# FLOATING LONDON
## PAINTING THE TOWN

By John Christian. March 2006

It must be all of ten years since Peter and I first met at a Cork Street private view. No-one introduced us, we simply found ourselves looking at the same picture. Given the almost pathological shyness of the English on these occasions, it is a wonder we managed to speak, but somehow we not only cleared this social hurdle but kept in touch. Since then, we have visited countless exhibitions together, and I think I may claim to have seen every one of Peter's one-man shows. Several of his pictures have found homes on my walls.

When we first met, Peter had not long returned from living in the south of France, and I know from our exhibition visiting that nothing touches him more than a good French painting. The Impressionists, Post Impressionists, Bonnard, Matisse and their contemporaries, these are the artists who thrill him most; and although he naturally looks much further afield, I have noticed that when another picture particularly engages him, it tends to be something like a late Titian, Impressionism *avant la lettre*. For all this, I would say that Peter is a very English artist in that his first love is landscape and he approaches his favourite subject with the eye of a poet. In fact in some of his earliest pictures the lyricism was perhaps just a little forced. With their baleful suns and moons, they recalled the transcendental landscapes of Georges Rouault, rather as the work of the mid-twentieth-century Neo-Romantics had evoked Palmer and Blake.

It was not long, however, before the poetry in Peter's pictures, far from being imposed by some stylistic prototype, was springing directly from his response to the motif itself. Highbury Fields, within a stone's throw of his own front door, became something of an obsession, appealing particularly in autumn and winter, when respectively the intoxicating colours of the falling leaves and the wayward geometry of the naked branches lent themselves to abstract interpretation. Subjects were also found in Waterlow Park, Highgate, on the Cornish coast, and, more experimentally, during visits to Florence, the Italian Lakes, New York, Long Island, and the Caribbean. Needless to say, such disparate venues inspired in our painter very different emotions, but whether he is painting a group of London children playing in a sun-lit sandpit or a storm brewing over a Long Island beach, Peter has a way of capturing the spirit of the place, of going beyond the externals to suggest a more permanent and mysterious reality. In other words, he honours art's perennial obligation to make the particular seem universal, and belongs specifically to the English romantic tradition.

I hope this is in no way implies that there is anything solemn or ponderous about these pictures. On the contrary, and almost paradoxically in the light of their other virtues, they carry themselves with a genial optimism, a blithe, good-natured insouciance, and heads, as it were, held high. No wonder they prove such sympathetic friends to live with, offering serious conversation when we want it and no less stimulating companionship when we need cheering up. Peter has an almost unfailing sense of colour, and there is a physical lightness of touch to his work, a sensuous delight in the handling of paint, whether manifested in neo-pointilliste dots or more gestural sweeps and smudges. The example of his hero Bonnard informs both the pictures' celebratory mood and their technical expression, although I hasten to add that this potentially hazardous influence, if it was ever overt, has long since been thoroughly assimilated.

Views of London seen from a high vantage-point began to appear in Peter's work in the mid-1990s. Initially small in scale, like most of his pictures at this date, and representing but one theme among many, they gradually not only grew in size but became the dominant aspect of his production. He was fortunate in finding a series of companies who accommodated him as their artist in residence, allowing him to paint from the windows or balconies of their high-rise office blocks. At Canada House, one of the first, he executed several accounts of Trafalgar Square and St Martin-in-the-Fields, the famous landmarks still besieged by pre-pedestrianisation traffic. More recently, the focus has been

on panoramic views of the Thames. Painting from eyries in Riverside House, Tower 42, 80 Strand, HSBC and others, he has explored the river downstream as far as Canary Wharf and upstream to Waterloo and Charing Cross.

The catalogue of Peter's May 2003 exhibition quotes the famous sonnet that Wordsworth 'composed' on Westminster Bridge in September 1802:

*This City now doth like a garment wear*
*The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,*
*Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie*
*Open unto the fields, and to the sky.*

Despite the interval of almost exactly two centuries, the poem anticipates the spirit and imagery of these paintings with astonishing accuracy. Like Wordsworth before him, Peter revels in the ample and generous expansiveness of his subject. 'Ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples' are still salient features of his teeming metropolis, and he seems to go out of his way to stress the city's 'openness to the sky' with his fondness for magnificent cloud formations. No-one understands better the truth of Constable's remark that 'the landscape painter who does not make his skies a very material part of his composition neglects to avail himself of one of his greatest aids'.

And yet, of course, London has changed enormously since Wordsworth's day. We only have to note how in these pictures the 'fields' that he saw in abundance have dwindled to a hint of the south Downs on the distant horizon. Some of the most arresting developments have actually occurred while the painter has been at work. Art-historians of the future will enjoy dating the fruits of his labours by the absence or presence of the Eye, the Gherkin, and other dramatic additions to the turn-of-the century skyline. The Eye in particular is a gift to any artist painting the Thames today, and Peter has taken full advantage of its formal possibilities. Colossal in scale but delicate and open in contour, it fulfils precisely the same purpose as a large foreground tree in a classical landscape by Claude, Wilson or Turner, decisively breaking the horizon and thus helping to solve the landscape painter's perennial problem of marrying earth to sky. Such excrescences as a steeple with a weather-vane on a church tower perform a similar function in the 'real' landscape.

The present exhibition at the Guildhall Art Gallery is not entirely confined to ambitious views of the Thames. There are examples of the Highbury Fields and Trafalgar Square paintings, as well as one or two of the large ink drawings that are another notable aspect of the Spens oeuvre. But the Thames-scapes hold centre stage, appropriately enough given the venue in the very heart, both geographical and historical, of the City.

Indeed, only powerful statements of this kind could hold their own in such august surroundings; anything less would be lost. They are paintings by an artist enjoying all the confidence of what Dante calls the 'mezzo del cammin' of life. Peter has passed through his early phase, the time when 'young men see visions', and many years hence he may experience one of those fascinating late developments when, his name made, an artist retreats into himself, experimenting boldly in response to inner promptings. But for now he has emerged onto the broad plateau of mid-career, that central space in his professional progress where it behoves him to stretch himself to the limit and paint the major, defining works.

Comparing these pictures with their predecessors, I am sometimes reminded of Spenser's comment at the opening of *The Faerie Queene*. His muse, he says, has compelled him to abandon the bucolic idiom of his earlier poetry and

*For trumpets stern to change mine oaten reeds.*

As this implies, something is inevitably lost on these occasions, whether (as here) it be a pastoral innocence or merely a spring-like freshness of mood and an engagingly tentative expression. But much is also gained. The muse is

still in charge, only ordering a gear-shift from the lyric to the epic mode.

John Constable maintained that it was 'the business of a painter not to contend with nature' by putting 'such a scene (as) a valley filled with imagery fifty miles long on a canvas of a few inches'. Rather than paint something so tremendous that it is essentially a work of art in itself, the artist should 'make something out of nothing, in attempting which he must, almost of necessity, become poetical'. Not everyone has agreed. Canaletto and Turner, for example, would have thought this a ridiculous philosophy, and Peter himself, though he has made plenty of 'things out of nothing' in the past, and indeed continues to do so, is at one with these great names in his London views.

Even if no subject is inherently unpaintable, however, the problem remains of how to handle a scene 'filled with imagery' and, at least metaphorically, 'fifty miles long'. Canaletto solved it with the aid of a phenomenal technique and a genius for aerial perspective, but how quickly his followers descended to the level of producing glorified postcards, and how often do we hear people say that while they admire Canaletto they actually prefer the more impressionistic style of his younger contemporary, Guardi. In other words, even if an artist is breaking Constable's rule, it still seems that less is more in the way he attempts to 'contend with nature'. A degree of subjective, interpretive abstraction is needed.

Perhaps this approach, like Constable's dictum itself, is a sign of the advent of Romanticism. Certainly it has been adopted by every artist since the Romantic era who has painted the Thames in anything but conventional terms. Turner seized the opportunity offered by the burning of the Houses of Parliament in 1834 to produce one of his most apocalyptic visions. Whistler, operating further upstream at Chelsea and Battersea in the 1870s, saw the Thames as fantasy, transforming its wharves and warehouses into fairytale palaces at night with a compositional economy derived from Japanese woodcuts. Night's close equivalents, sunset and fog, were the agents of abstraction at the turn of the century when Monet came to paint the new Houses of Parliament and their neighbouring bridges. But handling has been as vital to this process as mood and atmosphere. In March 1906 the young Fauve painter André Derain paid the first of three visits to London. Commissioned by the dealer Ambroise Vollard to paint views of the Thames that would rival Monet's recent series, he executed thirty canvases of unparalleled technical freedom and brilliance of colour. Many of them were shown in a memorable exhibition at the Courtauld Gallery this winter. Nor was Derain the last exponent of modernism to tackle these daunting themes. Oskar Kokoschka repeatedly painted them over a forty-five-year period (1925-1970), bringing to his task an Expressionist's nervous intensity and seeking to unify the myriad elements in a firework display of brushwork.

Both the scope for 'contending with nature' offered by the Thames and the problems it presents to the artist have increased with time. Whistler was only painting from the top of his house in Lindsey Row, Monet from St Thomas's Hospital and the Savoy Hotel. Kokoschka could avail himself of a series of much higher buildings, including some, like Unilever House, the Shell Centre, and the Vickers Tower on Millbank, that had only recently been built. But Peter has ascended to the Vertigo Bar on the top floor of Tower 42, which, as he says himself, induces 'an extraordinary airborn sensation'. By the time an artist reaches this degree of elevation it might be better to compare him to the Bohemian print-maker Wenceslaus Hollar, whose panoramas of London from the South Bank, made in the mid-seventeenth century, deliberately create the impression of a bird's eye view. The only difference is that an artist today can literally go 'up there', thanks to modern building skills and technology.

Fortunately for lovers of painting, the artist's resources have not kept pace with science, and Peter still makes the time-honoured response of seeking to abstract a personal vision from objective reality. There are essentially two ways of doing this. One is to work in the studio and rely on memory, aided by drawings, to select the essentials for you. This was the method advocated by Degas, who learnt it from his hero Ingres and passed it on to his pupil Sickert. The recent discovery of Derain's London sketchbooks has prompted scholars to argue that he too worked along these lines, painting his explosions of form-defying colour from drawings after his return to Paris.

The other approach is the exact opposite: to forge abstraction in the heat of a battle with nature, conducted face to face with the motif itself. Here Cézanne is the obvious exemplar and Peter is of the same persuasion, being as obsessive as the great Post-Impressionist about working *en plein air*. He is like the hero, modelled on Cézanne, of Zola's novel *L'Oeuvre*, who, angry with himself for compromising as a concession to official taste, rips up a picture when it is rejected for the Salon. 'It was a dishonest, misleading, disgusting piece of work, he said …He ought never to have let himself go back to the miserable light of the studio or the revolting trickery of painting figures from memory!'

Inevitably, there are parallels with those who have covered this ground before. Monet must always haunt the artist who paints Westminster and Charing Cross Bridges, and Peter in his more bravura moods can remind us a little of Kokoschka, although I suspect that he is too much of a Francophile ever to have studied the Austrian master in depth. Derain's Thames-scapes make a much more meaningful comparison. As for what Whistler would have called the 'nocturnes', I can think of no better precursor than Pissarro's *Boulevard Montmartre at Night* in the National Galley, a small Impressionist masterpiece that I know moves our artist deeply.

But essentially these pictures are *sui generis*, their 'handwriting' unique and unmistakable. Indeed, for me, Peter achieves his happiest results when he is at his most free and exuberant, catching buildings, river, sky and reflections in a homogeneous network of brushstrokes, welding them together in the medium of paint as powerfully and convincingly as they are welded by air in nature. The problem of coping with the 'tyranny of nature' of which Degas complained so bitterly, never perhaps more brutally presented than by a cityscape replete with windows, storeys and other repetitive, man-made data, is simply transcended in these vibrant accounts, such is the artist's success in creating his pictorial fictions.

They are fictions in which we ourselves play a crucial part. Students of visual perception have long recognised that painting entails a contract between artist and audience, the artist providing the signs that he believes will convey his concept, the viewer decoding them in the light of his own knowledge and imagination. Like so much theory in Western art, the realisation that apparently random shapes can be pregnant with meaning goes back to Alberti. Leonardo, famously, saw not only 'divine landscapes' but 'strange figures in violent action' in damp-stained walls, while the pupils of Alexander Cozens projected Claudian landscapes into their master's brush-made blots. Constable, too, was vividly aware of the phenomenon, observing that 'art pleases by *reminding*, not by *deceiving*'. And perhaps Rossetti was thinking along these lines when he said that any fool could paint a picture; the difficulty was to get 'intelligence' into it.

Peter's pictures tell us much about the mysterious business of 'reminding' by means of an 'intelligent' visual language. Someone, I am sure, has attempted to define the essential nature of such language within whatever convention it may be employed, and has no doubt got into deep philosophical and psychological water in the process. It is not necessarily a matter of describing forms in the academic way that used to be taught in art schools; this may come into it, but in the wrong hands it may be a positive hindrance. Nor are we just talking of looking at pictures from a distance, allowing space to make sense of what seems wayward and incoherent at close quarters, although this too may play a part in the experience. Rather the artist is seeking to make marks which, for whatever reason and under whatever stylistic dispensation, are significant, expressive and evocative; marks which, to put it at its crudest, *work* for the receptive viewer. When a high degree of abstraction is involved, as it is in Peter's pictures or in a Cézanne watercolour, the result is inevitably a good deal of losing and finding. It is as if we are being invited to join up the fragmented information, 'fill in the gaps', and create an aesthetically and emotionally satisfying whole through a pooling of the artist's and our own imaginative resources. Needless to say, the game is elitist in the sense that one has to understand the rules, which have become increasingly complex and demanding as modern art has developed. But no-one is debarred from playing, only philistines find themselves unable to compete, and the prize is one of the keenest and most sophisticated pleasures that art has to offer.