

ARTFORUM

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Peter Doig



Peter Doig, *Two Trees*, 2017, oil on linen. 7' 10 1/2" x 11' 7 3/4".

It's been fifteen years since Peter Doig moved from London to Trinidad. But his art has never gone tropical. If anything, his work these days seems more "northern" than ever. The thirty-four paintings and works on paper in this show kept making me think of Marsden Hartley, Max Beckmann, Helene Schjerfbeck—not of the Gauguins and Matisse who looked to the south for their light. Doig's early paintings often seem to represent remembered or, perhaps, imagined scenes from his Canadian childhood, but stylistically they are hard to locate, concerned more with inner than outer landscapes, apparitions rather than appearances. Doig has spoken of how, in his art, "the figures almost disappear as you get closer," so that "the paintings are very empty, in a way." That sense of evanescence, of the dissolution of the boundaries between things, is rarer in the new work. Now, the closer you get, the more recalcitrantly and materially present things and people seem – they might become less recognizable, but they don't evaporate. The paintings' rich facture is heavier than it used to be, the color less atmospheric, the drawing cruder.

The bather pictured in *Untitled (Head of Man)* (all works cited, 2017) doesn't really seem to be emerging from the dark, ominous waters around him – rather, the water seems to have cut his head off at the neck like a guillotine. The two eyes are set on completely different planes. It's an image of

displacement or placelessness, but with every plane and every feature paradoxically hammered down into its contradictory place. This head turned out to be a version of the life-size one in *Red Man (Sings Calypso)*, the largest and most elaborately constructed of the show's five versions of an image of a standing male bather. In a sense, then, maybe it's true that in *Untitled (Head of Man)* the head has been severed from its body – it has been conceptually collaged, one might say, excised from the full figure seen in the other versions, just as the figure itself can be seen as having overlaid on different backgrounds. In the sunny day of *Red Man (Sings Calypso)*, he stands in green trunks in front of a structure that might be a lifeguard's tower, whereas in *Red Man*, he wears red trunks and the tower has disappeared; the sky is nocturnal darkness. But the figure/ground relation is always problematic.

The most elaborate painting in the show was *Two Trees*, in which three figures stand by the edge of the sea, each of them set apart as if in his own niche by the very Nabi-esque trees standing between and behind them; two of the men, sporting odd headgear, appear to be spearfishers, and the third is filming them. The scene is set at twilight. Everything's in shadow, except that the brightly patterned outfits of two of the men practically leap out of the gloom, outshining even the red shirt worn by the central figure. The painting's eerie atmosphere derives less from the inscrutable nature of its unspecified underlying narrative than from the disquieting way the artist manipulates the modulations of tone and color. Yet as an image, it remains as unfathomable as it is memorable.

In apparent contrast to such enigmas were two portraits of Emheyo Bahabba, aka Embah, the late Trinidadian artist and poet, whose 2007 exhibition at White Columns in New York Doig helped organize Doig portrays him as a musician holding a guitar, and gave one of the paintings a title that explains why: *I do not sing because I am happy. I sing the song because it is about happiness. Embah.* These words speak to the earnestness that has overtaken Doig's art. He has given up much of what used to be most seductive about his paintings. The sense of trippy wonderment at his own ability to transmute the world into paint has morphed into a more awkward or brooding self-consciousness – a deeper, darker, beauty.