

**Frieze:** 'Peter Peri, Microcosmic particulars and macrocosmic leaps', by Dan Fox, October 2005

Look closely at Peter Peri's drawings and a multitude of tendrils shimmer and writhe in tiny capillary movements. Against unbleached paper – the texture of pumice stone – each hairline bulks out into an undulating graphic wormery that tickles the eyes. Back away, and elementary shapes begin to constitute themselves – cancerous tumours, rectilinear slabs, or the occasional graceful arc redolent of an architectural detail. Some of these follicle stylings amass themselves into more readily identifiable representations; an exotic looking headrest, say, or an ornate ceremonial religious prop. These forms are positioned awkwardly on the page, like cress seeds sown on damp tissue, left free to grow. So fibrous are these drawings that I almost feel the urge to shave them. And such a peculiar choice of imagery – Roman Catholic reliquaries, ethnographic trophies, sleek Modernist graphics.

The word that springs to mind looking at these images is holistic – not a particularly fashionable one to use in art criticism, with its echoes of New Age marketing or the kinds of artists who still think it's worthwhile pursuing quasi-religious gigantism. Yet the idea of holism – put snapily by the *Penguin Dictionary of Modern Thought* as 'the thesis that wholes, or some wholes, are more than the sums of their parts in the sense that the wholes in questions have characteristics that cannot be explained in terms of the properties and relations to one another of their constituents' – seems apt in Peri's case. On a purely formal level (if there is such a thing) they oscillate between microscopic and macroscopic levels, old-fashioned

studies in opticality. By extension, Peri zooms from microcosmic particulars to macrocosmic leaps of imagination, asking how we allow ourselves to invest illusory belief in mute images and objects. The less abstract choices of subject matter suggest that the artist is interested not just in an aesthetic holism, but one that is metaphysical (objects of religious devotion), scientific (strange biological forms, titles alluding to complex muscular movements, to the idea that parts of an organism are not isolable from the corporeal whole), and political. Peri has a direct family connection to early European Modernism: his grandfather was Laszlo Peri, an Hungarian émigré to Britain who was involved in Constructivism before turning later in his life to more figurative Socialist Realist work (which at the time was championed by none other than Britain's infamous art historian turned Russian spy, Anthony Blunt).

The younger Peri's paintings bear witness to his grandfather's bold graphic brand of Eastern European Modernism, and the utopian promise inherent in its more avant-garde manifestations (also implicit in the later figurative didactics of Socialist Realism). In *Dutch* (2005), for instance, three blue spheres hang in mutual orbit against infinite blackness. Beneath this suspended triumvirate are splayed intersecting white paths;

a kind of grid referencing in deep space. Arcs of yellow light spring through the space between grid and spheres like synaptic messages sparking across a brain. The painting exists at the opposite end of the spectrum to Peri's drawings, yet seen alongside works such as *Monstrance* (2003) and *Monstrance 2* (2005) you could imagine them as abstractions of grand models of physics, of planetary alignments; somehow being as much about early 20th-century art's relationship to esoteric spiritual belief systems such as Theosophy as to science or canonical Modernism. The drawings of monstrances (the consecrated vessel used in the Catholic church to display holy relics) depict objects bejewelled beyond basic form, encrusted in the décor of wealth, privilege and Papal orthodoxy. Status radiates from their core; powerfully representing the value imbued in a vessel that carries the Host, an object that can enable spiritual betterment just by sheer physical proximity. As the original definition of the word states, a 'monstrance' is intended to be a demonstration, a proof.

The detailed intensity of mark-making in Peri's work emphasize the varieties of form an object can take. Their curiously hirsute character suggest that these forms are unstable at a sub-atomic level, subject to change, to metamorphosing into something beyond the sum of their parts. Mark-making is both their subject and object: an enquiry into how something constitutes itself in our eyes. Not merely exercises in synaptic messaging between eye and brain, but, like the monstrances or the quasi-theosophical abstractions, they question why we believe in objects or images as esoteric vessels for transubstantiation, be it political or religious. Peri works in a graphic language of mutual dependency, a visual ecology built from bacterial marks and history's dust.

