

The wilderness years

Sue Allan learns how artist Peter Liddle, a classicist, creates order out of chaos in dramatic work which sells round the world

Appropriately for someone who paints mountains, Peter Liddle's house a few miles from Penrith sits on top of a hill, surrounded by grazing sheep, woods and fantastic views. The garden is full of his sculptures in stone and wood, and the ancient house a bohemian jumble of colour, interesting 'objets' and paintings. Upstairs in Peter's studio paintings are racked and stacked all around the walls, his easel and work table crammed into the corner beside the window which, surprisingly, has no view to speak of.

"Picasso used to have every window blocked out, with just a slit for the light to shine on what he was working on," says Peter.

"This is Storr," he says, pointing to the painting on the easel; a pinnacle viewed from a rocky foreground. "The original drawing was very different, as I never paint what I draw. I'm a classicist, and according to classicism, art is all about making order out of chaos. When I do a drawing, I'm already getting excited about lines and the curve of arabesques... But every damn thing in the painting, every brush stroke, has to be just right."

Peter's most recent work features mountains or the sea, scenes full of the passions of nature. "I'm a wilderness artist. I grew up in the wilderness and spend my life there. It's important to get frightened; I only get a good image when I'm pushed to the edge. I need a lot of hands-on experience with the thing I'm working on," he says, showing me a small sketch book filled with aqua pencil drawings. "This is what I've come back with after going up Gow Crag, where I camped out at 1,800ft up."

He's evidently pretty fit.

He nods: "Not bad for 68. If I'm not fit, I don't work."

"I started off in this business immediately after college and started hawking my work around the galleries in London. I lived in Soho, where I met every artist I wanted to: Francis Bacon, Lucien Freud – and Sheila Fell lived just around the corner. I built up a reputation and people would contact me wanting pictures; I was one of the first abstract painters to exhibit in the Royal Academy.

"I worked in London and then in Cornwall. I had a bloody good career and was about to have a retrospective exhibition in Chicago when my marriage fell apart, and so did I."

Peter's second wife, Sandra – to whom he has been married for more than 30 years – comes in just then, smiling, with welcome tea and biscuits as Peter continues.



Cumbrian artist Peter Liddle working in his studio at Whale Moor, near Penrith
Picture: Phil Rigby

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"So then I'm back in London trying to find a bloody studio, and doing lectures for the British Film Institute. I'm interested in film and interested in educating people."

He came to Cumbria – which he had visited previously – in about 1969, after writing to Lord Lonsdale to ask for a studio to rent. He was offered the old house at Whale Moor, near Askham, where he has been ever since.

As Peter shows me round, we come across his 'pebble pictures', sea shore scenes with a foreground of thousands of glowing pebbles.

"They used to take me six weeks," he says. "Each pebble has a complementary colour and an adjacent, so they shimmer in the heat. They were sold before I painted them and went all around the world. When I stopped doing them and started working with dancers the Piccadilly Gallery went mad. They said we've got 12 artists on our books, 11 of whom know what we like, do what we like and bring in what we like. You do what you like and bring us what you've done – and we don't like these. Are you going to carry on with them? I said 'Yes, until the seam's finished.' So that was that. I've never done what people want me to do."

Peter moved on from dancers to painting landscapes or, as he would say, using landscapes to make paintings.

"I'm still inspired by movement though," he says. "My mate says I'm the only landscape painter who can paint air."

Today Peter Liddle has no need of London galleries, with willing buyers all over the world. "And if I never had another exhibition in my life it would be fine by me."

■ To contact Peter email rtfar.t@tiscali.co.uk

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