

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

the guardian

by Johanthan Jones

**'When  
I stop  
painting,  
measure  
me for  
my coffin'**

He may be in his 80s and in need of a wheelchair to get about, but Howard Hodgkin is still painting with staggering power.

**Jonathan Jones**  
meets a 'living master'



**'I feel like I've been let out of jail' ...  
clockwise from main, Hodgkin, who is  
about to receive an award, in his studio;**



Hodgkin receives the Swarovski Whitechapel Art Icon award on 2 April. His next exhibition opens at Gagosian, Paris, in June.

**H**oward Hodgkin sits in a wheelchair in his studio. Light falls through the glass roof on to big boards propped against white-washed brick walls. One by one, his studio assistant starts moving them to reveal a glistening array of new paintings. It seems banal to call them beautiful – but that’s what they are.

“When I was young,” says Hodgkin reassuringly, “I used to mind people describing my pictures as beautiful. I don’t any more.” Why did he mind? “I used to think that it meant the subject was neither here nor there.”

Hodgkin paints what most people would call abstract art. Yet he insists that every slither of luscious colour refers to a particular place and time. His serpentine brushwork is not decorative. Each painting has a “subject”, as he puts it.

No one can fail to see that when

confronted – as I am in his studio – with a painting called Pain. It is a small wooden panel 27cm wide. Hodgkin paints on wood because “it doesn’t answer back”. He reuses old wooden frames, their antique materials and ornate woodwork becoming part of the painting. Pain is a series of fierce brushstrokes on a stained brown board, in horizontal bands, red above black above purple above a muddier, bloodier red. There’s a smear of weak white. Such bands of colour are similarly used to create oppressive moods in the paintings of Mark Rothko, but where Rothko’s colours are soaked in, Hodgkin expresses himself in visible, dramatic, unfinished brushstrokes. The result is much more personal and direct.

This makes Pain quite painful to look at, in the company of the artist. (Another of his new paintings, a disconcerting smear of yellow and black, is called Disturbed Night,

2013-2014.) I am here to interview Hodgkin as he prepares to accept a lifetime award for outstanding artistic achievement. Next week, the Whitechapel Gallery is naming him the first ever Swarovski Whitechapel Gallery Art Icon – a long name for a very worthwhile new honour.

There can’t be a more deserving recipient than Hodgkin and yet, when we meet, the image it conjures of a “living master” quietly contemplating past glories is wide of the mark. Far from relaxing or resting in his 80s, Hodgkin – in spite of an illness that knocked him sideways a few years ago – is painting with staggering energy and power. This is no past master, but a painter in his prime, creating some of his bravest and most rawly expressive works.

“I know that once I can’t paint any more,” he growls slowly, “they should start measuring for my coffin.”

His current streak is at once exhilarating and awe-inspiring. I have read so many lives of the great painters who reached a new peak in old age. I think of Titian, who became freer and freer as he got older until he was painting expressionist masterpieces, or Monet, whose poetic late style is sometimes "credited" to loss of sight. The fact is that many highly skilled, highly disciplined painters have a lease of creative freedom in old age.

That is what I am seeing here, in Hodgkin's studio. His new paintings are blasts of emotion - not only the moments of darkness like *Pain* - but, more frequently, sensual songs to the joys of being alive. *Indian Veg*, for instance, makes me smile. Hodgkin calls it, jokingly, "my first triptych and probably my last". A triptych is traditionally a religious painting on three separate panels. Hodgkin's is a spread of vegetables at a market in India. The searing reds and greens, tomato dollops and marrow smears, are life made vividly real and direct.

The poet Seamus Heaney said that Hodgkin's art celebrates what Dylan Thomas called "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower". I see this life-force dance through this picture.

It's a very uninhibited painting - such a simple celebration. "I do have a feeling after all these years of being let out of jail or something," he says. This mood has come to him in "the last 10 years", and it means he can do "more and more what I like or want to do".

Hodgkin's entire career has been a gradual self-liberation. In the 1960s he was loosely associated with the pop art movement. He was not famous back then like David Hockney. And yet while Hockney's art hit a nerve in the 60s and has gradually wound down ever since, Hodgkin became more adventurous, more poetic until, by the 1980s and 90s, he was regularly being compared with Turner, collaborating with Susan Sontag on their book *The Way We Live Now*, and triumphing with a sensational one-man show at the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

Today he is braving yet new artistic adventures. Why did he take time to get out of jail, as he puts it? "I had some very trendy friends at the wrong moment in my life, I think. It made me feel very left out. I felt totally out on a limb, separated from everybody else. It's quite lonely enough without adding that, somehow."

I suggest to him that painting and fashion are opposites. What I mean is that while other art forms can fit into contemporary trends, painting has older rules, and has to be slightly timeless to be good. Hodgkin puts it

more viscerally: "They're like two dogs snarling at each other."

He is keen for me to see his new painting, *Ganges*. Its colours are as intense in flavour as a hot pickle. Hodgkin has been travelling in India, and this is his homage to a country he loves. With its cascade of grey and white rain among the forest emeralds, swamp olives and mud browns, it is redolent of a place, a time - and the natural world. It is a painting to set beside Turner in its intense poetry of light.

I ask Hodgkin if his art gives him pleasure. "No, it doesn't. Because I always think it should have been better. It shouldn't be as inadequate as it often seems to me to be."

The light from the vast skylight is constantly changing, casting the pallour and brightness of the English sky on his paintings as he contemplates them.

"And yet," says Hodgkin after a while, "looking at the pictures behind you, I'm suddenly impressed."



**his oils**



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**Ganges; Disturbed Night; Pain;**