

From: *Elizabeth Peyton*, curated by M. Beccaria, exhibition brochure (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 1st October 1999 – 16 January 2000), p. s.n.

Elizabeth Peyton

A Project for the Castle

Marcella Beccaria

...Yes, Mr. Gray, the gods have been good to you. But what the gods give they quickly take away. You have only a few years in which to live really, perfectly, and fully. When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it, and then you will suddenly discover that there are no triumphs left for you, or have to content yourself with those mean triumphs that the memory of your past will make more bitter than defeats. Every month as it wanes brings you nearer to something dreadful. Time is jealous of you, and wars against your lilies and your roses

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

More than one critic has used the term "decadent" with regard to Elizabeth Peyton's works. Her drawings, paintings and watercolors embody the pulse of lives lived intensely, bringing together the languor of a glance and the trace of a wayward forelock on the pale, *poète maudit* face of many of her painted subjects. The people portrayed by Peyton - friends, rock stars, historical personages - are consigned to an eternal youth that contains, however, an image of their end.

Elizabeth Peyton has devoted herself essentially to the art of portraiture, managing to make utterly contemporary a genre that sounds outdated. In these days of "bad painting", when the memory of the pictorial heights celebrated in the Eighties still seems alive enough to produce mainly ironic responses, Peyton's refined style stands out. Her work exists in dialogue with the finest American tradition from the late-eighteenth century, as seen in the work of John Singer Sargent, who is, significantly, one of her favorite painters.

Peyton's canvases are streaked with relatively large brush strokes, which might seem like an homage to the heroism of Abstract Expressionism, except for the scale of the work, which is closer to that of miniatures, and a continuous dialogue with pop culture, echoing Andy Warhol's predilection for celebrities.

Kurt Cobain, mourned leader of Nirvana, Napoleon, Princess Diana, Elvis Presley, the Gallagher brothers from the group Oasis, painter David Hockney, John Lennon, Ludwig II of Bavaria, Sid Vicious and Prince Harry are some of the figures taken from history or from contemporary accounts. Along with numerous friends from New York, these personalities define Peyton's eclectic gallery of portraits. Figures with tragic destinies, fallen or merely slightly confused angels, are the chosen subjects that constitute her personal Olympus of heroes, which is composed above all by male figures. What interests the artist, a true aesthete in the noblest sense of the term, is the "beauty" of her subjects. In her case "beauty" is understood not only as a physical fact, according to a more or less objective judgment, but essentially as a cipher that marks the intensity of the lives lived by those she decides to paint. Her heroes are almost superhuman beings, yet too human at the same time. According to Elizabeth's words this is their biggest virtue.

Peyton makes no distinction between people she knows and loves and those known through the pages of a magazine or a history book. In both cases, her point of departure is video images or photographs taken from newspapers or personally shot by her. Peyton identifies the very idea of painting with a desire to hold on to one who is absent, and it is in the physical absence of the subject to be portrayed that her works come into being. Real data, or rather the physical person, has already been entrusted to the archive of memory that preserves the best possible image. Peyton's heroes personify the transfiguration of desire, according to a process that manages to make friends as *glamorous* as pop stars and celebrities as familiar as the most intimate acquaintances.

The selection of works presented at Castello di Rivoli is dedicated to the image of Rob Pruitt, a New York artist and friend of Peyton. Pruitt is portrayed while walking on his own, or at a party - indolent and lovable as his painting of a panda against which he is leaning - and while reading a magazine that pictures Brett Anderson, the provocative leader of British band Suede. These ordinary moments, captured on the spur of the moment, seem like amateurish snapshots. And it is precisely within the apparent fragility of these unmemorable occasions that Peyton's poetry resides. Her stroke, both in colors as shiny as enamels and in the ethereal transparency of watercolors, captures the beauty that exists in these moments, now gone by, exposing the nostalgia that inevitably accompanies the joy of a memory. The image of Rob, an artist of great talent, becomes as incisive as that of a rock singer with glory within his grasp. The *aplomb* with which he poses in Trafalgar Square in London becomes the subject of a large-scale painting, which marks a new direction for Peyton.

A certain sweet indolence also seems to characterize Jochen Distelmeyer, whose portrait is juxtaposed with those of Rob. Leader of Blumfeld, considered the most important German band of the Nineties, Distelmeyer and his group don't seem distracted by the international success they achieved in early 1992. After three years of silence, during which the group didn't seem to worry about reminding the public of their existence, they recently published a new album. In it, their new underground experimentations appear utterly uncontaminated by any urge to make an international splash.

Jochen Distelmeyer as painted by Elizabeth Peyton smiles like one who is aware of his own destiny. Hopelessly handsome, as androgynous as David Bowie during his Berlin period, the singer painted by Peyton becomes the very image of *vanitas*, the pictorial genre that induced ecstatic contemplation, bringing to mind, at the same time, the inevitable and continuous passing of time.

(translated from the Italian by Marguerite Shore)