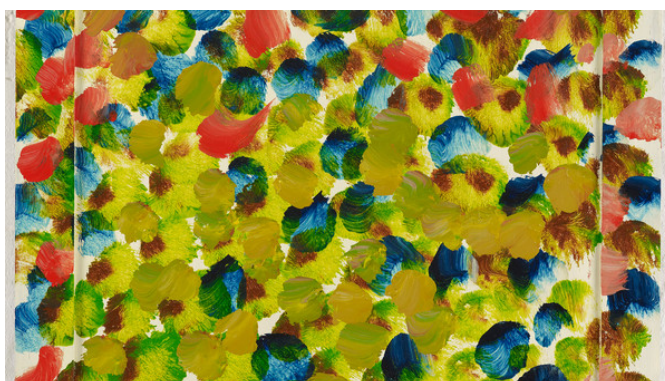


## GAGOSIAN GALLERY



### **Howard Hodgkin at the Gagosian Gallery, Paris** *The 81-year-old artist holds his first ever solo show in the French capital*

Jackie Wullschlager



*Out of the Window, Bombay' (2012-2014)*

“Degas, Degas, Degas,” Howard Hodgkin has repeated over recent years when I have asked him about influence. His dusty orange “After Degas” (1993) is the cover image for his catalogue raisonné, and early on it was easy to trace a line from, say, his great bedroom “Interior with Figures” (1977-84), with its undefined human forms, ecstatic bursts of colour and screen of pulsating dots, back to the heated eroticism of French 19th-century intimiste painting.

How extraordinary, then, that Howard Hodgkin, a selection of new paintings opened this weekend at Gagosian Gallery on the rue de Ponthieu, is the 81-year-old artist’s first ever solo show in Paris. The globalism of the art market is much trumpeted, but painting, perhaps, is the medium most resistant to it – a painter as eminent as Leon Kossoff, 87, only had his inaugural show in France last year; distinguished Europeans including Neo Rauch (German) and Michael Borremans (Belgian) are barely a presence in the UK.

Hodgkin is little known in France; most of his works are in British and American collections. “Americans knew at once what sort of painter I was,” he has insisted, and indeed in America, home of 20th-century abstract painting, the figurative element of Hodgkin’s work tends to stand out by way of contrast. But in Paris, the resonance with French painting is of course palpable.

Working within what he calls “the classical wall of feeling that Degas has built for us”, Hodgkin describes his paintings, which look mostly abstract, as “representational pictures of emotional situations”. His current late style tempers rapture with restraint: this year’s “From the Head of the Bed”, for example, reprises the pinks and turquoises of “Interior”, simplifies its figural

suggestions into horizontal slashes, and, in daringly extending its play-off between density of colour and patches of bare wood, suggests more eloquently than ever the fragmentary, elusory character of memory and desire.

In their evasiveness, such works bring to mind Vuillard, and in their uneasy introspection Bonnard: a brilliant yellow/black snake-like form, streaking, rising, falling across grey, in another new painting, “Disturbed Night” (2013-14), is as cogent a distillation of broken sleep and fractious, fractured, sexy dreams as any in modern art.

A bigger debt, formal and even “moral”, Hodgkin has acknowledged, is to Matisse. A third painting finished this year, “For Matisse” (2011-14) – slashes of pink and red, enclosing like a view from a window a golden centre, and framed by swoops of mint and blue, fraying, tapering, dwindling to rough minimalism – is a fine example of the compositional balance between concentration and expansion, logic and sensuality, integration and chaos, which places Hodgkin, more than any living French painter, as a direct descendant of the modernist master.

Yet in a show remarkable for its variety, Gagosian has countered this unmistakable French accent with an emphasis on works made on a visit to India in autumn/winter 2013-14, as well as displaying pictures – “Edge of the Field”, “Behind the Hedge” – whose leaf-green springiness seem quintessentially English.

All the paintings were completed in the past two years, with the latest and largest too new to appear in the catalogue: entitled “Arriving”, its airy blue curves have the sort of glancing, dematerialised quality that is evocative of how we see the world from a car or train or plane in motion. Movement and flux – the looping turquoise arc in “Indian Waves”, the scattergun effects of “Blue Door” – rather than the deliberation, stalking and protection of memory and feeling as in his earlier work, are certainly keynotes here.

The feathery, ragged, stabbing, swarming blobs, signature Hodgkin marks since the 1960s, which once functioned as a sort of screen or veil – Tate’s “Dinner at Smith Square” (1975-79) and MoMA’s “Red Bermudas” (1978-80) are celebrated examples – now range loose and free across the entire picture surface and its frame, as if, in “Out of the Window, Bombay”, the busy world of people, images, ideas, feelings, dissolves, jumbles, reforms endlessly.

“If I could ever really succeed, I would paint pictures that were so direct, and in which the subject was so displayed, that each would be like a piece of fruit being handed to you on a plate,” Hodgkin remarked in the 1970s. “Indian Veg” (2013-14), with its plump, bulging, vibrant produce laid out in three long, low horizontal paintings – a market-stall parody of the triptych form – is that picture.

“The Sea, Goa”, another long, low painting of oozing, opulent marks implying sea and horizon, is similarly condensed yet uncontainable; its rhythm and sense of energy are replicated in the grain and whorl of the wooden panel – a chopping board? – on which it is painted: earthiness meets eternity.

Painting, especially old-age painting, is about the passage of time. Hodgkin’s work, rooted in the search for time lost, has always been touched by melancholy, but this is an upbeat, bright selection. I still think, as I wrote a decade ago, that Hodgkin’s Indian paintings are among his more light-hearted – creamy souvenirs of a charmed traveller’s comfortable trip. But there are

gorgeous elegiac moments in this show, such as the flurried “Autumn in Bombay”, contrasting with others of time arrested in liquid flow, as in “Summer Rain”.

There are dying cadences too: “Day into Night”, where the thickly loaded, broad brushstrokes characteristic of Hodgkin’s late, improvisatory manner sweep in great washes of dark blue and black over a beautiful, pale pinkish light, and the starker, more absolute “Black as Egypt’s Night”.

Creating conversation pieces of bourgeois experience – dinner parties, hotel bedrooms – through the age of pop, minimalism, conceptualism, Hodgkin was slow to win acclaim. He held his nerve.

“The kind of sensual/romantic/passionate/emotional feelings that artists have do appeal to people. The only way an artist can communicate with the world at large is on the level of feeling. I think the function of the artist is to practise his art to such a level that like the soul leaving the body, it comes out into the world and affects other people,” he said in 1978.

Gagosian’s catalogue reprints Susan Sontag’s 1995 essay on the artist, ending “there is heroism in the vehemence and lack of irony in Hodgkin’s pictures. He labours over them as if painting could still be a vehicle of self-transcendence. In such matters, with such purposes, the race is to the slow.”

Thus, two decades later, it has turned out: in his embrace of the belated, mining the territory of French modernism as a coda for contemporary possibilities, Hodgkin has been preparing all his life for the late style, economical, emotional, celebratory, poignant, transcendent, which makes him the freshest painter working today.

*‘Howard Hodgkin’, Gagosian Gallery, Paris, to August 9, [gagosian.com](http://gagosian.com)*