

Biography: Peter Griffin

In 1999, Peter Griffin, by then establishing an international reputation as a painter met the Chilean playwright Ariel Dorfman. Both artist and writer enthusiastically endorsed the affinity felt between the visual arts and narrative drama and went on to collaborate with the event/exhibition 'Identities' held in the kindred theatre/gallery complex of Riverside Studios by the Thames in Hammersmith. From a mutual quest through different mediums, they presented texts and images that paralleled meanings of vulnerable and hidden realities, clearly felt if not always seen. Dorfman's dark play *Death and the Maiden* had previously been performed in London at the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs from which questions and quotations were set beside Griffin's prints to form the limited edition. The twelve prints and twelve texts were exhibited together at the Riverside with twelve of Griffin's original paintings. One of these entitled 'Identities' was an anonymous portrait head wrapped, as if bandaged, set in a plain ochre box on a slate brown-grey ground of 'weeping' paint. In the painting, *Death and the Maiden*, a shrouded figure enwrapped by contoured white lines stands alone on a dark, earth-textured ground on which the heads of faded flowers are collaged. A similar figure occupies another painting of the same series but this time appears twice in an equally divided canvas: one half of impenetrable shadow where the draped figure, almost invisible, merges into dark descending strands while, mirrored in the other half, the same figure appears sharp and clear floating on light parallel horizons of misty blue/greys. Concealment and revelation, death and resurrection, trenchant themes and intrinsic motifs that characterise so much of the painter's mature work. These recurrent forms evolved through the previous decade fused by consistent methodologies and deeply felt subject matter. The lone figure motif and that of the single head occupy simple prescribed frameworks and sequestered spatial divisions in the paintings. The titles given to each piece of work, intrinsic and indivisible, were exact and echoed the precise focus the paintings sought to invite. Griffin's journey up to this pivotal time was formed from contrasting circumstances, in origin, through chance, worked opportunities and his fulfilled ambition to be an artist.

Into humble origins in the Yorkshire mining town of Wakefield, Griffin was born on the 3rd of October 1947. Three days after giving birth his mother died from gangrene through medical error, a painful loss and total omission that would remain with him all his life. His father, recently returned from military service was unable to care and baby Pete was nurtured and raised through childhood into manhood by his grandmother in her small two-up, two-down, gas and candle-lit terrace house. From Romany stock, 'gran', a collector of bric-a-brac, Victorian ornaments, stuffed animals in glass domes and the like, but with few books, provided all. He drew and painted as a child but had no inkling of 'art' until he left school at fifteen for factory work and the day he walked into the city museum to be entranced by the drawings of Barbara Hepworth who he later visited at her home and studio in St Ives. Likewise, fortuitously meeting Gyorgy Gordon, a refugee from the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, who, then teaching at the local art school, talked to him about art and how he too could become an artist. With such encouragements Griffin attended evening classes, acquired some educational certificates to accompany his art work and enrolled at Wakefield School of Art. A year of revelation and pleasure with some serious reading and meeting his life-partner Rosalie, 'Rosie' from Liverpool, then on to spend three creative years at Loughborough College of Art before moving down to London and the Royal College of Art for what he later described as his 'most profound' education. Meeting and working alongside the artist-in-residence, the surrealist Robert Matta, he was drawn into the inner worlds of imagination, made all the more tangible through visual suggestion and searching for meanings through painting. In 1977 he was awarded the painter's Prix de Rome and spent two formative years in Rome, the culminating decade of his art education. Rome had so much to offer, the revelation of sculpted antique figures, forms and shapes evoking tangible human presence in countless images and historical fragments that he encountered throughout the city, looking at Renaissance and Etruscan images, drawing in front of Caravaggio's paintings in the Vatican, which, grand palace that it was, amused him by reminding him of 'gran's house' but above all seeking to learn from the basic elements of great art. While in Rome he met Terry Frost – then a committee member of the British School who, as the older artist, came to play such a significant part in his development both as mentor and supporter, and a much loved friend. While in Rome he forged many close friendships and after these two precious years, he and Rosie joined them regularly during their frequent return visits to the city. Back in England he formed a new working base painting strong associative figuration in open expressive pictures of things seen or felt while also spending some days each week visiting and teaching part-time in many art schools.

He became a full-time lecturer at Canterbury College of Art where he joined the Cypriot artist Stass Paraskos who was then setting up an art school in Cyprus, in the abandoned village of Lemba. He went out there several times to teach, loving the sun and informality of it all. As Italy had proved and many others came to recognise, despite being a 'northern lad' his cultural and cuisine appetites were Mediterranean, or as he once reflected when 'painting in a London winter I could think of Rome in the summer'. At Lemba he was much attracted by Stass's teaching mode, acute commentaries with over-laid poetic observations and the latent instincts that increasingly drew him to the powers of metaphor. He and I also met at the art college when I became the head of fine art and where he proved a very valuable colleague in the school, lots of ideas, organising field trips particularly those to Paris, Giverny and of course to his great love, Italy, to Rome and Florence and many more. He was a gifted teacher, well read with strong cultural beliefs, a role-model who gave much, a popular and inspired presence laced with humour. On several occasions he petitioned bureaucracies, both here and abroad to help and secure entrapped and other vulnerable students. In 1983 he switched to part-time teaching to spend more time in his London studio developing a reputation as the successful artist he would become, then by 1989 he felt it time to leave Canterbury altogether, but our close friendship remained. Apart from some periodic teaching as a visitor to other art schools, he now devoted everything to the full-time pace of his own creativity and increasingly acclaimed exhibitions. Cypriot folk art, sun-worn colours and antique fragments painted as 'simple basics' were sharpened in the early nineties with a trip to New York and energetic time spent with other painters and sculptors in the International Artists' Workshop, sharing intense, critical exchanges, studio spontaneity and the open freedoms of abstraction. But even then - not wishing to become an abstract painter he held fast to matters of theme and subject - not representational as such, but secured in essence, emblematic, made in visual silence, with the precious weight of paint, of colour and 'timelessness'. More travel soon took him to another sun-land, Australia, to sense an ancient past and recognise what spirits remained in song lines and distant dreams. From the surface spaces, gestured forms and turning lines the guise of sonnet and ode reinforced his searches throughout these years as his work was shown in group and solo exhibitions, in the north of England, London and in several countries overseas.

'Inside Out', the Maak Gallery exhibition of 1993, showed Griffin's growing eloquence and clarity together with affection for the parallel interpretations he found in poetry, written, said or sung. These hover through the given titles and echo with the painting's tonal earth colours set beside lone primaries together with the black dense and sombre blacks of charcoal drawings. If at times ambiguous, subject matter remained dominant, reassembled, coiled and tangled, the covered and wrapped figures, singular standing stones, gestural animations, these, as stilled performers, posed and relapsed were held 'back by tears for what remains'. Each image conveyed feelings possibly like those drifting out there in an unspoken urban landscape which when contained, were brought through to be only seen inside. By manipulating abstract and figurative elements in a signified but often minimal picture-space, Griffin spun visual narratives around his preoccupations or passing ideas. As with those of his earlier work, there were some in which he expressed long-felt empathy for those directly involved in socio-political struggle and such feelings were further aroused when in the early nineties he first encountered and immediately identified with the work of the renowned Chilean poet and diplomat, Pablo Neruda. He, the man, socialist, a lover of women whose words became a central inspiration to Griffin who read and re-read the poems, passionate human portraits of human life, feeling and destiny, the challenge of truth, understanding, horror and joy. Neruda had been a close friend of President Allende and like him died in the immediate aftermath of Pinochet's military coup of 1973, just short of his seventieth birthday. His words triumphed and by chance Griffin went on to meet a Neruda family friend, Sergio Insuenza Becker, who recognised the painter as a natural ally and together they went on to collaborate and celebrate the poet through Griffin's paintings and a publication. Both culminated in 1998, as book and exhibition, 'Sealed With Fire', held at the European Academy in London, then on to tour Argentina and Chile in Buenos Aires, Concepcion and Santiago. In these works Griffin chose to work with a broad range of paint and materials for figurative and abstract imagery layered as mood and meaning dictated. All was driven in response to the poems' intimate associations, perhaps just one line, one verse or the whole text held in essence, made as paintings and prints in which calligraphed words from the poems were interspersed to meld with the paint and collaged media, all intrinsic as one created image.

So with his life story, the questions and understanding, Neruda's poetry remained a constant inspiration to Griffin as did the similarities of their childhoods, especially in the poem 'Birth' that reflected how both of their mothers had died within a few days of giving birth. As man and boy, Neruda tried to imagine what his mother might have looked like, as with Griffin who hadn't seen a photograph of his mother until he was in his twenties: the emphatic theme of 'lost' mother recurred in many of his paintings across the years. Symbolized, abstracted or seen as an anonymous figure or just some faint image or identified by the picture title while in others obscured, kept hidden or concealed by other events. 'You Had Me', a painting of 1999, has very small, barely distinct, faded photographs collaged beneath layered washes of milk-white paint, his mother's picture is amongst them. The Neruda exhibition together with the invested on-going works was a major accomplishment and much focussed on Chile where he met Hortensia, President Salvador Allende's widow and later Joan Jara, the widow of Victor Jara, the Chilean theatre director, musician, poet and political activist who was executed in the Pinochet years. While in Chile, Griffin travelled to the south of the country and spent time with the Mapuche Indians. He had painting sessions with some of the children and from talking with the elders became entranced to learn of Pantheistic beliefs, the concept of the universe and nature as one divine totality, an all-encompassing immanence, the governance of all life with death simply seen as a return journey through the same energies to the stars, trees and rivers. A natural and ancient philosophy that, beside his own defaulted Catholicism, addressed so much of his own spiritual needs. The excursion took him to the old Mapuche sculptures, solitary tall, erect figures, some four metres high, principally of carved wood posed singularly or in clustered groups in the landscape or as those preserved in museums: palpable echoes of the fragmented antiquities that inspired him in Rome and the obsessive columns and standing wrapped figures of his own paintings. The South American context and contacts enhanced Griffin's growing international reputation leading to more exhibitions and thematic series including the major collaborative work with Ariel Dorfman and 'Identities' at the Riverside. His Strasburg exhibition in 2000 celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of The European Commission of Human Rights and an edition of boxed prints commemorated the centenary of the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset shown in London and Madrid with further exhibitions in Buenos Aires and Toledo. A fulfilled reputation that matched personal commitments and the maturity of his work.

His rapport with words, phrases, ideas and feelings matched those of the poets he read and re-read drawing abstract and figurative forms into reflective paintings. These, and like so much before, key circumstance, events and personalities were his life-guide which, bidding fate came close to ending when in 2006, while entertaining friends at home, he suffered a severe heart attack and was rapidly ambulated to hospital. Surviving major surgery and prolonged convalescence heightened his awareness and compelling questions of life like nothing before, giving him a renewed and concerted focus during the subsequent periods of treatment and recovery. The Heart, the organ and image, the fountain of life and clearly a perfect metaphor and one, while enhancing familiar haunts of subject matter brought changes to his manner of painting. The twilight, prescribed closed spaces, an emerging lone figure, standing or prone, the single anonymous head, filled, formed, wrapped, unknown with the 'heart of mine'. The head projected in sequential paintings then seen grouped adjacently, form strong visual narratives between them as do the heart paintings and the posed memories of surgery, theatre and healing. A refreshed palette and restoration set the images 'between Head and Heart' together with 'Paintings from the Interlude' in his solo shows at the Maddox Gallery in London. In another key encounter at the Tate Gallery in 2008 he met Mark Rothko's daughter Kate and Farida Zaletilo, the curator of the recently established Mark Rothko Art Centre in Latvia. From this Griffin was offered a two-week residency at the Art Centre in Daugavpils, from which, in 2014, it hosted his twenty-year Retrospective exhibition, emblazoned with Neruda's words 'I am only the head of those that go before me'. From the Latvian connections, the Danish Galleri Gl. Lejre in Copenhagen began exhibiting his work with a solo show in 2012, followed by several others. While back to Putney in 2015 a very special project was undertaken, the most

personal of all, shared with Rosie, a wife/husband production they called Dieci, in sentiment to their years in Rome. A set of ten prints beside ten of Rosie's poems. A triumph and dual celebration of a life together which was to close with Rosie's death the following year.

The spells of episodic sadness encountered in life, while deeply felt and invariably feeding into his art works, depict but one side of a life-embracing personality. Griffin was a warm sociable, engaging, humorous individual who enjoyed the company of others, a very good cook, great host, he loved dinner parties, get-togethers, conversation and discussion. Having a wide circle of friends, contacts and frequent travels, he kept mementoes and token reminders of places and people around him as every warm, cluttered welcome to his home or studio revealed. In and about, he mused upon and created his own image-state encompassing the persistent themes, words and sentiments of his working practice. This predominantly constituted the studio, a place of solitude. His last studio was over the river near Parsons Green in Fulham, surprisingly in a modern business block, polished name plate, a step through large doors, across a glazed foyer, past reception, along trim office corridors to stairs leading down to the basement below, there a simple door and into the studio. Cavernous, a refuge with no windows, no diverting scenery, no natural light, a crammed desk, PC and CD player, shelves, scattered books, objects, pots, pans and palette tables, painting racks, leaning frames, canvasses, easels and a wide paint-spattered arena open for work. The place of engagement with images sought from living and subjective ideas, the sanctuary for art making and the meanings he sought to share through painting. Although occasional visitors were welcomed, the studio remained an exclusive, secluded space, which in part matched the defined spaces created inside his paintings. The familiar division, pairing the picture into contrasting areas, rectangular, boxed, outlined, for dark and light, inside and out, smooth-plain or brush-gestured, colour saturated or blanched empty, contained-stilled or collaged-fixed. So to the dominant and recurrent performers: the single figure, contoured, coiled, shrouded, embalmed, standing, crouching or prone: the single head similarly wrapped, anonymous, concealed but significant, a gazing, if blind silhouette, a lone presence. Lines and markers direct the observer across and between each element defined without natural depiction, perhaps a word but nothing literary, wholly visual, yet each time a narrative lurking somewhere whether nudged by a carefully chosen title or signalled in the silence of painted matter. All assembled in solitude where words were images, incorporated with form and colour alongside poetical themes, playing each with and against each other. When working he would often listen to music, matching mood and atmosphere with his painting, but painting, drawing, printmaking are visual arts, wholly of vision, they remain mute and apart from occasional work with theatre, spoken words, music and performance, his art predominantly communicates in silence.

There were commemorative paintings with some in explicit dedication to loss but the years after Rosie's death were kept positive, brimmed with work, long studio days and exhibitions. When asked how things were going he would affirm his activities in part as compensation and speak enthusiastically of work and the next developing phase but he might also add how at the end of another busy day he would return home to eat alone and look at the empty chair. In 2019 he too, like his cultural hero Neruda, was diagnosed with cancer and underwent prolonged medical therapies plying between the same clinicians and hospitals that he had attended with Rosie. Never having learnt to drive, he was once a formidable pedestrian, walking between Putney and Parsons Green every day, but soon this was no longer possible, and he switched from the Fulham studio to his small back garden studio at home in Putney where he continued to work throughout the last months. He died on the 12th August 2020.

David Haste, artist & writer, formerly Head of Fine Art, Kent Institute of Art & Design, Canterbury
March 2021 ©