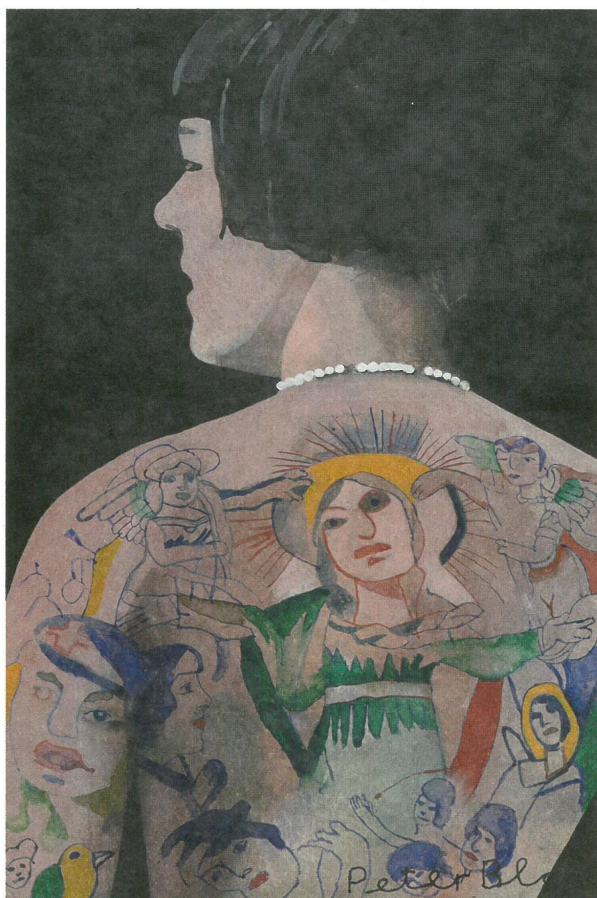


# CHRISTIE'S

## MAGAZINE

The Art People

November–December 2015



Peter Blake, *Tattooed Woman 5*, 2015

### **Peter Blake** *on his latest body of work*

THE COLLECTORS: Rajeeb & Nadia Samdani

### **LUCIAN FREUD's favourite printmaker**

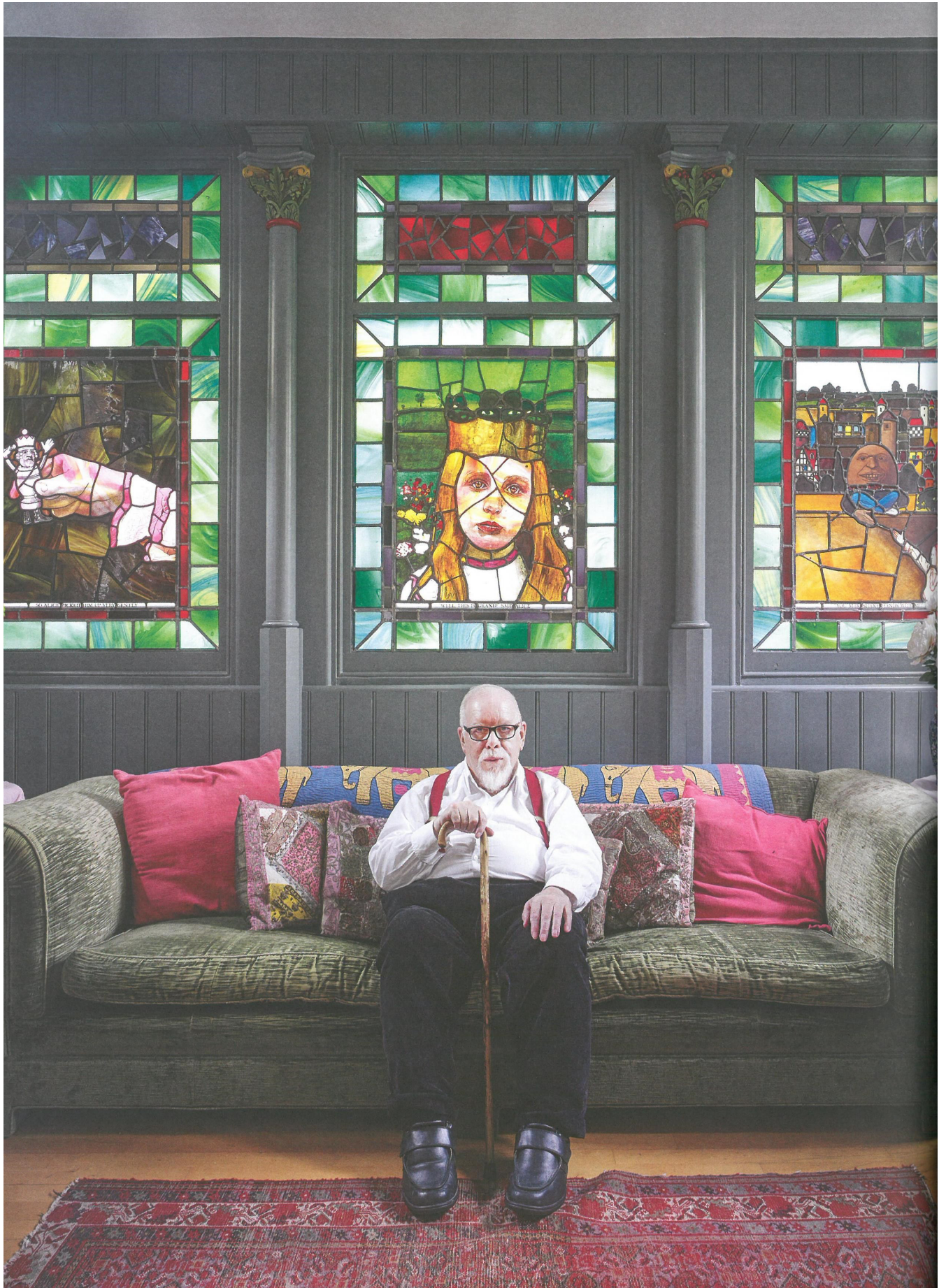
When SPACE AGE DESIGN ruled THE PLANET

### **Repro man: the world's most original copyist**

Where to hang out at ART BASEL MIAMI BEACH

PLUS

The Artist's MUSE: A Curated Evening Sale, New York – Modigliani, Lichtenstein, Gauguin



# The people's painter

His place in the pantheon of pop culture is assured, but Sir Peter Blake has never stopped working. He tells Rachel Cooke about his beginnings, his future plans and a new exhibition of his portraits

Photograph by Christoffer Rudquist

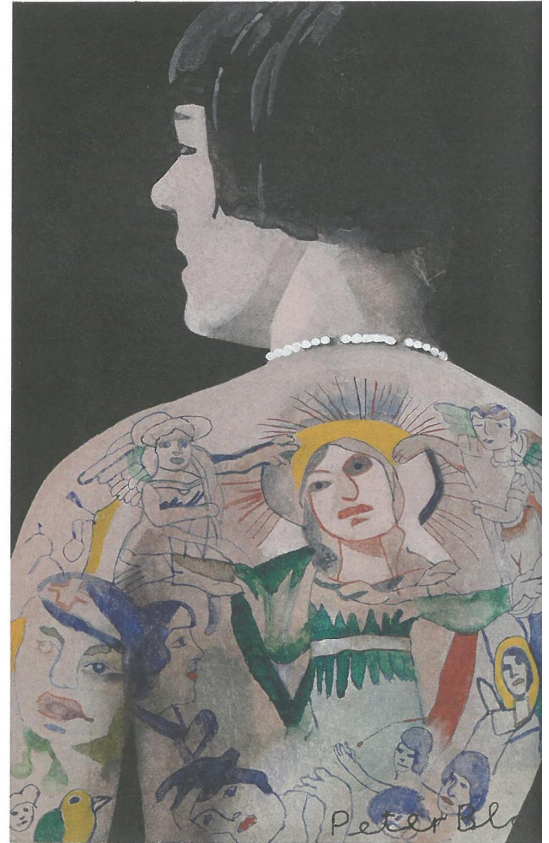
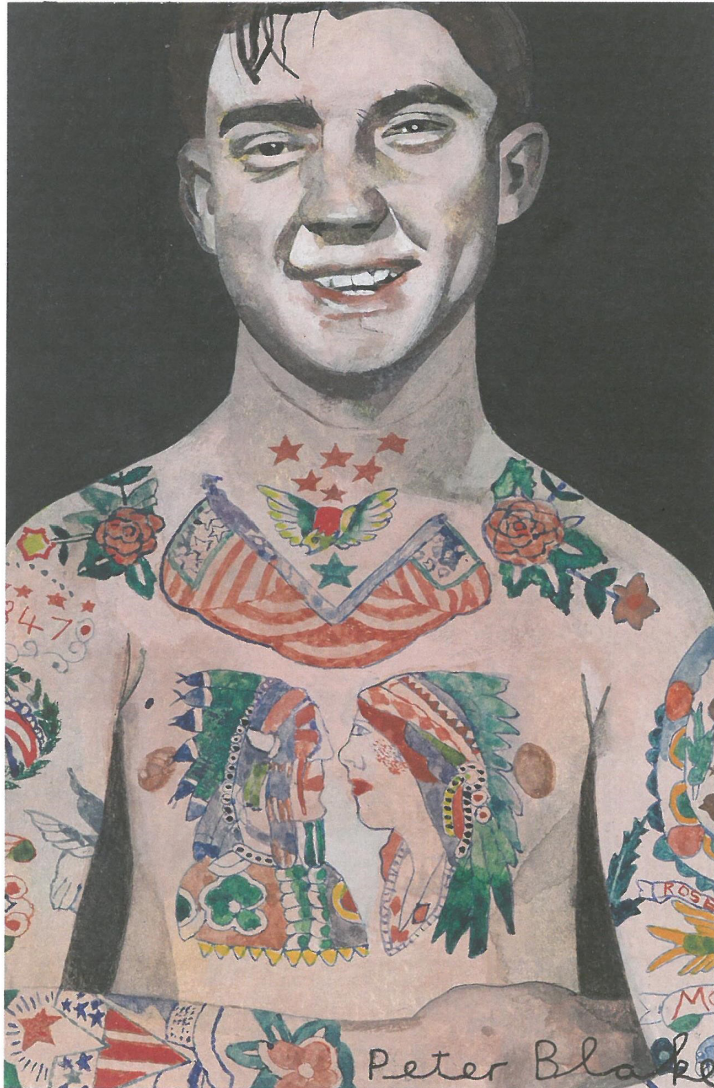
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eter Blake is that rare creature: a plain-speaking artist. Not for him the convoluted language of the exhibition catalogue. 'It's about getting a likeness,' he says simply of the portraits in his latest show. 'You hope you'll get something more than you would from a photograph, but not much more. I want them to be good, but they're not necessarily great art.' Do his subjects sit for him? He looks faintly alarmed. 'No! In the beginning, my sister sat for me; so did Helen Mirren, when I met her 30 years ago, though I think I was terrified. I probably thought she was going to take off all her clothes. But I find that relationship too intimate. I can't deal with looking really hard into somebody. What I do is take photographs. Well, these days, I get Mary McCartney to take them.' He smiles. 'This is my secret. I photocopy the photograph, and then I use transfer paper to trace an outline from it. It's not the process Lucian [Freud] would have gone through. This isn't what Auerbach does. But it works for me. After that, I've jumped the first hurdle.'

*Portraits and People* contains both new work and old, and divides roughly into three parts. First, there are the commissions: Paul Smith, Eric Clapton, Ian Dury, the disc jockey John Peel and many others. 'I did John Peel after he died,' he says. 'When his widow saw it, she burst into tears. It was the fingernails that shocked her. They were exactly like his.' Then there are the tattoo-addicts and wrestlers, a series of imaginary characters, male and female, with extraordinary names – Sadista is my favourite – inspired by Blake's collection of found images and tattoo design sheets (their names are spelled out in what look like Scrabble letters, but are in fact tiles from a Victorian word game). Finally, at the show's

centre is *Elvis Shrine: Portraits, Landscapes or Still Lifes?* (2015), a carefully arranged triptych of Elvis ephemera and other found art. 'The title comes from all the conversations I've had with taxi drivers down the years,' he says. 'Once they know you're a painter, the next question is always: "So what do you do: portraits, landscapes or still lifes?"' For Blake, this is impossible to answer. Like his contemporary, David Hockney, he falls into no easy category as an artist, for all that he will always be so strongly associated with the pop art of the 1960s. 'I'm a jobbing painter,' he says, with insistent modesty. 'I'm a workman painter.' He prides himself on his ability to turn his hand to almost anything.

I meet him at home in west London. His famous collections, vast and apparently still growing – taxidermy, puppets, folk art, elephants, toys: he collects them all – are kept in his studio, a short drive away, and he tries to be strict with himself in terms of what is allowed through the front door here. Nevertheless, this could not, I think, be anyone else's house but his. In a downstairs loo hangs a series of wooden ships' names. Another room glows faintly green thanks to its stained-glass windows, each of which features one of Blake's gorgeous illustrations for *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*. The upstairs sitting room in which we talk is pale and calm, all white sofas and coffee-table books; his wife Chrissy is in and out with a tray. Nevertheless, I'm distracted by the Victorian sideboard I can see beyond his shoulder. It is entirely covered in a dizzying mosaic made from broken tiles of all patterns and colours. 'Oh, yes,' he says when, unable to contain myself any longer, I mention it. 'It's made from old cigar »



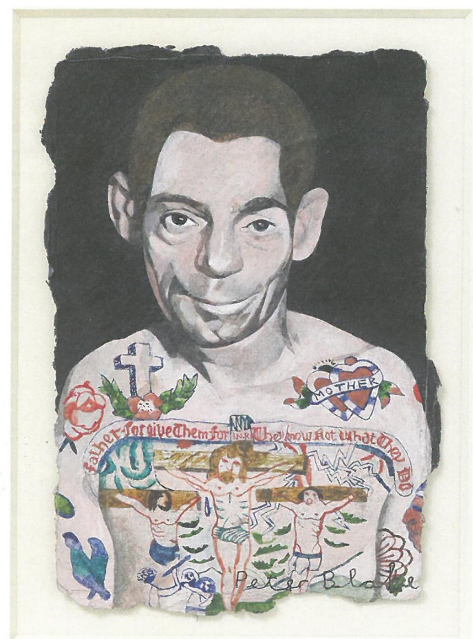
boxes and split briarwood. I saw it in an antique shop in Pimlico, and I just had to have it.'

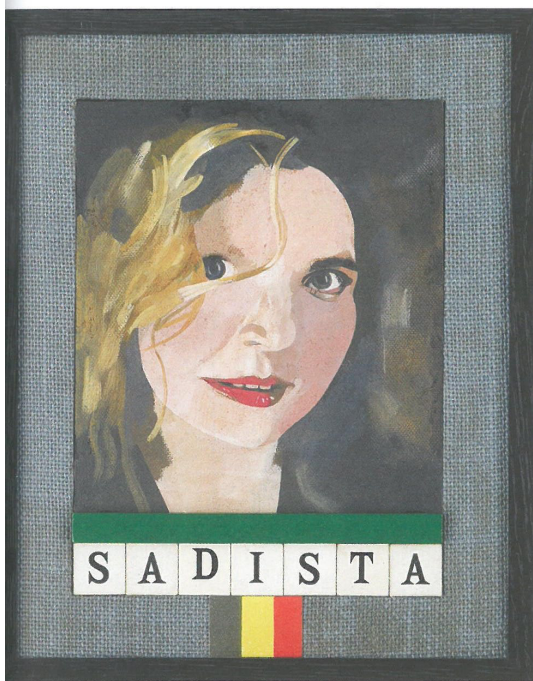
Blake's story is well known, and he is gracious enough not to mind retelling it, with the honourable exception of the tale of how he came to be paid a meagre £200 for the album cover he designed for the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (of this, he is distinctly weary). Growing up in working-class Dartford, he had planned to train as an electrician. But having passed a drawing exam – he is vague about the details – he enrolled instead at Gravesend School of Art. At just 13 years old, it would be something of an understatement to describe this as a culture shock. Every morning, he would bicycle in, still in grey flannel shorts, transporting himself in the process from one world to another. At life classes, one of the professional models was Quentin Crisp, the gay writer and raconteur. 'He worked at all the art schools: Bromley, Beckenham, Gravesend. This extraordinary

*Tattooed Man 1*,  
2015, watercolour,  
14.8 × 9.9cm

*Tattooed Woman 5*,  
2015, watercolour,  
14.8 × 9.9cm

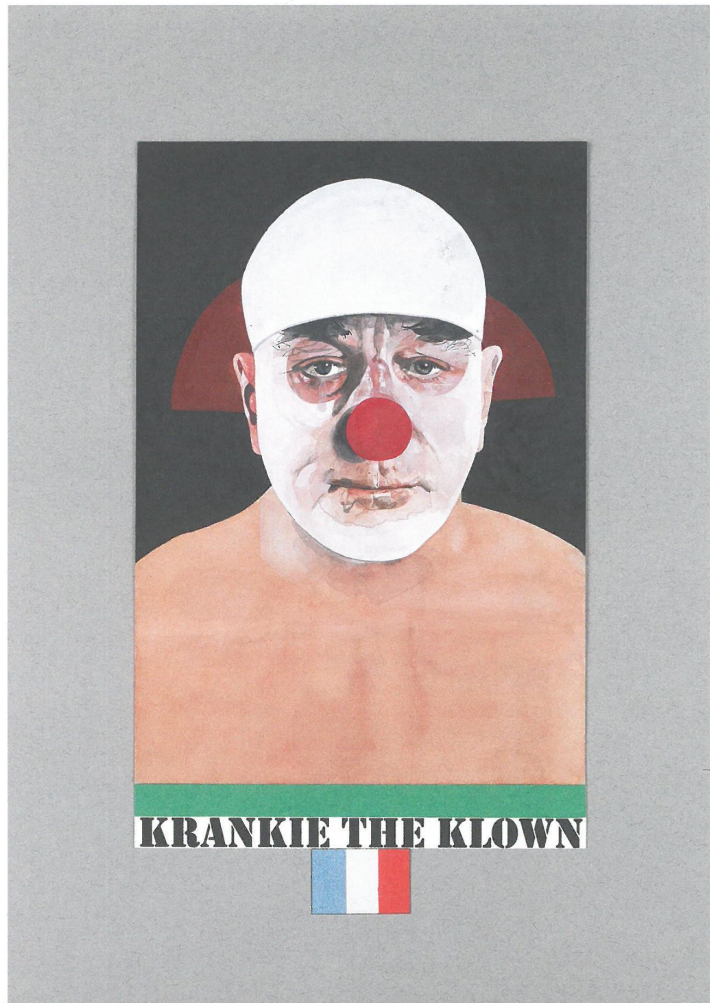
*Tattooed Man 4*,  
2015, watercolour,  
16 × 11.4cm





character would arrive in town, and no one had ever seen anything like it: blue hair, his fingernails painted, camping it up like mad at a time when that kind of thing was completely disallowed.' A pause. 'Well, Dartford had one gay man, but he was a bit less flamboyant. It was, you see, a different time. There was another group of models I remember, an Italian family who used to come with all their own costumes, so they could be whatever you wanted them to be: ancient Greeks, gypsies, American Indians. That kind of thing all ended in the Fifties, and it's funny to think of it now.'

It was a portrait of his sister that helped win him his place at the Royal College of Art. 'In the painting school at the RCA, you had to spend a lot of the first year in the life room,' he says. 'But all the portraits I did - a whole year's work - were lost when I left them in my locker during the holiday.' In the late 1950s and early 1960s, after he had graduated (in 1956) and the world began to shift, post-war sepia shading into full colour, Blake became well known as a pop artist. His paintings, which often involved collage, now encompassed elements of both contemporary advertising and the culture of his childhood (as he has noted, even as he discovered Paul Nash and the Pre-Raphaelites during his time at Gravesend, he still lived in a tiny cottage with his mother, and spent his free time going to wrestling matches and speedway races, just as he had always done). Represented by the dealer Robert Fraser, aka Groovy Bob, he found himself at the very heart of Swinging London (Fraser was close to the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, and his gallery showed work by Richard Hamilton, Gilbert & George, Andy Warhol and many others). But he never lost faith in the portrait as an art form. In 1961, after all, he made *Self-Portrait with Badges*, an image of the 29-year-old artist in a denim jacket and sneakers, an Elvis Presley fan magazine in his hand. It won him a junior John Moores prize, and is now in the Tate collection.



*Sadista*, 2015,  
oil on board,  
26.7 × 21.7cm

*Krankie The Clown*,  
2015, watercolour on  
paper, 41.9 × 29.2cm

Which portrait painters does he admire?

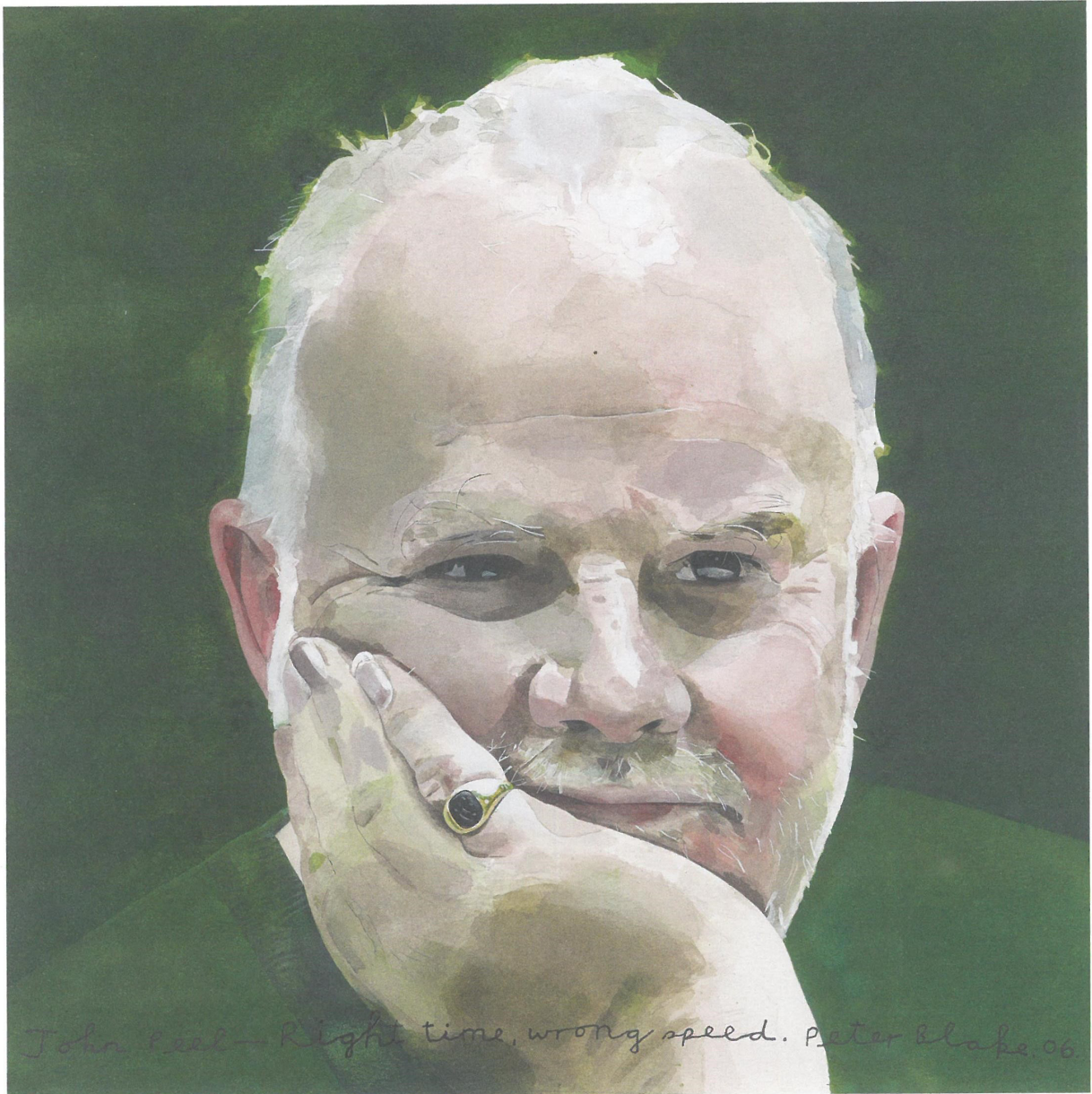
He rattles off a long list. 'Van Eyck, Velázquez, Rembrandt, Vermeer... Holbein, of course. Then Sickert. After that, it gets slightly looser. Stanley Spencer, and those early Freud self-portraits. I do like those: he paints eyes better than anyone. I admire Francis Bacon as a painter, but not as a portraitist. I once wrote a review [of Bacon's work] saying that if only he'd stop mucking about and concentrate, leave out the Letraset and the red arrows and all that, he would have been able to do extraordinary portraits. Soon afterwards, he stormed up to me at a party. I thought he was going to hit me, but in fact he was relatively friendly. He seemed to have taken it on board. Hockney, of course, gets an amazing likeness. His drawing of Mark Glazebrook [the dealer and curator]: the curve of his top lip is just right.'

Now 83, Blake clearly has an undiminished appetite for work: each year brings an exciting »



Previous pages,  
*Elvis Shrine: Portraits,*  
*Landscapes or*  
*Still Lives?*, 1995–2015

John Peel, 2006,  
watercolour on paper,  
30.6 × 30.6cm



***'I did John Peel after he died. When his widow saw it, she burst into tears. It was the fingernails. They were exactly like his'***

*Crowd*, 2014,  
cigar boxes, wood  
and found objects

*Ian Dury*, 2001,  
acrylic on board,  
30.5 × 25.4cm

new show, an extraordinary new commission (he recently produced a design for a Mersey ferry inspired by the 'dazzle' patterns used on vessels during the First World War). Is he surprised by the way his hunger for work endures? 'I'm not surprised by the appetite because I've always loved to work, but I am surprised I have the energy. I do get tired, though I've stopped drinking and that has given me extra time. I used to drink a lot, and I would sometimes lose a couple of days. My big physical problem is that I need a couple of knee replacements, but that doesn't affect work because I've never stood to work. When I'm feeling well, I work well.' Is there anyone whose portrait he still longs to paint? 'There are a few sportspeople, I suppose. And I'd like to have a go at Kate Moss. She has such an extraordinary face. It sounds odd to say, but she's not really a great beauty. That's why she photographs so well, and it would be very interesting to have a go at capturing that in paint.' Not that all commissions, he would like to point out, are happily accepted. One potential client, who shall remain nameless, invited Blake and



his wife for a drink after supper, only for his guests to ignore poor Chrissy, marooned at one end of the table. That man's portrait never became a reality.

In any case, at the moment he is at work on a small-scale project inspired by a line from Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*: 'from one of the finger-bowls a primrose grows' (Blake once illustrated Thomas's poem, which he loves). The idea is that he will reproduce the same primrose in every possible medium: pencil, etching, oil, acrylic, scraperboard, embroidery, stop-frame film, and on and on. Would I like to see? He gets up, moves slowly but not too effortfully to a small desk by the window and, in the manner of a boy removing a treasured model train from a toy chest, opens a box file to reveal this work-in-progress. The initial pictures, not much wider than the palm of his hand, are small, delicate and extremely beautiful. Each one has a different mood, a different tone, and the most pared-down of them – the scratched white lines of the scraperboard image being the most obvious example – verge pleasingly on abstraction. 'I think they would make a lovely book, don't you?' he asks, shuffling the images in his hands. He looks up at me expectantly, the autumn sunshine bouncing off the lenses of his spectacles like a blessing. ♦

*'Peter Blake: Portraits and People'* is at Waddington Custot Galleries, London W1, from 24 November to 30 January 2016. [www.waddingtoncustot.com](http://www.waddingtoncustot.com)