

VOGUE
July 2013

DREAMING IN COLOR

PETER DOIG'S PAINTINGS OF TRINIDADIAN LIFE
LEAVE THE IMAGINATION FREE TO ROAM.

by Dodie Kazanjian



Oil on linen, 47 x 63 1/2 inches. Private Collection, courtesy of Michael Werner Gallery

A tropical landscape, a lavender sky, a cobalt-blue sea, the hull of an orange boat with a man's head and knee visible. A huge, dark bird glides over him, wings half folded. You can feel the heat and hear the lush, sensuous quiet. The scene has a seductive, fairy-tale ambiguity. It's poised between realism and abstraction, a portal into another world of heightened color and infinite possibility.

Cave Boat Bird Painting is one of some 110 indelible images in Peter Doig's upcoming exhibition at the Scottish National Gallery in Edinburgh, a survey of Trinidad-based work he's done since 2000. "It's an imagined vision of something I saw," says Doig, who is recognized as one of the most mysterious and masterful artists of the last decade. "Whatever else it may be," observes the art historian Richard Shiff, "a painting by Doig is a lure to endless looking."

"We go kayaking off the north coast to this island that's inhabited only by birds," says Doig. "Once we were coming through a tunnel cave just as the prow of a fishing boat passed across it on the other side. It was dramatic, the shape of the boat's prow, and the color. That's where I got the idea." He wanted to have a figure in it so he used himself, changed the color of the boat—turquoise to orange—and added the bird, whose shape is reminiscent of the recurrent bird image in Braque's paintings. "In this part of the world, they call those corbeaux. They're more like vultures, incredibly ugly closeup, and incredibly beautiful when they fly."

Doig, who was born in Edinburgh, spent his early childhood in Port of Spain, where his father took a job with a shipping firm. The family moved to Montreal when he was seven. Thirty-five years later, in 2002, he decided to move back to Trinidad with his own family, so that his children could have the experiences he'd had. (Doig has always moved around a lot and he also spends time in London and New York, but Trinidad is his main base.) "I had Trinidad constantly in the back of my mind," he tells me. The show's title, "No Foreign Lands," comes from Robert Louis Stevenson, who wrote, "There is no foreign land. It is only the traveler that is foreign." Of his return to Trinidad Doig says, "I felt welcomed. I'm more directly influenced by my surroundings here because they're so potent. My work is very much about questioning—where I am, what I can depict, what's legitimate. A lot of it is about the idea of reduction. How can you suggest a lot with very little—without becoming a minimalist?"

In *Cave Boat*, Doig gives us something that artists try for and rarely achieve—an image that's here and now, yet timeless. The balance between detail and atmosphere leaves it open, active, and alive. We finish it ourselves.