

# The Daily Telegraph

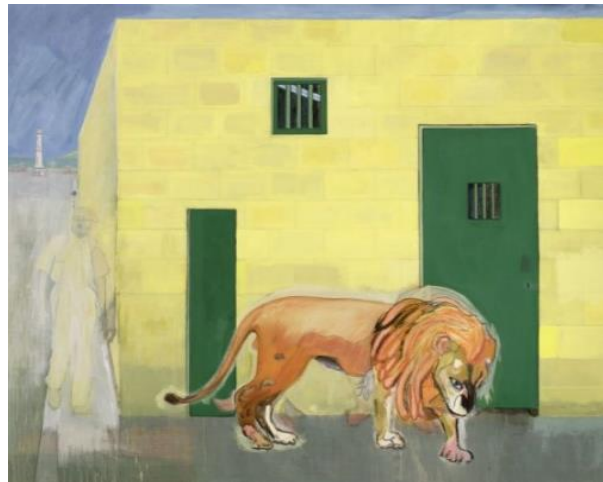
Alastair Sooke  
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## Trouble in Paradise

Caribbean-based artist Peter Doig tells *Alastair Sooke* about the bizarre court case that turned his life upside down.

Two years ago, at Christie's in New York, a painting by the British artist Peter Doig, featuring a ghostly canoe in a lagoon, sold for an astonishing amount of money: nearly \$26 million (£16.6 million). "It was crazy," says Doig, who didn't receive a penny from the auction, speaking to me on the phone from his home in Trinidad. "I remember painting *Swamped* when I was a mature student at Chelsea College of Art [and Design]. It was there in my degree show, and no one wanted to buy it".

How, then, does he account for its value today? "I can't really say. I just know how hard it is to make a decent painting. Over the years, it hasn't become any easier."



Trinidadian trend: Peter Doig draws upon the culture of his adopted home in works such as *Rain in the Port of Spain* (2015).

Warm, thoughtful and down-to-earth, Doig, who recently became a father for the sixth time, is now 57. Although he rents an apartment in New York, he spends most of his time living in a farming community in the hills above the Port of Spain with the mother of his youngest child. As we talk, I can hear birdsong in the background.

Instantly, it evokes an impression of paradise. Yet, Doig tells me, as hints of a Scottish accent break through his laid-back transatlantic lilt, "it's not quite what people imagine". He spent Christmas on the island but "for 18 days it rained solid".

Later this month, he will swap Caribbean downpours for British drizzle when he travels to London to accept the Whitechapel Gallery's Art Icon award for 2017- setting the seal on his reputation as one of our most distinguished painters.

When we speak, though, he is still smarting about the bizarre events of last summer, when he became embroiled in a Kafkaesque court case in the United States. "Now it seems crazy and absurd, like a joke," he says. "But, at the time, it was a major thing, costing huge amounts of money by the day".

Doig was accused of falsely denying that he had painted a rocky desert landscape owned by a Canadian former prison officer called Robert Fletcher. Supported by an art dealer in Chicago, Fletcher claimed that the untitled acrylic canvas, signed "Peter Doige", was an early work by Doig that he had bought, for \$ 100, directly from the artist, in 1976.



Reflective: Doig's *Figures in a Red Boat* (2005-2007).

"I was presented with this painting five-and-a-half years ago," Doig tells me. "But when I told them, 'Sorry, not my painting', they came back in more aggressive fashion."

In 2013, Fletcher and the dealer sued Doig for nearly \$8 million in damages, and the case eventually came to trial, in Chicago. The crux of Fletcher's argument was that he had witnessed Doig making the painting while the artist was serving a brief sentence for LSD possession at a jail in Thunder Bay, Ontario, where he, Fletcher, had worked.

It sounded almost credible: by the mid-Seventies, Doig, who was born in Edinburgh, was living in Canada, where his father, who worked for a shipping company, had relocated the family in 1966. Moreover, as a teenager, Doig had experimented with LSD—something he has always been open about, as attested by the titles

of two hallucinatory paintings from 1993, *Blotter* and *Window Pane*, which refers to brands of the mind altering drug.

The only trouble was, the artist says, none of it was true. While preparing for the trial, Doig's lawyers discovered that an artist called Peter Edward Doige, who died in 2012, was in fact responsible for Fletcher's landscape. "He was a struggling artist who lived a hard life," Doig says. "He ran away from home at 14, lived on the road, was arrested on several occasions - not for possession of LSD but for robbery - and did end up in prison".

Following his lawyers' breakthrough, Doig was appalled that the case still went ahead.

"It became quite sinister, because everything got out of my control. Suddenly, it was all very serious, and I was giving deposition under oath. I had to be very careful about what I said". The judge ruled that "Peter Doig could not have been the author" of Fletcher's painting. But, says Doig, "It's still ongoing and messy. And it did interrupt my work."

The announcement of the Whitechapel's Art Icon award, then, is especially welcome, because it will shift attention away from the court case and back onto his painting.

Doig is also pleased to be renewing his association with the gallery. In 1991, when he was still an unknown artist in his early 30s, occupying a squatted studio on Rosebery Avenue in central London and working as a dresser at English National Opera, Doig won the Whitechapel Award. "That award came out of the blue and gave me a break," he recalls. At the time, Doig's densely painted canvases, with their splendid colours and folksy imagery, felt out of step with the sleek prevailing aesthetic of Contemporary British art, epitomised by the flashy, conceptual work of Damien Hirst and the rest of YBAs.

By the 2000s, though, his ability to make the traditional medium of painting feel exciting and relevant ensured that his canvases were widely coveted.

“Peter is one of the most significant painters of the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” says Iwona Blazwick, director of the Whitechapel, who has known Doig since the mid-Eighties. “He has shown that you can be at once figurative, very traditional in a way, and radical at the same time.”

Trying to distil the essence of Doig’s art is not easy. In part, this is because his imagery is so diverse, encompassing everything from, say, a truck driving along a highway at night - which we find in *Hitch Hiker* (1989-1990) - to the boy in *Blotter*, staring at his own reflection in a frozen pond.

Following his move to Trinidad in 2002, Doig began to draw repeatedly upon its culture, as well as everyday occurrences that he observed there: a game of croquet on the seashore; a half-naked man carrying a dead pelican on a beach. Stag, a brand of Caribbean beer, became a frequent reference.

But the “meaning” of his work remained elusive. His most recent show of new paintings, held in an exquisite “palazzetto” in Venice in 2015, was typically enigmatic.

An orange lion roamed the streets of Port of Spain outside a yellow prison. In another painting, a sinister black-clad horseman eyeballed the viewer, partly inspired by a stock character called the Midnight Robber, from Trinidad’s carnival.

“My work has definitely been affected by the carnival in Trinidad, which is a major part of life here,” he says. “It’s a post-colonial society, and carnival represents independence and freedom in the broadest terms, and a kind of rebellion, too”.

Now Doig is in the middle of a new cycle of paintings, which he plans to show in Vienna in a couple of years. He is reluctant to discuss them, although he does reveal that one large work is inspired by an old postcard of a solitary skier high above Chamonix that he has used as a source in the past. Indeed, skiers, mountains and snowy vistas from a rare seam of consistency within his output.

What, then, makes Doig’s art so distinctive? “I really don’t know,” he replies. “It’s not like I’m consciously trying to make a ‘Doig’ painting. I just always want to try new things. I don’t think of myself as working in a particular way - unlike other British painters like, say [Lucian] Freud, [Frank] Auerbach, or even Patrick Caulfield, who you associate with one way of working.”

Arguably, the most distinctive thing about a Doig is its peculiar atmosphere: eerie, unresolved introspective. “There is this sense [in Doig’s art] of a dreamlike way of viewing the world,” says Blazwick. “It seems to have an uncanny quality and often a sort of darkness. There’s always something potentially violent in Peter’s ravishingly beautiful paintings, a sense of trouble in paradise.” Doig’s palette, too, is remarkably “vivid”, Blazwick says. Its “dazzle” reminds her of Gauguin and Matisse. “I see him as being their equal,” she tells me.

Moreover, Doig’s paintings have been enormously influential - which is another reason that the Whitechapel has decided to honour him. “Every graduate show I go to, there’s a legacy of Peter Doig,” Blazwick says.

In part, this reflects his long career as a teacher. This year, though, he plans to relinquish his professorship at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, a post he has held since 2005.

Why is he giving up teaching? “Well,” he replies, “I’ve done it for a long time, and it takes up a lot of mental energy. But I’ve got as much out of teaching as I’ve put in.”

What will he do when he has more time? “Hopefully paint,” he replies. “Or ski.”