

Site Specific by Olivia Hetreed

Energy: it radiates from Peter Spens' paintings, from the vibrant colour to the free but intricate mark-making that characterise his distinctive high viewpoint cityscapes of London and the Thames. There is an animation and immediacy to the work which makes perfect sense of the title of his new show, *Site Specific*.

So it's no surprise that the man in person is buzzing as he shows me round a selection of the works he is preparing for the show. At this stage he frets over the fine detail of presentation: what kind of glass to use: museum or maybe none, since his paintings are increasingly acquiring an almost sculptural texture – or happily marvels at the effect of varnish in bringing up the depth of colour in a magnificent night painting (*Night, Westminster from Millbank*) (illust. 8). He describes battling high winds and wild weather 380 feet up with a painting board in his arms, showing an obvious relish for the physical as well as the aesthetic challenge. But the ebullience of the artist and the liveliness of his technique belie a deep seriousness about the work itself.

I first discovered this when I was writing a film script about Vermeer (which went on to become the film "Girl with a Pearl Earring"). Peter's insight into the centrality for the figurative artist of looking and honestly recording chimed perfectly for me with Vermeer's intense gaze at his domestic subject matter, although the end result has a very different energy. Peter drew my portrait, so that I could experience first hand being the subject of such scrutiny - a fascinating and entertaining process.

Peter engages constantly with the contradiction between the shallow pictorial space and the implied depths that can be achieved through colour, texture and composition. In the series of large paintings from Millbank Tower (illust. 3/4/6/8) and the accompanying monotypes, you can see the examination and redefining of the spaces and shapes of the river, the bridges, the surprising patches of greenery on either side and the contrapuntal rhythms of the buildings receding towards busy, cloud-filled skies. The extremely high vantage point compresses distance, as if the buildings were piled breathlessly one upon another. While in *Morning, Westminster from Millbank* (illust. 4), there is a sense of wide open space as London recedes towards distant hills, *Night, Westminster from Millbank* has a jazzy brilliance and freedom, with reflections in the river and sky multiplying the play of light and dark at the heart of the city. Peter tells me that Oskar Kokoschka worked from this building and also 80, Strand: "a place I return to repeatedly", (illust. 10/11/12) and it's clear that this artistic history bears on his aesthetic choices even as he affirms that immediacy of looking and mark-making remain the highest constant of his work.

In this year of great occasions and royal pageantry it is both fitting and inevitable that a painter who has made the River Thames his special preserve should tackle the historic moment head on in *Thames Pageant, 3rd June* (illust. 9). This opportunity was offered by S J Berwin's invitation to work from their roof terrace at the north-east corner of Southwark Bridge. Like the resolute cheering crowds and the Queen herself, Spens braved hours of miserable weather to record his immediate impressions of a unique event. The throng of boats processing towards us, with the bell-ringing boat followed by Gloriana and the Chartwell, suitably central, raises the question of what moment is being recorded in an 'on site' painting. Peter calls the painting a "temporal collage", a more obvious version of the editing that goes into his usual choices about light and weather, serendipitous passing traffic or a striking cloud effect. "I didn't want to rework the directly observed painting of the boats themselves as the mark made straight from observation carries the essence of the moment and you tinker with it at your peril." Knowing this stretch of water so well, Peter even noticed a different quality in its motion: the Thames Barrier was raised to moderate the powerful ebb tide for the protection of the small craft in the pageant.

For a figurative painter there is a constant dialogue with the idea and reality of photography: what is it that the painter achieves that is beyond or other than the photographic record? While each painting gives the impression of a moment captured, though far too vivid to be frozen like a photograph, they are in fact the result of many months



of specific moments of looking, working and reworking. Exploring the space through small oil studies, the framing of the motif is established by drawing and redrawing relative proportions, leading to the discovery of the inner rhythm of each painting. These unique moments of perception of light, colour and space are edited through the material of oil paint into a vigorous harmony. By contrast the monotypes are worked from the finished paintings in the studio and become a time to reflect and re-examine the structure and marks that were painted on the spot. In the series of monotypes from Millbank (illust. 2/5/7) there is a sense of freedom to play and examine different choices in parallel.

The same sense of playfulness and adventure is evident in another of Peter's repeated subjects: the shoreline. Whether recording Spring on the Isle of Wight or a gale in St Lucia, these paintings invariably give me a wonderful sense of joy and freedom. There is a sturdy intentness to the figures busily engaged in building sandcastles, a thrilling kinetic energy in cloud and sea – that energy again – that seem to perfectly capture the pleasures of the seashore.

One painting stands alone and I wonder if it represents a new direction in Peter's work. *Carp Pond, Loom Lane* (illust. 35) is simple in its subject matter but bursting with creative invention in its use of reflection and colour. Although evidently figurative, indeed intensely evocative of the movement and brightness of the fish, it at the same time tends towards abstraction, in the same way that Vermeer's *The Lacemaker* does. A painter in full command of his own pictorial language, gazing so clearly that he goes beyond the everyday to reveal the essentials of light, colour and space in a work both humble and inspiring.

Acclaimed screenwriter **Olivia Hetreed** is well known for adapting Tracy Chevalier's best-selling novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. The film starred Colin Firth and Scarlett Johansson, winning multiple awards worldwide. A radical new version of *Wuthering Heights*, co-written by Olivia and the director was premiered at Venice 2011, winning the prize for Best Cinematography.