

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Howard Hodgkin: Still Driving Them Crazy After All These Years

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*Howard Hodgkin in front of his painting "Morning" (2015 - 2016),
© Howard Hodgkin. Photography by Prakash Rao. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian Gallery*

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"I'll tell you exactly why it's called Blackmail," begins the 83-year-old London born painter Howard Hodgkin in a musical Churchill growl as his audience of two hangs on a beveled edge. "It's because it's got a wide band of black going all around it-nothing more subtle or arcane than that." There you have it. Thankfully, or not, depending on what you're looking for in your art, no one was blackmailed during the making of "Blackmail" (2006-2015), one of the larger and more arresting works of oil on wood in Hodgkin's latest show at Gagosian Madison Avenue, titled "From Memory." "Blackmail" is one of the few paintings in the exhibition that Hodgkin's long-

time partner, music critic Antony Peattie (simultaneously doting and graciously laissez-faire), did not have a hand in naming. “Antony is my Chai Wallah of titles-my Title Wallah,” adds Hodgkin with an affectionate English chortle.

A good title can often serve as a key or catalyst to unlock or ignite a work’s true spirit, or as Hodgkin contends, “Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn’t. Like a painting, the title can exist on its own.” The fact remains that the works in “From Memory” fall comfortably into the realm of abstraction, and though a good-humored Peattie would partially dismiss the significance of the titles as nothing more than an essential step in making the cataloguing process more efficient, they do seem to serve as a conscious bridge between the pristine strokes of an elusive master painter and the oft representational leanings of the curious human mind, which intentionally or not, has been conditioned over thousands of years to search for patterns and meaning as a base survival instinct. Why not leave the works untitled if emotion is paramount to narrative?

“I’m a representational painter, but not a painter of appearances,” reads a somewhat formless quote from Hodgkin that sits at the masthead of the gallery’s press release for “From Memory.” It’s an interesting thought that Hodgkin may have once been willing to stand behind, but if the painter is aware that his works “collapse the binary distinctions between abstraction and representation” as the gallery suggests, it’s not a premeditated element of Hodgkin’s creative process, which seems to have settled into the rarified realm of pure artistic lucidity. “I know exactly what you’re talking about-is this going to be this or is this going to be that? It just happens.”

As to what exactly happens in that magical creation moment, the “god moment” when colorful oil touches canvas, or in Hodgkin’s case, the back of a repurposed wooden frame, a moment that takes on greater significance when taking into account that Hodgkin has previously said that he often takes upwards of a year in contemplating a particular stroke, he remains steadfastly mum. “If I knew, I wouldn’t tell you, but I don’t,” he says with another amiable grumble followed by a collective laugh. “It’s very difficult to talk about it, because we talk about it using words, and words don’t come into it when you’re-at least not when I’m painting. I can’t be much help I’m afraid.”

This is an interesting crossroads, where one can go down the path of conceited art-writer speculation or dramatically maneuver the conversation in a different direction. If you think “Love Song” (2015) is Hodgkin expertly articulating the essence of musical notes with oil paint, ala synesthesia, you’d be wrong. Also, Hodgkin paints in utter silence. Besides being an open lament for the loss of modern art champion Nan Rosenthal, “Tears for Nan” (2014) doesn’t come with a prepackaged anecdote about their friendship or professional relationship. Does the grain of the wood influence Hodgkin’s strokes? “That is a very good question,” concedes Peattie with a welcomed interjection. “Don’t you think so Howard?”

“Not really,” says Hodgkin, as mercilessly dry as the surface of Mars. The latter seems like the right choice.

“Being knighted is not so great,” says Peattie, in quick riposte to Hodgkin’s humble eye rolling, a presumably natural reaction to the topic of the artist’s knighthood and other elevated distinctions being mentioned. “When we would fly we would use it [the titles] but we’ve never had an upgrade, even on British Airways!” Peattie, who met Howard in 1983, attended the

investiture ceremony at Buckingham Palace in 1992 with Hodgkin and goes on to recount what seems to be a recurring snafu amidst all the pomp and circumstance. “After you’ve knelt, you’re told to stand and walk backwards,” recalls Peattie. “Howard turned his back on his sovereign.”

“She’s used to it,” says Hodgkin with another variation of his infrequent but increasingly welcomed guffaws. This misstep didn’t prevent Hodgkin from receiving an even more rarified distinction in 2003, Companion of Honour, which comes with a private audience with Queen Elizabeth II. “The Queen knew far more about me than I anticipated and she was very charming. Waiting in the wings were a bunch of mossy looking old men and she said to me, ‘I have a few Bishops waiting to see me but don’t worry about them,’ all with a big smile.”

Hodgkin mentioned earlier in the conversation that he probably first felt like a real artist when he was six years old after completing a drawing in red crayon of “a really ugly woman.” In his pre-teens he was asked, like many school children, what he wanted to be when he grew up. “I suspect I’ll be a painter,” was his decidedly English response. Did he have any idea his skill and sensitivity would take him so far? Looking back, would he do anything differently?

“No. I don’t spend time analyzing my motives or thinking about what people will say once I’m dead or whether I’ll have any reputation at all. Though old age has made certain problems easier to solve, I must say it’s very difficult being an artist now for over 60 years, to think about the things art students think of.” Fair enough. Does he have any advice for young art students with dreams of major gallery representation and a storied career like Hodgkin’s? “I wouldn’t say anything except, probably, don’t.”

Peattie steps in here one last time, again offering a bit of sweet consolation for a habitually verbose writer sitting in a pool of apparent irrelevance. “Sometimes Howard worries about a lack of dialogue, or his general inability for small talk. He doesn’t have a second skin.” For Hodgkin—and this is truthfully refreshing—his work is his second skin, and to animate its simple, sensational visual wonder with words is not just an exercise in futility, but perhaps even an act of intentional polluting. See it. Feel it. For yourself.

“Painting on one hand is a more subtle and mysterious activity and on the other it’s just itself,” says Hodgkin before his mind seems to finally dig deliciously into the past. “There was this one time, during my retrospective at the Met (1995). A man came up to me and said, ‘Stop driving my wife mad!’ I couldn’t understand what he meant, but I thought, at last I communicated with somebody! I will say I’ve never been afraid of driving somebody mad.” **WM**