



'Night Bathers', 2019. © Peter Doig. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2019. Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York and London.

The rare gifts of Peter Doig

Plus: the magic of Patrick Caulfield and James Rosenquist's vistas of lustrous but unappealing plenty

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'My basic intention,' the late Patrick Caulfield once told me, 'is to create some attractive place to be, maybe even on the edge of fantasy — warm, glowing, but often, by use, rather seedy.' He frequently succeeded, as you can see from a beautifully mounted little exhibition at the Waddington Custot Gallery. It is a reminder of what a witty and inventive artist Caulfield (1936–2005) could be.

Four screen prints from 1971, 'Interior: Morning, Noon, Evening and Night', give a virtuoso display of the visual legerdemain he could work using the simplest of props. These all have the same basic design: a window frame, consisting of thick, black lines, with a lampshade dangling in front of it. But by simple colour substitutions, he conjures up four quite distinct times of day, and moods.

**James Rosenquist:
Visualising the
Sixties**

Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, W1, until 9
November

At noon the glass is glowing yellow with sunlight, the interior a cool, shady blue. By the time night has fallen, outside is inky black, the window frame and shade a warm red, with an oval of yellow light at the bottom of the lamp. The effect is cosy, mysterious and at the same time ironic, which is characteristic of Caulfield's world and work.

He's like a magician saying: 'Look, this is just a trick and here's how it's done.' But you still feel the magic. Caulfield loved slyly emphasising the illusions that paint can create. 'Evening Paper' (1999), for example, is, like many of his images, almost abstract. He summons a room with a few oblongs — dark ones to represent a window, light ones for a door into a more brightly illuminated space.

But in the foreground, on a desk that is just as minimally indicated, are a pen and pen-holder depicted with such hyper-realist precision that you have to peer closely to check it's not a photograph stuck on to the canvas. Again — abracadabra! — he's summoned up an elusive atmosphere: nostalgic, slightly melancholic, a little sardonic. You feel as though a Hitchcock character is about to enter.

Caulfield objected to being classified as a 'pop' artist, which he wasn't quite. But stylistic labels are very approximate. James Rosenquist (1933–2017) was closer to mainstream pop but he didn't have much in common with Warhol or Lichtenstein. You quickly learn that from the large and high-quality show of his 1960s work at the Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac.

'Pop' depended on recycling imagery from mass media. But Rosenquist's territory was quite different from, say, Warhol's. His starting point was the billboard. He began his career painting them, a craft that employed soft-flowing brush strokes calculated to create a near-photographic illusion from a distance.

He later used these techniques to create a novel kind of painting: typically, a slightly surreal salad of commercial imagery. 'The Light that Won't Fail I' (1961) comprises the face of a woman, wisps of smoke rising from her cigarette, a pair of disembodied boots, and a gigantic comb. Other favourite ingredients are glistening slices of fruit, forks, light bulbs and strands of spaghetti. The overall effect is simultaneously dream-like and queasy-making: a vista of lustrous but unappealing plenty.

If Rosenquist has a successor, it's Jeff Koons, another artist who dwells on the tacky excess of affluence. But simply as a painter, Rosenquist was far better. Putting pigment on a surface, as Michelangelo observed, 'is a music and a melody in itself, which intellect only can appreciate, and with great difficulty'. Not many people can do it really well.

One contemporary artist who can is Peter Doig, whose new work is at the Michael Werner Gallery (another of the fine London townhouses that galleries are increasingly taking over; Ely House, the premises of Thaddaeus Ropac, is almost palatial).

Doig is an artist who has led a life almost as wandering as Paul Gauguin, whose ghost hovers over several of these paintings. The latter spent part of his early life in Peru, was brought back to France, then moved on to Oceania. Doig's itinerary includes Edinburgh, Trinidad, Canada, London (where he went to art school) and now Trinidad again. He is sometimes classed with the Young British Artists of the 1990s, but, as his CV suggests, the fit is highly approximate.

The current show suggests that Doig is a successor to that long line of European painters who had sought out the strong colours and brilliant light of the hot south — Gauguin, Cézanne and Matisse among them. These paintings, though, are scarcely documentary.

The splendid 'Lion (Fire Down Below)', 2019, sounds the royal blue and sunshine yellow chromatic chord of Van Gogh in Arles. But it would be wrong to conclude that big cats roam the streets of the Caribbean.

Doig himself is hunting for something else: new ways to put paint down on a surface, and make it interesting and beautiful. That might sound simple, but it is actually extraordinarily difficult. On this evidence, though, Doig is doing it.

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