



ArtScene

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'PETE THE STREET'

Peter Brown's description of his daily routine reminded me of Alan Bennett's autobiographical play, *The Lady in The Van*

Like the main character, Peter uses his van as something of a mobile home which he drives to one of many favourite areas of London then parks in a street. Canvas and easel are removed from the back and he wanders around until he finds a nearby vantage point from which he can paint his chosen surroundings. Dressed in paint encrusted clothing, officials sometimes look on him as a vagrant and move him on but he returns persistently day after day until a painting is finished. If this van appears outside your house, do *not* move Peter Brown on for he is one of Britain's finest painters.

His favourite locations range from Putney to Oxford

Circus, Highgate to Clapham and most places in between. Peter is a very down to earth character who likes to find a view that "tickles" him, then take time to soak up its atmosphere before even picking up a brush: the light, the wind, the temperature, the smells, the noise of traffic and pouring rain and, of course, the people are all mentally and emotionally absorbed. They are essential elements for creating his version of realism, portrayed not in a crystal clear, graphic way, but in an Impressionist style that evokes a "here and now" response. Indeed, Peter eschews preparatory sketches or photographs preferring to work spontaneously with paint *en plein air* – in the Monet manner. He only uses his home studio in Bath for the odd correction, highlighting

Clockwise: Albert Bridge, Midday, Oxford Circus Rain, 9am Earls Court, Marylebone High Street



or touching up. So successful is he at painting urban scenes that Peter has acquired the sobriquet, "Pete the Street".

Despite being produced at speed, there is nothing rough and ready about a Peter Brown painting. Each brushstroke is deftly applied as in *Afternoon, From Battersea Park* where broad patches of paint produce convincing, dark shadows and leaf laden trees on the left of this composition. Cleverly, the artist leads our eyes along the Thames and into the distance using whites and creams that he has dotted along the river and as the *impasto* increases to chunk size, it produces an almost magical interpretation of squint inducing, reflected sunlight.

Also glistening in the sunshine is *Albert Bridge, Midday*, the elegant structure that was originally built to Rowland Ordish's design in 1870. Peter has presented it centre stage in contemporary guise yet the road signs and bollards do nothing to diminish its striking impression of a series of triumphal arches used and loved by Londoners.

Not many artists who are skilful at painting static architecture are good at painting people in a crowd but Peter Brown has a talent for both. Note how *Marylebone High Street* focuses our gaze on gleaming window details, turrets and gables but the human figures walking to work, shopping, crossing roads, etc are imbued with life. *Oxford Circus, Rain* provides a receding view of majestic architecture culminating in that pointed church spire but the foreground and middle distance teem with buses, cyclists, and people with tense

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faces. The pale, grey sky, umbrellas and shiny pavements provide the finishing touches to a perceptibly, damp scene.

In contrast to petty officials who sometimes consider Peter's easel more of a threat to pedestrians than a car, the public welcome his presence on the pavements. They stop... watch... comment on his choice of viewpoint and often praise what he is doing. Although Peter likes to become absorbed in his painting, he delights in their reactions for "they are part and parcel of the experience of being on a street". He portrays that *total* sense of life in such a unique and convincing way that he has won numerous awards, gained election to prestigious art societies and been artist-in-residence at London's Savoy Hotel.

So, if you come across Peter Brown I recommend you do what Alan Bennett did in the play and suggest he parks his van in your garden. If he agrees – as *The Lady in the Van* did – rejoice! It will give you the rare chance to see wonderful paintings emerging on your doorstep. ■

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