

GAGOSIAN



Howard Hodgkin: the last picture show

Vigorous final works illustrate how a great painter can reinvent yet stay true to himself late in life

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'Love Song' (2015) © Howard Hodgkin Estate/Prudence Cuming Associates/courtesy Gagolian

The artist is dead; the legend begins. Shortly after Howard Hodgkin died last year, two defining museum shows, of his Indian pictures and abstracted portraits, traced his achievement across five decades in startling thematic retrospectives. Absent, though, were many recent paintings, including those made in his last months, ill in Mumbai. Rapidly executed, condensed statements memorialising pleasure or contemplating infinity — twilight ritual and indoor warmth in the smash of bronze and orange “Cocktails for Two”; weightless laps of pale blue, dissolving, thinned to a veil, in “Indian Sea” — they take to extremes the artist’s late abbreviated style and near sculptural use of bare wood.

These are among the three dozen pictures comprising Gagolian’s splendid Howard Hodgkin: Last Paintings: the artist’s final show of new work, and a powerful account of how a great painter in old age can reinvent yet stay true to himself. Exuberant and unexpected, the paintings range from playfully posh (“Knightsbridge”, whose unusual high gloss surface recalls the colour of glazed Edwardian brickwork) to the mysterious, the mournful, the Proustian. Across the lush gold-red “Music” Hodgkin risked, at the eleventh hour, a tremulous scrawl of green horizontal bars: sound waves made visible, an evocation of listening.

Like a leitmotif, the bars reappear, repositioned vertically, in the defiant “Portrait of the Artist Listening to Music”: expansive silvery slashes, suggesting the reach of the body, are positioned

among rhythmic, dancing marks that roughly imply a succession of upright panels, echoing in structure Munch's final gaunt "Self-portrait Between the Clock and the Bed".

This is a significant exhibition but also largely a selling one, which tilts the selection to the more radical works: along with previously unseen paintings, it showcases others, tending to the minimalist, from the past decade, which have not yet sold because they might defy collectors' assumptions of Hodgkin as master of the decorative.



'Portrait of the Artist Listening to Music' (2011-2016) © Howard Hodgkin Estate/Prudence Cuming Associates/courtesy Gagosian

So it is that the opening, earliest work here is "And the Skies Are Not Cloudy All Day", completed in 2008. Densely whirling green strokes in the upper section dwindle, grow sparser, eventually disappear, leaving the lower area empty: a dying cadence. The picture belongs to a quartet, "Home, Home on the Range", titled after a popular song of the American Midwest. The accompanying three panels, bright and full if rough and fierce, like the big American landscapes referenced in the song, quickly found buyers. "And the Skies" remains unsold. I remember how surprising it looked in 2008, and asking Hodgkin about it. "I had nothing left to say," he explained.

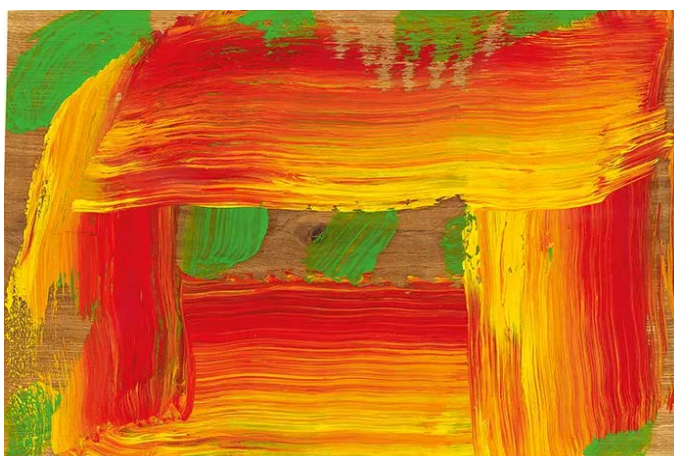
A decade on, Gagosian rightly — and cannily — positions the piece as pivotal, inaugurating a distinctive final period where Hodgkin, whose abstract language for most of his life was about building layer upon layer of half-evasion, semi-concealment, began to reveal and leave bare. In "Autumn Landscape" (2014), painted on the back of the frame, the grain of the wood and cross bands are part of the composition. In "Through a Glass Darkly" (2015-16) the board, glimpsed through vivid cadmium yellow and red slashes, acquires through contrast a tone of smoky purple. A couple of mighty strokes in chrome saturated yellow and oily dark emerald offset the light plywood, radiating tropical heat, in "Don't Tell a Soul" (2016).



'Don't Tell a Soul' (2016) © Howard Hodgkin Estate/Prudence Cuming Associates/courtesy Gagosian

Hodgkin had painted exclusively on wood since the 1970s but it comes to be an active player in these very last pieces, while the artist's iconic virtuoso stroke, that incomparable sweep of a broad brush loaded with different colours, is more simplified than ever, and still vigorous, sensuous, delicately nuanced.

A single fat red-green curve falls across green ground to turn "Over to You" (2015-17) into a conversation piece (the title comes from a melancholy/humorous Stevie Smith poem). A slap of violet/aubergine/mulberry/lilac hits pale, vacant wood in "Darkness at Noon" (2015-16). A red-pink-cream arc, phallic, rising above strips of cloud which also suggest reclining nudes, in "Red Sky in the Morning" (2016) is reminiscent of 1980s Venice stunners such as "In Bed in Venice" and "Small View in Venice". Hodgkin gave "Red Sky" (not for sale) to Antony Peattie, his partner since 1984 and his companion at that year's biennale when the Venice works began.



'Through a Glass Darkly' (2015-16) © Howard Hodgkin Estate/Prudence Cuming Associates/courtesy Gagosian

Here is, then, a continuum with Hodgkin's well-known subjects and method: memories of encounters, interiors, places tantalisingly transformed through a repertoire of allusive, elusive marks — irregular discs, staccato stabs, fingerprint whorls, commas, columns, curls. Fresh is how these latterly became more economical, and merged landscape and erotic recollection. "Toffee" glimmers with light piercing dark skies, and implies sticky, seductive nights. The

swarming green-blue scribbles in “Love Song” summon the awakening of spring, and carefree romance.

Waves and drips of white on blue, blue on white, in “Seaside” suggest bleached driftwood, hulls of white boats, the light of the sea alternating with clouds, a rush of happiness, the threat of disappointment: the distillation of an instant’s glance and remembrance, set down and worked on over years, but retaining tremendous fluidity. Offsetting the pronounced effects of solid wood, emphasising each painting as object, is a strong sense throughout of paint’s ebb and flow, of deliquescence: the luminous blue streaks of “Water”, the heavy muted blue passages of “Low Cloud”, the majestic flow of “Green Monsoon” and the homage to Constable’s depiction of rain in “Dirty Window”.



'Over To You' (2015-2017) © Howard Hodgkin Estate/Prudence Cumming Associates/courtesy Gagolian

It is the old paradox: Keats’ “writ in water” inscribed on marble, the fleeting moment arrested in the permanence of art. “For an artist time can always be regained, because by an act of imagination you can always go back,” Hodgkin once said. That is a hopeful premise, and if the last works are more pared-down than his glittery 1980s-90s compositions, they are still optimistic, innovative, satisfying. Starkest of all the final Mumbai pieces is “A Green Thought in a Green Shade”, a dash of remembered English leaf green whispering across a mostly bare board. The title comes from Andrew Marvell’s “The Garden”, a hymn to retirement and interiority:

Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less,
Withdraws into its happiness;
The mind, that ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find,
Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other worlds, and other seas;
Annihilating all that’s made
To a green thought in a green shade.

The poem is a perfect analogy for the expression of dissolution, withdrawal, metaphysical delight in the last works here. The painting is affirmation that Hodgkin became what he always dreamt of being: “a classical artist, in whom all emotion, all feeling turns into a beautifully articulated memorial”.