

IN THE STUDIO

Peter Brown

The New English Art Club president is usually found roaming busy streets in search of inspiration, so how did he adapt to the current restrictions, asks **STEVE PILL**

Peter Brown didn't earn his nickname from staying indoors. The New English Art Club president is affectionately known as "Pete the Street", a name that he earned thanks to his insatiable love for painting *en plein air*, whatever the weather. It is a practice that, even just in recent years, has taken him from the bustling banks of the River Ganges, via the towering skyscrapers of Midtown Manhattan and back to the mean streets of Bath – a city he has called home since 1993.

Yet while his previous exhibition titles have often celebrated this itinerant painting lifestyle – *On the Road, At Home and Abroad, World Travels* – his current show is called simply *A Big Year*. It's seemingly both a wry joke that the restrictions have in fact curtailed much of 2020 and also an acknowledgement that this has been an experience for which the worldly artist is still struggling to process. "It could have been called anything really, but it has been a remarkable year," says Pete.

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With a planned trip to Nepal first postponed and then cancelled altogether, and the initial lockdown restricting opportunities to paint on the street, the artist turned his attention to his home studio instead.

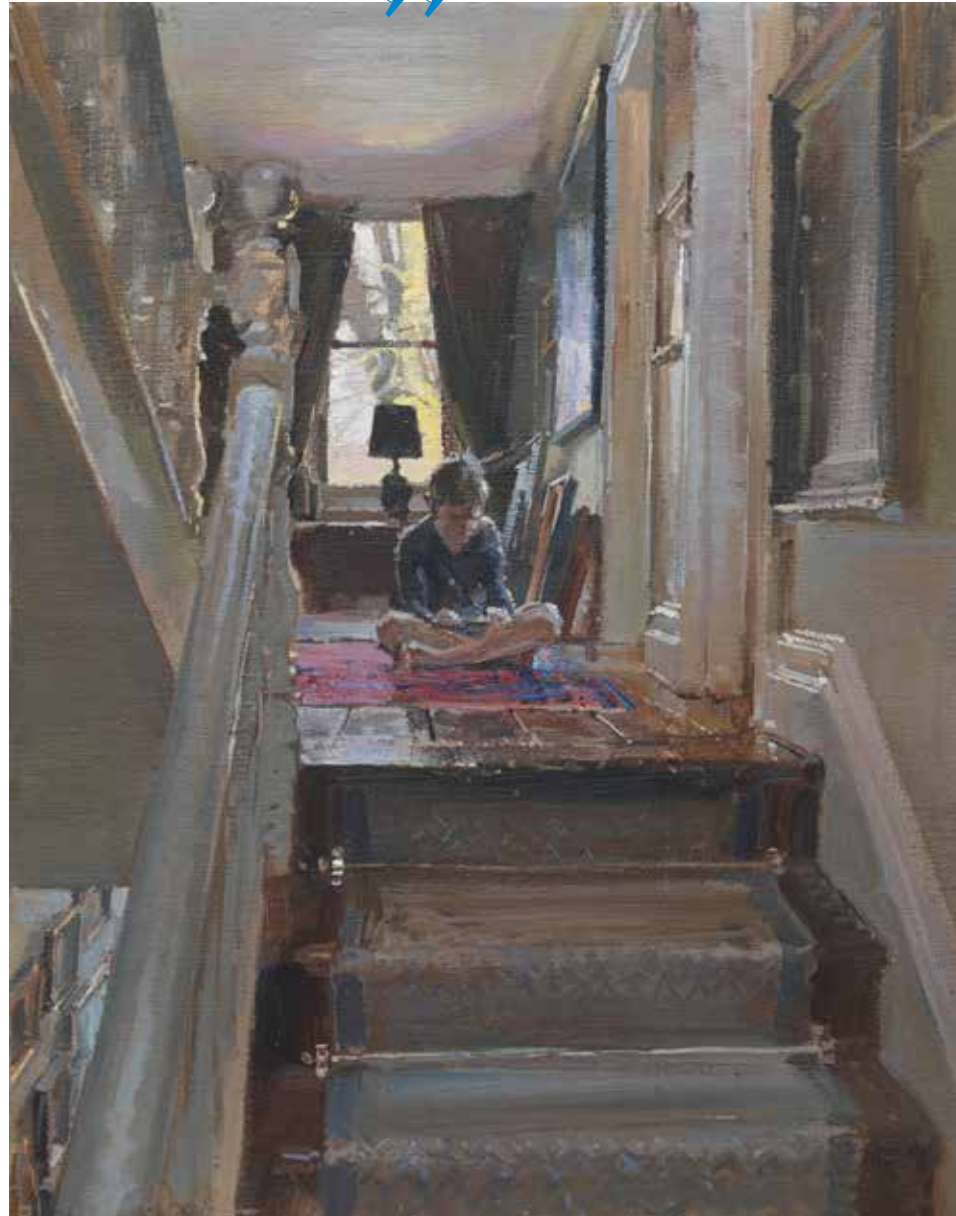
RIGHT *11.30am, The Studio*, oil on canvas, 89x76cm

FAR RIGHT *Ned on the Landing*, oil on canvas, 51x40cm





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dictated by world events somewhat**



He laughs at the suggestion that he was like a lion in captivity, robbed of his natural habitat. "It's funny, isn't it? I think what really drives me to paint is recording and then what goes along with that is the desire to get better and better at painting. Hopefully each time I do it, I get better... Although I probably don't."

He chuckles again. "Painting in the studio was just about observation and trying to really nail the light and space, I suppose. It wasn't so much about the location or a sense of place

as much. It became a sort of exercise in painting, really. I had done studio interiors before, but only one-offs. I do love the space, all the clutter and the nonsense. It's all bits of your life."

A Big Year features a number of these studio paintings, focused around the mid-morning light as it passes through the east-facing window of an upstairs room in the Edwardian semi that Pete shares with his wife and five kids. It's fascinating to see these works together, to chart the subtle changes in the light and >



ABOVE *Middle Beach, Studland, August 2020*, oil on canvas, 63x76cm

colour temperature; it's an exercise akin to Monet's paintings of haystacks or Rouen cathedral, albeit a Covid-appropriate series set in suburban south-west England.

The consistently sunny weather during the initial lockdown helped matters. "The great thing about that was that, at 10.30 in the morning, say, the light would hit almost exactly the same spot on consecutive days," says Pete. He was able to work on a canvas at the same time each day, taking care to mark the exact position of his easel on the floor and stick to his allotted window of time. "It's about

having the discipline to stop after two hours and go on to something else."

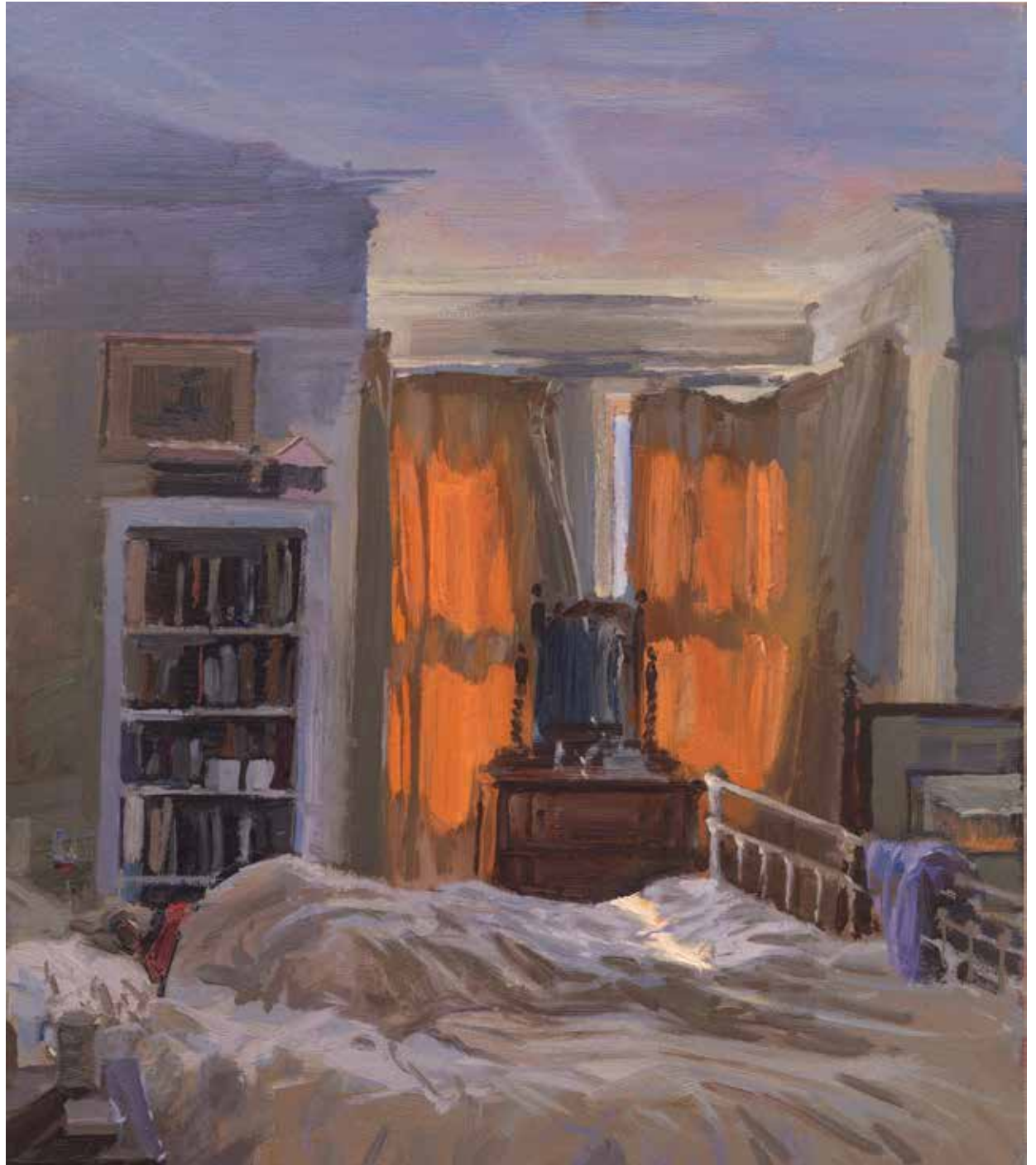
He applies that same logic and control to his street paintings. "If you're outdoors and you want to really nail something, the ideal weather is overcast when the light is even all day and you just stay on it. On a bright, sunny day, you've got two hours before it properly changes, and you start undoing everything."

In the afternoons, Pete found the light in his studio would change as the sun passed around to the other side of the house. Rather than persevere with the high contrasts between the

brilliant light outside and the dark interior, he would go in search of more subtle tonal ranges, often settling where the light caught the floorboards in a pleasing way or one of his children was idly playing with their phone. These settings provided interesting tests for the artist too. "In the hallways where it was darker, I found it very hard to get my tones right," he explains. "You need to get plenty of light on the canvas otherwise it's a struggle. I don't know how Rembrandt managed it."

Though Pete enjoyed the challenge presented by the interior paintings,

TOP RIGHT *Ned Asleep, Morning*, oil on board, 41x30cm



that proved short-lived. “I was gagging to get out,” he admits. “I always want to be where it’s happening, so I was very keen to get out of the house, get some air and just meet people again.”

Pete packed up his easel (despite owning several studio easels, he uses the same box easel at home as he does to paint *en plein air*) and headed straight to Bath’s Royal Crescent to capture people socialising on the vast lawns in the sunshine. Trips to the beach and the River Thames followed, but it was in London where the strangeness of the ongoing situation was most keenly felt. “I’ve never seen

so much pavement in all my life. I ended up painting on Fleet Street and I could see all the way down the street and all the way up Ludgate Hill. It’s crazy. I usually just go, well there’s a mass of cars and there’s a mass of figures with a few legs sticking out the bottom. I did one painting of Piccadilly in the rain and I think I put more figures into it than were there at any one time because I couldn’t bear it.”

Although Pete missed the chance to talk to passersby – he is rare among *plein air* painters in that he welcomes such distractions – the relative lack of tourists or office >

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workers has lent this current body of work an unexpected timeless quality. “I sent my godfather a catalogue of the show and he said what I’ve painted there is the London of his childhood, you know? He can remember walking through London and having a sandwich on Eros [in Piccadilly Square] and only seeing a couple of people in the week.”

While Pete is a member of several major national art groups, including the Royal Institute of Oil Painters and the Pastel Society, he has been most keenly involved in the New English Art Club (NEAC), a group of painters who create “art informed by the visual world and personal interpretation”. He was elected president of the NEAC in 2018 so has been responsible for steering the collective through this challenging year.

The *Annual Exhibition* in June was postponed until November following the temporary closure of the Mall Galleries. It left the members with a tough decision. “We thought we could either batten down the hatches a bit and go through the motions or we could really go for it. We thought ‘Sod it, let’s go for it!’”

In practice, that has meant arranging a programme of free events around the show, including a virtual guided tour and a live painting demo by Pete himself, as well as “chucking a bit of money” at producing a catalogue that can act as a record of the show, even in the event of a last-minute, lockdown-related closure.

The delay to this year’s *Annual Exhibition* means that submissions will be open for 2021 soon, yet ask



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ABOVE *Narrow Boat, Sydney Gardens*, oil on canvas, 25x30cm

what Pete might like to see more of in terms of paintings and talk soon turns to the bigger picture. “All the societies now, with Black Lives Matter, we’re all questioning the make-up of our membership and we’re worryingly white and middle class,” he says. “We’d been looking at [equality] before then with the sex of our members: it was quite worrying that 70% of the people who are graduating [from art schools] today are female and yet that it isn’t represented in any way in our membership. The question is how do you sort that out?”

Pete and the rest of the NEAC board have been proactive in that respect, putting together plans that will involve engaging with a younger audience of figurative painters as well as supporting those who are trying to make a career in the field.

The exact details will be announced soon, though in the meantime he offers this explanation: “We would like people to know that we’re here earlier, so that they know that there is a home for good figurative and observational painting and that they know it is a good thing to do.”

The NEAC show remains a notoriously tricky proposition for non-members – it was renamed an “annual” exhibition rather than an “open” one to reflect the fact that paintings by members make up, in Pete’s estimate, around four-fifths of the total on display – though he does have a few words of advice for anyone entering next year. “The last thing we’re looking for is someone putting in a painting that looks like a New English Art Club painting. If you’re doing that, you’re in trouble. Don’t go painting Venice. We used to get loads of paintings of Venice because people thought it was a New English Art Club thing. For heaven’s sake, don’t do that. We really just want to see objective, honest drawing, done from life.”

While there is still plenty of work to be done at the NEAC – and almost all other major art institutions, in fact – no one can accuse their gifted president of failing to lead by example. **A Big Year runs until 28 November at Messums, London W1. The New English Art Club’s Annual Exhibition 2020 runs 11-21 November at Mall Galleries, London SW1. www.peterbrownneac.com**

FAR LEFT *Rain, Piccadilly Circus*, oil on canvas, 76x63cm