

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Finding His Frame: Q+A With Howard Hodgkin

By David Ebony

The London-born painter Howard Hodgkin turns 80 next year, and in spite of rather delicate health continues to dazzle and provoke audiences in equal measure. A spirited and colorful mix of show-stoppers and head-scratchers fills his current exhibition of 21 recent paintings at Gagosian's Madison Avenue gallery in New York, through Dec. 23. There's classic Hodgkin, such as the intimate and moody *Dark Evening* (2011), with a centralized image that suggests a nighttime seascape, overpainted with more or less evenly spaced circular daubs of blue and white. Works like this could be counted among the best of Hodgkin's long career. Then there are some surprising, experimental efforts, including the spare *And the Skies Are Not Cloudy All Day* (2007–08), which, at nearly 7 by 9 feet, is one of the largest Hodgkin has produced. In Action Painting fashion, the expanse of bare wood is interrupted here only by feverishly applied green brushstrokes clustered near the top of the composition. The motion of the artist's body is evident, and the work thereby conveys his presence.



HOWARD HODGKIN *Ice*, 2008–2010 Oil on wood, 22 1/2 x 26 7/8 inches, (57.2 x 68.3cm). Photo by Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd. Courtesy Gagosian.; HOWARD HODGKIN *After Whistler*, 2010 Oil on Wood, 35 x 45 inches (88.9 x 114.3cm). Photo by Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd. Courtesy Gagosian.;

Hodgkin has had a remarkable 6-decade career. In 1984, the artist represented Great Britain at the Venice Biennale and the following year won the Turner Prize. He has had many museum

shows around the world, including retrospectives at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1995 and Tate Britain in 2006.

Hodgkin's paintings are ostensibly abstract, although they are based on landscape, the figure and still life. The artist strives to convey the feeling of the subject, or his feelings toward it. Rather than simply create a visual impression or record of a specific time and place, the images evoke the experience of the subject based on memory.

Hodgkin famously incorporates the frames in most of his compositions. Painting over them with vigorous brushstrokes or various dappled effects, he emphasizes the painting's objecthood rather than its illusionistic possibilities. On the occasion of the current show, the day before the opening, we sat down to discuss his technique and a number of other aspects of the work.

HOWARD HODGKIN Sorry, I usually get tongue-tied doing these things, at least in the beginning of an interview.

DAVID EBONY Why?

HODGKIN Nerves? Maybe it's apprehension about the opening, about the new work. I don't know.

EBONY With your extraordinary career, how could you get nervous about anything? I'm the one who ought to be nervous.

HODGKIN Oh, no [*laughs*].

EBONY I have just 10 questions for you, and then you're off the hook. Actually, they're groups of questions. Let's start with one about your early works. Your early paintings of the '60s and '70s had a Pop art feel, with relatively garish colors and all-over abstract compositions. Then the work slowly evolved over the years toward the direction of landscape; at least there are regularly landscape elements or references and more subtle color relationships. How would you describe that evolution?

HODGKIN I know what you're talking about, though I'm not the kind of artist who can describe

such a thing. But I think you're quite right; over the years I've become much more aware of nature. And natural light, of course, is very important to me.

EBONY Your works have been described as "pictorial objects," and the frames are often part of the painting. Are the frames designed?

HODGKIN Yes, they are in a way. And they've become much more like that as time has passed. But actually, the frames are not usually designed or fabricated; they're mostly found. My assistant Andy finds them—in antiques shops or flea markets, places like that.

EBONY How did you come upon the idea to paint the frame in the paintings, which you started to do in the 1960s? Was there a precedent?

HODGKIN You could say it came from looking at Seurat's paintings.

EBONY Your work seems precisionist in that each brushstroke in the painting appears perfectly executed, almost like a Zen master's. The brushstrokes look spontaneous but, of course, they're not. They are well rehearsed. Do you destroy work that doesn't achieve that level of precision or perfection?

HODGKIN Yes, I do. When the subject doesn't return to me, if it doesn't come back, then I destroy it.

EBONY What do you mean by that—when the subject doesn't return?

HODGKIN While I'm working, the subject at hand—what I am starting out with—goes away as I get further involved in the painting process. But then, if things go well, toward the end, it eventually returns to me. It's there in the finished painting; but if it doesn't return, I destroy the work.

EBONY Is your process totally preconceived, or is it intuitive?

HODGKIN Actually, my paintings have become more intuitive over time.

EBONY What artist's work has inspired you more than any other?

HODGKIN Vuillard.

EBONY What's next for you? What's on the horizon?

HODGKIN I'm getting ready to go to India.

EBONY Will you paint there?

HODGKIN I did a mural in New Delhi some years ago—in 1992, for the British Council headquarters in India—made of black stone and marble. I would just like to revisit it.