

theguardian

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18 December 2017

Peter Doig review – sun, sea and savagery in a troubled paradise

In these grave and noble paintings of our catastrophic age, the Scottish artist uses lurid colours to create bold beach scenes haunted by murders and mangy lions



The art of Peter Doig takes place in a troubled Arcadia, a place of sunshine, sea and deadly snakes. In his new painting *Red Man (Sings Calypso)* (2017) a colossal figure stands on a golden beach, his bare – reddish – torso framed by the black iron frame of a coastguard's platform. The sea is a green band flecked with daubs of white. The pale blue sky is hollowed out by puffy cloud shapes. On the ground, a man lounges in shades with a boa constrictor wrapped around him. Is it a pet or is it strangling him?

In the Greek legend of the Trojan War, the priest Laocoön and his sons were strangled on the beach by giant snakes. The man with the snake in Doig's painting looks like the doomed Laocoön as depicted in classical art. Doig was a friend and collaborator with Derek Walcott, the Nobel prize-winning Caribbean poet who died this year and whose epic work *Omeros* transposes the myths of Homer to the West Indies. Doig's new paintings are similarly Homeric, or Walcottian. He sees his Trinidad home as a place of giants, monsters, blind singers.



'A narcissistic colossus' ... *Red Man (Sings Calypso)*, 2017.
Photograph: Courtesy
Michael Werner Gallery, New
York and London



'He paints with an inner fire' ... *Chopped Hand*
by Peter Doig, 2017. Photograph: Courtesy
Michael Werner Gallery, New York and London

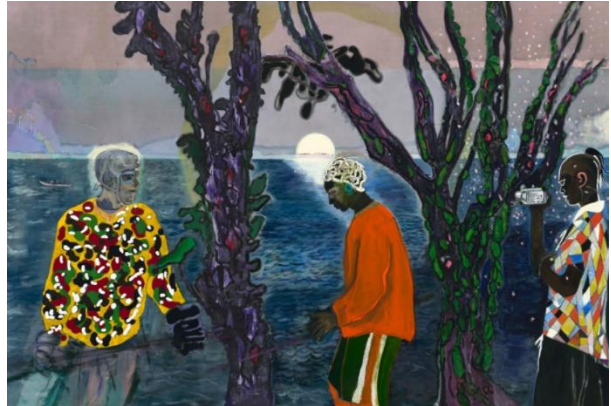
Red Man (Sings Calypso) is a big painting, nearly three metres tall. The "red man" in it is a heroic male nude who knows exactly how impressive his muscles look. Doig got this image from an old photograph of the film star Robert Mitchum, who spent time in Trinidad and in 1957 released an album of Calypso songs. This narcissistic colossus blindly sings his calypsos while the figure behind him on the beach seems to be dying in the coils of a snake. Is the Mitchum figure a tourist in paradise, blind to the inequalities and injustices beyond his bubble of beautiful privilege?

You can't accuse Doig of being blind like that. In other works he broods on the yellow walls of a prison in Port of Spain, Trinidad's capital. It becomes a desolate stage set in these images of a brightly coloured blankness interrupting life. In *Rain in the Port of Spain (White Oak)* a mangy lion parades in front of the lemon-coloured prison wall. It is the Rastafarian Lion of Judah. Someone has painted this defiant graffiti on the prison and it has come to life – proud but hungry. Does it bring

redemption? In Carnival Hat, a man leans listlessly against the yellow wall, hopeless in his red hat.

These paintings have the ghostly stillness of Giorgio de Chirico's empty piazzas frozen in time. They are brand new, yet for me evoke poems written thousands of years ago. The world Doig paints glows with an inner fire, an ecstatic vision. He can explain every detail in almost banal terms – the Laocoön-like figure apparently struggling with a snake is, he tells me, in reality a portrait of a friend who posed with a friendly serpent one day on the beach. Yet all the memories and references that end up in Doig's paintings are transfigured into a bright palette of dreams. This is imaginative art of the highest order.

Two Trees, the grandest and most glorious of the new masterpieces that fill this exhibition, is a monumental seaside scene more than three and a half metres wide. The two trees that rise up in front of a violet sky look like the tentacles of a giant sea monster. The tendrils and leaves that sprout from their twisting forms have mutated into lethal suckers in phosphorescent, lurid colours. The bright yellow top covered with a gaudy floral design worn by a helmeted hockey player in the foreground is just as unsettling. Doig's colours create emotions that can't be put into words.



'A grave picture of our catastrophic age' ... Two Trees, 2017. Photograph: Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York and London

So Doig explains, but even without knowing any of that you feel the bejewelled tragic irony of this modern masterpiece. In its majestic, spooky gorgeousness this is a noble and grave picture of our catastrophic age. How magical, to see art that is so obviously destined to endure, when the paint is still practically wet. Peter Doig is a great artist and getting better.