

Peter Plagens: An Essay by his Wife

From the exhibition catalogue for “Artists & Writers / Husbands & Wives” at Eaton Fine Art, West Palm Beach, FL, 2002

Exhibition Participants: Barbara Novak and Brian O'Doherty, Laurie Fendrich and Peter Plagens.

I.

Because I'm married to Peter Plagens, it's hard for me to write about his art. There's an assumption that rich understandings of things come out of solid, close analysis, which requires a cold separation between the examiner and that which is examined. But can I, his wife, do this? And even if I can do it, what will it do to my marriage to Peter? Writing this essay demands the impossible—that I distance myself from my marriage to Peter—that I put our marriage at risk. I refuse.

Unless I begin from a very different premise, namely, that knowledge comes from an attachment to something. The understanding of an artist's work is not the exclusive province of detached, “objective” art historians and critics. After all, their very distance often renders them impotent—what Nietzsche so aptly and contemptuously called “eunuchs guarding the harem.”

The fact that I am married to Peter, that we have raised a daughter together, and are both painters (we even share a studio), that I have spent hours, days, months and years with him, means that I begin from a kind of familiarity and intuition no one else could possibly have. But relax. This will not to be a tell-all essay. I'll simply try to look honestly at what I choose to write about.

I begin from my million free-floating memories of Peter at work in the studio, or Peter at work on an essay. The painter and the writer mix together.

I know the way Peter paints. I also know his painting moods—happy, that it's a Saturday morning in early October, and he can go off to the studio for a whole day, not worrying about having to be at *Newsweek*; panicked, that he doesn't have enough time left in the day, or in his life, to do what needs to be done; decidedly all business, because he has paintings to finish for a show coming up in the spring, or he's in the middle of a batch of paintings that he simply wants to see through to completion; mad at me after an argument, retreating to the studio (a five-minute walk) for the rest of the evening.

But to understand Peter's art will take more than plastering together this infinity of remembered images. And there's a further problem. Knowing someone deeply is an *assumption* a wife makes about a husband, or a husband makes about a wife. What if I really don't know him?

To affect a simulated innocence, I sat down for a couple of hours and asked him questions about his art and life, while dutifully typing out his answers on the computer. I learned precise dates this way. I also learned that when he was a kid and was good at drawing cowboys, he couldn't do horses very well. The frustration at his failed horses, rather than his good cowboys, stuck with him.

II.

Peter has always seemed to me to be a big guy, which is strange, because he's not particularly tall. He is chunky and thick. His face is fleshy and saggy, with a big, round nose and a high forehead. One eye is noticeably higher than the other—I'd say it sits a full quarter of an inch higher than the other. He has very big legs—not fat, just big.

Once we had a contest where we drew one another simultaneously to see who could capture the better likeness. At the end, after two hours of drawing one another, he realized that he had made my nose too long. Suddenly, he cut the drawing in half horizontally, right in the middle of the nose, slicing out a half inch strip and then taping the drawing back together. That made the likeness just about right.

In retrospect, I see that this surgical approach to art-making is at the heart of Peter's art. I've seen him do this same thing with his collages, and even with his paintings. He has a way of staring at a collage and then suddenly resolving it by cutting a small slice off one side. When he paints a painting, he also practices this process of successive removal. Of course, with a painting he can't cut off the sides. Instead, he begins by making a lot of brushy activity on the surface, through a kind of automatism, and then, as the painting grows, he gradually removes things from it by painting successive layers of paint. Each layer slowly encroaches on and finally defines the few bits of "incident" that will remain. What's painted last, in other words—the ground of the painting—looks as if it is what was painted first.

But back to the man. Like I said, Peter isn't very tall (I think he's 5'10"). Certainly not for basketball, a sport in which height counts, and which he's played most of his life. I've seen him play pickup games lots of times. Amazingly, given his bulk, he has a mild sort of grace on the court. He's always told me his big legs made him a perfect fit for riding bicycles, not basketball. He tried bicycling for a couple of years, but it's basketball that he loves to play and watch on TV. He knows the game inside out, and analyzes it beautifully. We'll be lying in bed watching a game on TV and he'll jump out of bed to demonstrate what some Lakers guy just did. I'm always astounded. I mean, here we are drifting off to sleep and he'll jump up to show me some move. (Obviously, he's showing more to me than the move, since I'm at a low level of comprehension when it comes to basketball.)

Peter will watch absolutely any sport on TV—hockey, JV girls' basketball team playoffs from a 1957 Wisconsin tournament, bobsledding, football, golf, track. When I interviewed him, I asked him about the connection between his loving to watch sports

and making art. He said that lots of artists like dance, and that painters, in particular, love visual movement. Sports, he said, was his “lowbrow version of dance.”

This was telling. Peter senses (without thinking it can be rationally proved) that art is something “high,” in the end, and he feels that he himself is something “low.”

He’s an ornery man, a difficult man, grumpy and grouchy about life, mad at its injustices and pervasive ugliness, its refusal to clearly come down on the side of the good and the beautiful. He’s always wrestling with meaning. He says that he’s an atheist, a cynic, and a materialist, someone who believes Daniel C. Dennett’s *Consciousness Explained* presents the best understanding of life there is. This drives me crazy, because I don’t understand him to be this way. (This is the same man who quietly drags me to the Met to see a Sydney Nolan painting retrospective so he can show me one tiny bush in the foreground of one specific painting off in the corner.)

For all his avowed cynicism, Peter secretly lives on a small morsel of hope. I think of him as a skeptic, not a cynic. What sets him apart from everyone I know, and makes him lonely, is his relentless hunt for the truth. He never, ever tries to soften an idea, about himself or anybody else. He doesn’t care one whit what people think about him. He also has a steel-trap memory. These two things make for a lot of social problems. A lot of people don’t like Peter. They think he has a smart-ass personality that’s argumentative. They consider his gonzo-journalism style to be a form of showing off and a reflection of a shallow person.

They don’t get it. Peter is a man always continuously struggling to tell the truth. He uses the vernacular ways that come out of his lower-middle-class background. His fluid, often funny prose—perhaps in part coming from the gift of gab his mother had—is even a part of his truth-telling, because he’s always trying to figure out how words work.

Unfortunately, there’s a cruelty often built into the kind of truth-telling from which Peter doesn’t flinch. He practices real art criticism, the kind that employs reasoned judgment, rather than simple analysis or description followed by thin judgments. He offends people. Although Peter has conquered needing to be liked, he gets no pleasure from hurting someone’s feelings. He himself has been subjected to art criticism far more vicious than anything he’s ever dealt out. But if he thinks something is bad, he’ll say it, in print.

Peter has a ridiculous constitution and an unfathomable drive and discipline. I’ve seen him (through my half-opened eyes) stumble out of bed at 6:45 a.m., go straight to a partly-completed painting in the studio-part of the open loft we used to live in, and without hesitation pick up a brush out of a can of water and start painting. I’m not making this up. No coffee, no bathroom, still wiping the sleep from his eyes. The rest of the day would continue like that—no break, nothing, until he collapsed for an hour of TV-zapping (stopping at channels with sports, old movies, and weird community-access shows, such as the *The Brini Maxwell Show*) before falling off into sleep.

The pressure, the constant motion, the fragmentation, helps Peter. He makes art out of a sense of the absurd, the arbitrary, and the indifferently-watching universe. I think this is why he always begins his art by doing something randomly. He'll put down some marks, and then later on, react to them intuitively. I think that his doing this in a half-awake state heightens for him the arbitrariness he thinks surrounds both art and life.

III.

Born in 1941, in Dayton, Ohio, Peter grew up (save for three years in Cleveland) in Los Angeles, after his family moved there when he was about two years old. Although we've been in New York for sixteen years, I still think of him as an L.A. guy. He's transfixed by popular culture and knows it inside-out. (Of course, it goes without saying that he simultaneously loves and loathes it.) But Peter had utterly no problem in moving to New York. He says that what he likes most about New York are its cold, dreary days in the winter, and the fact that we gave up owning a car.

Like almost all the painters I know, Peter could draw really well at an early age and knew he was good at drawing. And like a lot of artists, especially those who end up abstract, he doesn't particularly value this talent. He sees it as something that's gotten in the way. He's adamant that the quality of work by an abstract artist has absolutely nothing to do with whether or not he or she can draw, and fights the idea that artists who want to paint abstract paintings have to "prove" first that they're good drawers in the traditional sense. Traditional perception-based drawing is a way figurative artists try to keep control of things, he says.

This all sounds like a funny kind of denial—or is at least psychologically interesting, even to Peter—because he wasn't just a good drawer, he was a *really* good one. And if you look closely at his paintings, there is a kind of deftness to the automatism that can't be faked by someone who has no drawing talent. It seems to me self-evident that it had to come from someone who could draw. Anyway, Peter was so facile at drawing when he was young that he became the cartoonist for his college paper for four years. He even toyed with the idea of becoming a professional cartoonist.

There is also the odd fact that Peter's first solo show (in Los Angeles, with Riko Mizuno in 1971) was figurative, not abstract. The pencil drawings were based on old family photographs. He worked from top to bottom, randomly changing pencils so that everything got out of whack a little and the textures changed as he worked. He says he doesn't know why he did those things. That was the one and only time he exhibited figurative work. But I think those figurative, distorted portraits mark his commitment to abstraction. Through them, he found a way to make art that came unselfconsciously, through a kind of self-constructed automatism. His working method is still there: arbitrariness at the beginning, fused with structure at the end, chaos let loose in the middle just enough for him to chase it down and impose his artist's order.

Peter came from the very bottom of the middle class. His father, a commercial artist, always had low-level jobs, and on more than one occasion was out of work. His mother

worked, too. His parents lived in a cash world. They even paid for their small house in L.A. in cash. His father had a Christian Science background, read books all the time, and had a philosophical bent. His mother was a loud, good-spirited, lapsed Irish-American Catholic.

Even though he had a scholarship at USC, Peter worked his way through college (box-boy, then a produce man, at a supermarket). Meanwhile, he was trying to claw his way up the social ladder. He'd gone to college intending to major in English, but switched to studio art. In wanting to be an artist, he assumed from the beginning that he'd teach to support himself. After graduate school at Syracuse, and a couple of semi-art-related jobs, he began teaching. He started at the University of Texas at Austin in 1966 (in the middle of his three-and-a-half year stay there, he went to Brussels for about a year), and then moved back to Los Angeles, where he taught at Cal State Northridge (1969-1978) and then USC (1978-1980). In 1980 (after I had gotten together with Peter), we moved to Chapel Hill, where Peter was the Chairman of the art department (1980-83). When we moved to New York in 1985, he got a couple of teaching jobs until he gave up teaching to become *Newsweek's* art critic in 1989.

Peter always felt that he and his art were on the outside of the L.A. art world. He had begun to write criticism (his first review appeared in *Artforum* in 1966, before he moved to Texas). A lot of artists act funny around art critics. Peter says bluntly, "When you're an art critic, it distorts your social relationships. You end up being a person with lots of acquaintances, but few friends."

Peter says that he fell into writing art criticism. But he also liked it. Writing art criticism gave him a tiny piece of power in the art world, at the same time that the swelled pride that comes from it gave him something he had to resist. Being an art critic and an artist simultaneously presents problems. Other artists want from art critics only one thing: written praise for their art. And then there's the additional problem that people "read" your paintings from what you've said in print about other artists' paintings, or painting in general, instead of just looking at them for what they are.

The whole time he lived in L.A., Peter carried a slight feeling of inferiority, especially when he was around successful artists like Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston or Ed Ruscha. Peter never had a funky studio in Venice that he lived in with a girlfriend by his side. He had ended up a teaching artist, living in the L.A. suburbs and supporting a family. A lot of other artists felt outside, including his friends Karen Carson, Ron Linden, Merwin Belin and Walter Gabrielson.

Walter and Peter shared a studio together in Pasadena from 1970 to 1978, which I know about only through what each of them says about it. Later on, I guess, I became Peter's Walter.

IV.

Peter thinks there were two direct art experiences that had a major impact on his art.

The first was when he was in graduate school, and came down to New York for the opening of the “New Realism” show at the Sydney Janis Gallery in November, 1962. He saw those paintings and had his first inkling that being an abstract painter wasn’t the cutting edge of anything.

The second experience was his year in Belgium, in 1968. His favorite kind of historical painting had been Flemish art, and he wanted desperately to go to Europe. Not realizing it wasn’t the best city for what he wanted, he had gone to Brussels, taking a sabbatical from his teaching job in Austin. The trip was an eye-opener because he traveled around Europe and saw all the old masters.

To this day, Peter loves the Flems. To him, they are the abstract equivalent of abstract painting. He says that if you looked at a Flemish painting upside down, it would essentially look like a Hans Hofmann painting. He likes the fact that Flemish painting isn’t mucked up with all the knowledge of Italian painting. The paintings look clean, clear, and honest. They look modern. His biggest thrill of his museum-going, he says, was the time he got to hold the tiny van Eyck painting of St. Francis in the conservation department of the Philadelphia Museum.

The one contemporary artist that Peter hung out with in Brussels was Marcel Broodthaers. At first, he was shocked and surprised to learn that Broodthaers was the best contemporary artist there. It made him know once again that he was behind the times. He didn’t really understand the art, but he liked the man a lot and liked to look at his art. Peter used to loan him money—small loans—because even though he was well-known, he was poor.

But seeds get planted in artists in strange ways. One of the things Peter eventually realized from Broodthaers was that an artist could be *literary* in his art. Peter has always loved words too much to abandon them, even in his devotion to abstraction. He knew other artists who thought this kind of thinking was corrupt. But from Broodthaers he learned that he could use both words and symbols in his art. He didn’t need to be a purist, and could indulge his dual nature.

V.

Peter’s describes his work as a mix of carefully done things and messy abstraction. But what is the meaning in this contradictory mix? His work has other contradictions that show similar battles, especially that between words and abstract images.

Peter is a committed abstract painter, but he is continually making collages. The collages drag in images of things in a Schwittersesque sort of way. The images are used abstractly, as tentative references to the real world. Peter collects the fragments he uses in his collages by picking them up off the street or clipping them out of other artists’ art announcements. Sometimes he cuts up a family photograph for small fragments of a

picture of our daughter as a toddler, or me stupidly grinning. He then glues these things down, alongside floating modernist squares or squiggles, and paints around and into the found images and the constructed marks. In most of his collages, he snips off edges to find the composition. In the most recent ones, however, he's struggled the way he does in a painting—no snipping of edges allowed, just wrestle it out within the four borders.

Collage violates all Peter's stated principles about the superiority of abstract painting, but when I asked him about this, he said, "So what? I'm a painter. I don't illustrate theories, I just express what I am."

So what is he? Well, he adheres to no theory of color, balance or composition. He constructs principles and then violates them. It's the same with sports. He likes a ballgame to have rules so that there can be great, barely acceptable moves. He *uses* images in his collages, but never *makes* them. And for all the drawing or making of small things going on in his paintings, they never look representational. To him, image-making is repugnant, and is tantamount to lying. Over the years, Peter has painted Brobdingnagian paintings—almost mural-sized—as well as the tiniest collages. He's uncomfortable in the middle range of scale. He works in series, the way ball games are played.

Only after Peter had finished the first draft of his first novel, *Time for Robo* (1999), did he show it to me. I hadn't had a clue he was writing it before that. He has a secret private life, deep in his computer, when he's not painting. *Robo* isn't for everyone, but I loved it. Sure, I'm the wife. Maybe that's why. The book is about words versus reality. He admits it's based on a primitive linguistics principle, namely, that our reality is made of words because we have words for things. His novel comes from a painter who passionately loves the both abstraction and the lure of words.

Writing *Robo* allowed Peter to make words come out as if he were painting a picture. Most of us painters don't have the writing itch, so we don't understand what he was doing in writing such a novel. Abstract painters, in particular, are much more heedless of an audience than writers are. They're used to working in isolation, with only themselves as the audience. It's the very autonomy of abstract painters—they *make* reality—that Peter duplicated in his approach to his novel. Of course, anyone who's struggled through *Time for Robo* knows the impossibility of complete autonomy. Peter knows it, too. For him, what counts is the humanity and dignity of trying to be autonomous.

Peter never thinks about pleasing an audience—well, that's not true. Maybe me. I think his heart did beat fast when he finally handed the first draft of his novel over to me to read. And I think he feels the same thing when he shows me paintings, or collages (I feel this way when I show him—my primary audience—my paintings). Peter is on a life-time mission to fuse together his divided self—the half that's in love with words, and the half that's in love with paintings.

Peter shares with me an old-fashioned interest in color in the plastic sense. Lots of contemporary artists use bright colors, but so many of them have boiled them down to

graphic design colors that only make for nice reproductions in catalogs. With the rise of the quick-hit approach to art, only a few people know what it is to experience Peter's small tingle in seeing what happens when one kind of red is put against another.

Peter says that he doesn't need (or believe in) a metaphysics for art (he says art is just something human beings do), and that there's nothing spiritual to his art. All of this fits into his avowed Dennett-derived materialism. He has contempt for the idea of painting as cultural production. His avowed cynicism (again, I think it's better understood as skepticism) helps keep him away from easy beauties and fraudulent truths. It's hard to be so vigilant, for so long, without fatigue setting in. Besides, Peter knows that art isn't what it was fifty years ago. We're seeing the devouring of art by show business. Even though he loves movies, especially old movies, he sees the injustice in movies gobbling up everything else. To Peter, movies are an art that set out to become show biz; only accidentally did some of them become works of art. What we have now, he says, are artists who set out, from the get-go, to do show biz.

But Peter isn't so disillusioned that he's lost the peculiar joy of painting. When we discuss painting's future, he says he thinks it will survive, albeit with diminished impact. He doesn't care. He still gets up early, just about every day, and goes to the studio.

Laurie Fendrich
14 February 2002