

Peter Peri

Often when an artist talks about the work of another, particularly of a historical figure, he is speaking about both that artist and himself. Referring to Bosch and Munch, Peter Peri has spoken of a circle in a painting “that functions like an eye ... so you are in a continual circular movement – looking through the hole to see your own gaze returned, almost as if the artist haunts the picture from all of its apertures.”<sup>25</sup> In reference to Dürer’s *Hare*, Peri raises the idea of images that are “as much a product of repulsion as fascination.”<sup>26</sup> He could, in both instances, be discussing his own paintings. He employs a recurring motif of spheres; orbiting in their black grounds like so many planets or moons, they can also be thought of as eye-like apertures or, when enlarged, as heads. *Last Family* (2007), with four spheres, three in a row and one above, which could be an orange sun in almost total eclipse or nearly burnt-out, is identified by Peri as “a family of skeletons after humans have been wiped out.”<sup>27</sup> The surface of *Projection 6* (2004), as in much of Peri’s work, is scarred and distressed, with scratched green/blue bands that have an iridescence like shafts of metallic light in a night sky. But the color, while seductive, appears infected. The paintings at times look like they endured some sort of apocalyptic meltdown. There is a visceral, gnarly quality to his surface, as if you could feel and smell viscous tar, an oily ooze, sticky and wet, wafting over a bad horror or science-fiction film. His painting *The Call* (2005) comes from H.P. Lovecraft’s 1926 story “The Call of Cthulhu,” which ends, Peri says, in “a monstrous, unfathomable fourth-dimensional city.”<sup>28</sup> The disorientation of space, in fact, is characteristic of his work. Because the black grounds, which might represent deep space, are subject to his physical handling of the surface, Peri in effect delimits the infinite. Still, there is a silence to these paintings, as well as a sense of disquiet – something anxious or troubled about them that gives the work a melancholic or morbid mood, or evokes the feeling of impending dread. The space in *Man with Bad Intentions* (2008) – a web of tightly interlaced diagonal bands, one of which shifts inexplicably – registers as conflicted, impenetrable, and potentially about to snap. Its title suggests a portrait of just such a person.

In the skewed geometry of paintings such as *Fat Man*, *New Man*, and *Telephone Talker* (all 2008), with their tilted and overlapping planes and subtly glowing highlights of blue, orange, and white, it’s clear to see how Peri composes a picture within the interaction of structure and materials. Starting with gloss black household paint for the ground, he uses matte, gloss, and satin spray paint to differentiate tones of darkness, placing black against black, before further delineating the structure with colored poster and paint pens. Set against the black field, the lines have a heightened intensity. Although nothing is planned out beforehand, some of Peri’s paintings can be related to works by other artists, whether after the fact, intentionally, or not.

*The Melancholy of Departure* (2006) shares a title with a 1916 work by de Chirico. In the original we are confronted with a painting within a painting, a triangular canvas set on an easel with an image of a map. Peri’s painting, constructed of many intersecting lines or points of departure that form mostly triangular spaces, charts a topography that is scrambled and placeless. *Country 10* (2006) may refer to “the tenth country,” the location of the Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun*, which featured sets designed by Malevich, and to his cosmic abstraction, to his *Black Square* in particular, although Peri says the reference is unintentional. In this work, a sickly green spray-painted orb sits on top of a tilted black rectangle with an irregular black frame. We know these paintings are contemporary, and yet they feel as if they have somehow entered this moment through a warped black hole. When Peri is asked which artists are important for him, he mentions Pawel Filonov, Paul Klee, Ivan Kliun, Natalia Goncharova, and František Kupka, situating himself almost entirely in another time. To the list he adds a familial connection, his grandfather, László Péri, a Hungarian Constructivist who first showed in Berlin with Moholy-Nagy in the 1920s but later turned to social realism. Peri speaks of his grandfather’s work as “part of a mysterious code that was lost” and states that he wanted to revisit that code.<sup>29</sup> It’s here that Peri’s work can be seen as contemporary, because as he returns to what was a utopian ideal, he arrives in a dystopian landscape. “The subject of my work,” he says, “could be thought of as dissolution, or more precisely the fetishization of dissolution within Modernity.”<sup>30</sup> In his identification with the dissolute, we see the paintings as sites of decomposition, disintegration, and extinction – all of which promise a life after death.

- 1 *Projection 6* 2004  
acrylic and enamel on canvas  
40 x 40 in (101 x 101 cm)
- 2 *Telephone Talker* 2008  
mixed media on canvas  
54 x 48 in (137 x 122 cm)
- 3 *The Melancholy of Departure* 2006  
mixed media on canvas  
60 x 48 in (152 x 122 cm)