

Grandstand

Cheltenham Racecourse Chairman, Robert Waley-Cohen, worked at Christie's in London and New York for twelve years. He interviews Peter Spens in front of the Grandstand series at the Cranley Gallery.

RWC Looking at your paintings of Cheltenham combines the pleasure of two of my passions, fine art and steeplechasing.
PS Thank you. The start of the Cheltenham series was an invitation from the bookmaker, Ben Keith, to see his world and come to the races. The Wednesday of the The Festival in 2012 was a splendid, sunny, early Spring day.

RWC That was your debut was it? You were starting at the top!

PS Yes, that was my debut to Cheltenham and to racing as well. I had never been to a horse race before that. I just drove down from London for the day, received some lovely hospitality and then painted a little study from your disabled area at the corner of the grandstand. This small study led to Ben's question, 'Do you think you could do a painting that captures the excitement of the betting ring just before the start of a race?'. I accepted the commission and in September made contact with Cheltenham Racecourse about access. When Peter McNeile saw the Olympic series, he asked me to be Cheltenham Racecourse's first artist in residence. But the story of the Olympic series started further back. One afternoon in November 2011 I was busy painting outdoors, 400 feet up the Millbank Tower. A scouting party from the Olympic Broadcasting Service (OBS) appeared and said, 'You should be doing something for the Olympics'. By February 2012 they had decided to commission two films about my painting to be broadcast as London contextual pieces during the Olympics.

RWC So, how did you obtain access to paint the Olympics?

PS OBS said access had to be via the organising committee, LOCOG, who said painting in any of the main stadia was completely impossible. However, a friend who is an army lawyer invited me to visit Horse Guards, which seemed ideal. This led to Major General Norton coming to see me at the Cranley Gallery. At that visit he green-lighted the Olympic project and suggested that if I was going to do the Olympics I should also tackle Trooping the Colour, Beating Retreat and the Thames Pageant. That summer I was organised by the Army and everything worked more efficiently than usual!

RWC So you viewed Horse Guards in its different stages of usage and decided to take on the Pageant?

PS Yes. SJ Berwin allowed me to paint the picture, 'Thames Pageant, 3rd June 2012' (illust. 26), from their splendid roof terrace. The picture is five foot across and was prepared in bright sunny weather similar to 'Summer, West from Queen Street Place' (illust. 28). Then, on the day itself, it was pouring with rain.

RWC No sharp shadows, all grey and bland, very difficult: a photographer's nightmare, let alone a painter's.

PS I had prepped the picture so that the whole structure of the scene was already in place but then I repainted it in the overcast conditions with the crowd on the banks and the bridges during the five hours before the flotilla arrived. When the actual group of boats came down the river they were all painted in very fast, live, running script, judgement suspended.

RWC Usually artists make drawings and work it up later in their studios. Am I not right? But you choose to go a different route. People love drawings because they are spontaneous and have that immediate reaction which is often lost in the more formal studio version.

PS Exactly. There is nothing like being there. What I am really after capturing is the immediate calligraphic energy of direct observation that you see in an old master drawing, but in paint. If you think about the Rembrandt drawing of the elephant, it's a lot of small gestures and squiggles, but in terms of translating the skin and weight of an elephant, it's all there. So really my goal is the translation of sensation into mark. At these events, there were millions of photographs being taken in fractions of seconds. But as someone painting on the spot, my process creates a temporal collage. This process is about being there for many hours over many days and orchestrating those observed marks into a painting.

RWC You react to an atmosphere. I'm interested to know your response to Cheltenham during The Festival as your first ever day's racing. I think the passion at Cheltenham is exceptional and the atmosphere's astonishing. I don't know whether you experienced that and how it impacts on your painting.

PS Well, I think that the advantage of being there is that you are not just working at one remove from a photograph or a sketch in the studio. The experience envelops you. I am fascinated from working on this series to understand what it is that



occurs when tens of thousands of people are all focused on one thing. What is that energy that is released with all this collective concentration on a race or event?

RWC People go to these things for the atmosphere. Cheltenham is absolutely the theatre of dreams where all the participants, whether they're breeder, owner, trainer, stable lad, jockey or passionate follower, congregate. Horses don't have as long lives as you, and they have a relatively short time at their peak, so this annual event of The Festival is the equine Olympics of national hunt racing over jumps. That's why, during the four days of The Festival, 235,000 people gather mid-week. As a race takes six minutes, it's a much more intense experience than a football match. Someone is going to win and the crowd have their bets on the outcome.

PS It can't go to penalties. When I started the original commission I went down four days before the start of the November meeting to work on the landscape and try to understand the geometry of the racecourse setting. But the racing days were so charged with anticipation and excitement that I learnt to concentrate on them, starting early in the morning, feeding off the anticipation in the air. When the races were run the speed of painterly attack required meant that caution was abandoned. People would come up and ask me when it would be finished and my stock reply was, 'Your guess is as good as mine!'.
RWC It's great to have that low evening light on Cleve Hill in the background of 'Cheltenham, Autumn meeting' (illust. 9). We're so lucky to have such a beautiful venue and the light on the hill must be a challenge to you as an artist with changes going on all the time. The horses and riders convey great movement and energy.

PS Yes, the hill has a very ancient quality to it and with the race it's about finding a notation for movement rather than copying every sinew. This painting, 'The Festival from Ladbrokes Box' (illust. 5), was worked during the first two days of The Festival this year.

RWC Is that the running of the Ladbrokes World hurdle?



PS Well, it's not one specific race but each element was observed live over two long days.

RWC Clearly in all your Cheltenham pictures there are different activities going on simultaneously. There you've got them coming in tired and relaxed from having raced, then here somebody coming in victorious and also, in the middle ground, the second circuit heading out. This obviously never happens in the same instant but occurs over time in a normal race.

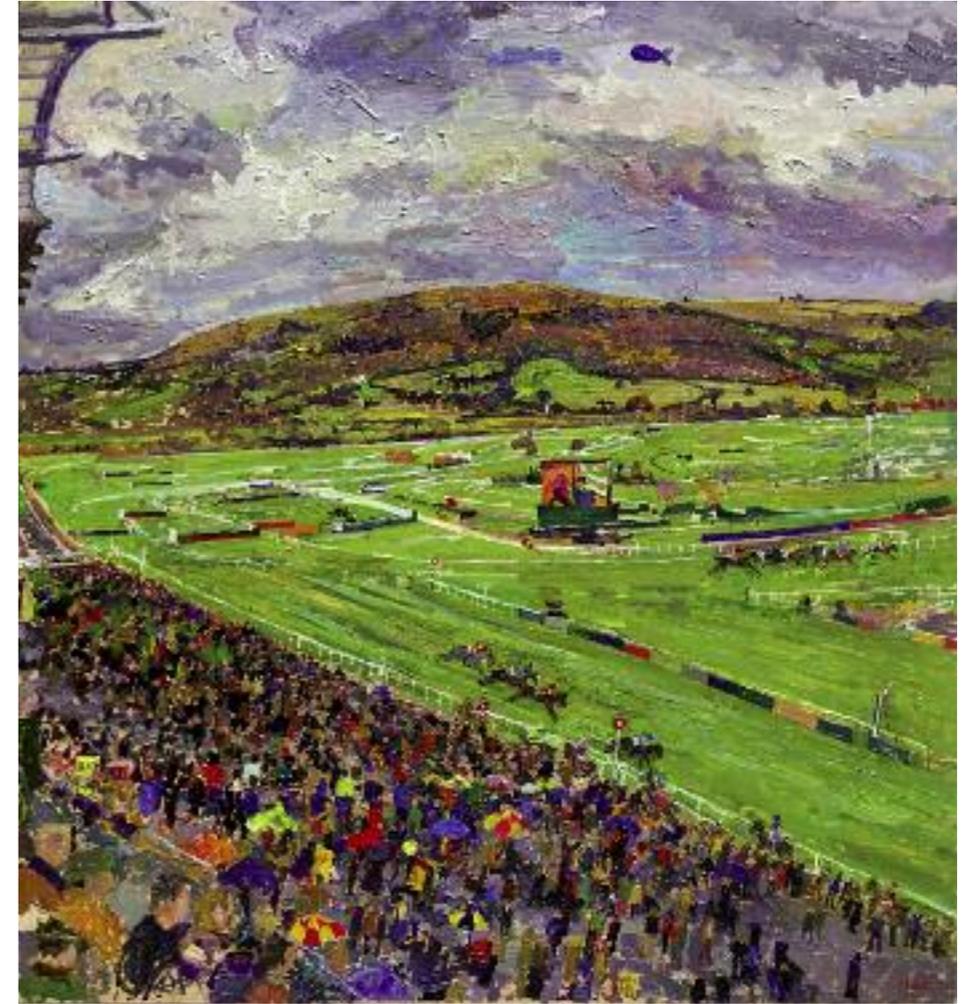
PS This Grandstand series accepts that many different events will be avidly observed over many hours, which develops the painting's texture, the visual pattern of the day. I am working with time rather than chasing frozen moments.

RWC Yes, in 'Cheltenham, November meeting' (illust. 10) you've even painted one of my horses coming quietly in, which I am sure of, as my colours are brown with orange sleeves and quarter cap.

PS I am delighted that you can identify your horse! 'Blustery Cheltenham' (illust. 3) is also illustrated on the cover in an early stage. Painting from the west corner of the Grandstand on some incredibly windy days meant that I constructed a shelter to protect myself from the elements. One weekend there were some incredibly high winds, bookies' umbrellas were flying off, but my structure did hold so I was able to paint through it. As there are only sixteen actual days racing in a season I couldn't afford to lose time just because of bad weather.

PS The large painting, 'The Festival 2013' (illust. 7), was worked on for all four days of that event and then the further two days of the April meeting completed it. That year, Spring hadn't sprung despite it being mid-April.

RWC Yes, I just love that great sweep round the bend, it's very unusual and on this large scale it looks terrific. It's not normally as cold during The Festival as it was in March 2013!





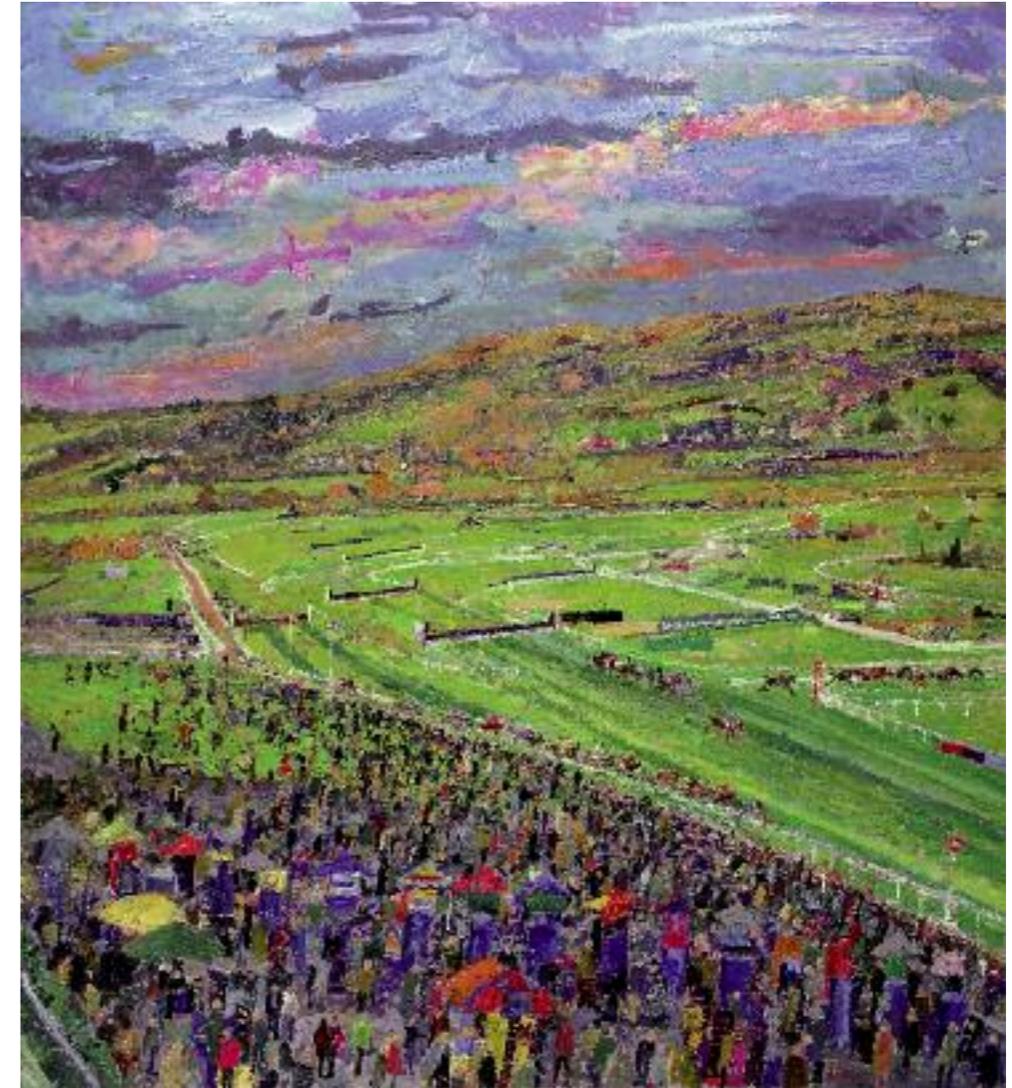
PS For painting outside in sub-zero conditions, my kit to keep warm enough to work was quite amusing to people: I've got a sweatshirt adapted with large pockets at the front and rear which can hold hot water bottles. I was working next to the Channel 4 cameraman, who was quite jealous, even though we agreed it wasn't a great look! I remember the great relief going down for that Mayday evening meeting which was really splendid, warm and sunny.

RWC Just a totally different vision, isn't it? A very different atmosphere as it's the big day for the amateur jockeys and their trainers at the end of the season. A smaller crowd than The Festival but an incredibly knowledgeable one.

PS 'Mayday, Cheltenham' (illust. 6) happened in one session and it was a real counterpoint to so much prolonged work on The Festival picture. The Siberian Winter was over and things were flowing again!

RWC I see that several of the paintings, including this one, have been made into limited edition giclée prints. Could you explain what a giclée is?

PS It is a specialised form of printing on conservation paper using twelve inks. Although the Thames Pageant painting (illust. 26) was bought by Ben Keith in 2012, the legal firm who had given me use of their terrace commissioned thirty giclée prints to give to their partners. It took me ages to find the right printer and I have worked with Alex Melville very closely. I'm amazed at their quality and capacity to show the different layers of paint.





RWC The monotypes are very striking, could you explain their position in your work?

PS They are unique prints. 'Cheltenham Racecourse' (illust. 8) was worked from 'Cheltenham, Autumn meeting' (illust. 9) when it was still in progress. I put the picture behind me and look at it in a mirror to see the image reversed. I am painting only in black ink on a polished copper plate. When the plate goes through the press it is printed on the paper the right way round. The monotype is my way of digesting a picture and working with the memory of the place.

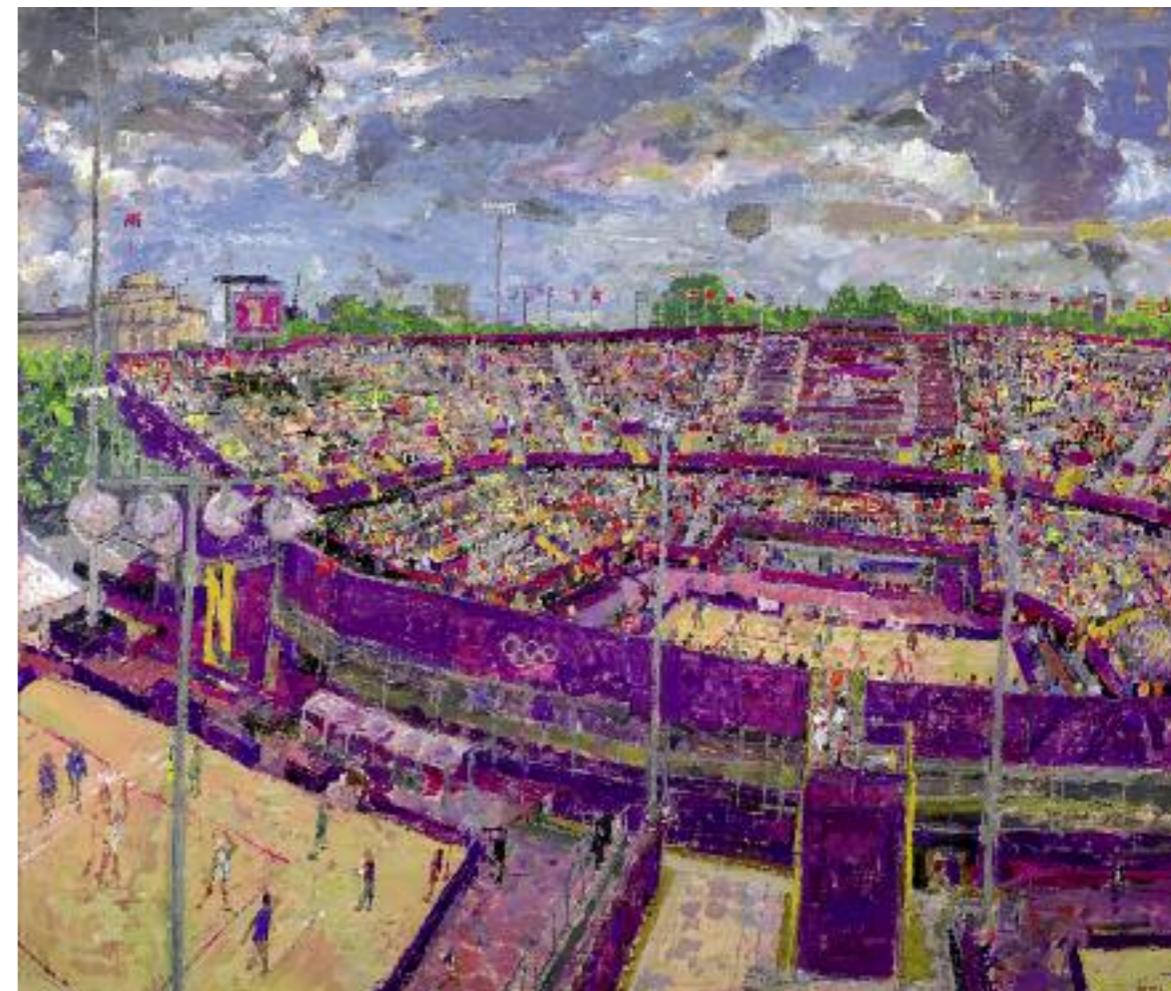
RWC I think the monotypes are much more pared down. In this one, 'Parliament from the Jubilee Bridge' (illust. 41), the complex space is very well depicted with limited means.

PS That was derived from the painting worked on the west walkway next to Hungerford Bridge. With repeated sessions on a painting there is a backlog of observation of the image going round my mind; the monotype is a way of re-finding and ordering that information.

RWC I respond more to colour than black and white and your series of paintings from the Millbank Tower and Queen Street Place are very rich and powerful (illustrations 29 – 40). The night paintings have an intense language of pure colour.

PS Thank you. Let's look now at the picture 'January snow, Cheltenham Racecourse' (illust. 11) which we have also printed as a giclée. The snow is still around, as there had been a very heavy fall a couple of days earlier. But for the Trials day it was really warm, with the snow still untouched on the hills.

RWC It was a massive effort to get the course cleared and all those black covers had to be moved to the edge; huge manpower and energy to actually get the day's racing to happen. But we did it and from misty beginnings it grew into that sunny winter afternoon in your painting.



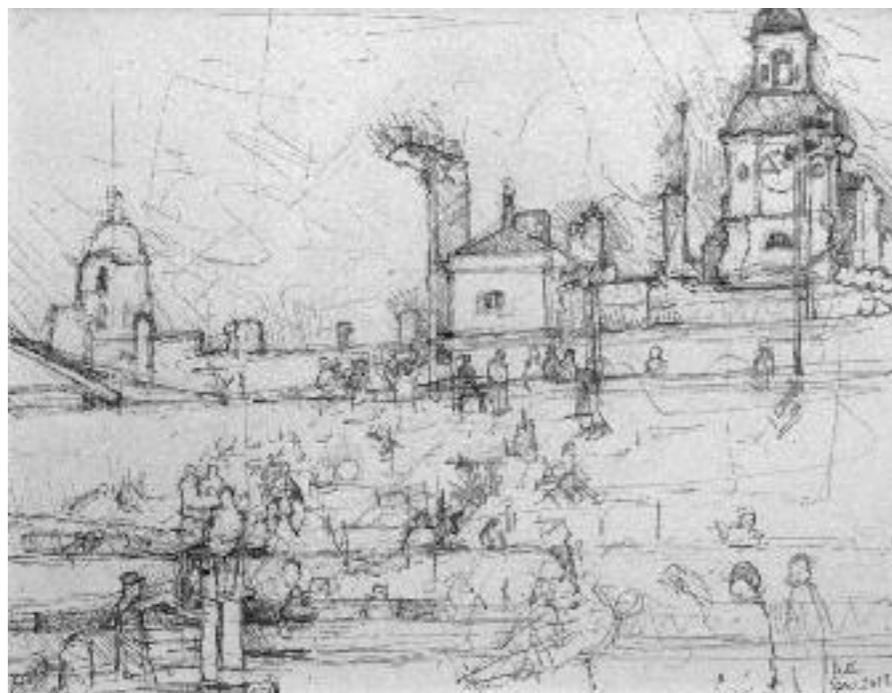
PS For me it was a great day as I had the luxury of working from one of your boxes on the fifth floor. This painting was a sprint as I knew I had only one session. The boxes on each side were full of families and they saw the whole thing develop over the day, which provided a lot of entertainment. It is painted quite loosely and is one of the most impressionistic of this series; wet in wet painting allows great fluidity. Paintings seem to either have this calligraphic flow to them or they end up being more like a workhorse, returned to and battled with again and again.

RWC I also like the military Horse Guards series. They're great fun. Here's the mounted band with infantry all around.

PS The large painting, 'Trooping the Colour' (illustr. 20), was started in 2013 and I finished it this summer. The small studies were painted in tandem. In my mind the area just below the memorial was finished, then about 150 cavalry arrived and I knew I had half an hour to get down a notation for that experience. It is that section of the painting that is most interesting to me; all those horses and their riders and how the paint works as a trigger to evoke the subject.

RWC Yes, it works very well. It conveys the whole scene; the challenge of getting horses to co-operate with a huge mass band. You get a feeling of the music and the great passion of the whole thing. With this study (illustr. 17) I'm particularly impressed by the calm of the enormous drum horses.

RWC Your large night and day Shard pictures (illustrations 33 & 34), with all the cranes of the new construction going on is quite a contrast to the London of the Olympic and military pageant on Horse Guards. Then looking at Horse Guards during the Olympics, did they really design the whole thing in that amazing purple?



PS Yes, that was the Olympic purple and 'Beach Volleyball from Horse Guards' (illustr. 22) is the one that BBC London reported on during the Games. The central London location meant that there are historic buildings and the trees of St. James's Park popping up in the background beyond the stadium.

RWC It looks like a bullring. The warming up on the practice court in the foreground is very effective. Also, what's this large hot air balloon over Buckingham Palace?

PS That's the balloon which OBS used for their aerial shots over London. The atmosphere was 'the circus is in town'. To me the Olympics were totally new subject matter, I had no idea how it was all going to work out. But it was an opportunity to paint there everyday for the twelve days of matches, often twelve hours a day. I was very much on view to the crowd and people kept on asking, 'Can I be in your picture?'

RWC I enjoy you zooming in on the game in 'Beach Volleyball from Horse Guards, morning 2012' (illustr. 16) with the line of spectators appearing above the purple hoarding then looking past the match to the tunnels and media pen. It is an interesting contrast to the larger picture (illustr. 22) where you pull back and show the whole amphitheatre.

PS That huge structure worked as armature to so much flux, it was painted early evenings over the course of the Games. Then the organisers decided that I was part of the show and invited me to paint right next to the court, which was superb. It allowed me to paint 'Night, courtside at Beach Volleyball' (illustr. 22) during the last four evenings, which included the Finals. Spitting distance from the action with the cropped facade of Horse Guards behind. A very special time.

