

Conversation with David Cohen at John Davis Gallery
Hudson NY May 18, 2019
(Unedited)

DC: Ladies and gentleman thank you very much for coming. It's a wonderful turnout.

DC: The idea of this exchange came to me from a very stimulating studio visit with Peter out in St Albans Queens, a part of the city in which I've lived for two or three decades, which I've never visited before. One of the things that makes a place interesting is artists living and working there, and with the centrifugal effect of the real estate market, more and more places are becoming places where artists are living and working. You probably wouldn't have guessed that we both have a connection with London, but we do, because Peter spent quite a few years in London, but your journey is a bigger one than that for you, ending up in St Albans Queens, because it obviously starts on the other side of the planet.

PB: Yes, growing up in Australia, I grew up in Brisbane and couldn't wait to get out of the place, I worked there and was doing some life drawing, but what excited me was elsewhere, and so I travelled to India first, then to Paris and around Europe visiting a lot of the great museums and then ended up in London.

DC: That's an interesting and unusual journey, and in this show your works have some interesting and unusual titles, which are very dense titles I must say, not Untitled #6, that doesn't seem to be your style of titling, but some of them, you've told me, are actually from Australian Literature.

PB: Lately the author I've been interested in is Gerald Murnane, and there's a bunch of his books that I've been excited by, and this show is titled after one of them, called The Plains, which I think touches on or attempts to teeth out how the character of those living on the land become formed by the experience and the land itself, the environment, the climate. This interests me as a narrative, as a source. Every time I go home I search around the bookshops, and search out interesting literature and bring some books back with me, and likewise with music, It began with Peter Sculthorpe and there's been many others since. The moment when the painting finishes I try to be aware of what was going on in that moment, it could be one of the musical pieces I brought back that was playing, it could be something that came to the forefront of my mind from something I've read, so I try to be quite specific, about going and finding that passage, or that line of a song, or whatever it might be, and titling the work accordingly by jotting down exactly what was happening as the image came.

DC: So for instance that very large painting on the right there, what's the title of that one

PB: Hey man, Slow down, Smoldering log, jog, In the rain she stands.

DC: A catchy title.

PB: That's a collage of a number of different thoughts, so the Hey man, Slow down is a line from a Radiohead song, and the Smoldering log is an image from The Turning by Tim Winton, and the rest just came out as I wrote it down, the other words fell into place.

DC: What it signals is that this is not Polite abstraction, it doesn't necessarily pinpoint anything about a painting, to have a long, or descriptive or literary or illusive of allusive kind of title, other than to say, don't look for a purely formal set of arrangements, or relationships in this painting. And I think your painting has that strong narrative urge, not in any descriptive sense, but in the sense of some kind of journey, or some kind of story, some kind of exploration, that animated these moves. Is that a fair read?

PB: That's a fair read.

DC: There's a real gusto and energy in your painting that is sustained. There are two things that I find very striking about your painting, but I'll back up from telling you what those two things are by telling you something quite different. I've been following your work over the years, and particularly in your studio earlier this year, perhaps because you were showing me quite a lot of work, some of which was coming to this show, others that weren't. In your studio space, which is filled with so much work, and we have sketched together and you are a fast worker, you generate a lot of material. I was very struck, in the studio, by the difference between image to image, the eclecticism or diversity within your oeuvre, very different strategies, approaches, feelings, degrees of abrasiveness or finesse. But then I was also struck by the willingness to go to places that could be quite difficult and Un-ingratiating.

So those two observations I offer, but I also offer that John has made his selections for the gallery and he has definitely preserved that spirit, but at the same time, the way that John has of placing the work, and making intellectual sense of the work in the exhibition, means that actually one finds within each painting the qualities I've described, rather than coming into this gallery and having anything like the experience one has of going into your studio. Now that is a commonplace experience for artists, when their work leaves their perhaps messy work space, or perhaps very clean work space, and goes into perhaps a nicely ordered gallery or a rather badly decorated home, so the experience can go either way. What it feels like in the gallery and what it feels like in the place its made are in contrast to how it stands up in the real world. That is the sign of a successful work of art, that it can go out into the world and be, and do its own thing. But, let me first ask how you feel, about seeing your work rested from its place of origin?

PB: You are quite right, it's a very different experience seeing it here rather than in my studio. In my studio it would never be set out like this, nothing gets separated. In the studio there's stuff on the floor, stuff all around, there's many different ways of working going on, not just painting, but lots of drawing, constructions, all sorts of source material hanging around, books and stuff, so it's very different. I live with the things and I know them. They are presented differently, I never would have hung this next to that, but I'm glad it has been, it makes sense, I'm seeing them differently, through John's eyes rather than my own. Things that I was unsure about I am now seeing as successful, so I'm learning from it, which is why it's good to do it, and maybe I'll go back into the studio and do it differently.

DC: One thing that's very clear, that they don't mind being abrasive, they are not setting out to observe any decorum, they are not calculated affronts, rather they are very involved in their own activity of being made. What I marvel at is, without resorting to a set of mannerisms which are "Peter Bonnerisms" is how it is that you sustain this spirit of revolt, this frenetic energy, in the work. Do you find that your making works that don't have that energy and you discard them, or find some way to mess them up, so that they begin to generate this sort of feeling, or is this a feeling that you have no control over, this is the feeling of a Peter Bonner painting.

PB: I don't really think about it, there's no benchmark of energy which I feel like I've got to have to be a Peter Bonner painting. When I work I try to get myself in a sort of zone, and I just move around the studio and the decisions come to me, pretty much while I'm moving. So I'm not sitting looking at a painting calculating what it needs. If I ever do that it pretty much never works. I might be involved in working on one painting, using a certain color and the feeling comes to me that this color has to be placed on another painting in a specific way, and I do that and something unimaginable happens. That's when the energy comes in. It comes about more by me listening in the right way, maybe as I'm moving through the studio, walking around, disinterested instead of being still and focussing on something.

DC: Do you think of your painting as trying to find some order, from amidst a maelstrom of thoughts and feelings, or is it more a question of actually critiquing or upending an established order to find that energy?

PB: There's a little bit of the upending going on I suspect, it could be the Australian in me, as you pointed out earlier. My journey started there and at heart I'm still the underdog, the rebel. Part of me wants to make it hard for people to gain entry into the experience, part of me is throwing down a challenge such that only the initiated can gain entry. I feel like there's a secret which is hidden deep within each work, and there's a lot of stuff that maybe people would find difficult to wade their way through, to decode, to gain access to that place. I don't have any rules as to the means, but I'm continually working until something occurs that I recognize and somehow I feel like I'm at one with it for that split second and the painting snaps into place. There's a coming together, myself and the painting.

DC: Brilliant that it happens like that!

DC: You've told us something about the background about where the titles come from. Do the titles coalesce in the split second after the painting is done or do you have any intension to make a painting with that particular title or is there more of an organic fluid relationship between the two?

PB: I often have the intension but it never works out. I pretty much start every painting with something that's personal, some experience that I've had, and they often start with drawing and then they go their own way and in the studio take on their own life. I try to listen to what's coming and let them evolve organically as they may, without attachment.

Question from Audience

Eric Banks: is there a political aspect in there, in these paintings?

PB: The politics are more, in the way I described, the way the art world has drifted towards commercialization and decoration, and these are not decorative in any way.

Q: how do you reconcile the history of Abstract Expressionism with your work, the distance between the impetus of those paintings at that time in history and now? Do you see a parallel? Does it come across out of the way you've been taught or learned?

PB: I look back at the Abstract Expressionist painters and I see the motivation as being patriarchal. It was very much about having a victory with the painting, being in complete control. In contrast one of the elements or attributes about Australian Indigenous painting that influenced me is that the process of making is much more organic, much more social, much more honest. For example the women artists I really like are sitting whilst they are making their paintings, in a group often, together and very social. There's no masculine energy being pumped into the paintings to heroically pull them off in the last second. I'm moving around the studio not particularly worried about any one painting, nor about having to conquer or dominate.

DC: Yet there is that moment which you realize it suddenly arrived!

PB: Yes but it's unexpected, it feels like it happens without effort or force. It feels more like I'm sitting and waiting, tilling my field, and it turns up eventually, this day or the next.

DC: But that sense of not vanquishing, of not conquering, it doesn't seem to be anything passive about the painting.

PB: I felt as a student at the Studio School there was certainly that mentality, about the heroics of pulling off that great big work. That was talked about by some teachers and in their work substituted for real ambition. I took that into the studio and questioned it and it didn't feel relevant or right.

DC: The opposite of Ab Ex paintings, there's neither iconography nor alloverness in these works!

PB: true.

DC: So that's what makes them rather abrasive and difficult and Un-ingratiating, is that they are not cohering towards an obvious gestalt, but nor are they a unified field, so there often is a sense of an event or struggle, but an event or struggle within some context, if that makes sense? And that would also bring in that scruffeto, the puncturing of the canvas, the sense of attack that is going on sometimes, in some paintings, and the sense of braiding and discovering colors by scraping away. Those strategies would suggest a narrative event.

Lois Dixon: We have discussed that the paintings are aggressive, powerful, strong and antagonistic at some point. Would you object at the same time with people finding them beautiful?

PB: No, if that's how you relate to them.

EB: There's beauty in the grotesque.

LD: I think they are all of the above, that's a hard act to pull off in my book.

PB: Thank you.

DC: There is beauty in the grotesque, and there's also Un-grotesque beauty that can surface and does surface from time to time in your painting. There's beautiful moments or maybe the higher beauty of an organization that ultimately makes sense in an image that has cohered. But the coherence is not around a central design element or an iconic form.

DC: I'd like to talk about Sydney Nolan and Arthur Boyd because they are the grand figures of post war Australia, and Fred Williams, they are all deeply rooted in the sense of Australian land.

PB: And the Psyche, if you think of Boyd.

DC: Yes

PB: As a kid I used to be fascinated by Arthur Boyd, because there were all these programs on TV, showing these massive paintings of the Shoalhaven River with all these figures on them, made with his hands, which fascinated me, but Fred Williams has become more interesting to me as I began to study art myself. Fred went out into the landscape and tried to understand and deal with cubism using the Australian landscape as motif, maybe he succeeded. Sydney Nolan is a tough one, because he came up with the Ned Kelly series early on, and they are very iconic.

DC: Yes.

PB: Although I think perhaps some of the best landscape painting I've seen done by an Australian artist is in those Ned Kelly paintings. But the painter I think I'm the most influenced by is Ian Fairweather, a Scottish painter who studied at the Royal Academy. He became a

vagabond and travelled around the world, visiting China between the wars, and ended up living on an island as a hermit just north of where I grew up. In the 50s he was making paintings that one could think of as Abstract Expressionist paintings but in some ways they were more interesting, abstract but underpinned by a figurative presence. So I've seen a lot of his work over the last 20 or 30 years, and I'm influenced by his working all over with some presence, figurative presence or gravitates, not iconic like Nolan.

DC: And he's well known in Australia?

PB: Yes, and becoming bigger and bigger.

DC: Two non-Australian painters that your work reminds me of, The Scottish painter Allen Davies, I mentioned him in your studio and I was pleasantly surprised to hear he was a force that you are aware of, and the American painter George McNeil, who was an influential teacher at the Studio School and at Yale. Both of them are abstract painters who are not afraid to bring in narrative impulses and to make a bit of a mess to achieve unexpected harmonies.

PB: Very true.

DC: Which I think characterizes your endeavor as well.

LD: What is your definition of formal?

PB: I can best describe it by giving an example of this that struck me when I was a student. It was in Titian's painting at the Capodimonte in Naples, called "The Annunciation". There's a blue shape behind Gabriel that as I was painting felt more and more like a real shock, it seemed impossible, the way it worked positioning, announcing the form of Gabriel in relation to Mary. I saw that it was through creating this formal shock, a relationship that was not just unexpected but seemingly impossible, that Titian was able to communicate the substance of the shock of Gabriel's message to Mary. This for me is formal, where the content and meaning is being evoked through formal means.

Q: Just listening to you talking about the ah ha moment, and then thinking of John hanging the works and you seeing them differently, and you have that moment of, oh I've never thought about that, will you go back into paintings or will you start a new one instead?

PB: Both! If I look back over the years and I have an exhibition of some works that I made and if I'm lucky, and I don't get to bring them all home, the ones I don't get to bring home I generally don't get to paint on again, though there's a few exceptions to that, and the ones I bring home are vulnerable, I live with them and they start to annoy me.

Q: You would have it and work on it a bit more?

PB: They usually get worked on and turned into something completely different. For example, there's one downstairs that I've shown with John before and it was a completely different painting. Before that it was shown at another gallery and it was different again, so if John doesn't sell this one then it might be reborn.

DC: A forth season!

DC: Some artists would say that it belongs to that moment and I've moved on, but you're the sort of painter that says wherever something is from, it needs to work on today's terms. You don't have an archeological sense?

PB: I'm not worried about the record, there are artists who are, and they say this one can't be touched because it's a record of what happened on a particular day, but I feel that we only have one day to live and somethings work out and others don't, then we rest and live out that day all over again and that adds up to a life.

LD: And a lot of paintings, or fewer paintings.

PB: Fewer really good ones if we are lucky.

DC: So would you be able, in that ah ha moment, when you realized that "Hey man, Slow down, smoldering log, Jog, in the rain she stands", had cohered into a satisfying image, would you at that moment, be able to give some sort of a verbal equivalent of the sensations or the narrative of the self discovery that characterized that moment, or is it a purely formal discovery?

PB: The medium isn't verbal, the medium is visual and textural and its that medium that's bringing on that ah ha moment. If I were a poet maybe words could communicate it. When I was singing in a choir I had a similar moment when we were singing a piece and I suddenly became aware of exactly where I needed to be with my pitch in relation to others in the choir and felt that ah ha moment, finding that oneness with another person in the choir. I felt there were no longer individuals but a oneness had come into existence, its hard to describe what that is, because it's felt, I was inside it, and that's what happens when I'm painting. I do try to provide a clue, and give a viewer some way to access them.

Q: In this room here they seem different. I wonder if they are more recent? There seems like there's a layer taken off, they seem like they are more vulnerable. I'm not saying the others aren't, and the imagery seems very found, any responses to that?

PB: They are different for sure, the one on the left could be the oldest in the show, the one on the right, isn't the most recent, I think the final marks I made this year, but it was a long time gestating that painting, and eventually it happened, so that's a thing that generally happens, in that its effortless in the end. Previously the closer it was to completion the harder it got, now it's the opposite of that. I have to distance myself and let it sit and eventually the answer will come, and eventually it comes.

John Davis: I have a question. I may be way off, but I think sometimes I'm imagining things, that you're slicing the painting for different reasons. For instance, if you get stuck in a painting your using the slicing thing which opens up all these possibilities. But I think that's not the only reason you do it, you could also be in the zone, and just slice the painting as part of the process of making the painting. But its a serious thing you are doing and I'd like to hear your thoughts about it.

PB: Yes great question John, the slicing began really in earnest after I made a series of drawings on panel, I made them in 2013 and before but when I showed them in 2015 I didn't like them. When I was making them the problem I faced was that I couldn't erase on the panels. If I erased on the panel the charcoal would smudge and make a mess, and I didn't like that, I like no erasure at all. So I picked up a tool and started scratching into them, which lifted off the charcoal by scratching and scraping off the wood basically, and I thought that was awesome as I could get the drawing, get the light back into the drawing effectively, so I started to use the tool on everything, which worked well if it was on a panel however it didn't work so well if it was on a canvas. There were other problems, most canvasses got shredded at some point if I was insensitive to where the gesso boundary was, but then something good happened. Somehow the space was changed by what was happening when the canvas was getting cut, and I felt that the space was much more interesting to me, its much more of a

defined form if you like. I think of it as being like a lens, where there is a tension on the edges where it goes in and comes back out again and that somehow has something to do with the shifting of the canvas in and out as I'm repairing the damage. Im not trying to repair it as it were prior to the moment when I made the cut, as if it wasn't cut. I'm making it looking at the whole positioning it in space, physically now, in-front or behind, and somethings happening to the quality and feeling of the space. It's a decisive and important act, almost like I'm inside a collage working outwards.

DC: Peter thank you very much indeed, I think we've covered a lot of ground.