



Elizabeth Peyton
Blue Kurt (1995)
 Private collection
 Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ/ Gavin
 Brown's enterprise

Opposite page:
 Elizabeth Peyton
Jarvis on bed (1996)
 Collection Laura and
 Stafford Broumand
 Courtesy Regen Projects/
 Sadie Coles HQ/
 Gavin Brown's enterprise



Elizabeth Peyton's intimate and romantic paintings, depicting an eclectic brew of rock stars, actors and historical figures as well as more recent images of her friends and fellow artists, are among the most familiar and acclaimed portraits of recent years. [David Lock](#) presents a personal portrait of the artist.

Since the mid-'90s, American artist Elizabeth Peyton's paintings have continually popped up in key exhibitions, such as *Dear Painter... Paint Me* at the Pompidou Centre, Paris, the Whitney Biennial and, most recently, *The Painting of Modern Life* at London's Hayward Gallery. Her paintings are now as familiar and covetable in the art world as the celebrated subjects she so often paints.

Other than in several one-person shows at Sadie Coles HQ, there has been little opportunity to view her work *en masse*, or the chance to consider it in any detail while absorbing her career as a whole. This summer, however, the Whitechapel Gallery is set to afford Peyton her first important survey show in a public gallery here in the UK. I'm particularly looking forward to her return to the Whitechapel this July, as one of my earliest encounters with her work was in the group show *Examining Pictures* there in 1999. Crowded around oversize paintings by Margherita Manzelli, Philip Guston, and Richard Prince, Peyton's small painting *John Lennon, age 6* (1996) imprinted on my imagination more than anything else in that show; such was the intensity of the portrait – all milky flesh tones and watery brushstrokes. I couldn't get the painting out of my head. This was not only thanks to its deft, intuitive handling, but for its presence and ability to be so dominant, while simultaneously being so modest. Peyton's paintings, built up in layers of light-capturing glazes, with loosely applied broad brushstrokes, typically resonate with an arresting, emotional intensity.

When encountering an exhibition by Elizabeth Peyton, the small scale and intimacy of her paintings can seem surprising. Often no larger than 10 x 8 inches, she compresses her usually larger-than-life subjects into a small private world of her own making. Her portraits of Britpop mainstays Jarvis Cocker, and Liam and Noel Gallagher, such as *Jarvis and Liam Smoking* (1997) or *Noel and Liam (MTV Awards)* (1996) are by turns



Elizabeth Peyton, *Jarvis and Liam Smoking* (1997)
Collection Tiqui Atencio
Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ / Gavin Brown's enterprise

comradely, and all macho posturing and attitude. She painted an effete looking Jarvis Cocker, again and again, at once alone and melancholy with impossibly crimson lips and cigarette in hand, as in *Jarvis after Jail* or lanky and louche as in *Jarvis On Bed* (both 1996).

These pictures today retain their charm and presence, many years after the colour and noise of Britpop's heyday has subsided. The paintings never offered the perspective of a musical 'insider', but were created from torn-out pages of the *NME* and *Rolling Stone* – images that were already in mass circulation. It was with these 'devotional' paintings, alongside those of another cult musician, Kurt Cobain, that Peyton first attracted wider attention.

Peyton's oeuvre could never be dismissed as playing to one tune, however era-defining her rock star portraits became. Like Andy Warhol before her, she was too smart to be pigeonholed. From the very outset, she was equally drawn to historical figures such as Queen Elizabeth II, Oscar Wilde, Napoleon, Marie Antoinette, Ludwig II of Bavaria and the poet Rupert Brooke; figures who fascinated Peyton by "standing for their own ideals of independence". Several of these portraits featured in her early shows, including one at New York's legendary Chelsea Hotel in 1993 where she exhibited charcoal drawings in a rented room (viewers had to request a key in order to view the work). The subjects, choice of venue and approach all highlighted the importance of the presentation of the pieces; how the atmosphere and fabric of a particular location were elements that would in turn resonate through the work itself.

Peyton herself has commented that what she is drawn to in her subjects is "that particular moment, when they're about to become what they'll become", which suggests her desire to give permanence to the fleeting, inspirational moments in a person's life. In several cases, the androgyny of her subjects seems reinforced by the protective shield of a maternal figure. In a way it emasculates the men in her paintings and bathes them in a lush softness that can be at times syrupy, but never banal. This is evident in the portraits of Elvis with his mother, *Gladys and Elvis* (1997) or Jackie Kennedy, in headscarf and shades with John Kennedy Jnr, *Jackie & John (Jackie fixing John's Hair)* (1999). This is powerfully contradicted, however, in her paintings of Prince Harry, whom she has also painted repeatedly; often alone – as a fragile small boy in tie and sandals, in the crowd at an Arsenal match or surveying the flowers after the death of his mother. There is a quality of loss here which Peyton seems continually drawn to (less controversial brother William rarely figures in her paintings). Of Prince Harry, Peyton once remarked "I just felt more for [Harry]. He's younger, he's not going to be the king. He's the one maybe not as looked at."

In an era where the concept of the 'celebrated' is de-mystified, obsessed over and devalued like no other, Peyton's paintings almost feel out of time; they recall an time when the cult of celebrity had a genuine aura and mystique about it.

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George by Mary Jane Ansell, 2009 © Mary Jane Ansell



Jonathan (Jonathan Horowitz) (2009)
 Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ / Gavin Brown's enterprise

In conversation with Laura Hoptman, Peyton remarked that “Celebrity itself is not that interesting to me, but it is interesting what people do... I think about art and what it is in society through the people I paint and how [they] are a part of their time, maybe more than other people are.”

It is this authenticity that makes her paintings so alive and personal. Often we can feel we share that intimacy with these famous subjects and Peyton has an uncanny knack for enshrining the most memorable, and thus most enduring, aspects of a personality and allowing us to feel somehow connected to those subjects. Peyton admits to being “fascinated by that moment when a person’s worth and destiny are revealed, whether to themselves or to the world.”

From the moment they first gained currency in the mid-1990s, Peyton’s work seemed such a direct confrontation of, and a thawing antidote to, the cool, detached style that then predominated. Her charming, accessible, and simultaneously tough paintings unbuckled our attitude to what contemporary painting could be about and, along with contemporaries such as John Currin, contributed in no small part to the resurgence in figurative portrait painting. That influence has been felt by a new generation of artists including painters as diverse as Hernan Bas, Annie Kevans and myself.

Latterly, Peyton has turned her attention towards a more personal world, concentrating on her close friends and artist contemporaries, making some of the most confident paintings of her career – notably in her portraits of the British artists Nick Relph, Spencer Sweeney and, most

memorably, the Polish artist Piotr Uklanski. All are portrayed with similar unifying qualities: angular cheekbones, crimson lips and tousled hair, characteristics which have been the hallmarks of her career.

Interestingly, her most recent paintings of Matthew Barney and Michael Clarke suggest again a challenge to this norm; here there is a darker palette, less overtly glazed, a greater degree of naturalness and a newfound fondness for portraying balding men, in stark contrast to her earlier archetypes.

This new, moodier tendency was much in evidence at her solo show at Sadie Coles HQ in London this May, where she showed a mixture of paintings and drawings featuring an array of mainly artist friends alongside still lifes of flowers. There was still the odd ‘celebrity’ portrait, like a pencil image of the rapper Jay-Z, which seemed inert and less appealing by comparison. Nevertheless, the outstanding painting of the show, *Dakis, Matthew and Boris* (2009), with its sombre palette of greys, blues and browns, almost suggests Lucien Freud’s portrait of Bruce Bernard – a marked contrast to her more habitual influences: Hockney, Matisse and Warhol.

The upcoming Whitechapel show, which arrives from New York via Minneapolis, finds Elizabeth Peyton in mid-career. She remains, despite all her success and the apparent accessibility of her work, as enigmatic as ever.

Live Forever: Elizabeth Peyton
 9 July–20 September, Whitechapel Gallery



Dakis, Matthew and Boris (2009)
 Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ / Gavin Brown's enterprise