



6 April – 3 June 2007

Essay

Peter Peri's paintings and drawings almost seem to inhabit another era; an emerging modern world in the early decades of the last century that now seems more radical, more dangerous, more glamorous. Yet the powerful physical presence of Peri's densely worked and reworked black paintings and time-intensive drawings locates them very much in the 'here and now'. At first sight, the paintings and drawings seem to occupy opposite ends of visual language – the former suggesting the arrangement of form, colour and texture as an end in itself, and the graphic work apparently representing figurative objects or architectural locations. Yet the characteristic that connects these two ongoing bodies of work is a complex handling of space as the viewer is pulled into a seemingly infinite dimension, while at the same time pushed back to the surface of the paint's texture or the detail of pencil line – an action Dan Fox describes as oscillating between the 'microscopic and the macroscopic'.¹



Peter Peri
Kaisersaschern 2006
mixed media on canvas
Courtesy Greatford Estates Collection

In *The Melancholy of Departure* 2006, delicate coloured lines delineate triangular black forms that sit in front of, behind or hover alongside each other. The eye is kept moving around and back and forth between these interconnected geometric shapes, carried along by electric blue, green and pink lines, just as neon light pierces the darkness. As if created by a malfunctioning spider, the grid of this linear network seems to have its own logic while rigorously denying order or pattern. The title refers to a 1914 painting by Giorgio de Chirico, *Gare Montparnasse (The Melancholy of Departure)*, which features the symbolic departure of a steam train. It is a scene in which perspective has broken down, signalling a sense of loss but also liberating escape. In the arresting *Country 10* 2006, a loosely painted, pale green sphere,

suggestive of a frail sun or alien moon, is suspended in a roughly-drawn cube scratched out of the blackened ground of the canvas. Like *Country 10*, the fictional location for the radical opera *Victory over the Sun*, first performed in 1913 in St Petersburg with sets and costumes designed by the Russian artist Kasimir Malevich², Peri's painting evokes a bleak futuristic world in which darkness dominates.

Seeking to renew his relationship with figurative imagery, Peri took up drawing just a few years ago, and through drawing came back to painting, continuing to work on both at the same time. Peri comments, 'What does connect them is an equal inclination to disrupt the presence of the form – holes appear in surfaces and edges fade and unravel. There is a simultaneous desire to possess form intimately and to keep it remote, to deliberate obsessively or render it with spontaneity.'³ The series of drawings titled *The Metropolis and Mental Life* depicts tower-like sculptural forms that appear monumental but give no indication of scale. Drawn in graphite on Peri's trademark unbleached paper, these angular forms seem to be made up of organic life forms or tiny hairs that defiantly escape the imagined outlines of the object depicted.

On closer inspection, the falling shadows ignore perspectival logic and the sides of the structures sit at odds with each other, disrupting the spatial illusion. *Country of the Blind* 2006, portrays a three-dimensional structure made up of pyramids and trapezoids reminiscent of a modernist sculpture presented on a base plinth, or a futuristic city floating above the ground. Yet any literal reading breaks down as the eye is drawn towards the inwardly collapsing, murky space at the centre of the image. Peri's depictions of ornate flower arrangements seem an anomaly among the predominance of abstract and geometric imagery, yet they have their own internal and disorienting logic. *Le Langage des Fleurs* 2006, is made up of repetitive lines and marks, creating an effect almost like tapestry. Through the process of peering in closer, the image dissolves into intricate decorative patterning.

In a famous lecture to art students in 1959 Frank Stella described, '... the two problems in painting. One is to find out what painting is and the other is to find out how to make a painting.' He outlines how he approached the first by looking at and imitating other painters, technically, emotionally and intellectually immersing himself in their work. 'Fortunately,' Stella continues, 'I got tired of other peoples' paintings and began to make my own.'⁴ Like Stella, Peri has set about investigating the legacies of modernist movements, in particular Constructivism and Suprematism, as a way of finding his own personal set of pictorial codes. A statement by El Lissitzky offers an insight into the constant play or push and pull between spatial dimensions that defines Peri's own practice: 'Suprematism has swept away the illusion of three-dimensional space on a plane, replacing it with the ultimate illusion of *irrational* space with attributes of infinite extensibility of depth and foreground.'⁵ Peri describes his interest in these earlier artistic and political structures as 'an engagement with coded systems that manage to divorce themselves from the objective world, and in particular the discovery within those systems of the pursuit of a synthetic universe.'

Peri's paintings and drawings continually disrupt and disorient, compelling the viewer to keep looking, searching for a way to possess the work. The interdependent parts of each carefully constructed composition cannot be isolated, but are held in exquisitely balanced tension by the treatment of the image as one holistic composite. As Peri comments, 'I think this is one of the most powerful things you can get from looking at paintings, that sudden perception of things as utterly precarious, where everything is paradoxically held in place by an overwhelming fullness.'