

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Eastern Influence, a ‘Sculpted Ecosystem’ and English Abstraction *Lee Mullican, Meg Webster and Howard Hodgkin in this week’s Fine Art*

Peter Plagens



‘Morning’ (2015) by Howard Hodgkin PHOTO:HOWARD HODGKIN/GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Howard Hodgkin: From Memory

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Through June 18

To grossly oversimplify matters, the English are more well known in America for their verbal works of art than for their visual ones. The French and the Italians, on the other hand, are more famous for their painting and sculpture than for their written works. Yet when contemporary British abstract painters go for the sensuously nonverbal, they go whole hog.

Howard Hodgkin (b. 1932) is the best of them. Initially a painterly Pop artist in the manner of David Hockney, he progressed through loose geometric abstraction in the 1970s to, about 10 years down the road, the small, brushy and lyrical paintings for which he’s now almost exclusively known.

Mr. Hodgkin’s success depends not on theory but taste, and his taste in color is superb to the point that there’s real character to it—lush and melony but not over-bright. “Love Song” (2015)

is so confident that the artist makes the oil stains that leach into a wood panel appear necessary. “Dirty Window” (2014-15), only 11 by 15 inches and one of the few works without his characteristic paint-slopped-over frames, is superb. Mr. Hodgkin may not be John Milton on wood, but he’s as deceptively smooth and entertaining as, say, the late, great British mystery writer Ruth Rendell.

Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.