



Peter Kinley

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STILL, LIFE: The Chamber Music of Peter Kinley's Paintings

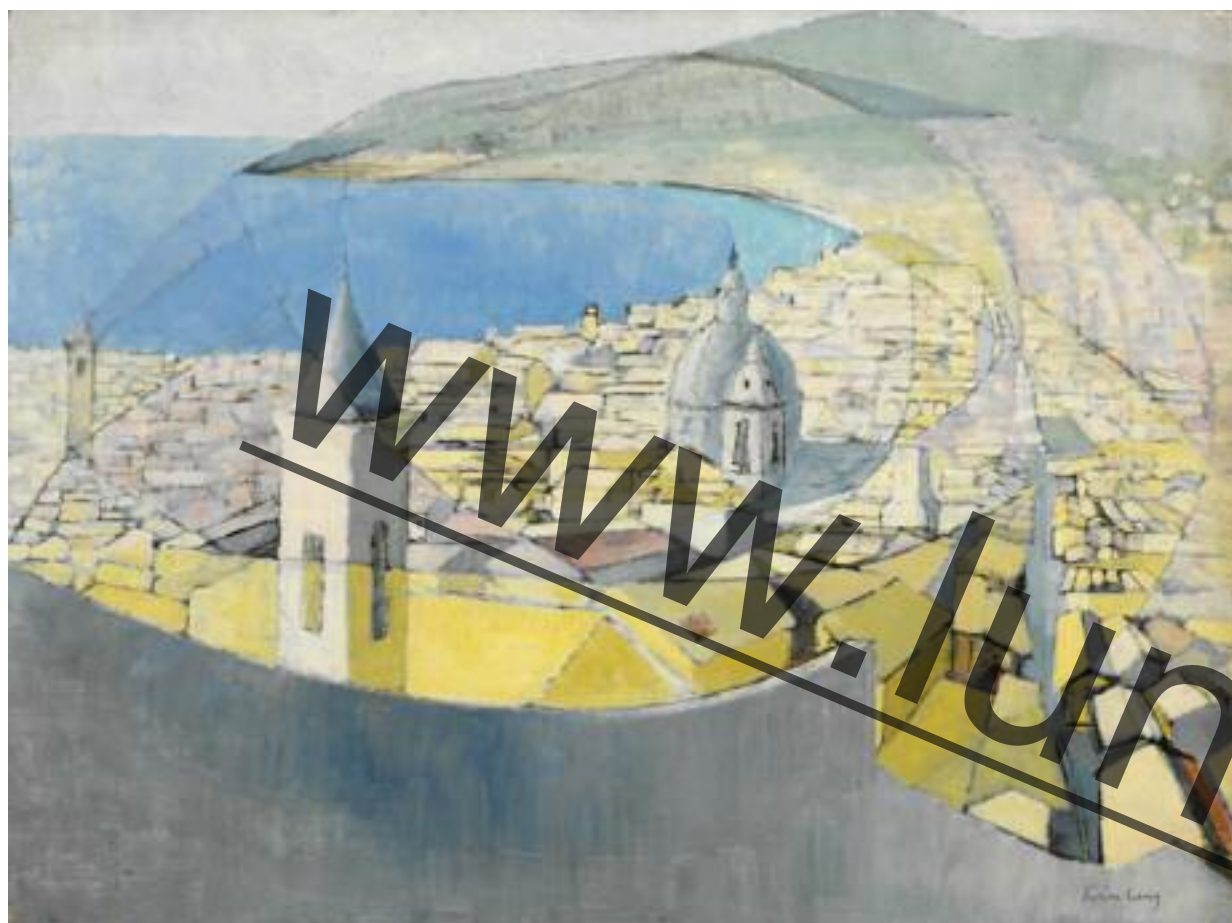
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Within Peter Kinley's deliberately restricted visual language, to which he remained consistently faithful, he discovered endlessly nuanced possibilities for a kind of pictorial chamber music: a form of picture-making in which the contribution of every element to the harmonious structure of the whole can always be experienced in isolation as well as in relationship to every other feature that completes each painting. Colour, texture, brush-mark, outline and motif are consistently enumerated with clarity and conviction, the role of each highlighted by their varied interaction from picture to picture. What one notices on studying even a random selection of his paintings is their surprising profusion of imagery, colour schemes and compositional solutions.

Kinley was a painter of endless invention and self-renewal but also of extraordinary patience, producing pictures marked by their serenity while calmly and subtly expanding on a range of themes and methods over a period of some 35 years up to his death from cancer in September 1988. Distancing himself by 1960 from artistic fashions and favouring timeless imagery conveyed in fresh layers of paint, he trod a solitary path that has made him difficult to place but that conversely has ensured for his art an aesthetic longevity. Confronted by his art, one has a sense that every painting is brand new, a heightened equivalent to lived and observed experience. Where the work of many of his peers has acquired a period flavour, Kinley's pictures at their best remain perpetually in the present moment. His way of working and his rigorous self-restraint, particularly in the work of his final 20 years, could easily have descended into a formula, but despite their reduction to basic elements the paintings always strike the viewer as explicitly rooted in visual observations and lived experience – and therefore as true.

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Standing Figure in Studio Interior,
1961
Oil on canvas
183 x 136.5 cm (72 x 53³/₄ in)



3
Nice, c. 1950
 Oil on board
 41 x 61 cm (16 1/4 x 24 in)



4
Landscape, 1954
 Oil on canvas
 35.5 x 51.2 cm (14 x 20 1/4 in)



5
Seascape, 1954
 Oil on canvas
 76 x 122 cm (29 7/8 x 48 in)

Finding a Voice

In a conversation with the art critic Norbert Lynton just before the staging of his retrospective in 1982 at the Museum of Modern Art Oxford, Peter Kinley spoke of his youthful enthusiasms for such European painters as František Kupka, Alberto Magnelli and Jacques Villon (brother of the Dadaist provocateur Marcel Duchamp). The fractured post-Cubist language developed by these and other painters of the first half of the twentieth century clearly helped shape the stylised interpretation of observed reality evident in such youthful paintings as *Nice* (c. 1950, Plate 3), painted on a visit to the Mediterranean city where his parents were then living and where Henri Matisse for many years had his studio. Clever and accomplished though this painting may be in its integration of land mass and urban architecture within a compositional scheme of ovoids and spirals, for Kinley such an intrinsically intellectual approach to picture-making was fated to become unsatisfactory very quickly. Later in his life he spoke of the distinction he made between painters and image-makers. He had no doubt that it was the former category in which he felt at home, and that it was therefore his intuitions and his physical handling of the medium, rather than any theory or system, in which he placed his trust.

The discovery of the work of the Russian-born École de Paris painter Nicolas de Staël (born 1914), through his solo exhibition at the Matthiesen Gallery in London in February 1952, was a godsend to Kinley, as it was to many other British painters of his generation, including his close friend Donald Hamilton Fraser. Wary of being swallowed up by the influence of Pablo Picasso, as had happened to so many others, and judging Picasso's pictorial vocabulary to be too personal to be taken on by anyone else with any prospect of success, Kinley saw in de Staël (see Plate 8) the possibilities for an abstraction derived from nature that prioritised colour, form and surface and that could be applied in a personal manner to any area of subject matter.

The most important lesson for Kinley of de Staël's art lay in its audacious stripping away of

Red Monkey, 1978
Oil on canvas
172.4 x 182 cm (67⁷/₈ x 71⁵/₈ in)



65
Study for Acrobat, 1978
Oil on canvas
61 x 76 cm (24 x 30 in)



66
Leaves, 1977-8
Oil on canvas
116.5 x 152 cm (45⁷/₈ x 59⁷/₈ in)

67
Banana Tree, 1978
Oil on canvas
91.4 x 101.6 cm (36 x 40 in)



It was on the trip with Hodgkin that Kinley had watched bathers and acrobats by the Jamuna river from the terrace of the Taj Mahal, an experience that again was to find form in a series of paintings, culminating in *Study for Acrobat* (1978, Plate 65) and the large *Acrobat* (1978). A figure effortlessly suspends himself from a slim bar in the form of a horizontal line that itself seems to hover weightlessly in thin air. A blissful state of balance and resolution is achieved through the defiance of gravity, creating a powerful visual metaphor of freedom, contentment and oneness with the world.

Banana Tree (1978, Plate 67), together with related works such as *Leaves* (1977-8, Plate 66), provides a further point of comparison with Howard Hodgkin, who used dyes on paper to paint his own series of *Indian Leaves* on a visit to Ahmedabad in 1978. Hodgkin's pictures, representing a variety of exotic trees and plant forms including lotuses and palm trees, were shown at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1982. (They were published in book form in the same year by Petersburg Press, with an essay by Bruce Chatwin, a close friend of Hodgkin with whom they had shared many conversations in Wiltshire.) Kinley's lone banana tree occupies much the same position as the standing figures in earlier paintings, and partly for this reason – but also because its trunk resembles a human torso – it can be experienced as a surrogate figure. Kinley's pictures feature many such stand-ins for solitary motifs placed in an empty or enclosed space, whether they be flowers and other living forms, monkeys and less obviously human-shaped animals, or even (in the works of Kinley's final decade) such inanimate objects as airplanes, submarines and battleships.

The loosely applied flesh-pink backdrop of *Banana Tree* is suggestive, as in certain other paintings, of the sultry heat and dense atmosphere of India or the tropics. Though the subject was prompted by the sight of actual banana trees, the sparseness with which the leaves and especially the plank-like trunk are delineated conveys more of an idea of such a plant form than a directly observed record of its appearance. It serves as an emblem signifying the thing rather than a portrait of it. Of course, such is also the case even with Kinley's representations of the human form.



Paintings of typical Wiltshire farmhouses and rolling countryside made in the mid-1970s, such as *Hills* (1973-4, Plate 75), *Three Houses* (1973, Plate 76), *Country House* (1974-5, Plate 77) and *Brown Hill* (1975, Plate 78), exude serenity in their reductive motifs, sensitive brushwork and soft colour schemes. It is in the majestic paintings conceived just as he was about to leave his second wife and return to London in 1981, however, that Kinley most cogently articulated these themes. *House with Two Gables* (1981, frontispiece) is one of several variations on a large country house owned by an Australian friend, Charles Ewart. The symmetrical outlines of the building suggest a perfect 'storybook' house as a child might conceive it, but the stark elimination even of such basic features as doors and windows renders it even more economically: it is no longer a particular person's property, but a 'house'. The biographical subtext, while important to the artist in anchoring his memories to a particular place associated with conviviality, thus becomes irrelevant to the viewer, for whom the picture instead serves as an emotive container for feelings of well-being, security and self-sufficiency. These are meditations on the concept of 'home', in specifically English terms, that are all the more compellingly stated because of the artist's own childhood memory of having been uprooted from his native soil.

75
Hills, 1973-4
Oil on canvas
70.5 x 114.3 cm (27³/₄ x 45 in)

76
Three Houses, 1973
Oil on canvas
71.1 x 114.2 cm (28 x 45 in)



77
Country House, 1974-5
Oil on canvas
76.2 x 114.3 cm (30 x 45 in)





PETER KINLEY 1926–88: Pictures from a Life

Catherine Kinley

Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?

Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind.

Who is riding so late through the windy night?

It is the father with his child.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Der Erlkönig* (1872)

*All my work so far has been the result of a specific
and personal experience of one kind or another.*

Peter Kinley, undated note (1980s)¹

Peter Kinley was born Peter Nikolaus Arthur Eduard Schwarz in Vienna on the 16 July 1926. His father, Arthur, was the son of Maximilian, an Austrian civil servant and lieutenant in the Imperial Reserve, and his wife Ernestine. The family was cultured and artistic. While we know little of Arthur's older brother, Julius, who left home early on, his elder sister, Paula, married a writer and his younger brother was the expressionist painter Fritz Schwarz-Waldegg (1889–1942). In addition, there were two younger girls, Peter's formidable aunts, Vilma, an actress, and Melanie. The boys both served in the Austrian army during the First World War, Fritz in Galicia and Italy and Arthur on the Eastern Front, where he was captured by the Russians on 10 December 1915. Thereafter, he was held prisoner in a Siberian forestry camp on Lake Baikal during the Russian civil war. His organisational skills so recommended him to his guards that he was invited to stay on when hostilities ceased. He declined and made his way back to Vienna by various means, dodging roadblocks, where anyone suspected of being bourgeois was summarily shot. Arthur was finally repatriated in 1920. Trained as a banker and company auditor before the war, he took up his profession again and, in 1920, became a bank director, working with the government.

On 28 November 1925 Arthur married Lydia Mathilde Schroeder, a protestant German, inscribing a photograph he had taken of her earlier that year in Salzburg, 'and so she arrived'. Lydia, who was fashionable, pretty and a talented dancer, was one of five sisters and three brothers, the children of Johannes, a printer, who had married Gottliebin Kienle from Wurttemberg in 1879. Then living in Dresden, the Schroeders were musical and some of the girls sat for the painter, Conrad Felixmüller. Contemporary photographs suggest that they were also addicted to amateur dramatics. One sister went on to marry a Swiss violinist and another married an artist from Schleswig-Holstein, Hans Toensfeldt. We get an early glimpse of Lydia in a Dresden newspaper article of around 1911, winning a prize in a dance competition

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The artist in his Hammersmith studio. London, 1981

early digs, there was a landlady straight out of Ealing Studios, perpetually in curlers and turban, a cigarette dangling from her over made-up mouth, in a revealing dressing gown. This lady was extremely suspicious of the young artist, who, rather than come home at a respectable hour, stayed out all night. He was duly evicted.

In the meantime, Monika Wolf, his Austrian cousin (who had come to Britain with her parents before the war), was renting a room in London and looking after her son. Also called Peter, he had been born in 1947. Kinley's predicament inspired sympathy. His German girlfriend, writing in April 1950, was 'sorry to hear your room is so bad', and in February 1951 his foster sister hoped 'these "digs" of yours are better than the last ones'. News of his situation reached his Viennese aunts who wrote to Monika, asking her to find accommodation for her cousin. In due course the young couple moved in together. It was a hand-to-mouth existence in the early days. The couple and Monika's little boy slept and ate in one room, where Peter also painted. They went on to marry in 1954 and eventually moved to a flat in Notting Hill Gate. Here, Kinley's work dominated the flat, remembered as a studio rather than a living space. His long struggle for a big enough space to work in had begun. Monika, who was the model for many of Kinley's early figure paintings, was assiduous in supporting his career and promoting his work, eventually becoming a well-known art dealer and curator.

There was a respite from London in the summer of 1950, when the art student joined his parents in the south of France and watched Picasso installing his sculpture, *L'Homme au Mouton*, 'in the square at Vallauris'. Fired with enthusiasm, Kinley's aunt apparently pushed him forward: 'my nephew is an artist', whereupon Picasso replied, 'comme tout le monde'. Humiliated and furious with his aunt, Peter was too embarrassed to take up the friendly and ameliorative invitation from Françoise Gilot, Picasso's lover, to join the artist and his helpers in the bar.

While still a student, Kinley exhibited five times in 1951. In *Young Contemporaries*, his first London exhibition, he was singled out as 'a risk taker', showing six paintings and two



116
Picasso installing
L'Homme au Mouton.
Vallauris, summer 1950



119
The artist holding a palette at the
Notting Hill studio. London, 1955



117
The artist (who had changed his surname to Kinley in 1950) with Monika's son, Peter. 1956



118
Monika and the artist. Photograph taken in 1954, the year they married.



120
The artist in his studio. Notting Hill, London, c.1955

sculptures, produced under much stress as he had many shows to work towards in a year when he was also taking his Intermediate examination.¹¹ Throughout his life, Kinley said that he should have been a sculptor and he is remembered in the early 1950s patiently carving little abstract works from plastic wood. By the end of 1951, he was showing, at Gimpel Fils, abstract paintings in yellow and grey and blue, described as, 'more alive than any of his neighbours, in comparison with which they appear ... relaxed and assured. This man of the world air is rare in British painting; can it be due to his years study abroad?'¹² He would continue to get favourable reviews, although as his father pointed out at the time: 'in conservative England there will be a long and hard struggle, until modern painting and sculpture are properly recognised'.¹³ Kinley later recalled:

For a short period, in the very early 50's when I was still a student, I experimented with abstract (non-figurative) work ... I would describe it more as somewhere between Mondrian and Kupka; it might be thought of as having developed out of Cubism – flat rectangular forms, but not primary colours. It was more formal exploration than personal experience. Pasmore interested me quite a lot in the early 50's particularly his 'wave' paintings.

Meanwhile, Kinley passed his Intermediate examination and was teased for having been worried about it. At the end of the summer he had a difficult family holiday in Vienna where financial worries intruded and his relatives rowed with one another. He was able to field his favourable London reviews and his family noticed that this was one of the rare times he smiled.

A close friend at the time was his contemporary at St Martin's, Donald Hamilton Fraser. In the heyday of the coffee bar, the young artists often met at the Kenya coffee house in Queensway, then full of émigré Polish chess players. Later, in the early 1960s, the two artists were more likely to be found at the Linden at Notting Hill, nearer to where they then both lived. They would discuss painting for hours, each a sounding board for the other, 'like talking to oneself'. They also exhibited at the same galleries and a mutual influence is evident in their work of the period. There were discoveries: Hamilton Fraser remembers that Kinley brought back some Egon Schiele reproductions from a trip to Vienna, a revelation to his friend. When not conversing, the young artists admired the bohemian beauties who swished by on their way to model for William Russell Flint at his studio on Campden Hill.

As Kinley rapidly gained success with a number of well-reviewed exhibitions, he became the centre of a group of artists who were trying to work in a similar way. Despite the importance of Picasso for many artists of his generation, he was then more drawn to the work of the Russian-French painter, Nicolas de Staël, whose 1952 exhibition at the Matthiesen Gallery in London, as Hamilton Fraser put it, 'burst upon us like a thunderbolt'. He remembered Kinley gesturing at the coffee machines in the Linden and saying, 'with de Staël's language one should be able to paint anything'. Much later Kinley observed that this was a time when he was 'seduced' by the painterly quality of de Staël's work: 'He seemed to offer the possibility of painting in an unsystematic way but without an idiosyncratic and highly personal style.'

When Gimpel asked Kinley to exhibit again Peter Cochrane, who later became Kinley's dealer, bought a painting. His early success also reached his Intelligence Corps boss from Düsseldorf, William Fedrick, now with the British Council, who contacted him in 1953: 'I can't doubt that you are – or rather were Peter Schwarz – in which case you probably remember me.'¹⁴ Unfortunately, Fedrick was to die of peritonitis a few months later.

Kinley had exhibited with Gimpel Fils three times when the gallery invited him to make his first one-man exhibition in 1954, the year after his graduation. He exhibited 27 paintings, many of them landscapes, and the show, while not a sell-out as described in the press, was extremely successful. Lawrence Alloway (1926–90) wrote: 'he has a sensual care for paint