Peter Doig, a Scottish painter who has lived in such disparate countries as Canada, England, Germany, and Trinidad, typically paints surreal, dreamlike landscapes and figures derived from various sources, including personal memory, photography, historical painting, and other media. Doig gained international prominence in 2007 when a painting of his was sold at auction by Sotheby’s for $11.3 million, a staggeringly large amount that greatly surpassed any price his (already well-respected) paintings had garnered theretofore. Since then, Doig has continued to command top-level prices: in the first half of 2017, he was the seventh-highest-selling postwar or contemporary artist in the world. These astronomical prices have unsurprisingly thrown Doig into broader conversations about the excesses of the art market.

These discussions will inevitably loom large when we think of Doig’s career. That they have tended to dominate the mainstream discourse on his work, however, is an injustice to the paintings themselves. As many—including Doig himself—have commented, we have had simply too little time (as with any contemporary artist) to effectively uncover the historical value that prices like his would suggest. Only time will be able to do so. In the meantime, the best we can do is look at the work presented to us, and appraise it as faithfully as we can.

It is these thoughts, as well as a basic familiarity with Doig’s work, that I brought with me to his latest exhibition at Michael Werner Gallery, which runs through November 18. Like Doig’s paintings, this exhibition is hard to pin down. Though certain motifs recur throughout, the different spaces within the larger gallery are quite different from one another. The exhibition seems to have been divided into three sections, each dedicated to a different formal idea or point of departure. This in itself is not jarring; much more difficult to fathom was the extreme difference in quality between works in the exhibition. Many are very good; a number are disappointingly poor.
Peter Doig, I do not sing because I am happy. I sing the song because it is about happiness. Embah, 2017, Oil on paper, vellum, and board, Michael Werner Gallery

The first painting one sees walking into Michael Werner Gallery is an excellent three-quarter-length portrait of Emheyo Bahabba, the late Trinidadian artist and studio-mate of Doig’s while they both worked in Port of Spain in Trinidad. The painting, *I do not sing because I am happy. I sing the song because it is about happiness. Embah* (2017), shows Bahabba (Embah is Doig’s affectionate nickname for the artist) wearing a radiant blue shirt, a brown jacket with red pinstripes, and a white cowboy hat. The man plucks a ukulele, seemingly mid-strum. Behind him is a tropical-looking hill underneath the night sky.

The work shows Doig at his painterly best. Set in the nighttime, the painting has an unnatural, even unearthly light. In the work’s few areas of untampered, full-bodied paint, such as the figure’s cyan polo shirt, light radiates forcefully. Elsewhere, Doig’s use of thin layers of turpentine-diluted paint achieves a translucent underburn and a complex surface. Doig depicts the pinstripes of Embah’s jacket by scraping away the top layer of dark brown paint, revealing underlayers of modulating color, from deep red at the shoulders to light blue and yellow near the hem. The same scraping trick was used to draw the ukulele strings, which echo the pattern of the pinstripes. The figure’s skin, on his face and hands, is alternatively translucent and opaque. A combination of diluted and scraped paint gives the figure sickly, almost disease-ridden flesh and a face that’s hard to look away from.

The gallery space to the right of this first painting contains quite a large number of works considering its relatively small size. The paintings in this room vary significantly in scale: its largest—*Red Man (Sings Calypso)* (2017)—hangs at 116 by 76 inches, and its smallest is not much larger than a sheet of printer paper. One wall is crowded with paintings hung in a salon-like fashion. *Red Man (Sings Calypso)* shows a muscular man facing the viewer in his speedo at the beach (Doig’s internationalism is perhaps in no case more obvious than by this fellow’s swimwear), hands clasped as if in choral singing posture underneath a matte black, rigidly painted structure that appears to be a sort of lifeguard observation tower. Behind him, closer to the incoming algae-green tide, a purple man wrestles a snake in the sand.
Though the picture carries a level of mytho-symbolic potential through the background figure’s resemblance of Laocoön’s struggle, the disjunction between this rearward disturbance and the serenity of the singing man in front suggests that rationalizing some symbolic “point,” though enticing, may not be the answer to this painting and others. Doig himself has been quoted as...
saying, “we don’t always have to know what our painting is about.” Resisting this temptation, I found it more interesting to look around the room and consider the number of other works that also contain this singing man, recycling his figure and pose in different compositions and color schemes. There are about eight smaller paintings in the room that use him; this variation on a theme put me in mind of the studio, in which the artist goes through the process of trying out different ideas in preparation for a culminating large painting. Of course, we can’t know if these paintings were made in such a chronology, and I found myself questioning the implied hierarchy of “finished piece” over “study.” Often, Doig’s smaller works felt more successful because of their experimental, not-fully-thought-through quality, which endows them with perhaps a greater sense of the mystery for which Doig seems to strive.
In another room, Doig plays with a recurring urban landscape and a color scheme that pervades each work. This setting, which uses a de Chirico–like upended perspective, generally consists of a yellow wall under a bright blue sky, and a road that leads off into space. The most interesting things going on in these paintings are often only faintly suggested in the far-away background—a man pushing a wheelchair, a couple “embracing,” etc. But in these paintings, more than elsewhere in the exhibition, what I might call Doig’s unpretentious experimentation with paint remains overly clumsy, which distracts from the larger “vision” of the imagined scene. Doig typically maintains an explicit tension between the drama of the scene and the undisguised “hand” of the
painter, but these works, such as Chopped Hands (2017) felt over-indulgent and ultimately flat.

The show’s largest painting, Two Trees (2017) takes up an entire wall in the gallery’s main space. The painting, at 94 by 140 inches, depicts three young black men arranged in a line parallel to the picture plane. Standing on an unseen shoreline against a white-hot sun just beginning to dip beneath the horizon, it is unclear what exactly they are doing. The leftmost figure wears a hockey helmet and gloves and holds a stick. The central figure, wearing an orange shirt, stands uncomfortably, holding what looks like a fishing pole and facing the rightmost man, who looks on, filming the other two with a video cassette recorder that is almost jarring in its historical specificity. The two titular trees, which sit between the three figures, are purple, with moss-like, deep-green growth running up their trunks and branches.

There’s a lot to look at in this painting, despite its apparently simple spatial construction. Returning to a Caribbean landscape reminiscent of so many of his most famous works, Doig builds subtle complexity. As with other works in the exhibition, Doig asks us to look deep into the painting’s space by including minute details off in the distance. In Two Trees, a tiny boat and a delicately depicted island draw the eye back and forth between the painting’s figures and horizon line. Whereas the men are largely built up in thick impastos, the background terrain and sea look almost stained into the canvas, and gradate delightfully between colorful hues. Because the feet of the figures, the trunk of the trees, and the shoreline are all cut off by the bottom edge of the canvas, their relative position to one another becomes studiously ambiguous.
This brings me to a final point I’d like to make. For all the painted figures in this exhibition, there are remarkably few feet. In many works, as in Two Trees, Doig selectively choses to place the figures such that their legs are cropped out of the canvas. These works are not composed in any traditional manner; rather, Doig lops them off awkwardly at the knees or shins. In others, like Red Man (Sings Calypso), Bather I (2017), or Spearfishing (2017), Doig simply neglects to render his figures’ ankles and feet, and often also leaves blank the ground upon which the figures would rationally stand. Of course, bare feet, like hands, are notoriously difficult to paint, and artists throughout history have devised with ways to avoid the task—but I’m willing to give Doig the benefit of the doubt here. Rather, his explicit rejection of the figure/ground relationship that ties figures to their surroundings seems to build on the sense of weightlessness, as well as unfamiliarity, that I believe Doig is trying to create.
1. “Peter Doig” opened at Michael Werner Gallery, New York, on September 16 and remains on view through November 18, 2017.

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