistinct forms whose colors repeat, in diluted tones, those of the leaves and bushes. It is almost as if the painterly setting of the jungle has stuck to the figure and has transformed his body—which at first sight appears colorless—into a projection screen for dripping paint and enigmatic shadows. The work belongs to a series of pictures in which Peter Doig turns his attention to Le Corbusier, one of the most important champions of modernism. The image goes to back to a photograph that shows Le Corbusier in his swimming trunks, standing in a doorway framed with palm fronds at his Cap Martin home in the South of France.

**12 • *Paragon*, 2006**

*Paragon* shows three figures spaced out in a diagonal along a beach, where they are playing cricket. Sea, sand and vegetation overlay the canvas in highly simplified forms, arousing memories of paintings by Paul Gauguin, who likewise used dark outlines to demarcate people and objects in some of his works. In addition to the luminous color fields, the foreshortened perspective and renunciation of a single light source also remind us of Gauguin. While his artistic forerunner sought to recreate the mythical paradise of the South Seas, Peter Doig focuses on everyday life in his adoptive home of Trinidad. Cricket—a legacy of British colonial rule—is a popular sport throughout the Commonwealth. In *Paragon*, however, the game Doig invites us to watch has been translated into a timeless arena with a distant, otherworldly air.

**13 • *Untitled (Man on Horse)*, 2014**

This painting is one of Peter Doig's most recent works and was completed just a few days before the opening of the exhibition. The retrospective character of our exhibition is thus extended right up to the immediate present, granting us a view of yet another facet of Doig's oeuvre.

**14 • *Cat of Nine Tails*, 2014**

This monumental mural was specially created by the artist and nine of his students—Peter Doig teaches painting at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie—for the exhibition at the Fondation Beyeler and was executed directly on site in the large Souterrain gallery. It is based on Doig's 2004 painting *House of Pictures (Carrera)* (ROOM 2), which revolves around the theme of seeing and opens up views into an imagined world. Through the window of a building, comparable to that in *House of Pictures (6 •)*, we look not into an interior but onto an ocean backdrop. The mural offers a striking example of the re-use of motifs in Doig's oeuvre. The artist readily returns to compositions and subjects explored in earlier works in order to deploy them in new combinations.

**15 • *The artist's visual archive***

The selection of pictures being screened here has been compiled from the artist's personal archive. Peter Doig, who takes a lot of photographs himself, is a keen observer of our age and of the vast flood of images it produces. For his paintings and prints, and indeed for his art as a whole, Doig's library of visual material is an inexhaustible source of inspiration. Coupled with his own memories, it forms the foundation of his artistic activity. We are here showing a random sequence of pictures from this archive, in which many of the original motifs underlying the artist's works can be found, and in which private and public materials combine to form a Doig-ian microcosm.

### Experimental prints

The last room of the exhibition is devoted to Peter Doig's experimental printmaking—the first time that this ostensibly secondary strand of his oeuvre has been afforded space in a public exhibition. Doig's prints play an important role in his creative process: they are test beds for the atmospheres and moods that he wants to express with his paintings. Here he can approach his subjects in an uninhibited manner, develop ideas and if necessary discard them again. Doig works on his plates in a range of techniques and repeatedly takes prints from them, documenting his evolving composition in its different "states", as these impressions are called. The final state of a print is consequently the sum of all the stages that have gone before. The successive states bear witness to a—quite literally—multi-layered process of slow and steady crystallization, resulting in images that can ultimately feed in turn into large-scale paintings. Doig's prints thus not only grant insights into his working process and artistic thinking, but occupy a place within his oeuvre in their own right—as artworks whose impact is no less compelling than Doig's oil paintings and which have an enduring power to surprise.

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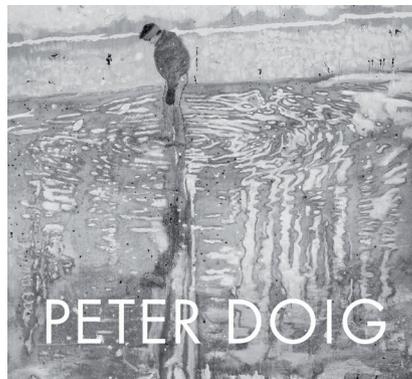
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The exhibition is accompanied by the catalogue *Peter Doig* (Hatje Cantz Verlag) in English and German editions, with an essay by Richard Schiff and an interview with Peter Doig by Ulf Küster.

176 pages, 115 illustrations, CHF 62.50

Further publications on Peter Doig are available from our Art Shop: <http://shop.fondationbeyeler.ch>

Upcoming exhibition:

**Paul Gauguin**

February 8 – June 28, 2015

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- PETER DOIG**
- GUSTAVE COURBET (until 18.1.2015)
- PAUL GAUGUIN (8.2.–28.6.2015)
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