

BIRD'S WORDS



Painting a mood of contemplation

● Forgive the following. Sometimes I just need to wander off.

Every now and then I have to look at something other than statistics on the pain and suffering of homelessness, or the tragedy of Gaza. Asked once by a man far younger than me how I can carry on the fight for social justice I said “Because I lose myself, I wander in the desert.” Or I go to look at art.

Gauguin and the Contemporary Landscape at the Ordovas gallery must be one of the smallest exhibitions ever curated, consisting of five paintings. Only one painting, *Le toit bleu* or *Ferme au Pouldu* – is by Gauguin, with two paintings each by Peter Doig and Mamma Andersson. The effect should be underwhelming; in fact it is not. You could spend 10 minutes looking at the works and depart. But you would have missed the point of the exhibition. The impact of this small collection of paintings did throw me; though I am always happy to be thrown. To be foxed by what the curator of a show intends to achieve, even if I don't get it.

The West End of London, just above Piccadilly, has been home to small private galleries since as long as I can remember. I first started visiting them in the early 1960s on home leave from my young offenders' institute. I was determined to be Britain's greatest artist and the West End galleries were a great spur to me.

Last week I went for an hour and looked at the Ordovas gallery show nestled in Savile Row, next to the abandoned police station. I felt profoundly moved by this enigmatic show. Why only five paintings? Was it really about landscape? Certainly the three painters represented were showing bits of nature. But were they not more about human life than about nature? Nature painting you would imagine would be exclusively

about views of nature, not human constructions in nature.

But the Gauguin is of a farm, with a peasant and a dog and a farm building. *Camp Forestia (Care Taker)* by Peter Doig is of a white cabin on the edge of water and reflected in the water. It's brilliant but it's not actually nature, though it is set in nature. Mamma Andersson's *Stubbornly Waiting* is a tree severely trimmed almost to a stump, not looking very natural in a bleak backdrop of nature.

So the enigma of why such a small collection of paintings is added to by the enigma of the exhibition's name. But I can live with that, because more than anything these days I need creative enigma. Our life and times are full of enigmas. Life increasingly seems to be a trail of unsolvable enigmas. Trump and the destruction of much of human life by smartphones, to name but two.

I have known Peter Doig's work for a few decades and have always been astonished by its handling of what it describes. The first painting I saw by



THIS WEEK JOHN WILL BE

Reading:

Isaiah Berlin: A Life by Michael Ignatieff

Watching:

A Fish Called Wanda

Listening:

Moanin' by Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers

Doing:

Doing a Q&A after a showing of the film *Someone's Daughter*, *Someone's Son*

him that stuck with me was a majestic painting of a block of flats. It made me look at those '70s social housing towers in a new way. It did not make it easier for me to enjoy the endless balconies and the conformity of them all. But Doig removed a kind of mist that I felt had been laid over the blocks by their constant familiarity.

Camp Forestia (Care Taker) is drenched in simplicity. Bold and beautiful and full of a kind of blurry, slightly out of focus detail. But everywhere you look something is happening. You might even want to view it as an abstract, as flat pieces of painting describing water and land and grass.

Stubbornly Waiting by Mamma Andersson is a large work that seems almost to not have a subject. It lacks 'centralness', is how I would, stumblingly, describe it. What is the subject, I ask? It reminds me of a painting of a tree I once did with a bland background, and I struggled to complete it because it looked as if it was waiting for something to be added. Some people, or a house, or something. Maybe even a dog.

Unlike the Gauguin in the show, or Doig's cabin by the waterside, with reflection as big as the cabin, *Stubbornly Waiting* seems vacant. Large and empty.

Or is it? A stumpy-looking tree, a greyish white-to-dark background, and perhaps a whiteish hill? I was intrigued by it because whatever the artist was up to, it really worked. Even the title seemed to ring true.

I left the gallery confused and slightly dazed as to what the exhibition was about. But I felt I had been in the presence of something that was more than simply the collected and displayed paintings. There was a sense of peacefulness. And making me look at nature again. Or take the words of Gauguin, quoted in the exhibition: “I let myself live in the mute contemplation of nature which provides me the whole of art.” Yes, that kind of says it all.

Pity they closed Savile Row police station, often called West End Central. As a 15-year-old I spent the night there in a cell with about 30 men, after a nuclear disarmament demonstration in Trafalgar Square. Breakfast was two Danish pastries and two cups of tea. The coppers were kind. There's nothing like a kind copper.

The exhibition runs until 24 April. I shall be going back to top up my dosage of enigma.

John Bird is the founder and Editor in Chief of The Big Issue. @johnbirdwords
linkedin.com/in/johnbirdwords
john.bird@bigissue.com

► READ MORE

bigissue.com/author/john-bird

Mamma Andersson's *Stubbornly Waiting*, 2024