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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Full Color: British Artist Howard Hodgkin Returns to New York

A painter's painter, he's defied genres

By Andrew Russeth

The London-based artist Howard Hodgkin, who was recently deemed, by a critic, to be "Britain's greatest painter," was sitting in Gagosian Gallery's Upper East Side space last week, in a private meeting room. A few days earlier, the 79-year-old's exhibition had opened in a gallery one floor above. Before the opening, he'd had his requisite Bloody Mary, at the Carlyle Hotel, across Madison Avenue—his favorite part of the ritual of having an exhibition in New York, which is something he's been doing since 1973.

"I remember, long ago now, an artist who met me said, 'Ah yes, the colorist,'" Mr. Hodgkin told *The Observer* wryly. "That was a putdown, a total putdown."

But, we proposed, hadn't some of history's greatest artists, Matisse for instance, been labeled colorists?

"He probably would have been furious," Mr. Hodgkin replied. "It's demeaning, really. It makes less of what one does."

This is an old argument. Throughout art history, color has been deemed the emotional side of painting, line the intellectual. Matisse was the sensualist, goes the old cliché, Picasso was the thinker, the innovator. Such dichotomies are, to the average viewer, academic trifles; to artists they are everything.

Still, what exactly it is that Mr. Hodgkin does is difficult to explain. He is frequently quoted saying that his paintings depict "emotional situations." He makes richly colored works that seem keenly, brazenly uninterested in the centuries-long divide between figuration and abstraction, and he is famous for his reticence about their meanings.

He's been celebrated for this practice, with a retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1995, a knighthood in 1992. ("I very nearly didn't accept it but then I thought it was taking it too seriously not to," he told an interviewer of the latter award, in 1994.) He's long since reached the age of accolades and generic exhibition titles. "Howard Hodgkin: Time and Place" was the name of a museum survey earlier this year in San Diego. "Innocuous and rather silly title," Mr. Hodgkin deadpanned in the local paper.

Though *New Yorker* critic Anthony Lane once succinctly described Mr. Hodgkin as a "natural-born Eeyore," there is also a certain formidability about him, even when he is sitting in the wheelchair he has taken to using recently. He speaks slowly and carefully, but punctuates his speech with moments of dry wit: asked where he was planning to visit on an upcoming trip to India, he quipped "luxury hotels," but then offered that Mumbai and Delhi are on his itinerary.

In his current exhibition at Gagosian, titled “Howard Hodgkin: New Paintings 2007-2011,” he’s continued in the mode he’s pursued for most of his life. In *Big Lawn* (2008-10), he has covered part of a wood panel with only a few wide strokes that seem to contain thousands of shades of green. In *Ice* (2008-10), he floated a wave of blues—from Caribbean water to a moonless night—over a ground of various bubble gum and tropical pinks that envelopes the object, including its entire frame.

The wood panel at the center of *Saturday* (2005-08) is a field of quick marks, ocean blue, while the flag in *Flag* (2006-10) is depicted with only three arcs: green, mustard and orange. “It was probably some painting by Sonia Delaunay, not a very emotionally important source at all,” Mr. Hodgkin told us when asked about the subject. “It was just a visual; something that got me going.” He is hard to pin down.

Frequently, Mr. Hodgkin disregards the frames of his works, painting onto them, or flipping the panels around entirely to paint on their backs. “We look for frames in antique shops, junk shops and flea markets,” Mr. Barker, the painter’s assistant, who sat alongside him, chimed in. “You’re looking for the proportion, aren’t you?”

“You’re quite right,” the artist replied. “It’s the shape and size that affect, and please me, if they work.”

Saturday’s wide, short frame features ornate carvings, and Mr. Hodgkin was unusually respectful of it, barely touching it with his brush. “That is probably the only genuine antique frame in this exhibition,” Mr. Hodgkin said. “It’s a provincial Quatorze frame. But you can see that it’s been made smaller.”

“It’s been cut down,” Mr. Barker added.

Mr. Hodgkin’s painting practice is a slow and deliberate one. “It takes me a long time to think things out and reimagine the subject matter,” he said. He dates his works the moment he selects a panel, but they can then sit on the wall for years before he finishes a painting.

His subjects, the memories that inform his work, also emerge over time. The title of the two largest works in the show—*Where Seldom Is Heard a Discouraging Word* and *And the Skies Are Not Cloudy All Day* (both 2007-08)—take their names from the lyrics of “Home on the Range.” “When I was a child on Long Island, it was played on the radio the whole time,” Mr. Hodgkin said.

The names would sound too nostalgic by half, coming from an American. Mr. Hodgkin was born in London in 1932, and spent time in the States in the early 1940s, an evacuee from England during World War II, and spent many hours at the Museum of Modern Art. By then he had already decided to become an artist, a pivotal decision made at age 5. He’d made, he said, a painting of a woman with a red face, which people—presumably his family—admired. “I did want to be admired,” he said, “as small children do.”

His work has steadily progressed through styles since then, explosively colored portraits and domestic scenes in the 1950s and ’60s giving way to equally frenetic landscapes that veered increasingly into abstraction. Over the past decade, though, his average picture has become more austere, more economical in its elements. He has, we proposed, found something of a stable language.

“I think that’s perfectly true,” he said. “But I would like to quickly say that I’m not the kind of artist who keeps looking to see what I’m doing in relation to everything else. There are lots of very good artists who are, as it were, art historians of their own work.

“A painter once said that artists need critics like birds need ornithologists,” he added, paraphrasing Barnett Newman. “I don’t think that it’s helpful to me.”

Make paintings as long as Mr. Hodgkin has, and you’ve lived through several declared “deaths” of the medium. We asked him how he feels about the state of painting today.

“I think it is a great pity that people have turned painting into such a special case because it’s not,” he said. “To paint a picture is a very natural, human occupation, and the possibilities of painting—to anyone who has used oil paint—are infinite, and for that reason I am very pleased I am a painter rather than a sculptor or another kind of artist.”

This continued fascination with the medium led him, early in his career, to collect Indian painting, which, we reminded him, he once referred to as “totally and shamelessly eclectic.”

“I was talking about Mughal art, specifically,” he said, “which is particularly totally and shamelessly eclectic. But I don’t see why any modern artist, or living artist, wouldn’t feel attracted by that.” Next February, he said, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford will host an exhibition of his collection.

And, with that, he announced his plans to head to MoMA, to catch the Willem de Kooning retrospective. It seemed appropriate: much of what Mr. Hodgkin does can be traced back to the wilder rhythms of Abstract Expressionism, and, in particular, the fluid way in which de Kooning moved between figuration and abstraction.

Mr. Hodgkin prepared to head to the elevator; we returned to his exhibition and took a last look at the painting called *Breakfast*, which consists of merely a single translucent swath of pale red, a lime-green line and a thick chocolate stroke, laid down one on top of one another, on a panel. Part of that mass of paint had dripped, purposely, along one side of the frame. It is bracingly spare.

“It almost seems to disregard its frame,” we’d observed to Mr. Hodgkin, earlier.

“I think you’re quite right, it does.”

“Can you say a bit more about how it began? The memory that led to it?”

“Not really,” he’d said amiably. “Not more than you can see in the picture itself.”