

Active Reaction

I am sitting now in a New York apartment looking at a Peter Spens painting from 18 years ago. It depicts my wife and me with our first child. We are each holding her as if there were two children. It is intimate, vibrant, every mark matters. It reminds me of Peter's love for Bonnard. Two other Spens pieces hang on the opposite wall, another portrait of my wife and me and a tranquil, contemplative seascape. This is relevant because Peter's work has been part of my life since I was a teenager. Because Peter is my oldest friend. My thoughts then are of the development and growth of an artist, the commitment to a personal way of working, a dedication to craft and graft. A remarkable body of work, the traits of which are clear in this exhibition.

I don't believe in a higher calling but I do believe in passion. Peter began making pictures when we were sixteen. He did it as he does it now – with energy, steely courage and a self-deprecation which keeps him grounded. At our Grammar School his academic abilities suggested he should be an engineer or architect. Our teachers insisted there was no future in art as a profession. He proved them wrong, now having painted continuously for 40 years, never veering from his conviction that art matters, that the language of colour and form is universal, that the world is there to be experienced. Art for Peter is the act of living in a moment and a space. It is not recording, it is action and reaction.

The works in *Active Reaction* embody the qualities that make Peter's oeuvre important and enduring: intimacy, scale and strength of vision. This is about seeing the world and making marks in the moment, whether that be in the studio, at a sporting event or the in the city. Working directly from the subject creates a unique vocabulary of motion, shape, time and colour.

In *Night Games, Beach Volleyball, Copacabana* (illust. 3) colour seems to pour down from the Olympic Rings across the court. The Rings, the lights, the crowd connect to embrace the action. On the court the figures are in motion, suggested but finely made. Like the linesman in the foreground we are both observers, transfixed by the action and participants. This is the power of making the picture in the moment, in the place where life happens.

The cover painting, *England v Sri Lanka T20 Delhi* is remarkable. Sport at night is a spectacle. The darkness makes theatre of the stadium, every noise louder, every action sharper. Peter defines space with partial marks to create the chaotic, passionate madness that is sport in India. Details are sparse and we are compelled to watch the action on the pitch. There is something of the sublime about it – the urgency is almost intimidating. Our reaction is active.

Peter has always been able to use every inch of his paintings to build a narrative. This is not static depiction – it is dynamic and purposeful. In November 2014 he painted the dismantling of the Poppies installation from the Walkie Talkie building. *Poppies at the Tower, Twilight* (illust. 27) creates deliberate design elements which Peter often employs. The poppies sit in a maze of concentric circles which wrap



around the Tower, through the City and back across the Thames over Tower Bridge. Our eyes are taken across the cityscape and back to the Poppies, which as the only red compel our return and provoke an emotional response. In *Surfers, overcast Harlyn Bay* (illust. 8) surf and cloud are connected in their form and movement, they echo each other in tone from grey to white and frame the activity of the surfers. Every mark made gives us the very direct experience, energy, emotion of the scene in front of us.

All of these works are about seeing, observing and participating: they are impatient, twitchy, and alive. Peter's life studies carry the same weight of seeing – yet they are humane and tangible. The use of the same model in *Three Figures in a Studio* (illust. 30) consciously echoes Seurat's *La Poseuse*. These three different aspects appear almost disconnected, giving a sense of some unease at first. And yet there is intimacy, the figures connected by their spatial relationship, their forms flow together. Order is restored.

It is this humanity which has always made Peter Spens' work so powerful: creating a story in every scene and sharing it. I may be an advocate but the work provokes the same emotions in me as it always has. There is nothing contrived, nothing artificial or provoked by trend. It is crafted from a belief that art can help us not just understand the world better but also participate more fully in it. Peter sees for all of us.

Mark Allin, New York, October 2016.

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