

Peter Joyce

Digging Deep



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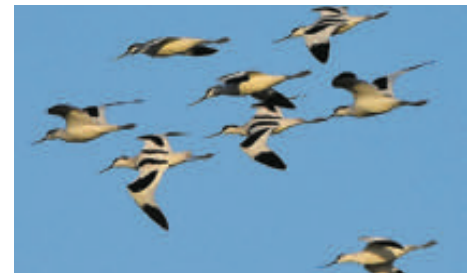
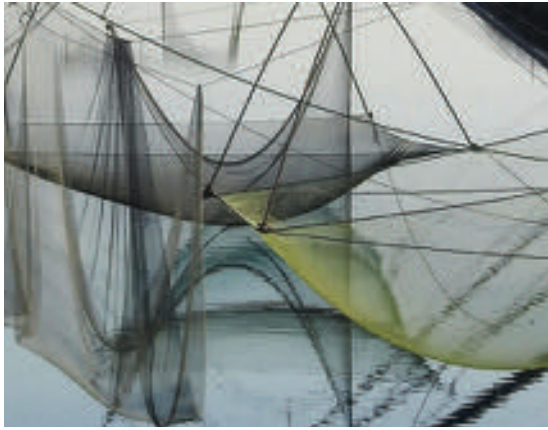
## Digging Deep

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It's only about two hours from London to Peter Joyce's home near Bouin in the marshlands of La Vendée, but it might be another world. Joyce first came to this region of Pays de la Loire on holiday and fell in love. Born in Dorset, and still with a house there he, and his wife Jo, moved permanently to this remote location more than a decade ago, seeking a place where he could work without interruption, as well as be close to nature. Though, initially finding it rather lonely and intimidating, Jo took a bit of persuading to make it their full time home.

As we drive from Nantes airport, the landscape becomes more and more deserted. Once covered by sea, the area is flat and open with huge vistas and expansive skies. There are few trees and even fewer people. You can drive for miles without seeing a living soul. Just the occasional farmer or fisherman, an odd cyclist or birdwatcher. The ever-changing light rolls in from the Atlantic, dramatic and mercurial. With its boundless horizons, it's a mysterious and existential place. A land time forgot.

And then there's the abundant wild life. I saw a couple of white egrets, a heron and a short-eared owl in the few days I was there. But I might also have seen kites and spoonbills or even storks at the right time of year. The extensive wetlands provide a pit stop for spring and autumn migrant birds travelling to and from Africa, and a winter quarter for many other species. Huge flocks of greylag and brent geese, black-tailed godwits and dunlin swirl in their hundreds of thousands between their high tide roosts and the food-rich mud-flats. If you're lucky you might catch sight of a brown hare leaping through the fields. Red deer and roe deer, as well as wild boar, are common. Beaver-like coypu can be glimpsed swimming in the creeks and waterways. While, in summer, asp vipers, the regions only venomous snake, bask on sunny banks.

It was the Romans who first built the dykes here, some 2000 years ago, and created the salt marshes. Benedictine monks then extended the network of pits and canals and turned the local production of sea salt into a thriving industry. The area remained the largest salt producer in Europe until the 18th century. With the decline in salt production the salt marshes were reclaimed for agricultural use. As some areas were below sea level, a network of canals (étiers)



and locks were put in place to send the salty water back out towards the sea and replace it with rain water. Now there are both salt water and fresh water marshes. A lattice of creeks and inlets is home to small boats, half-rotted wooden slipways and Chinese-style counterbalanced fishing nets. But mostly the land is left to its own devices, the rough, unkempt fields dotted with isolated cows and horses like children's farmyard toys.

So what has all this got to do with painting? Well everywhere you look there are sites to assault the eye of the visually sensitive. If you were to go up in a small biplane – as the Cornish landscape painter Peter Lanyon might have chosen to do – you'd discover an area patchworked with pools and salt pans. The colours are muted – soft greens and browns - with the occasional flash of blue. Wooden posts, bleached by the wind and tides, cast fishbone-shadows on the wet sands. Pink and blue bailer twine flaps on barbed wire fences, suggesting scribbles of bright paint set against the green turf. Telegraph poles (soon to be placed underground) provide vertical reference points – like thin pencil lines – against the flat horizon. While rusted mesh netting, left by oyster catchers, offers the visual grammar for a potential abstract painting. This is a landscape that feeds the aesthetic imagination. One well suited to the sensibilities of an abstract painter and a dedicated naturalist.

Peter and Jo's house is full of objects lovingly collected at brocante sales and on their walks. There's a zen-like precision to their displays of found objects, a minimalist respect for artefacts carefully set in space. Whilst their garden is home to a clutch of pet hens and their accompanying cockerels, as well as an anarchic gaggle of guinea fowl with whom Peter seems to have a uniquely special bond. But it's the studio, an old converted oyster shed, surrounded by disused basins where the molluscs were grown when brought up from the sea, that is the powerhouse. Empty for six years, it's here that Jo now makes Peter's frames in one half of the building, while he paints in the other.



Peter's Studio

Before going to France I'd not met Peter Joyce. From his work I'd expected someone older, not a man in his 50s. It's as if by choosing to live in this forgotten region that he's made a deliberate decision to turn his back on the razzmatazz of the urban artworld with its fashionable postmodern discourses and place himself squarely in the company of British Modern painters of an earlier generation, many of whom took themselves off to the, then, remote St. Ives looking for similar things to Peter: untamed landscape, peace to work and intense, changing light. Like Lanyon and Patrick Heron, Joyce alludes to both real and invented landscapes, bringing to his work a subtle sense of place and the sort of understanding that can only be achieved through total immersion and habitual looking.

Walking round his studio we discuss how he begins a painting. Although he takes copious photographs he never translates these literally. Rather they form part of a mental reference library. He





starts by laying marks and lines of paint on bare canvas. “Once you put two colours down in a painterly space, one stands in front of the other and you have a tension”, he explains. “Then I go through three weeks of nonsense while I try to avoid being seduced by those first marks. Often I hang large works on the bedroom wall – it’s the only wall big enough – and live with them for a few weeks while trying to feel what direction they should take. It’s then that I discover a point of departure and can dive back in. At the end of each day I photograph what I’ve done to chart a work’s process”.

Joyce is a painter of landscapes but they’re landscapes of the imagination, arrived at through perpetual looking, rather than direct representations of the actual world. The painter to whom he is closest is Prunella Clough. Her subtle translations of the everyday – the detritus and incidentals caught out of the corner of the eye –

are mirrored in Joyce’s work. Like hers, his colours are muted and rooted in nature. Shades and tones that might be seen on his frequent walks. The silvery greens of lichen on a gate. The ochre or verdigris of a rusty fence. Never simply decorative, they could be pigments dug straight from the earth. This chthonic connection explains his passion for collecting ceramics, themselves made from that most basic of elements, clay. He and Jo have a fine collection.

Looking was a habit formed early in his Dorset childhood. He describes it as something of an Enid Blyton existence, one where he spent a lot of time alone, making maps, looking at butterflies and insects. Later, at art school in Bournemouth, he moved from the design studios to study painting. It was, he says, as if someone had turned on a light. His first paintings were based on tight patterned grids. He didn’t, he admits, at the time, even know the significance of the grid within modernist painting. It simply allowed him a way to exert control over the canvas, provided a system he could then subvert with more expressive painting. He has, he says, never done the copying thing. But being expressive didn’t come naturally from a graphic design background. Like a child he had to counter the feeling that he needed to be neat, that he shouldn’t ‘go over the edges’. Then he discovered the American Abstract Expressionists and found the ambition and scale of their work jaw-dropping, though he never felt he had to emulate them. His own sensibility is more akin to painters such as Lanyon, Hilton and Heron. And his light is essentially northern, his colours English. There’s an air of nostalgia about his work. Something of the Festival of Britain and the wonderful Shell Guides that started in June 1934 with Betjeman’s Cornwall, and continued until 1984. His colours are reminiscent of those to be found in early John Pipers or Paul Nash. Eric Ravillious is another artist who comes to mind. Yet his work is never a pastiche, rather a revisiting and a reinvention.

The process of mapping, first explored as a young boy, is suggested in a number of Joyce’s adult paintings. It’s both a psychological and metaphorical device, as well as a way of attempting to describe the experience of being in the actual, physical landscape. Being a cartographer is to be an explorer in the unknown land of the creative imagination. In the final decade of the nineteenth century



Freud articulated the first ideas about the unconscious using words derived from topos (place), implying a sense both of location and investigation. Like Freud, Joyce has an interest in archaeology. The process of digging deep through ancient layers, of uncovering what is hidden, implies the search for new ways of seeing. Joyce's paintings are about quiet discoveries. A painting such as *Traverse* 2018, with its drawn white lines suggests a memory of the White Horse of Uffington or other ancient white horses incised into the English landscape. Many of his paintings feel as though they are searching for some atavistic historical essence.



In *Deep* 2018, a blue ribbon-like line connects 'vessels' or 'baskets' that might have been suggested by the many fishing nets seen locally in the small harbours and creeks when Joyce is out on his daily walks. There's the sense of something being plunged into hidden depths, yet also of being caught and contained. While in *Dimpsey* 2018 (a vernacular word from the southwest of England meaning dusk) there's an implied division between two states: the conscious and unconscious mind, emotion and reason, dark and light, even land and water. These are not landscapes that you can actually inhabit or visit but places discovered from trawling through a poetic imagination. In *Spoor* 2018 the edge of the collaged piece of hessian implies a division between wet and dry as we look down through the veils of paint.

In *Les Prés* 2018, a jut of what might be land is seen from above. Triangular and rectangular shapes overlap implying the history of alluvial layers and possible archaeological sites; long barrows hidden beneath fields. The work reveals both what we know about a landscape and what we don't know. What is hidden. Built up in layers and veils of colour it also maps the history of the painting's making. While *Wind Whistle* 2018 has many of the similar aerial qualities to *Les Prés*, its wedge-shaped image suggests an artefact found in some ancient burial mound: a bone, or stone-age implement.



In *Red Streamers* 2018 with its layers of transparent, scraped back paint, and *Grey Lines* 2018 there's a feeling of looking down from above (a quality that pays tribute to Peter Lanyon) into pools of water, of seeing tones and shapes that shift and blur with the current's movement. Nothing feels static. There's a sense that what we're looking at is fluid, constantly changing. Not so much a fixed statement but a momentary glimpse of something in flux. As Heraclitus said, when exploring ideas of time: it's not possible to step into the same river twice. Joyce's paintings capture a moment. A flash of sunlight on water, the wind rippling across the surface of a pond, grass swaying in the sand dunes. Moments that are fleeting, then gone.

In other paintings it's not so much physical locations or topographies that have inspired Joyce but times of day, changes in light and, what the poet Wordsworth called, "emotion recollected in tranquillity". In *Thicket*, 2018, the mood is sombre, like the night closing in. The swirling veil of darkness that appears to be covering the touches of yellow speaks of those twin points in the life of any painter or writer, doubt and depression. While *Blue Flash*, 2018 suggests not only a dramatic streak of lightening across a wide sky but a burst of emotional energy like a clash of cymbals or roll of drums. It is in direct counterpoint to the stillness and introversion of *Thicket*, the buoyant side of creativity. Never static there's a constant sense of movement in these works. Things shift and change like the weather in this open landscape. Looking at this series of paintings is like listening to the flow of a piece of music with its diminuendos and crescendos, its moments of stillness and electric dynamism.



*Thicket*  
acrylic and collage on board  
28 x 24cm

There's a nostalgia to these paintings but it's never mawkish or sentimental. Joyce's acute observation and eye for detail are the stuff of Proustian memories. The stone, the bit of wire, the wooden post act as catalysts into his creative imagination. He admits he would rather go back into the past than forward into the future. That when making a painting he discovers his place in the natural world, in the historic scheme of things. It's often only after a work is finished that he realises what it is about.



*Dimpsey*  
acrylic on wood panel  
40.5 x 44cm



*Blue Flash,*  
acrylic on board  
27 x 43cm

He works tremendously hard. Sometimes he'll start on a raw canvas. Other times on a gesso ground. Colour is applied randomly and the paint is always acrylic. If the marks become too representational he'll pull them back and scrape them down. He likes to work on different scales so that he's not repeating himself. The difference in the size of a canvas forces change, allows him to resist the recurrence of particular motifs. He is, he insists, not painting for anyone but himself, to resolve visual problems and needs to shut out the world in order to discover the paintings he wants to make. Nothing is pre-planned or preconceived.

I ask what he reads and he admits he never reads novels but rather art catalogues, stuff on wildlife and, more recently, books on architecture, a growing interest. He may or may not, he says, listen to music whilst working. Often alternative difficult stuff that breaks accepted formats.

Like the great poet of observation, Gerard Manly Hopkins, Joyce looks for the essential essence of things. What Hopkins called 'inscape'. As the poet-priest wrote in his great poem, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells...

The routine that Peter Joyce has created in these forgotten marshlands of France attempts to do just that. It is a singular, almost monastic existence, in a hectic, frenzied world. One of painting, walking, looking and just being. He and Jo have simplified life down to its essential components. The uniqueness of the physical world – both in its visual appearance and its inner essence - are the enduring subjects of Peter's work. The light and the dark. History and the transitory moment. The past and now.

**Sue Hubbard 2019**

Sue Hubbard is an award-winning poet, novelist and art critic. Her latest novel *Rainsongs* is published by Duckworth and Overlook, NY.  
[www.suehubbard.com](http://www.suehubbard.com)



1. *Yellow Forms*  
acrylic on board  
23 x 18cm



2. *Wedge*  
acrylic on board  
28 x 24cm



3. *Two Nets*  
acrylic on board  
24 x 28cm



4. *Les Prés*  
acrylic on board  
92 x 100cm



5. *Lac du Jaunay*  
acrylic on board  
63 x 130cm





6. *Ramble*  
acrylic on board  
30 x 38cm



7. *Orchard Entrance*  
acrylic on board  
30 x 38cm



8. *Spoor*  
acrylic on board  
59 x 64cm



9. *Wind Whistle*  
acrylic on board  
69 x 69cm



10. *Dust Devil*  
acrylic on board  
69 x 69cm



11. *Settlement*  
acrylic on board  
69 x 69cm





12. *Farm Tracks*  
acrylic on board  
40.5 x 44cm





13. *Tide Route*  
acrylic on canvas laid on to board  
63 x 104cm



14. *Evening Snorkel*  
acrylic and collage on paper  
77 x 112cm



15. *GR8*  
acrylic on canvas laid on to board  
63 x 130cm



16. *Tarifa*  
acrylic on board  
92 x 82cm



17. *Red Streamers*  
acrylic on board  
92 x 82cm





18. *October*  
acrylic on paper  
77 x 56cm





19. *Traverse*  
acrylic on board  
28 x 44cm



20. *Morning Chill*  
acrylic on board  
21 x 39.5cm



21. *Deep*  
acrylic on canvas laid on to board  
40.5 x 51cm



22. *Grey Lines*  
acrylic on canvas  
138 x 107cm



23. *Plage du Midi*  
acrylic on board  
26.5 x 61.5cm



24. *Reflected Red*  
acrylic on board  
24 x 28cm



25. *Centre Point*  
acrylic and collage on board  
25 x 20cm





26. *Terres Insolites*  
acrylic on canvas  
138 x 214cm



## BIOGRAPHY

1964	Born in Poole, Dorset
1980-1982	Bournemouth & Poole College of Art & Design
1982-1985	Stourbridge College of Technology & Art: BA Fine Art
1986-2004	Home and studio in Poole, Dorset
1990-2013	Represented by Anthony Hepworth Fine Art
1992	Birth of son, Brennan Joyce
1995-2002	Part time lecturer in Fine Art at Arts Institute, Bournemouth
2004-2007	Home and studio at La Croix Bussard, La Barre de Monts, France, retaining a home in Wimborne, Dorset
2007	Home and studio at Le Cerne du Moulin, La Coupelasse, Bouin, France
2010	Marries Jo Long
2013	Represented by Jenna Burlingham Fine Art

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1991	Anthony Hepworth Fine Art, Bath
1992	Anthony Hepworth Fine Art, Bath
1993	33 Mossop Street Gallery, London
1994	Clive Jennings Gallery, London
1995	Ainscough Gallery, Liverpool
1996	Russell-Cotes Art Gallery, Bournemouth

1997	Atrium Gallery, Bournemouth University
1998	The Arts Institute, Bournemouth
1998	Atrium Gallery, Bournemouth University
1999	White Gallery, Brighton
2000	Maltby Contemporary Art, Hampshire
2004	Red House Museum & Art Gallery, Christchurch
2005	Anthony Hepworth Fine Art, Bath
2005	Watermill Gallery, Aberfeldy
2006	Strover Gallery, Cambridge
2008	Anthony Hepworth Fine Art, Bath
2009	Strover Gallery, Cambridge
2009	Brick Walk Fine Art, Connecticut
2010	Samuel Robson Fine Art, Oakham
2011	Anthony Hepworth Fine Art, London
2012	Samuel Robson Fine Art, Oakham
2012	Jenna Burlingham Fine Art, Kingsclere
2013	Anthony Hepworth Fine Art, Bath
2014	Strover Gallery, Cambridge
2015	Jenna Burlingham Fine Art, London 'Moving South'
2017	Jenna Burlingham Fine Art, London 'Marks of Passage'
2019	Jenna Burlingham Fine Art, London 'Digging Deep'

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