

Howard Hodgkin

9 x Haiku

Opening Thursday 27th August 2015, 6-8 p.m.
Exhibition 28th August - 25th October 2015

If Sir Howard Hodgkin does not wish to be an abstract painter, he may wish to be a poetic one. Because, even though patterns and rules apply, poetry is never abstract. His paintings are poems in colour, an incandescence that evokes India, a country Hodgkin has been exploring since the 1960s.

He is an admirer and connoisseur of Indian miniature painting, and most of his paintings are indeed miniatures, handy in size and entirely compatible with the human field of vision. Very much representational in their actual physical presence, few of these enigmatic works, however, are figurative. Each has its own subject matter, also expressed in emphatic titles – as in Jungle, Green Sea, Low Tide, the names of three of nine works in this exhibition. Such mental condensates have precipitated on wooden boards in coats of paint; each holds a memory of a place, an event, a mood. In this regard, too, the paintings are miniatures: filtered and precious distillates of moments lived that precisely re-present barely tangible things. Only poetry can achieve that – in Hodgkin's case, it is the poetry of painting.

Clearly, first impressions notwithstanding, these paintings cannot have been created from a position of gestural actionism. Rather, they were elaborated slowly and painstakingly – not to say wrested – from an inner vision, and are the result of the poet's infinitely difficult task of capturing a particular mood, state or disposition.

Let us consider Blue Thoughts (2010-2014), a small painting, barely larger than A5 (210 x 148 mm). It contains an unending, deep, vast – even monumental – ocean of undulating blues, and took Hodgkin five years to complete. His persistence in staying with a piece to the point of completion reflects itself in the severe shape that contains the painting. In this instance, a wide frame clearly defines the square of the pictorial space although it has itself become a part of the ground.

If he merely uses a board without an actual frame, Hodgkin often applies a painted frame. In The Rains Came, it is in three parts, the picture as such set in a black-blue border within a light green one, which in turn is enclosed by a border of luminous yellow with a hint of brown.

When our young daughter saw a colour copy of The Rains Came affixed to an empty white wall, she wondered if it was the work of her little, three-year-old brother. Her question made a point: according to Bashō, the grand old master of the Japanese haiku, we should 'get a three-foot child to write haiku.' A much reduced form of three-line verse, haiku try to capture a fleeting mood or moment. It can only be done in very plain language and by someone with a mind completely open to sensorial perception.

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Here the use of language attempts to capture some aspects of Hodgkin's paintings. Haiku may provide an adequate response to the quiet, discreet manner in which his works speak to us. The strict three-line formula of haiku is echoed in the form and formality of Hodgkin's picture frames, where, much as the haiku poet does in a few plain words, the painter unfolds entire universes in a few brush strokes: no more than six of them can be counted in the Red Bathroom.

There are even fewer such traces in Autumn Landscape. In the exposed grain of the unpainted wood above the horizontals in flaming bright-green and orange hues, the painting appears to continue by other means, pushing the reduction of Hodgkin's pictorial idiom to the extreme – again like haiku, which leaves a lot unsaid by the words written on the page.

Dr. Philipp Meier