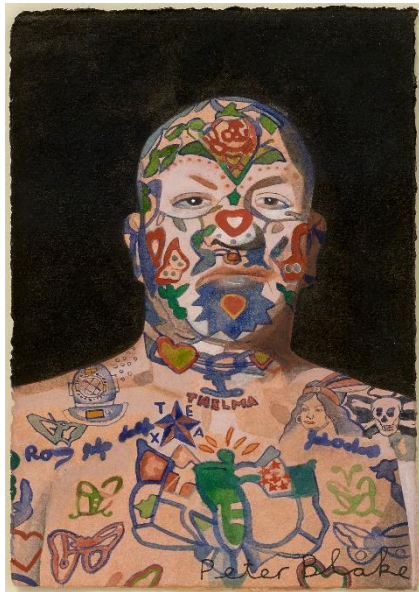


Peter Blake: Portraits and People

24 November 2015 – 30 January 2016



Peter Blake, *Tattooed Man 5*, 2015, watercolour. Courtesy the artist and Waddington Custot Galleries.



Peter Blake, *Ian Dury*, 2001, acrylic on board. Courtesy the artist and Waddington Custot Galleries.

Waddington Custot Galleries are delighted to present *Peter Blake: Portraits and People*, the first exhibition to focus on the artist's portraiture. Selected by the artist, the exhibition will feature a significant group of new works alongside earlier paintings which have never been previously exhibited, continuing his series of *Wrestlers* and *Circus Acts* as well as introducing past portrait commissions of notable friends and patrons. Blake's choices reveal his enduring fascination with people, their personalities and eccentricities.

The exhibition will offer a unique opportunity to view commissioned portraits and gifts which have hung in private collections and rarely been seen. On show for the first time is a portrait of one of Blake's closest friends, and his dealer since the sixties, Leslie Waddington, the fashion designer Paul Smith and two portraits of actor Helen Mirren, who sat for Blake in the early eighties whilst starring in *Cleopatra*. Other works loaned from private collections include a portrait of the musician Ian Dury, who was taught by the artist in the sixties and a double portrait of the late British art collector Simon Sainsbury and his partner Stewart Grimshaw.

Portraiture has been prevalent in Blake's work since the late 1940s. From his images of pop culture icons such as Marilyn Monroe, Brigitte Bardot and Elvis Presley to his imagined characters, the artist has always explored a diverse array of individuals. An extension of Blake's fascination with America and all things Rock 'n' Roll, the centrepiece of this exhibition will be the three-panelled *Elvis Shrine: Portraits, Landscapes or Still Lifes?* that Blake has been working on for over twenty years. Iconic in scale, the work pushes portraiture into a format associated with religious altarpieces. Featuring Elvis busts, portraits and memorabilia, the work was inspired by the common question asked by taxi drivers on discovering Blake is an artist – "What do you paint? Landscapes, portraits or still lifes?"

Blake has given each panel one of these themes; the images surrounding the Elvis paraphernalia falling into its ascribed category. As well as portraiture, the work extends into Blake's obsession with collecting and fandom.

Blake continues his exploration of wrestlers; a major motif which has appeared in many guises throughout his career. A wrestling fan from childhood, Blake says, "*I loved it immediately. I loved the theatre, the fantasy and the idea of good versus evil.*"¹ He began his first series of wrestlers in 1961 using publicity shots from sports magazines and giving each an invented, heroic personal history. The watercolours in *Portraits and People* introduce ten new characters to the theatre and spectacle of wrestling, including *Krankie the Clown* (2015) and *Madam X* (2015). Blake's portraits of female wrestlers nod to his earlier images of pin-up girls and Hollywood sex symbols. A set of ten oil paintings focus solely on female wrestlers; alluring in their beauty but still with a toughness and strength that pushes traditional gender boundaries.

Blake will also present a series of small, colourful watercolours depicting the faces and torsos of heavily inked men and women. Their individual body art, intricately rendered, is again part of a recurring theme in Blake's oeuvre: the circus, the fairground and the side-show attraction. The skins of these imagined characters have become canvases in themselves – one figure has an image of the Crucifixion emblazoned on his chest, whilst a tattooed woman has the names of the British Princes, William and Harry, etched on each breast. Another's complex facial tattoos cover the entirety of his face, echoing the masks in Blake's wrestling portraits.

Peter Blake: Portraits and People will be accompanied by an exhibition catalogue with an essay by Marco Livingstone.

Notes to Editors

About Peter Blake

Sir Peter Blake (b. 1932, Dartford, Kent) is a British painter, sculptor, draughtsman and printmaker. He is known as one of the leading figures of British Pop art. He lives and works in London.

Peter Blake studied at Gravesend School of Art before being accepted into the Royal College of Art, London (graduating in 1956), where many of the key British Pop artists, including David Hockney, R. B. Kitaj, Joe Tilson, Allen Jones, Peter Phillips and Derek Boshier, also studied.

After completing his National Service, he received the Leverhulme Research Award to study popular art whilst travelling throughout Europe. Blake's first one-man exhibition was held in 1962 at the Portal Gallery; solo shows followed at the Robert Fraser Gallery (1965) and at Leslie Waddington Prints (1969). Since the early 1970s his work has been exhibited regularly in one-man shows throughout the world, including the Nishimura Gallery, Tokyo (1988) and the Govinda Gallery, Washington D.C. (1992).

His first retrospective exhibition was held as early as 1969 at the City Art Gallery, Bristol. Subsequent retrospectives were held in 1973 at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, touring to Hamburg and Brussels and at the Tate Gallery in 1983. In 1994 he was made the Third Associate Artist of the National Gallery, London. Peter Blake was elected a member of the Royal Academy in 1981, and was knighted in 2002. A major monograph written by Marco Livingstone, *Peter Blake: One Man Show*,

¹ Peter Blake, quoted in Natalie Rudd, *Peter Blake*, Tate Publishing, London, 2003, pp.88

was published in 2009 by Lund Humphries. In 2007 Tate Liverpool held a major retrospective of Peter Blake's work which toured to Museo de Bellas Artes, Bilbao, Spain, in 2008.

Exhibition Details

Title: *Peter Blake: Portraits and People*
Address: Waddington Custot Galleries, 11 Cork Street, London W1S 3LT
Telephone: +44 (0)20 7851 2200
Website: www.waddingtoncustot.com
Dates: 24 November 2015 – 30 January 2016
Private View: Monday 23 November 2015, 6-8 pm
Opening Hours: Monday to Friday, 10am to 6pm, Saturday 10am to 1.30pm
Admission: Free
Travel: Piccadilly, Green Park or Bond Street Tube Station
Twitter: [@WCG_LONDON](https://twitter.com/WCG_LONDON)
Facebook: [Waddington-Custot-Galleries](https://www.facebook.com/Waddington-Custot-Galleries)
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