Artforum
September, 2017

ARTFORUM

HOWARD HODGKIN
1932–2017

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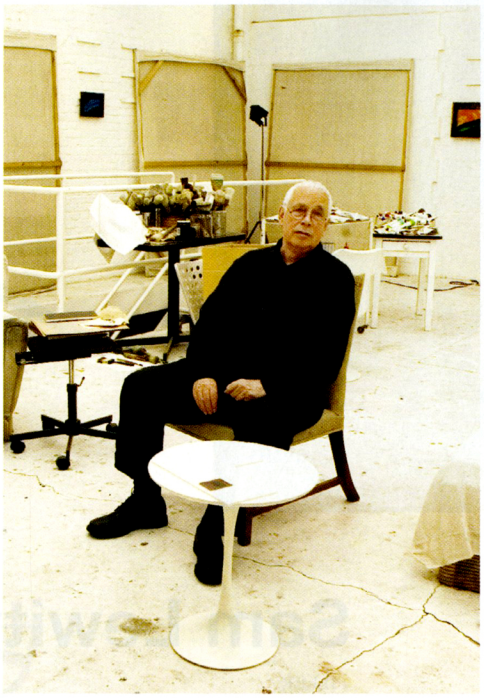
THE ENGLISH PAINTER Howard Hodgkin, who died on March 9 of this year at the age of eighty-four, came from a privileged background, went to the best schools, and became widely popular in his native land, which showered him with accolades that included a knighthood. Yet Hodgkin claimed to have come from humble circumstances, thought of himself as an outsider, and once said that England was "enemy territory" for painters. His own sense of himself was not what people made of him, and when he spoke, as he often did, of the painted frames that were integral to his compositions, it was to stress how the vulnerable interiors of these works had to be secured to protect them from what was outside.

He kept his paintings fortified while they were in process. When one entered his bright, white London studio, not far from the British Museum, no works would be in sight; all were hidden, turned to the walls and covered with white sheets. His paintings' specific subjects are usually not easy to find. Of a work based on his memory of people in a kitchen, he said that "the emotional charge in the picture comes above all from the people who were there. But you don't see them." The titles of his paintings—such as *Reading the Letter*, *Tea*, and *Counting the Days*—often refer to things that cannot be discerned.

Hodgkin and I exchanged a number of letters in 1995; in one I asked about his subject matter. He replied, "The subject matter of my pictures is of primary importance. . . . I wouldn't even know how to begin a picture without a subject." And he gave me a list: "My subject matter is simple and straightforward. It ranges from views through windows, landscapes, even occasionally a still life, to memories of holidays, encounters with interiors and art collections, other people, other bodies, love affairs, sexual encounters and emotional situations of all kind, even including eating." With respect to the last item, I learned that, working through an abysmal dinner on one of his many visits to India, Hodgkin lifted the lid of a tureen to exclaim, "It's my favorite thing. Cold cauliflower stalks"—and meant it, too. I think I can recognize them in one of his paintings.

But do his paintings invite us to focus on iconography? It is perhaps natural to try. However, when the young Hodgkin first visited the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the painting he fell in love with was not Pavel Tchelitchew's *Hide-and-Seek*, 1940–42, but Henri Matisse's *The Piano Lesson*, 1916. Like Matisse's work, Hodgkin's own paintings invite looking at, not looking for. He is often quoted as having said, "I am a representational painter but not a painter of appearances. I paint representational pictures of emotional situations." I take that to mean that his paintings depict mind spaces with flashbacks in them—often dazzling, sometimes dim—and that we are actually invited to follow John Keats's principle of enjoying the pleasure of not (quite) knowing what is being recalled. For Hodgkin, the task of painting was to channel and transfuse emotion, not to transmit thought. This is, I realize, quite opposite to the delivery of noncontingent truths that many people now want art to provide; but at its best, the blanketing indirectness of Hodgkin's art is allied to an indeflectible directness of physical sensation—shown in the paint to have been experienced in these "emotional situations"—that seems honestly, sometimes painfully, true.



Hodgkin's own paintings invite looking at, not looking for.

From top: **Howard Hodgkin in his studio, London, April 11, 2007.** Photo: David Sandison/The Independent/REX/Shutterstock. **Howard Hodgkin, *In the Black Kitchen*, 1984–90,** oil on wood, 27½ × 41".

If *The Piano Lesson* set the standard for the kind of interior Hodgkin would paint, early canvases by Édouard Vuillard and late ones by Pierre Bonnard reinforced that example, while nudging him toward the application that he developed in the mid-1970s, in pictures crammed full of richly colored painterly dots, short and long brushstrokes, broad bands, blunt columnar forms, arcs, and squiggles. Working on small, usually old pieces of wooden board, Hodgkin accentuated the handmade look of the new pictures. In setting down the marks themselves, though, he avoided what he called the "autograph mark," using instead "emotive-type marks but in quotation marks." But unlike the marks of others who did that, his do not resemble depictions of brushstrokes. They serve a descriptive purpose, and they were slowly and painstakingly applied in the manner of his French exemplars. This was another reason for painting on wood—it allowed for extensive revisions, far more so than canvas. Any other reason, I wondered? "Once a picture is finished," he replied, "I feel it should be strong enough to look after itself in the outside world. So a picture as a lump of wood seems reasonably logical." □

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