



PETER DOIG

[ARTIST]

“SEEING A PLAY, LISTENING TO MUSIC—YOU’LL ALWAYS
CONTEXTUALIZE IT IN YOUR OWN WAY.
WHOEVER YOU ARE, WHEREVER YOU ARE.”

Points of inspiration for Peter Doig’s artwork:

Hand-painted advertisements

Duane Allman record covers

Friday the 13th

In contemporary art’s cosmos, Peter Doig has for some years been a star both lucent and unique. Doig is a figurative painter whose lush dreamscapes at once evoke his medium’s past and suggest the feel of photos and films, and his big canvases hang in famed museums and are prized by collectors worldwide. But on the Caribbean island of Trinidad, where he lives, Doig is likely known less for his work than for the space where he makes it. In 2003, he founded StudioFilmClub with the Trinidadian artist Che Lovelace. In an airy old rum factory with a digital projector on one wall, a large screen on another, and a homey bar stocked with coconut water and local Stag beer, he hosts free screenings. Each Thursday night, FilmClub’s patrons thrill to independent and art-house films ranging from *Killer of Sheep* and *Klute* to—on the night of my first visit a couple years ago—Nagisa Oshima’s 1976 classic of sensual obsession, *In the Realm of the Senses*.

Born in Scotland in 1959, Doig had a peripatetic life from the start. When he was little, his parents moved to Trinidad, where his father worked for a shipping company that later transferred them to Canada. In 1979, Doig moved to London to attend art school, where he began a course in set design before switching to painting. He spent part of the ’80s in Montreal, working as a dresser for the opera and making sets, before returning to London and, painting snowy memories of his Canadian days, launching the high-profile career that saw him nominated for the Turner Prize in 1994, and gaining a repute equal to that of any living peer. In 2002, Doig returned to Trinidad with his family and has lived there since. Traveling often to far-flung exhibitions and teaching gigs, he returns home, invariably, with fresh Blu-ray discs for screenings he blazons with impromptu film posters that he paints, on Thursday afternoons, and hangs still wet near his studio door.

On the hot October morning when I dropped by Doig's place, on the dusty outskirts of Trinidad's capital, Port of Spain, I found him dragging chairs toward a back wall already lined with empty cases of Stag. That week, he'd hosted two screenings as part of the island's burgeoning yearly film festival: Senna, Asif Kapadia's remarkable documentary on the eerily well-documented life and crash of the race driver Ayrton Senna ("Did you see how many guys showed up in F1 shirts?" Doig said excitedly), and Kapadia's rather different first feature, *The Warrior*. On the radio that morning, we'd learned that it was the birthday of '70s calypso legend the Mighty Shadow; we dug through Doig's deep record collection to toast a Port of Spain poet who penned songs with refrains like "I believe in life and its problems." And then we settled into a proper chat in which our friend Jonathan Ali, editorial director of the Trinidad + Tobago Film Festival, and co-conceiver of all questions posed, was a full participant and key begetter.

—Joshua Jelly-Schapiro

I. SOMETIMES YOU GET IT REALLY RIGHT

THE BELIEVER: I wonder if we could talk about the genesis of FilmClub and how you began showing films in your studio here.

PETER DOIG: Well, I moved to Trinidad in 2002, and that was the year of the Kairi Film Festival [of Caribbean film], which was held at the Deluxe, a beautiful old cinema downtown—it's a nightclub now. I had just moved to Port of Spain, and one of the films I went to was this documentary about the making of *The Harder They Come* [*A Hard Road to Travel*]. It made me wonder who had actually seen *The Harder They Come*; I thought maybe a whole generation hadn't seen it, this hugely important film. In those days, it was very hard to get on DVD, and it wasn't on television, not in theaters. I went to another festival a short time later, for European films; it was clear people came out for these things, that there was interest in independent cinema. So I said to Che Lovelace, who had a studio by me, in the same space, "Let's show a film; let's show films." I had a digital projector, and Che had the contacts since he lived here. He'd also promoted a lot of parties, so he had the mailing list.

BLVR: The first thing you showed, then, was *The Harder They Come*.

PD: Yeah, and I think we had about forty people. And I just thought it was really exciting. It felt like an incredible reception to the film, the way people responded verbally as well. So then we showed *Ghost Dog*, Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I*...

BLVR: Part of your wanting to screen *The Harder They Come* here was a sense that it *should* be shown here, that this was an iconic Caribbean film—it would resonate with Trinidadians. But has that remained a part of your programming choices—the question of what made sense in context?

PD: Early on, we used to talk about that—what's a good film for *here*? But then after a while we just thought, Maybe that's patronizing. Why shouldn't people be able to see a film that's not necessarily about their experience, even as metaphor; about something completely different. And FilmClub took to showing films that people were talking about, films that were showing internationally but not in cinemas here. But also older films; it's very difficult to choose. I spend hours and hours deliberating, because it's only one night a week; I can't afford the time to do more than that. When you're choosing only one film, it has to be sort of *right*. And sometimes you get it really right. Occasionally you don't.

BLVR: On film nights, the conversation often goes on long after the film. The studio becomes a social space, too; the movie prompts a party.

PD: You know, I remember when I was first doing it, some of [the older cinephiles here, people at the university and so on,] were quite negative about us showing these films without offering context—without someone up in front, talking about them. But I was very anti-that; I don't think that's the point. People *will* talk about the film; they'll do it in their own way.

BLVR: You come to the space, it's free, and then a film starts playing—no introduction.

PD: Exactly. And then real discussion can happen, and can happen spontaneously. Even when we have had directors here, they'll answer questions, they'll talk to people, but generally around the bar. It's never someone giving a lecture. When Anton Corbijn was here, he said to me, and I think he was genuine, he said it was his favorite-ever screening of *Control*.

BLVR: His film about Joy Division.

PD: I mean, he was really taken away by the crowd— young people surrounding him, asking questions. Which was so interesting, because I don't think a lot of people knew the story beforehand—they weren't born when it took place; they didn't know the end. But the film's powerful, the music; they were so affected by this story they didn't know. Seeing a play, listening to music— you'll always contextualize it in your own way. Whoever you are, wherever you are; I think that's really important.

II. GET YOUR CAPPUCCINO

BLVR: Your own life has involved a lot of different “contexts”—your work, in a sense, has been about synthesizing art experience from those places, making something new. For all the critics who call your paintings “cinematic,” though, it's only a few works that draw explicitly from film, isn't it? Your pieces with the figure in the canoe, riffing on *Friday the 13th*.

PD: Right, it's true—it's only a couple where the references are direct. But I think my paintings, certainly, are *filmic*. I mean, how could they not be? I just think so many people—writers, musicians, whoever—are so influenced by film. You can't get away from it; it permeates things. It's been here in Trinidad one hundred years. And certainly my work has reflected that, those kinds of experiences.

BLVR: Can you remember particular cinematic experiences from when you were young yourself that were especially key?

PD: Yeah, many. Especially in Toronto. I moved to Toronto when I was fourteen and started going to the

cinema a lot with my friends. And that was the absolute height of the great all-night cinemas—they were places where you could go and stay till morning, do whatever you wanted. They were showing *Pink Flamingos*, *The Harder They Come*, *Thundercrack!*, all those sorts of films; *The Big Splash*, Fritz Lang. We just used to go to everything—we really, really got into it. There was the ninety-nine-cent Roxy, the New Yorker—which also was one of the first punk venues in the city. The Ramones played there, the Talking Heads, everyone who came up. You had these spaces where one night a band would play, and on another night they'd show films; I'm sure they had the same in London at that time, too, in New York. But it was so exciting. Everything felt connected.

BLVR: You've replicated that here, in a way—the studio as social space and cinema, as performance space; you've had bands play here, too.

PD: Well, maybe that's been problematic for my work in some ways. [Laughs] Because it is an upheaval—it changes your studio. I never had a kind of open studio in London; it's not what I wanted. I'm not one of those artists having people there lying around on their paintings, you know, like Hockney or whoever.

BLVR: One outgrowth of FilmClub, though, is the posters you began making to announce films. Did you start painting those right away? Did you do a poster for *The Harder They Come*?

PD: No, the first one I did was for *Black Orpheus*, actually, a few films in. I had started a painting, a study that I had kind of abandoned, of a black man in a boat. It was from this Duane Allman record cover, *An Anthology*—this image from the gatefold sleeve, with eight figures in a boat. One of them was the drummer, Jaimoe [Johanson], the only black guy in the band, and I started this painting of him, just Jaimoe, floating in a boat. I abandoned it. But then I was thinking about posting a poster for the film on the notice board here—this was when the space was the Caribbean Contemporary Arts Center; lots of artists were working here. It felt important to do something in the building, to have a weekly thing. And the film was *Black Orpheus*; I

already had this figure in the boat seeing himself in the water. It was like Cocteau's use of reflection to suggest entry into the underworld. So I just painted on it TONITE, BLACK ORPHEUS, STUDIO FILM CLUB and put it up. That was the first poster.

BLVR: You've spoken about how part of the inspiration for the film posters has come from local signage—hand-painted signs for soca shows and so on.

PD: Yes, I love that kind of stuff. But I think it's dying, all over the world; the technology has become so cheap. Five years ago it was cheaper to pay a guy to spend ten hours in the hot sun, painting a Stag bottle on a wall as advertising: now you can just print one up. It's tragic—but I think it's happened all over: in India, Africa. You see these large plastic signs going up where you once saw hand-painted ones. But when I came back to Trinidad, one of the things I was so attracted to here were these signs on the street. Often the wording was quite abstract to the outsider—NO DRAWER, BLACK AND WHITE, SOCA EXPRESS.

BLVR: DJ ALLAN "HONEYBOY" DIAZ...

PD: Right. [Laughs] These signs just punctuated by words. And words you can see from a distance, words in color. And with this language, too—I loved it.

BLVR: Have you found since the posters began being exhibited abroad that you've changed your approach to them?

PD: No, not really. Because I never thought about exhibiting them. I think I must have had a pile of thirty or forty of them when one of the gallerists I work with came down to look at paintings for this Metropolitan show I did in Munich. And he said to me, "What are those?" And I said, "Oh, those are just the posters I do for the FilmClub." And he asked to have a look at them. And he said, "You should exhibit these." And I said, "Well, no—they're specific to here." But then I thought about it, and I thought, OK, I'll do it, but only if there's a film program attached; they're not just artworks to exhibit on their own.



Peter Doig, *Black Curtain (Towards Monkey Island)*, 2004. Oil on linen, 200 × 275 cm. Courtesy of the artist, Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, and Michael Werner Gallery, New York.

BLVR: They had to be tied to an event.

PD: Always tied to an event, right. And they've been exhibited four times now, but always tied to a film program. But it's interesting—I think in some ways my paintings, now, have been influenced by the posters. Just because the posters are made so quickly, almost thoughtlessly, I surprise myself sometimes in a way I never used to let myself with my real paintings.

BLVR: At least one other of those "real paintings" became a poster, though, too—the poster for the Trinidad + Tobago Film Festival in 2004, that image of a man walking by the cemetery wall here in town—*Lapeyrouse Wall*.

PD: Right, yes. The tagline for the festival that year was "Our stories, our films." I had made this painting of a kind of flaneur-type figure walking Port of Spain's streets. And one night during a screening here, someone got up and walked in front of the screen; their shadow was of the screen. It made me think of the man's shadow on the wall—that image was a way of implying that we were in the film, in a way. He's sort of walking into the film.

BLVR: Which is especially interesting on this island,

where there's a real tradition of interacting with movies in the cinema. People shout at the screen; they comment on what's going on. It's the same across the Caribbean.

PD: Exactly. Every time I go to New York, I see a film—it's such a different experience; it's very quiet. You know, you go to Film Forum, you're maybe one of ten in the audience. And that's a different experience; you get your cappuccino or whatever, go in. It's completely different seeing a film here.

III. EL PRESIDENTE

BLVR: Trinidad is distinctive for the impact cinema has had on the culture. Especially since World War II, when the U.S. naval base was here. V.S. Naipaul has written about going to the movie palaces as a kid to watch westerns. People loved those films here—this was a frontier place, too.

PD: You know, still, today, if you leave Port of Spain and go to places like Sangre Grande—it's like a western town. One street, the bad boys. Everything centers around the courtroom, the saloon. I've long thought it would be a great place to make a western, Trinidad.

BLVR: That's never quite happened, but westerns did have such a resonance in carnival culture—it's where great steel bands like Desperadoes got their names. And there is also a long history of other films being shot here—*Affair in Trinidad*, with Rita Hayworth; *Fire Down Below*...

PD: *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison*, the Robert Mitchum film—that was set in the South Pacific, but shot in Tobago. Lots of locals were hired as extras—it's like in [eminent Trinidadian novelist] Earl Lovelace's new novel.

BLVR: Right! *Is Just a Movie*. It's a story—by your FilmClub partner, Che Lovelace's, father, it's worth noting—about a foreign-film production with local crew. And these local actors go to a casting call; well-regarded actors here, who learn they're basically auditioning to fall down dead, to be shot by the Mitchum character.

PD: Spear-carriers, basically.

BLVR: Right—and they want to die glorious deaths; it's that old story, in a “marginal” place like this, wanting to be part of the drama, to join the story yourself. Do you have memories yourself of going to the cinema here as a kid?

PD: Absolutely. The first films I saw in my life were here. I can remember very clearly going to see a Robin Hood film with Errol Flynn at the Roxy—it's a Pizza Hut now. And *The Sound of Music*. I saw that, I think, three times; it was hugely popular here. We went to the drive-in a lot with my parents. But, you know, at that time quite progressive films were shown in cinemas here, too. In the early days of FilmClub, there was this guy who used to come to all the films—an actor, Verne; he worked as a fireman. And when I showed *Woman in the Dunes*, he'd bring me the book *The Woman in the Dunes*. When I showed *Belle de Jour*, he brought me the book of *Belle de Jour*, these little paperbacks that he'd collected here. And he told me that they used to show Fellini in cinemas here.

BLVR: In the '50s and '60s, lots of those Italian and French films weren't just in art houses—they had commercial distribution in Latin America, everywhere. But Fellini, especially, seemed to resonate in this part of the world, didn't he? Jean Dominique, the great Haitian broadcaster and activist, used to talk about watching Fellini during Duvalier's dictatorship. “Every time you see *La Strada*,” he said, “you feel something against the black part of life.” And he had a film club there in Port-au-Prince, too.

PD: There's a similar history here, you know. One of the great Trinidadians of the World War II generation, Ulric Cross—he was a hero with the RAF—has told me about being involved in a film club in the '50s. It had something like eight hundred members. They used to bring down reels—*Battleship Potemkin*, Renoir films, all sorts of stuff.

BLVR: Many of your older patrons at FilmClub must have grown up going to films nearby.

PD: Yes, you know, the speaker that I use came from a cinema down the road—the El Presidente. I used to go by; it was closed up, boarded up. But I thought there must be some equipment still in there. And I managed to find out

who bought it—it was some police credit union or something—and I managed to buy this big old Altec speaker, a beautiful speaker, a very good speaker, and it worked perfectly. And once I put it in, one of the local patrons of the film club recognized the sound—this man who'd spent his whole childhood going to films there. His whole cinematic experience was in the El Presidente. And he recognized the sound; it had a particular sound. It's not Dolby, or digital, it's what he'd heard growing up.

BLVR: Speaking of sound, this space isn't a black box; you have the sounds from outside coming in, along with some ambient light and noise.

PD: Sometimes that adds to it—it's rarely distracting. I think we've done three hundred nights now, just over three hundred nights... And there was only one night when it really, really rained. When it rains here it's very, very loud, because we have this huge sheet of galvanized [steel], the roof. That night we showed *The Spirit of the Beehive*, I remember that quite clearly. Which is an incredible film; it's also quite a quiet film. And the sound of the rain was deafening. But actually that somehow added to the atmosphere. It just made the experience different, very contained—feeling.

IV. YOU GO BACK

BLVR: Today in Trinidad, like everywhere, there are lots of options for entertaining yourself, for absorbing stories visually—there's TV, Netflix. But it seems there's still an appetite for cinema, for watching things on a big screen in the dark with other people. You've said that film is the art of our time.

PD: I mean, I think it's quite obvious, really. In France—who are the great French contemporary artists? They're all filmmakers, surely. Why did it kind of stop in the 1950s—that history of French art, painting; it's when this incredible wave of filmmakers comes in.

BLVR: Renoir's father was a painter, he was a filmmaker.

PD: Exactly. In another time, Godard would have been another kind of artist.

BLVR: Where do you think we are now, though? Paul Schrader recently said that if he were starting now, he probably wouldn't choose film as his medium; he thinks film has done its job. Looking at it now—maybe the twentieth century was a century of film, but the twenty-first will be something else?

PD: You know, when I went to study painting, in the early '80s, I really, really liked the idea that I was studying to be a painter, because it was such an odd thing to do, in a way; it was like being a poet. There were no art careers in my generation. No one really expected to get an exhibition, even to sell a painting, until they were at least thirty. That's just what it was—you kind of fell in love with painting, and you fell in love with the tradition of painting. And I'm sure there was a time when filmmaking was like that. But filmmaking was kind of more vital then, because there was an audience, there were venues. Cinemas weren't *like* art galleries, maybe, but they were places where the *new* was seen. I think in a way that changed; art galleries did become more interesting again. But maybe that's changed again. It's interesting what Schrader says. If you're a young person now, maybe you choose something else.

BLVR: So what do you do? How do you approach it?

PD: Go back. You go back. But what I find so surprising, for instance, working at an art college and looking at the portfolios of students coming in—looking at five or six hundred portfolios, there wasn't one piece of work in those portfolios that was made with a phone-camera. It's so weird. Everyone has these tools—now children's toys, even, have sophisticated video cameras. It's like the equivalent is if everyone could draw from an early age. But it's not creating great new filmmakers yet. The tool isn't creating a new language. The language hasn't changed. Not yet, anyway.

Though you know, this guy who was a student of mine at the Royal College of Art; he made a film on his Nokia phone with Michael Fassbender—it's called *Man on a Motorcycle*. It's only ten minutes; it's a brilliant little film, and he used his little Nokia phone because he liked the quality of the image. This was a painter; he could have used 16 mm, even 35 mm, or a sophisticated hand-



Let the Right One In (2008), House (1977), Black Orpheus (1959), and Carmen and Geoffrey (2005). Oil on paper. Courtesy of Peter Doig and Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin.

held camera, but he chose to use the Nokia. Which does have this beautiful quality when it's blown up. It wasn't about making a film with a phone: he doesn't tell you that's what he's done. And the film cost him five hundred pounds to make, basically just taking Fassbender and the sound man out for dinner, you know.

BLVR: It's already become almost glib to say, but you really can make good films cheaply now. And maybe that's most important and interesting in a place like this, which has such a rich history with movies but less history with making them.

PD: And that is such a question, isn't it: one hundred years of cinema in Trinidad, great writing on film from here, great songwriters, lots of referencing films in calypso, in carnival—but why no great filmmakers so far? Film has been so written about and talked about; people buy endless pirated copies of films; so much is available. But it's really interesting, all these years have passed.

BLVR: You could broaden it to the whole English-speaking Caribbean, even.

PD: Yeah. I mean, there have been extraordinary one-offs—*Bim*, here in Trinidad; *Rue Cases-Nègres*, by Euzhan Paly from Martinique—that's in French, of course, but a great Caribbean film; the Cuban classics; films made by outsiders. But we think of Jamaica as having a film culture:

that's mostly about one film, for non-Jamaicans, anyway. And what a precedent—but I think a lot of the Jamaican films since *The Harder They Come* want to reference it in a way, but they lose sight of what the original was; this kind of pure thing, full of experimental passages; it was made at that incredible time for film—*Touki Bouki* came out then; *Easy Rider*, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, they're all connected. And then with an artist like Jimmy Cliff, in his absolute prime—everyone was playing the sound track in the early '70s. It introduced Jamaican music to the world.

BLVR: Right, it gave this incredible culture its images, just before Bob Marley hit in '72; kids everywhere got into reggae. Trinidad never had that moment—there was no Marley of calypso, few films to capture *this* island's culture visually for a global audience, let alone for people here—which, of course, is true for most islands, for most of what used to be called “the third world.”

PD: Maybe the reason the great Caribbean filmmaker hasn't arrived yet is because film has always been so connected to ideas of entertainment; maybe the storytellers and documenters and historians have stuck to literature for the most part. I don't know. But surely that's changing as it becomes so much easier and cheaper to make movies. And I just think there are so, so many stories to be told by the people of the Caribbean, in film. So much of this region is only very superficially known outside. The surface, really, has barely been scratched. ★