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“Look, I hate opening up like this,” Peter Godwin says. “It’s not that I find it difficult, but it’s like Matisse said: ‘Painter’s tongues should be cut out at birth.’” I’m glad that Godwin still has his tongue. I’m glad because, while the artist may wish his work to speak for itself, Godwin also has an undeniable ability to narrativise his practice and infuse it with a sense of the personal.

In telling me about his forthcoming exhibition, *Studio and Mountains*, at Defiance Gallery, Godwin pulls stories from across several decades, lending a weight and context to each of his artistic moves. In the first part of the exhibition, Godwin presents still lifes that he has painted from his studio in Brisbane Water, on the Central Coast of New South Wales. Here, one finds interiors that hum with a charged stasis, which sit somewhere in the space between representation and abstraction – between the illusion of the painted scene and the reality of the painted mark. In *Studio Interior with Tawny Frogmouth Nestling*, 2022, for instance, the figure of a bird that regularly pays Godwin visits has been captured through a series of painterly gestures that simultaneously track the movement of the artist’s hand and the ghostly shape of the tawny frogmouth. In the show’s second half, the artist is revisiting and reworking prints that he first conceived during a trip to Hong Kong, and the Liu River in mainland China, in 2015, depicting the surrounding limestone mountains. By contrast, these works are constructed of bold calligraphic lines, and seem to have propelled themselves with far greater force towards abstraction.

Yet despite their separate subjects, mediums, and foci, the two sides of Godwin’s exhibition suggest the artist’s constant – and, one senses, obsessive – thinking and rethinking of his work. Or, as he colourfully puts it, “I’m taking two steps forward, one step back.” While Godwin is scheduled to have a major survey of his work at Orange Regional Gallery in 2024, when speaking with him, one senses that he is always thinking deeply about the historical backdrop for everything he makes. His works do not appear to exist within a frictionless space, but, more pointedly, reflect an artist with a longitudinal view of not only his own art but also others’.

“Someone showed me a book that had been published by Robert Hughes,” Peter Godwin confides to me, recalling a moment in the early ’90s. “And I stopped painting for about twelve months.” The monograph in question, which drove Godwin to this dramatic hiatus, was Hughes’s 1990 book on Frank Auerbach. “At the time, no one was working with thick paint like I was,” Godwin recalls. “But when I saw that book on Auerbach, I realised that he’d done it.” Godwin does not elaborate on the specificities of this “it”; however, it is clear that – whatever the elusive “it” was – Auerbach had managed to capture it. As a new coterie of Australian artists emerged and adopted this thick, impasto painted aesthetic – the likes of Ben Quilty, Craig Waddell, Guy Maestri,

Nicholas Harding – Godwin moved in the other direction, increasingly adopting egg tempera for his paintings.

There is something incredibly telling in this brief anecdote, which moves beyond easier – maybe lazier – descriptions of the artist’s eccentricity. To me, it suggests something more profound about Godwin. I detect in his words a fundamental need to carve out something that is purely his, unalloyed by the aesthetics of others. For Godwin, one senses that comparison is a fraught subject. That is, that he does not like his work to stand next to other people’s art within the mind of the viewer – that he wants a distance. “I don’t want anyone looking at my work and the starting point of the conversation to be that it reminds them of another painter,” he says, before pausing. “I admire the way Howard Hodgkin worked through and found a particular language, which was his and his alone,” he explains. “I have this burning desire to find a language, which gets away from representation.” And this perhaps strikes at the heart of Godwin’s work. In each of his paintings and his prints, one senses this pursuit of a visual language that is wholly his own. “I just want it to be honest – really honest work,” Godwin says.

Over the course of multiple conversations, Godwin returns to the question of when an artist should begin their career. It is not a question that I pose, but – perhaps, because Godwin only started exhibiting seriously in his late forties and it is something that other writers have tended to focus on – it is on his mind. “I didn’t want to rush out and show, and maybe that could have been insecurity. I don’t know,” he says. “I was standing back and looking. I was looking at exhibitions and I was looking at my contemporaries. And I just waited. I don’t know why.” Neither do I. But even after our relatively brief conversations, I could hazard a guess. The artist who stopped painting for twelve months after seeing Hughes’s book, who resists being compared to any of the modernist masters, was still reaching for his own inexplicable language – and those precious moments of honesty on the canvas.

- Tai Mitsuji