

other

The already great curatorial challenge of putting together a meaningful exhibit

is made all the greater, when that exhibit happens to be the opening show of a brand new gallery. What does it take for an exhibit to capture the spirit of a place, of a group of people and of a time? What show can portray the breaking out of a chrysalis, of an organization, of the contemporary art movement of a nation, of a nation itself? These questions do not have easy answers, but then good art is all about engaging and wrestling with difficult questions.

In a world torn apart by misunderstanding, intolerance and strife, two artists have come together to re-imagine the landscape. To find universality of the human spirit amidst the ruins left behind by violence of man and nature.

Gallery Aicon opens in London with “Other”, featuring Riyas Komu from Mumbai and Peter Drake from New York. Riyas and Peter, personal friends and professional collaborators, represent, ironically, “the other” in their respective cultural habitats. The show looks at both perceived differences and intrinsic universality of the human condition.

Riyas Komu – painter, installation artist and cultural commentator – is influenced by the politics of gender and religion in his native India. Komu’s work has been featured in Art Forum, Art India and other publications. He has participated in Enrico Navarra curated exhibits in France and in solo / group exhibits in India and the US. “Other” is his UK debut.

Peter Drake – painter, teacher and pedagogue – has questioned the phenomenon of “normal”; peeling façades to expose tensions that linger beneath. Drake’s work has been collected by the Whitney Museum and LA MoCA amongst others. Regularly exhibited all over the US and Latin America, “Other” is his first show in the UK.

Written by Projjal Dutta



other

riyas komu + peter drake
16 march thru 20 april
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The Beauty Of Pathology: Peter Drake's Painting by Donald Kuspit

Has mankind entered then a psychopathic stage?
Hermann Broch, "A Study On Mass Hysteria"

I am struck by the beauty of Peter Drake's M/oral Pathology paintings, 2007: erotically intense red, marked with luminous gestures and geometrical shapes, sometimes hexagonal, sometimes rectangular, usually surrounding an abyss of blackness. Never mind that the abysmal hole is an open mouth, its interior nakedly exposed. Nor does it matter, at least at first shocking glance, that the flamboyant gestures--they have a baroque flair--turn out to be Arabic phrases, or that the shapes instantly read as teeth. The blackness arouses expectations of death; its lesions spot the fiery red, suggesting ash. One has the sense of an action painting with a representational edginess. The phrases--seven in all--are familiar from Bush administration statements about the Iraq war: "weapons of mass destruction," "mission accomplished," "Al Queda in Iraq," "will withdraw if asked," "stay the course," "imminent threat," and of course "axis of evil," the idea that justified the war. All turned out to be false, or at least questionable. All suggest a certain pathological suspicion of Arabs, more broadly, a paranoid attitude. Perhaps persecutory terror was a legitimate response to 9/11--normal in the context of the event--but it has clearly become an all-consuming obsession.

Drake's M/oral Pathology series is a critique of the war inspired by this paranoia, a war that Drake ironically turns against the country that initiated it in a series of more obviously violent images: a tank roams the streets in *The Battle of Levittown*, 2006, crushing a car, and shoots flames in *The Siege of Syosset*, 2006, incinerating a house. The climactic picture--a scene of total destruction--is *Katrinastan*, 2007. A composite of images derived from photographs of New Orleans after it was devastated by Hurricane Katrina, Drake's horrific painting is apocalyptic in import. But not completely, for the biblical apocalypse was a prelude to resurrection, while it is not clear that New Orleans will be resurrected, if the inadequate efforts at rebuilding by the Bush administration are any indication.

Taken together, Drake's M/oral Pathology and urban violence paintings damn the Bush administration as a moral fraud. More subtly, they suggest the bankruptcy of the American Dream: the neat suburban houses of Levittown and Syosset--both Long Island towns, the latter more upscale than the former (but they're all expensive these days)--evoke living death. The clean, peaceful, utterly quiet houses pictured hide lives of quiet desperation, as Thoreau said. Like the Iraq war, they enact psychopathology. One wonders if the mouths Drake paints belong to the people who live in the houses. Open, the mouths reveals their sickness to the world. The sense of intimacy is uncanny and disturbing: looking into these diseased mouths, we look into their souls--their inner hell.

Drake comes from upscale Garden City, also on Long Island, suggesting that there is something personal in his exposure of the deadness and disease that is Long Island suburbia. It promises the good life, and a clean, quiet, safe haven from New York City's dirt, noise, and crime. But the houses have a tomb-like insularity--a monstrous inertness. Drake could just as well have picked on the gated communities proliferating across the United States, but he picks on Long Island communities because he knows them all too well. Attacking them, Drake damns their emotional sterility and banality. The paintings diagnose the disease that is suburbia, just as the M/Oral Pathology paintings diagnose the disease that is the Bush administration. The suburbs voted for Bush, and they get their come-uppance in Drake's paintings. Even as he diagnoses the disease, Drake treats himself for it, as his hygienic realism--crystal-clear details, meticulous execution, clinical exactness--suggests. If art never works without a personal touch, however subliminal, it works best when the subjective is subsumed in an objective correlative, so that it seems to disappear into detachment. As Drake's perfectionism indicates, the trauma of suburbia can be muted by rendering it with ironical verisimilitude.

But for all the moral indignation implicit in the M/oral Pathology paintings, and the anger implicit in the war paintings, what makes Drake's paintings convincing--expressively powerful rather than simply illustrationally efficient--is their abstract beauty. They are formally exquisite, and their formal underpinning erupts through their imagery: they instantly read as abstractions, the former gestural, the latter geometrical. But the aesthetic issue that informs them has less to do with the reconciliation of abstraction and representation than with the reconciliation of gestural and geometrical abstraction, supposedly the grand climax of modern art, as Alfred Barr insisted by way of his famous 1936 diagram of its development. What is striking about the war paintings is the planarity of the structures depicted, made all the more distinctively flat by the sharp differentiation of light and shadow that defines the planes. But the gestural character of the crushed car and bright yellow flames, edged with glaring red, makes it clear that geometry and gesture are at odds however much each without the other makes for a formally and expressively incomplete--and less dynamic-- picture. The austere geometrical tank "initiates" the grand gesture of the crushed car, just as the flame-throwing tank starts a gestural fire. Katrinastan is dramatically Cubist--Americanized Synthetic Cubism. At the same time, there's an interplay--or is it standoff?--of geometry and gesture: neat, calm geometry breaks down into aggressive, wild gesture --crumbling planes become gestural debris. As civilization at its suburban American best is destroyed--finally turned into the ruin that is Katrinastan (a brilliantly ironical evocation of the supreme Other, Nature, the most terrifying alien of all, doing unto us as we have done unto It)--the abstract foundations of art are exposed.

Drake's open mouths are perversely beautiful. Indeed, the insidious interplay of black, red, and white is altogether sublime, especially because of the oral cavity--a sort of dragon-toothed void, a dangerously empty depth--they articulate. The mouth is ready to swallow one's eye even as it jumps out of the frame, as though to blind one with its intensity. Robert Motherwell famously said that there's no such thing as pure red. There's blood red, sunset red, and wine red, each charged with a different emotion. As has been much noted, red roses are an expression of passionate love. "If you want to make a point, you make it in red," writes the philosopher Nicolas Humphrey. The point that Drake's M/oral Pathology series makes is that red can express passionate hatred. It is the red of the rage one suffers when one is seriously hurt. Drake's mouth looks like a gaping wound that will never close and heal. An infected mouth is a narcissistic injury, for the mouth is the major means of self-expression. Terror, and with it death, have entered the body through Drake's mouth, destroying it from within: Bush's mouth, which never speaks the truth, and seems to stumble over language (suggesting that he is fundamentally inarticulate), has deeply injured the American body politic, and betrayed America's faith in itself, and the democracy it hoped to spread in Iraq.

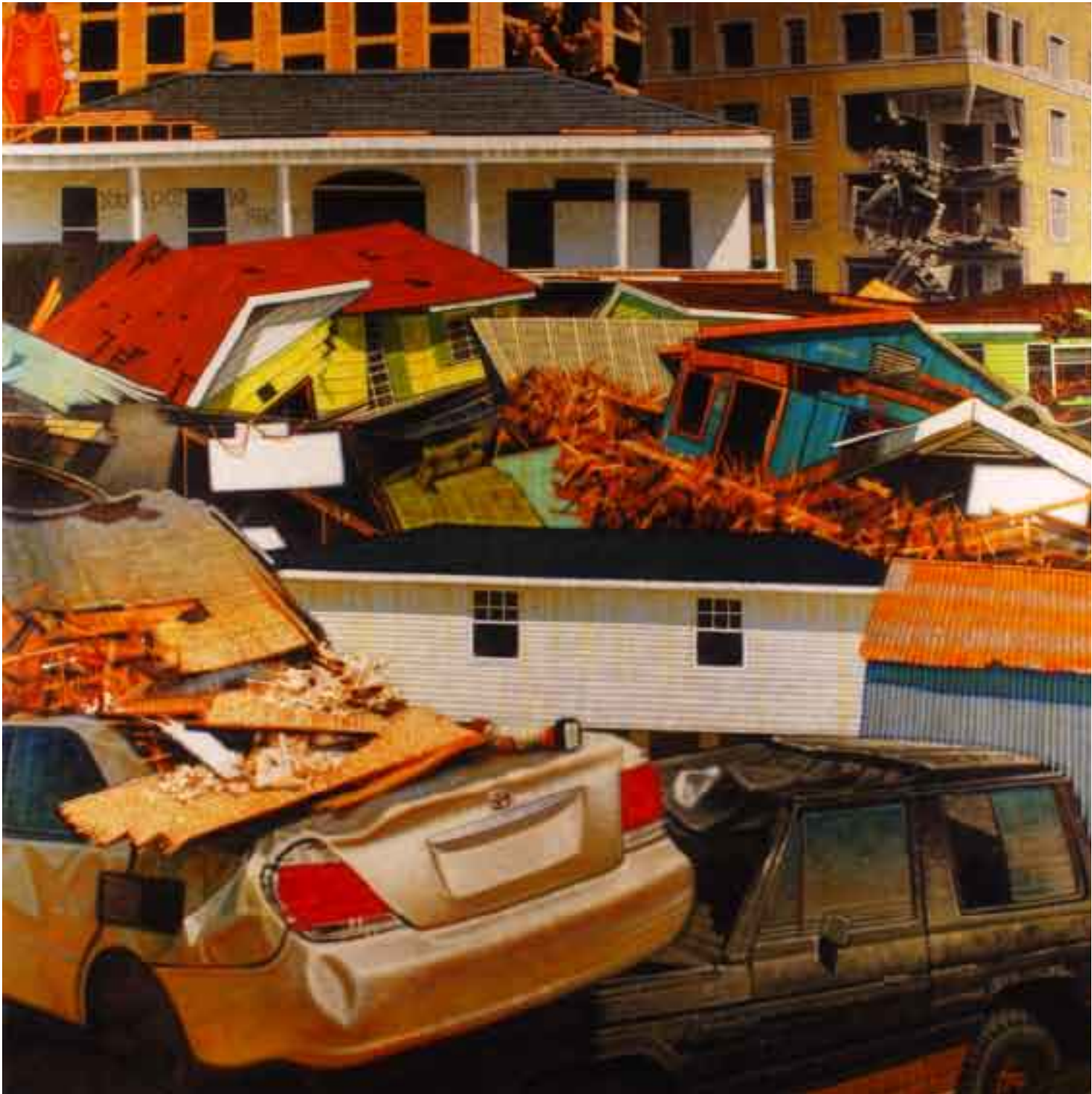
Ultimately Drake's red is the color of the terror--it reminds one of Edgar Allan Poe's red death--that Edmund Burke thought was immanent in the sublime. Sheer terror is the psychopathological side of the sublime--the unconscious feeling hidden behind the conscious sense of elation. Drake has pictured, with innovative daring, the negative sublime of sheer terror lurking in the dark abyss of nothingness hidden behind the aesthetic sensation of the sublime. We project our annihilation anxiety into the sublime. That is, we defend against our fear of death by imagining it to be a sublime experience--the paradoxical sublimity of Drake's grandly sick mouth. But the heaven it promises is emotional hell in aesthetic disguise: Drake's infernally red mouth is the entrance to it. We live in an age of terror, and when we experience terror we respond with rage, like a bull who sees red and attacks.

But the seductive red is deceptive, for it is the color of the blood the bull will shed when it is killed.



Peter Drake, *M/oral Pathology I, Mission Accomplished*, 2007, 29 x 31", Acrylic on canvas

Peter Drake, *M/oral Pathology V, Weapons of Mass Destruction*, 2007, 89 x 89", Acrylic on canvas



Peter Drake, *Katrinastan*, 2007, 65 x 69", Acrylic on canvas



Peter Drake, *Jericho Attack*, 2006, 29 x 29", Acrylic on canvas



Peter Drake, *The Battle of Levittown*, 2006, 65 x 69", Acrylic on canvas



Peter Drake, *The Siege of Syosset*, 2006, 65 x 69", Acrylic on canvas

Peter Drake



Peter Drake's work has been exhibited in solo and group exhibitions throughout the US and Europe and his works are included in the collections of The Whitney Museum, The Phoenix Museum of Art, The Museum of Contemporary Art, L.A., The Achenbach Collection and the L.A. County Art Museum among others.

Drake recently was awarded a 2006 fellowship in painting from the New York Foundation for the Arts, is a prior recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Award and was chosen to be the year long Artist in Residence at the "Kunst Station Sankt Peter" in Cologne, Germany.

During 2005-2006, individual paintings were exhibited in the Mobile Museum of Art, ASU Art Museum and the Katonah Museum. Articles and reviews of Drake's work have appeared in Art in America, Art New England, Flash Art, Interview Magazine and The New York Times.

Peter Drake's work is represented by Linda Warren Gallery, Chicago, Claire Oliver Gallery, New York, District & Co., Santo Domingo, DR, Lisa Sette Gallery, Scottsdale and AICON Gallery, in London,

In 2005-2006 Drake had solo exhibitions at Linda Warren, Claire Oliver and District & Co. Upcoming exhibitions include a two-person March exhibition with artist Riyas Komu as the opening exhibition of the new AICON Gallery in London.

Peter Drake lives and works in Manhattan.

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