

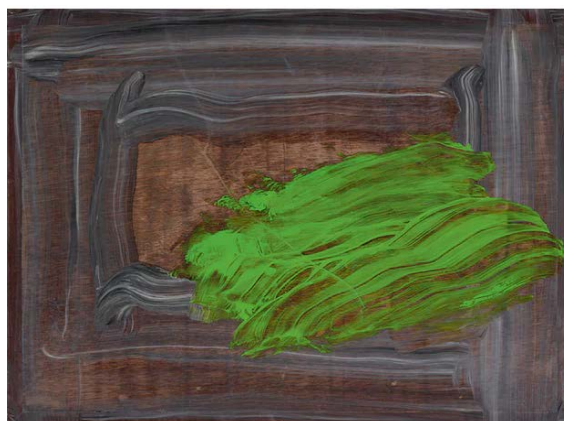
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Indian winter: Howard Hodgkin's final frames

*A 2016 trip to Mumbai resulted in what would be Howard Hodgkin's last paintings.
Throbbing with colour and feeling, they are a vivid and furious epitaph*

Jonathan Jones



Last burst ... A Green Thought in a Green Shade by Howard Hodgkin – now on show at Gagosian Grosvenor Hill. Photograph: Prudence Cuming Associates/Howard Hodgkin Estate, courtesy Gagosian

Howard Hodgkin would sometimes lose heart and his partner Antony Peattie would say: “Shall I get the scissors?” They both knew what he meant, says Peattie, as we look at Hodgkin’s final paintings in a back room at the Gagosian gallery in London. It was a joke about the great colourist Henri Matisse, who started snipping paper cutouts when illness and age left him too weak to paint.

In fact, although he used a wheelchair in his final years, Hodgkin never needed the scissors. He was to die practically brush in hand. In 2014, sitting in his skylit studio close to the British Museum, the painter told me: “I know that once I can’t paint any more, they should start measuring for my coffin.” An exhibition of his final, powerful paintings at the Gagosian shows how true those words were. Even as his health failed, Hodgkin found a way to paint. When he stopped, it was to go to hospital for the last time.

Hodgkin painted his very last works in the winter of 2016-17 in Mumbai, a city that always filled this remarkable artist with renewed energy. It was not a holiday, though, but a carefully planned painting trip. “We got there in December and he just wanted to work,” says Peattie. “I think all the pictures were in his head. He just wanted to get to Mumbai to paint them out.”

Everything had been prepared in advance. Hodgkin painted on wood that was often salvaged – anything from the backs of old mirrors to tea trays. When he was fitter (they were together 33 years) Peattie used to get embarrassed when Hodgkin would find, in the street, some old door that had been thrown out and decide he had to have it.



Howard Hodgkin and Antony Peattie in his London studio in 2011. Photograph: Sten Rosenlund/Rex/Shutterstock

“We took an apartment in a modern block,” says Peattie. “It had a terrace to sit out on and two bedrooms. The management converted the second bedroom into a studio, covered the carpets, and took out the art, the mirrors, the television and the bed.”

They even fixed batons along the walls to Hodgkin’s specifications so he could hang his paintings at the height he liked. Crucially, this also meant they could be flush: he hated seeing works propped against the wall at an angle. As I witnessed myself in his London studio, Hodgkin liked to look at his work, to meditate on it. “He wanted to think more and paint less,” recalls Peattie.

Yet he painted with something close to frenzy, in that last Indian winter. His works throb with feeling. They are not elegiac. They are furious. He wants to set the evening alight.

Contemplating them alone in a private room before their public unveiling, I find something ghostly in them. The most alluring, *A Green Thought in a Green Shade*, takes its name from Andrew Marvell’s 17th-century poem *The Garden*, with its idea of the mind escaping to a pastoral daydream: “Annihilating all that’s made / To a green thought in a green shade.”

Hodgkin’s painting is not, however, a green thought in a green shade. It’s a last burst of green trying to escape from what looks like a sepulchre. Far from being a gentle shady green, the border Hodgkin has painted on a small wooden panel is purple and grey and smeared with bony white. It reminds me of the grey *pietra serena* window frames in Michelangelo’s Medici tombs, or a monument in the shadows of a church. A more grisly line by Marvell comes to mind: “The grave’s a fine and private place, / But none, I think, do there embrace.”

Out of this deathly prison surges a green so bright, it can only be the stuff of life. Laid down in fast, broad, long strokes, this green fuse forces its way out of the tomb. From the shape of the ecstatic smear it might be a double bed, or even two lovers lying side by side. Yet at the same time it is ethereal and insubstantial, a cloud floating in a dark limbo, a memory of green.



Unsettling ... Indoor Games, 2016-2017. Photograph: Prudence Cuming Associates LTD/Howard Hodgkin Estate, courtesy Gagosian

The equally unsettling *Indoor Games* has red, pink and purple vertical shapes that seem to be passing through a teak-coloured portal in a mist of night blue. They look like robed figures, as if Hodgkin – who called one of his last exhibitions *Absent Friends* – had seen a vision of departed souls. It's not a view Peattie can fully endorse, though: "He did know that he was in his 80s, that time was running out, and that he needed to work. But I don't think he knew they were his last pictures."

The paintings are not so much his conscious farewell as the culmination of a late style. After his pop art-ish paintings of the 1960s, he had evolved to a more mature style by the 1980s, with such paintings as *In Bed in Venice* that combine abstract allusiveness and raw sensuality to evoke powerful remembered moments. In his last, even more radical phase, he gets close to pure abstract colour, yet the work is still full of feeling.



Howard Hodgkin in front of Home, Home on the Range at his 2008 Gagosian exhibition. Photograph: Martin Argles for the Guardian

The Gagosian exhibition follows this late period, starting with the 2007-08 painting *And the Skies Are Not Cloudy All Day*. When I first saw it a few years ago, I was flummoxed. This painter, whose most revered works are richly constructed chromatic memory boxes, appeared to have just stood in front of a huge wooden panel and daubed some green on it – leaving big empty unpainted spaces. It isn't even a nice bit of wood. Yet looking at it now, I see emotion in each dollop. It is a memory of a distant time, a long-lost happiness, that green day he'll never see again. As he tries to remember it, only scattered patches of colour come back. The rest is bare.



Golden explosion ... Cocktails for Two, 2016-2017. Photograph: Prudence Cuming Associates LTD/Howard Hodgkin Estate, courtesy Gagolian

One of the most frightening pictures is called *Now*. Painted in 2015-16, it is hard to look at, as its streaks of yellow and red create a harsh, burning heat. “*Now*,” it seems to say, “means raw pain.” *Don’t Tell A Soul*, painted in 2016, is another breath of leafy emerald, while *Water*, from the same year, feels like a cool drink on a boiling day – a draught of refreshment painted in luscious azure lightened with foamy white. Blue is also a colour of redemption.

Hodgkin had a genius for making his colours look wet and fluid, as if still moving. His use of wood as a surface helped because it doesn’t absorb the oil paint. Colour stays on the surface. It stays alive. These last paintings register pure emotion with a directness that is harrowing yet ultimately joyful. Hodgkin kept his appetite for life.

The very last painting in the show is *Cocktails for Two*. It is a golden explosion inside a heavy painted tomb-like box. It seems to show a double bed. As darkness and death close in, the bed, the place of love, is light.