

Peter Godwin

Essay by John McDonald (Art Critic – Sydney Morning Herald)

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Peter Godwin with Red Mountains

It's not what the artist does that counts, but what he is. Cézanne would never have interested me a bit if he had lived and thought like Jacques-Émile Blanche, even if the apple he painted had been ten times as beautiful. What forces our attention is Cézanne's anxiety – that's Cézanne's lesson. "

Pablo Picasso

Peter Godwin takes heart from Picasso's famous line about Cézanne's anxiety. It seems to justify his own late-blooming career as an artist who only began to exhibit regularly after the age of 50, enjoying instant success.

He once explained his reluctance to show his work by saying he wanted it to be like a brick

wall. "That wasn't just ego talking," he explains. "I was trying to say that I didn't mind people interpreting the work any way they liked, but I wanted it to be solid in terms of the painting. I wanted it so no-one could pick at the edges too much."

Now, on the verge of unveiling a radical series of wall-sized prints, Godwin finds himself prey to the same anxieties about whether the work will stand up – not just to public scrutiny but to his own exacting standards.

"I'm not worried about them being non-paintings," he says. "It's the gestural thing, it's how my drawing stands up. I have to be sure they're not relying purely on scale."

Neither does it end there. Godwin says he's got to be able to look back on something in five years and see that it still holds together.

On first impressions Godwin doesn't seem the anxious type. Built like a brick wall himself, he looks more like a bouncer at a pub than a painter of delicate interiors and gestural landscapes. His conversation is studded with quotations from Braque, Picasso and Matisse, which may be partly a legacy of the many years he spent as a popular and successful teacher at the National Art School and Hornsby TAFE.

Godwin took his teaching responsibilities seriously, getting pleasure from passing on his knowledge and skills to students. Always in the back of his mind he had the example of his own fractured education.

In his teens Godwin wanted to be a marine biologist. By the age of 16 he had already gone skin diving with figures such as Valerie and Ron Taylor, Ben Cropp and Philippe Cousteau. Yet by his own admission he was hopeless at maths and science. After receiving a good mark for a paper because of the quality of his drawings, he enrolled right away in art classes at Hornsby Tech. He would last barely a few months before going back to travelling, skin diving and working on boats.

"I wasn't ready for it. And that's why I'm funny about people at a certain age wanting study fine art, because life experience is vital. When I returned to Hornsby at the age of 22 I flew through the course and joined an elite group that went on to study at the National Art School – then known as East Sydney Tech – where I had teachers such as John Peart, whom I loved; and Michael Johnson, who was giving us a taste of New York when all I wanted was Cézanne and Bonnard."

Godwin remembers a class when he was making an ink drawing and suddenly felt he had

got something. He paused, then continued with the picture. When John Peart looked at it, he said: "You know it was finished five minutes ago." In that instant Godwin thought: "I know. This must be what it feels like to be an artist."

Shortly after graduating, Godwin was asked if he would run a printmaking class at Hornsby. Another invitation came from East Sydney, and before long he found himself teaching painting and drawing five days a week.

"I loved it, he says. "I fell into this thing of getting satisfaction not from developing my own work, but from working with students. You can't really teach them. You're just running alongside, but when you see that little light go on, you say: 'Thank you!'"

Godwin was painting, drawing and making prints all the time he was teaching, but hesitated to approach a commercial gallery. For more than 15 years he had a comfortable arrangement with a small dealer and framer in Balmain who would sell everything he produced. Even though Godwin was heavily involved with art education, he says he often felt like a dilettante.

At one stage he thought he had the makings of an exhibition. "I was really pushing the paint, producing pretty rich landscapes of the Hawkesbury. Yet they turned out to be very close to the paintings Frank Auerbach was doing at the time. This was a shock because I only knew of Auerbach's earlier works where the paint seemed to be dripping. I felt a bit disillusioned and stopped painting for a while."

"I survived that," he recalls, "but I'd had a sniff, and thought, "if I'm going to attack painting again I'll have to go back to those things that remain lodged in my mind. I remembered Bonnard and Braque. I remembered Chardin, and the frescoes of Pompeii. So it was back to the horizontal and vertical, and that's when the interiors started to develop. I started using egg tempera, which I had dabbled in eons ago when I was working my way through Ian Fairweather."

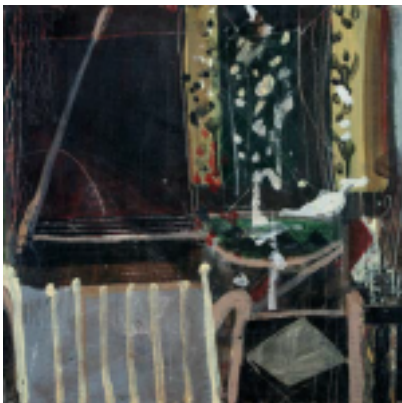
It was Campbell Robertson-Swann of [Defiance Gallery](#) that finally convinced Godwin to hold a solo show, but it wasn't a snap decision. Godwin agrees with Robertson-Swann's claim that it took five or six years of arm-twisting before the deal was done.

That exhibition, held at Defiance Gallery in the unfashionable Sydney suburb of Enmore in 2002, proved to be an astonishing success. At the age of 49 Godwin's first solo outing was a

sell-out. It was a feat he would repeat on an annual basis. By the time of Godwin's fourth Defiance exhibition in 2007, Robertson-Swann had 60 clients competing for only 16 works.

Godwin enjoyed the novel sensation of having money in the bank, but also the fact that his paintings had struck a chord with a discerning audience. He's still waiting for the public galleries to come to the party, which may be a badge of distinction considering the things they collect.

The paintings shown at Defiance were dark-toned interiors, filled with distant echoes of Braque and Chardin. The medium was egg tempera, which Godwin used in unorthodox fashion, putting it on in thick skeins rather than glazes. The paintings were filled with recognisable subjects – a table, a chair, curtains, shells, a dead bird or squid, a small tribal mask from New Guinea – but there was also a powerful sense of abstraction. These abstract overtones became more prominent from one exhibition to the next, as Godwin grew confident and adventurous.



The Duck (Salon – A Memory) Study



Li River Landscape, Clouds, Mist, White Horse and Waterfall (diptych)



Red and Green Mountains

“With each show,” he says, “I was happy to feel there was some movement. It didn’t have to be drastic, just so long as I could see a progression. It might have been a slightly different way of using black, a larger scale, or some form of stripe. The blue and white curtains felt like an obvious reference to Matisse, but I didn’t mind.”

For Godwin, the key to the series was the idea of ‘decoration’. Not in the soft sense of the word, as facile prettification, but in the heroic manner of Matisse or the Nabis. “I think I knew as a painter what Matisse was trying to achieve,” he says. “He was giving decoration the mantle of the abstract. People didn’t realise it, but it was a fierce controlling factor.” Godwin sought to make paintings in which form and content were indivisible; where abstraction and representation were not opposing concepts but two points along the same continuum.

The interiors continued until 2012, when Godwin accepted an invitation from the Australian Wildlife Conservancy to travel with a group of artists to the Kimberley, where he would spend a week painting and drawing in a nature reserve. This prevented him from using egg tempera, which was impractical in the landscape. He switched to fast-drying acrylic, which meant he couldn’t work back into the surface in the manner to which he had grown accustomed.

It was another anxious moment that soon passed. “I felt like I was going back to my earlier paintings of the Hawkesbury,” he says. “There I was in the Kimberley, with this marvellous gorge and a river in front of me, and it just came back. It came back.”

“I realised that for me painting is like a homecoming. You’ve been away but you return to a place you know. You end up with a painting that feels familiar, even though it never existed before.”

This is remarkably similar to T.S.Eliot’s famous lines from the *Four Quartets*:

*We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

This was not the first time Godwin had painted in the north-west, so he was at least partially prepared for the experience. Another artists' excursion the following year took him into unfamiliar territory, as he travelled with Euan Macleod to Hong Kong and Guilin, as part of a project called The Painter's Journey, sponsored by the Nock Art Foundation.

Godwin had initially thought to concentrate on Hong Kong Harbour, drawing upon his experience of painting Sydney locations such as White Bay, but he soon abandoned this plan. "I did a few things," he says, "and there was no challenge whatsoever. So I thought, 'I'm going to do these Chinese mountains, even though they've been done to the point where the Li River is a cliché in itself.' Conical hills, mist and clouds, a few little sampans down the bottom, and there you have it!"

It was like painting the Eiffel Tower in Paris. How does an artist inject new life into a motif that has been painted a thousand times, and photographed by every tourist?

Godwin looked back to Ian Fairweather, creating layered, calligraphic landscapes that were Chinese in inspiration, but very different from the traditional brush-and-ink renditions. These great shuddering loops and curves had nothing in common with the habitual elegance of Chinese painting. The experience for Godwin was transformative – "like stepping off a cliff – again."

Godwin believes the Guilin landscapes have taken his work to a new level, but recognises that his thinking had been "kick started" by Fairweather before he picked up the brush.

He resorts to metaphor: "We've all got this horse we have to ride, and once we learn to use the harness, we've got it. But one doesn't rush into it. You say, "What kind of harness do I need here to handle my anxiety?"

To a more clinical painter this could mean a hobby-horse, but Godwin is likely to be thinking of a wild stallion. "Three or four days before we left for China," he remembers, "I kept saying, every day, 'I don't know if I can do this...'"

Although he knows the value of a spontaneous response, Godwin accepts there is also a need for discipline and a framework of ideas. "There's got to be method. While I believe in the happy accident, I think it's important how you use it."

He paraphrases Braque: "The rule that corrects the emotion, and the emotion that corrects the rule."

The new works Godwin will be showing in September have grown out of the Chinese landscapes. He had been thinking about returning to printmaking since 2009, after a visit to London where he saw a series of large-scale prints by Howard Hodgkin. Last year Godwin spent several months in England working with a master printmaker on a set of massive carborundum prints unlike anything that has ever been seen in in this country.

The medium is an old one, but unfamiliar to most people. "You could call it an etching," he says, "but it's really the reverse of an etching. You mix the carborundum with a special

water-based solution and paint it onto the plate, where it sets. It's a not a relief, it's raised. It's a method that lends itself to painterly effects."

Godwin produces a startling set of photos showing him applying the paint mixture with something resembling a broom to a plate lying flat on the floor.

"For me this is new," he says. Whatever anxieties are felt before the beginning of a series, they are dissipated in the creative moment. "Here I am, trying to find a window onto the picture, standing in front of those huge plates and saying: 'Where do I start? Where's my beginning point?' There were times when it felt like an out-of-body experience. It was as if I was up above, watching myself at work."