

Painting through the pandemic

Committed *plein-air* oil painter **Peter Brown** shares his experiences of working around the Covid-19 restrictions of 2020–2021

On Friday March 20, 2020, I drove to London sensing it could be my last chance for some time. I parked at the Mall Galleries and wandered down Whitehall to Parliament Square. I'd never seen the pavements so empty. Even early on a Sunday morning there would be expectation of crowds arriving later in the morning. Traffic was very thin too, mainly buses and taxis. I found my subject at the Horse Guards building – the wonderful,

mounted Queen's Guard, now devoid of tourists posing for photographs (below). It was a grey day and I set up to paint for four hours. The armed police would come over every now and then to check progress. That night they were stood down for the first time in their 350-year history.

Lockdown looming

As I drove home, I knew that I wouldn't be returning to London for a while. Instead, I painted in Bath – the canal at

Sydney Gardens. The nearby Holburne Museum was closed, and the park was quiet yet busy with walkers. The tennis courts above had been booked out and couples puffed and groaned as they banged balls over the net at each other. It was a beautiful warm spring day and, although the tension was growing, everyone seemed at ease.

At 8.30pm, the family listened to the lockdown announcement. My eldest son Ollie had come back from Durham University, so everyone – all seven of



▲ *The Queen's Guard, Whitehall, the day before they were Stood Down, March 2020, oil on board 6×12in (15×30.5cm)*



▲ *Studio Mantlepiece* 2020, oil on canvas, 25×20in (63.5×51cm)



▲ *Moses Back From His Walk*, oil on board, 16×12in (40.5×30.5cm)

us – was at home. We were told we must work from home, if possible, with the implication that if it was essential to travel to do your work, that would be OK. What did that mean for 'Pete the Street', the steadfast *plein-air* painter who 'eschews working from photographs'?

I worked it through in my head and concluded that I should stay at home. Ninety-nine per cent of people who see *plein-air* painters assume it is a hobby, so if I went out, I would be seen as flouting the guidelines. Memes had started to appear on social media saying 'Our grandparents fought in two world wars and we are being asked to stay indoors. Don't **** this up!', which helped square it in my head. Beautiful low warm spring sun or not, I was going to paint interiors in the house for at least the next three weeks.

Liberated

Our lives have been affected in many ways by the Covid-19 virus, but there was a positive here – something that would not have happened had we not

been put under restrictions. I could concentrate 100-per-cent on interiors and not worry about capturing a more beautiful or exciting view outside. It was in fact a liberation.

The first day was hard to get started. The need to rush had been removed from our lives. I walked the dog happily in the morning in broad daylight, enjoying the sun on my back without worrying that I should be painting the wonderful light, because now I had time. There was time to stop and talk, to get home and have a coffee and a gas with my wife Lisa, to draw Ned still asleep in his bed, all before getting into some serious painting.

But it was not just this that prevented me from cracking on. There was a nervousness within us all, and a guilt. We were worried about our elderly relatives, about the awful loss of life around the world, and about the underpaid and overworked front-line staff who were going through hell, putting their lives at risk while we sat on the sofa. That all needed to be reconciled, accepted or put to one side

for the sake of our own sanity.

Remarkably it was noon before brush hit canvas: a 25×20in painting of the mantelpiece full of dusty untouched clutter, side-lit by the bay windows looking out to a crystal-clear blue sky (above left). I just painted. No emails. No looming deadlines.

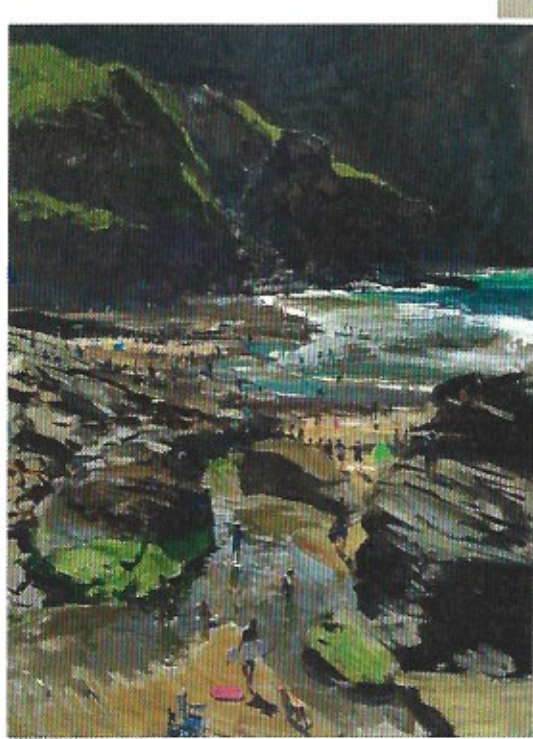
We all sat down for our meal at 6.30pm and then watched the newly posted episode (Day 6) of my daughter Hattie's YouTube vlog 'The Browns in Isolation'. I kept an eye out for appealing subject matter – painting the hallway with the open front door when suddenly the dog bounded in from his walk with Ned (above) and the light bouncing round the kitchen in the afternoon (page 20).

Relative freedom

In June 2020 they started to relax the lockdown restrictions – we could now meet up to six people in outdoor spaces. My first reaction was to find people again. The lawn in front of the Royal Crescent has always been a space where locals and visitors to Bath meet and relax, and it became a real focal



▲ *Kitchen, Afternoon*, oil on board
16×12in (40.5×30.5cm)



▲ *As The Tide Rushes In, Trebarwith Strand*,
2020, oil on board, 16×12in (40.5×30.5cm)

point for the residents of the city to re-engage with each other. There were groups of young and old, adhering to the social distancing guidelines in varying degrees. It was a joy to see people socialising again (below).

After that I headed for the coast – I was one of those people on the beach (the crowd)! I also visited the quiet rocky beaches of my childhood – Seacombe Bottom near Worth – and then as the summer wore on, I painted further afield in Bantham in Devon and Trebarwith Strand in Cornwall, beaches that were then busy with holiday makers. I was also keen to go back to London and painted there in between

seaside trips into that winter.

The paintings I made during that time were for a show at Messum's London, 'A Big Year' in November 2020. The show was then to move to Messum's Harrogate in the spring of 2021.

New year, new restrictions

I found myself in a hotel in Harrogate on January 4, 2021, when restrictions were brought back in. I decided painting there was essential to my work – after all, I was outside and not in contact with people. And then it snowed, and the snow settled. I painted a deserted Harrogate (even Bettys Tearooms were closed), deep in snow for two weeks.

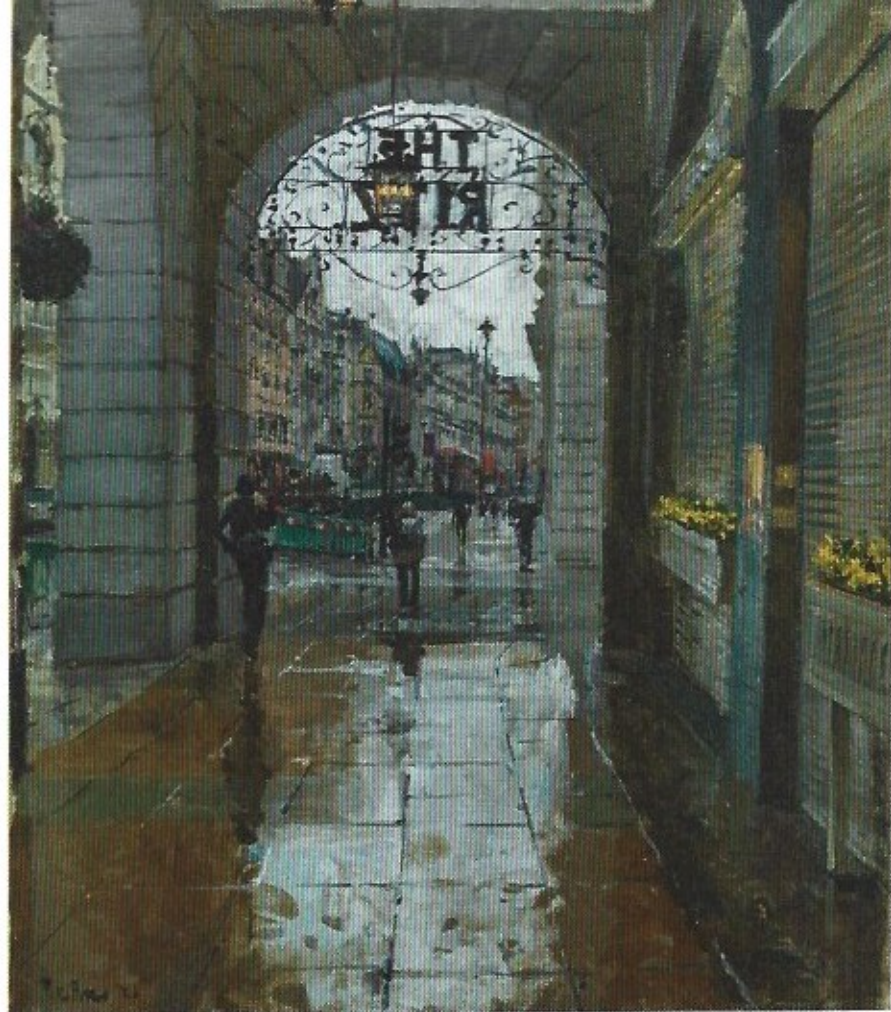


▼ *Relaxing of Lockdown, Royal Crescent* 2020,
oil on canvas, 20×60in (51×152.5cm)





▲ *Piccadilly Circus, Rain*, 2020, oil on board, 30×25in (76×51cm)



▲ *The Ritz*, February 2021, oil on canvas, 25×20in (63×51cm)

By March restrictions were slowly being lifted and we were given our 'road map' out of lockdown. The feeling in London was different. The infection rates were reducing and Londoners could enjoy their once bustling city. The quiet villages of Soho and Covent Garden were inhabited in the main by their residents, being devoid of throngs of commuters and tourists. So, I painted a peaceful Old Compton Street, a deserted St Martin's Lane, snowfall from under the Ritz arches – the hotel that did not shut during the world wars now shuttered, Wyndham's theatre in twilight and many more (above).

Looking forwards

Who knows what the future holds? All restrictions are (currently) lifted but we are left with scarred town centres. I am painting for my next Bath show in a city centre with empty shop premises but thronging cafés spilling on to pavements. In London recently I painted a view towards Piccadilly Circus from Leicester Square in afternoon sun. There were no foreign tourists and workers had not returned in any real numbers but the school holidays had started and I could not see pavements again. Initially frustrated as my view had now changed, but it was fantastic to see, and I returned to painting pavements black with figures. TA



Peter Brown

is president of the New English Art Club and a member of the Royal Institute of Oil Painters, the Pastel Society and Bath Society of Artists and has won many awards. He is represented by Messums, London (www.messums.com). Peter has recorded two DVDs for APV Films (www.apvfirms.com); for details of his other DVD and books see www.peterbrownneac.com

Peter is one of the judges for the ING Discerning Eye Open Competition 2021. The exhibition is at the Mall Galleries, London, from November 11 to 21.