

Title: New Arrivals audio interview

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Contributors: Peter Doig and Chief Curator Keith Hartley, National Galleries of Scotland

Transcript

Keith Hartley

Peter Doig is one of the most exciting painters working today. He uses remembered and found images, often in photographic form, to help him express moods and experiences that only come alive through the act of painting itself through the use of forms and colour combinations as much abstract as representational. I'm Keith Hartley, a curator. Welcome to *New Arrivals*, a series of podcasts introducing the artists behind some of the recent additions to the collection of the National Galleries of Scotland. In this episode, I speak to Peter about his early career as a painter and his work *At The Edge of Town*, which entered the national collection in 2021.

Peter to begin with it would be good to establish a few biographical facts because I think that they're significant to your development as an artist. You were born in Edinburgh in 1959 and moved with your family to Trinidad in 1962. You all moved on to Canada in 1966. You came to London in 1978 to attend art school, a foundation course at Wimbledon School of Art from 1979 to 1980, and a BA at [Central] Saint Martins School of Art from 1980 to 1983. You returned to Canada in 1986, moved back to London in 1989 and did an MA in painting at Chelsea College of Arts from 1989 to 1990. And you moved to Trinidad in 2002. How much do you think that these moves to quite different environments and lifestyles affected your art, in particular between Canada and London?

Peter Doig

Well, I think, moving that much, and I moved a lot as a child, even within Edinburgh I think we lived in three or four different houses. And then we had a short period that I often forget where we lived in Wales for about six months and we moved actually from Wales to Trinidad. My father had taken a job there, one of his first jobs, and I think he felt it was a bit depressing or something. He was working as an accountant at a nylon factory and he saw a job advertised in the paper for a job in Trinidad for a shipping company, and he apparently took the train to London to go for the interview not thinking he was going to get the job, but he did.

I think we lived in six different houses in Canada in the period of about nine years or so. Well, it may be a little bit more, 12 years maybe. So we're constantly moving and not necessarily because of new jobs. I think my parents both just liked moving to old places and working on them, fixing them up. And then maybe just naturally having itchy feet, wanting

something not so much better but different really. Often from suburbs to countryside and then countryside to city. I arrived in Toronto at 14, the first time I had lived in the city. Suburbs in those days were actually quite rural. And then deep, deep, deep countryside, you know, in Quebec, where I think a lot of the influence came as far as landscape and suchlike. I think when I arrived in London to begin with, I didn't really reflect on Canada. I kind of turned my back on Canada in a way as a young person that was much more interested in what was happening in the big urban centres of New York and London, of course. But as I got older, I think within my work anyway, I was always reflecting on places where I'd been, places that I'd seen and I think the leaving of places makes you look at them in a different way than always returning to the same place, if that makes sense. Leaving, a place and remembering aspects of it or people, and I think that that had a big impact on my work.

Keith Hartley

Why did you choose London to go to art school?

Peter Doig

Interesting question. I'd left school at 16, so I had no exam results, so I didn't have the 'high school diploma' as it was called which made getting into art school in Canada impossible. I definitely wanted to get away, but it also made it impossible to get into an American art school. I thought I'd always like London when I visited it. I had a few relatives here, a few friends here as well. So I thought I'd give it a try, really. I came to London and I kind of got in as what was called a 'mature student' at the age of 21.

Keith Hartley

What sort of paintings did you make when you were at Saint Martins in the early 1980s? This was a time when painting was back in fashion. The hugely influential exhibition *A New Spirit in Painting* was shown at the Royal Academy in 1981 while you were at Saint Martins and the Whitechapel Gallery was showing many of the same artists. How did you respond to this renewed interest in painting? And how did this mesh with what you're being taught at Saint Martins?

Peter Doig

Well, just to go back quickly, when I was a foundation student, I was studying at Wimbledon School of Art, and I went there initially because I thought maybe I'd be interested in theatre or theatre design or working in the theatre arts somehow, mainly to do with family, really. And then I discovered the etching department and I became very friendly with a man called Neil Wyatt, who was a technician in the etching department and very knowledgeable about painting and music and, of course, printmaking. And he was very encouraging and introduced me to artists that I connected to. People like Edward Burra, for instance, and of course, the German Expressionists of the old school. I think it's fair to say he wasn't so interested in what was happening currently. He was much more interested in what happened in the past. So when I arrived at Saint Martins, my strongest work was definitely my prints. And in fact, I was told at the interview that I was being given a place in the strength of my etchings and that if my paintings didn't improve that I'd be sent to the print

department. When I started at Saint Martins, I became much more interested in painting and the world of painters. And you know, I think it's fair to say that it was all a bit new for me, seeing so much painting and having exposure to not only the Tate but the National Gallery, as you mentioned the Whitechapel and just these incredible shows that came in waves and I think Nicholas Serota was there at the time. And there were extraordinary exhibitions, one after the other. Really, there was, I mean, can't forget, like [Max] Beckmann's triptychs and that had huge impact on students, I think, and painters in general. There was [Markus] Lüpertz and everything from Günter Brus to [Pablo] Picasso. There was a Bruce McLean. As I said, there was just one after the other, really. And there's all these possibilities being presented. And I think to begin with, I was making quite sort of modest, small, I mean, not comparing myself at all, but sort of Burra-like works, paintings that kind of came out of my sketchbooks, paintings of drawings I made in pubs and then turned into little sort of genre-type scenes and then would expand to paintings. And then I think I've, I guess, became more competitive, and I think there was definitely that atmosphere at Saint Martins. I mean, not in a kind of strange way. You didn't really want to miss a minute when you were there. You wanted to be there the whole time because everyone was working so hard. And I mean, not just in the painting department but in the fashion department as well, and the graphics department. Everyone was seemingly sort of tied into this sort of scene, even though, it has to be said, painting didn't really get a look in. The other departments, especially fashion and graphics were really at the cutting edge of what was happening in London at the time. So I started making paintings that reflected my interest in music and my interest in what was happening in New York.

Keith Hartley

Did you see the *Who Chicago?* show at Camden Arts Centre?

Peter Doig

I did. And that was probably for me more influential to me than *A New Spirit in Painting*. I somehow really related to the likes of Roger Brown. And to a degree Ed Paschke but I think Roger Brown was the artist that I really found something special in his work. He talked about mood in a work and mood also that could have sort of cartoon-like qualities, I think I really responded to that. It suggested possibilities in painting for me. H.C Westermann I loved as well. I was more interested in his graphic works really than his sculpture, although it's probably just because I'm not a sculptor!

Keith Hartley

Could you tell us something about the works you made after your 1982 road trip with a group of friends across America to New Orleans? This gave rise to several paintings about urban America, didn't it.

Peter Doig

It was an exciting trip. We went to Canada, myself and two friends from Saint Martins and spent the summer, and I think in exchange for borrowing my parents' car to do the road trip, we did some work on their farm - fencing work - and then they lent us the car for, I

can't remember how long it was, it seemed like an eternity but was probably three weeks or so! And we drove from Toronto to New Orleans via Nashville, Memphis and then made the loop around, came back up via Washington D.C. It was a great, incredible experience and we took lots and lots of photographs. And I guess made notes. And then upon returning to Saint Martins made works that in a way, told stories of this of this trip, narrative works. One that I remember was called *Just Passing Thru*, and it was just like snapshot images on a kind of background that suggested maybe cities at night or travel. I remember it was it was the time that Grandmaster Flash and the Furious five had released their seminal track, *The Message*. There weren't direct references to it but that was one of the soundtracks to that trip.

Keith Hartley

Music was quite an important influence at that time on the way you worked.

Peter Doig

It certainly was. We went to New Orleans hoping to hear some of the greats. This is long, long before the internet so you had no idea what you're going to come across when you got there. But we did manage to see Lee Dorsey and Allen Toussaint, Ernie K-Doe. It was a trip that really wasn't just about music by any means, but it was a big part of it.

It was a lot to do with cars, cars on the road. At the time, I painted lots of cars. Cars stuck. After that one, there was the one, the next image is of a cowboy. It's almost like a cowboy looking out of it out of a film screen over a sort of aerial view of Manhattan drawn in a... I don't even know if I was aware of Keith Haring so much at that time, but, you know, a kind of graphic-y, cartoony, drawn cityscape. And I think if you look in close, you'll see that there are quotes from lyrics from some of the current hip hop songs mixed in with I think a few lines of John Lee Hooker tracks and things like that.

Urban America in the early 1980s was quite different to what it's like now in a sense that the centres of the cities, were quite run down and I suppose considered to be dangerous, which meant they were very exciting as a young person just to visit in a way.

Keith Hartley

I can remember going to New York in 1980 and people telling me, 'you shouldn't go in this area or that area or whatever'.

Peter Doig

Yeah, I mean, shocking how segregated the cities were too compared to, I mean, London. London, in a way, it had a different way of dealing with segregation. And I think that in Canada as well, people from different places were integrated in a different way. Much more sort of within the fabric of the city to a certain extent, whereas in America it was, I think, for someone who was visiting for the first time in their late teens, early 20s, it really was shocking how segregated it really was, you know, when you were actually there.

Keith Hartley

Can we now turn to the painting, *At the Edge of Town*, that became part of the collection here at the National Galleries of Scotland in 2021. The date usually given for this work is 1986-88. Did you begin this painting in London or in Canada?

Peter Doig

I began it in Canada, actually, just shortly after I arrived. I'm trying to remember the dates but I think I arrived in Canada in late summer of 1986.

Keith Hartley

So it was one of the first paintings you worked on when you got to Canada.

Peter Doig

It's one of the first paintings I started, yes. But it took quite a long time to take the form you see it in now. The photograph of the figure was a photograph I took of a friend of mine in 1982, actually. He came to London. He was an old friend, younger than me. So he was probably a teenager, 18 maybe. He left school and he came to London and he was on his way to take a trip around Europe and I found these very cheap flights to fly to Portugal. And so we flew to Portugal together and spent a week there. And there is a photograph of him actually walking along the balcony of a kind of Portuguese guesthouse. So not this setting at all. And I remember he had these totally torn up Levi's, and it was just him sort of creeping along the edge of this balcony. The painting started with him and then the landscape element came laterally. The landscape was literally just a view out of the barn where I made the painting. I made the painting on my parents' farm in the barn and there are slats in the timber work, in the frame of the barn. And you could see this hill in the distance with this configuration of trees, which were northern pines, which are, you know, quite famous because of their use in Canadian landscape painting by Tom Thomson, David Milne, the Group of Seven. And so that was for me, a very unusual direction to go in, because it's something I'd resisted in the past and it was definitely new territory for me.

Keith Hartley

So putting various trees and using the view from your barn, took you in a different direction, really?

Peter Doig

It did. And you know, there was not really a narrative to the painting, but this friend of mine was going through a change in his life. He was coming to terms with who he was. He was young and it was difficult for him. He very much confided in me. It was my way of sort of depicting him dealing with an opening up in a way.

Keith Hartley

And this was based on a photograph of your friend, you said.

Peter Doig

A photograph I took of my friend. In a very different circumstance to the landscape.

Keith Hartley

I wonder now if we could turn to something that happened around this time. And I was wondering, how does this painting relate, if at all, to the now famous story of your watching Sean Cunningham's 1980 horror film Friday the 13th?

Peter Doig

The first Friday the 13th painting, which came from watching the film - Chris Ofili has this painting now actually. I made the painting as a reaction to the scene in the film. But the landscape actually is a version of the trees that I could see from where I was working. So it was a mixture of something that came from a film and then in a way, putting it in a place that was where I was or was familiar to me, really.

Keith Hartley

This view of the trees on the horizon - did you paint it in this work first or in *At the Edge of Town*?

Peter Doig

I think I painted in this work first, but they were definitely being worked on simultaneously. You can see quite strong connections with colour. I probably didn't have that many paints at the time. The purple of the canoe is the same purple that's in parts of the sky. And there's a blue, too, that you could see in the sky in this painting, which is in the sky of the other painting.

Keith Hartley

You mentioned earlier, this sort of early twentieth century Canadian landscape painters such as David Milne. When did you first encounter their work, when did they attract your attention?

Peter Doig

Well, I think growing up in Canada, you're very familiar with these artists because I think they were what was considered to be Canadian art. Particularly the Group of Seven. David Milne is not part of the group. David was interesting because he'd been in the Armory Show in New York, the one that Duchamp was in. And so, he came from a slightly different world of art than the Group of Seven, who I think for the most part, worked as illustrators. And, you know, kind of took to painting and made painting their thing. But Milne I think, always saw himself as an artist, I might be wrong, but I think that's true to say. Milne's paintings definitely have a different quality to them. There's this sort of fineness, spareness, there's an element that is almost Japanese in a way, the use of the ground or the paper, if it's a paper work, coming through and there's a great delicacy and beauty about them.

Keith Hartley

The subject matter reminds me very much of the paintings that [Edvard] Munch painted because they come from very similar sort of landscapes, you know, these Canadian and Norwegian landscapes. There are similarities, aren't there?

Peter Doig

Well, there are. I'm not sure in the case of Milne, but I know that there was an exhibition at the Albright-Knox in Buffalo, which is only an hour and a half from Toronto, that was hugely influential on the Group of Seven. You know, Munch was in the show and a number of other Scandinavian artists. And I think it really gave them a lot of ideas as to the way that nature could be depicted in a somewhat non-realistic way. But definitely, you're right. I mean, I think in the landscape there are lots of similarities, and I think that in many ways, Milne is possibly the closest to Munch. But in a way much more restrained. There's very little visible angst in his work, although it's definitely there. And there's a deep sense of sort of loneliness. And he did live quite a lonely existence. He left the city and moved to a lake quite far north of the city. And you could only get to the cabin he lived in by row boat. A very, very isolated existence. And just painting constantly.

Keith Hartley

What was this the first time when you were living back in Canada that you really start to relate more to a Canadian tradition?

Peter Doig

Oh, very much so. I think that growing up as a teenager in Canada and not being Canadian, you know, being conscious of not being from there. So much of the culture is about the great outdoors and canoeing and camping and fishing and hunting and families have long traditions of going to cottages and camps. It just wasn't part of our family life at all, really. It wasn't to do with envy or anything. I did have my experiences. You know, I would go with friends and we'd go camping at a national park somewhere and spend a few days out. And I had my own experience of living in the countryside. But it was not a typically Canadian one in the sense that it wasn't part of a tradition, really or family heritage. My parents just didn't go in for that, I guess they were too busy or whatever. They just weren't that interested in it. I think that myself and my friends who were interested in art in a way reacted against the likes of the Group of Seven, because it represented something that we weren't really interested in. I guess we were kind of like young punks in a way, and we associated that work with calendars and banks and postage stamps and just this great national identity thing. And so didn't really take it on at the time. It wasn't until I was older, and I came back to Canada, and I learnt more about the artists and in a way came to Canadian art through, you know, having discovered the likes of Munch.

Keith Hartley

I was going to come back to that because you've mentioned that the dream sequence in the canoe on the lake in the film *Friday the 13th* made you think of Munch's work. And what specifically reminded you of Munch and how did Munch impact on your own work at that particular time? I know I've always felt that the male figure in your painting *At the Edge of*

Town always makes me think of Munch's paintings and prints of melancholy. And I mean, perhaps that's just happenstance, really as far as I'm concerned. But I just wonder how you feel about that.

Peter Doig

Well, there is no direct quote. I see it now that you mention it. I have never actually put those two together, but I think that the figure in Munch's paintings, he really went with the emphasis on the face, and the emphasis on the rock in this painting (*Melancholy*) is not that much different, really. You need the figure, of course, as well as the rock and as well as the background. But I think that I found it very liberating to look at the way he painted the figure and not get tied up in getting it right or the academic side of it. The hand is definitely a hand, that's all you need to know. The hand in the foreground there. It's not really important to paint, you know, the veins and the hairs and the suggestion of bone. There's enough information there. The important thing is the form and the shape and then the attitude that comes across by the expression.

Keith Hartley

I was very struck when watching the YouTube video of you talking to Sheena Wagstaff at the Metropolitan Museum of Art about Munch's works and how you kept coming back to close-ups of parts of Munch's paintings, which are very painterly, expressive and abstract, really. Elsewhere you talked about expressing a mood and saying, if you took this to a logical conclusion, it might lead to some sort of abstraction. Did this have a big impact on the way that you started to paint works at this time?

Peter Doig

I decided that I wanted to come back to London to pursue painting properly, really. As I said, I made maybe five or six, maybe a few more paintings that I would consider to be finished paintings of my time in Canada. But predominantly I was working and I was working as a painter in the set department for filmmakers. And I think I did learn a bit about using material doing that as well because we were painting such huge areas and using very loose paint and, you know, working with effect and all that kind of stuff.

Keith Hartley

I wonder if we could talk about the way that you use the human figure. You seem to use them, not as a figure with whom we, the viewer, can empathise or attempt to understand, but rather like the German romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich did, as focus that enables us to enter the painting and explore its moods and resonances. Is this something that you're conscious of doing? Or am I totally off beam here?

Peter Doig

I had seen Friedrich's paintings and I recognised the figure and I think Whistler paintings, too. The Whistler paintings he made. When I was at Chelsea, I used to go by bike from Kings Cross every day and back and I would go along the Thames. I would think a lot about Whistler, those Whistler paintings. And oftentimes the figure was just a little sort of gesture,

really. I realised that I wanted to have some human presence, but I didn't want it to dominate necessarily.

It has to be said too I was always a little bit afraid of using the figure and not getting it right. That's why you know, *At the Edge of Town* was, for me, quite a bold use of the figure. I can't really think of another painting where the figure is so up front. I mean, at one point, the figure was a silhouette, it was just a black form. And that felt too gimmicky in a way. And so I added a kind of flesh tone, really, but it's not really particularly lifelike.

Keith Hartley

It looks more grey and it's become almost part of the sky, really.

Peter Doig

Exactly, it's not about realism in any way. And I think that, you know, if you go down to the *Pond Life* painting, which is a few years later. I mean, the figures are there, but the figures are very obscured behind what could be either kind of skate marks on ice or becoming more abstracted, really.

Keith Hartley

Yeah, I mean, they start off almost as if they are skate marks on the ice, but then they sort of almost extend over the whole picture surface. I mean there are other paintings in which you do a similar sort of thing at the same time.

Peter Doig

Yes, I think that the paintings became probably their most painterly around this period, really. There's *The Architect's Home in the Ravine*. There are a number of paintings that I made for a small show at the Whitechapel at that time.

Keith Hartley

And can we just return to the image of these skeletal trees on the horizon. You used them as you said, probably firstly in the Friday the 13th painting. And obviously here in *At the Edge of Town*, but you're also using it in *Milky Way* as well. I mean, they are almost anthropomorphised, you know, they feel sort of like stand-ins for figures, really.

Peter Doig

I think definitely in this case, yes. I remember the sketch that I made for this painting, I was waiting at a train station in rural Canada for someone to get off the train. And I did this sketch in a sketch book that led to this painting and thinking of maybe a city in the background sort of illuminating these trees and I mean, some of them come yes, from the ridge of where my parents farm was, but also trees that I saw in other places or just sort of ideas about trees. But they definitely have a life of their own.

Keith Hartley

Words that have often been used to describe your works from the late 1980s onwards are 'uncanny' or its German equivalent, *unheimlich*, or mysterious. I think it's because people don't have a rational explanation for what is going on in your paintings. Of course, that's precisely what attracts them to your work and what gets them to look long and hard at the paintings. Do you see this as a fitting justification for your attempts to paint a mood or experience?

Peter Doig

It's important to remember that the paintings often take time to make and they're not really planned in the sense that when I start them, I have no idea what they're going to turn out like. There's definitely a journey involved in the making of them. And I suppose part of that journey is finding the mood of the painting. It's not something that I would say, you know, I'm determined to find the mood of this painting. But if I think about it, that's, I guess what happens. And until that atmosphere, let's call it, is right, the painting is kind of nothing, really.

Keith Hartley

So you don't have a mood that you want to express early on. You have inklings, perhaps, of something that you wanted to do. And gradually as you paint the work, it crystallises, possibly over a long length of time.

Peter Doig

I think so. And I think that, you know, oftentimes if I showed you the photograph of where the painting came from, it could actually look quite banal, really. But there's enough information for me to begin. And that's what I seek out.

Keith Hartley

Well, I think that's a good place to end, Peter, and I'd like to thank you very much for a fascinating conversation. We are delighted that your great painting *At the Edge of Town* is now in the collection of the National Galleries of Scotland.

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