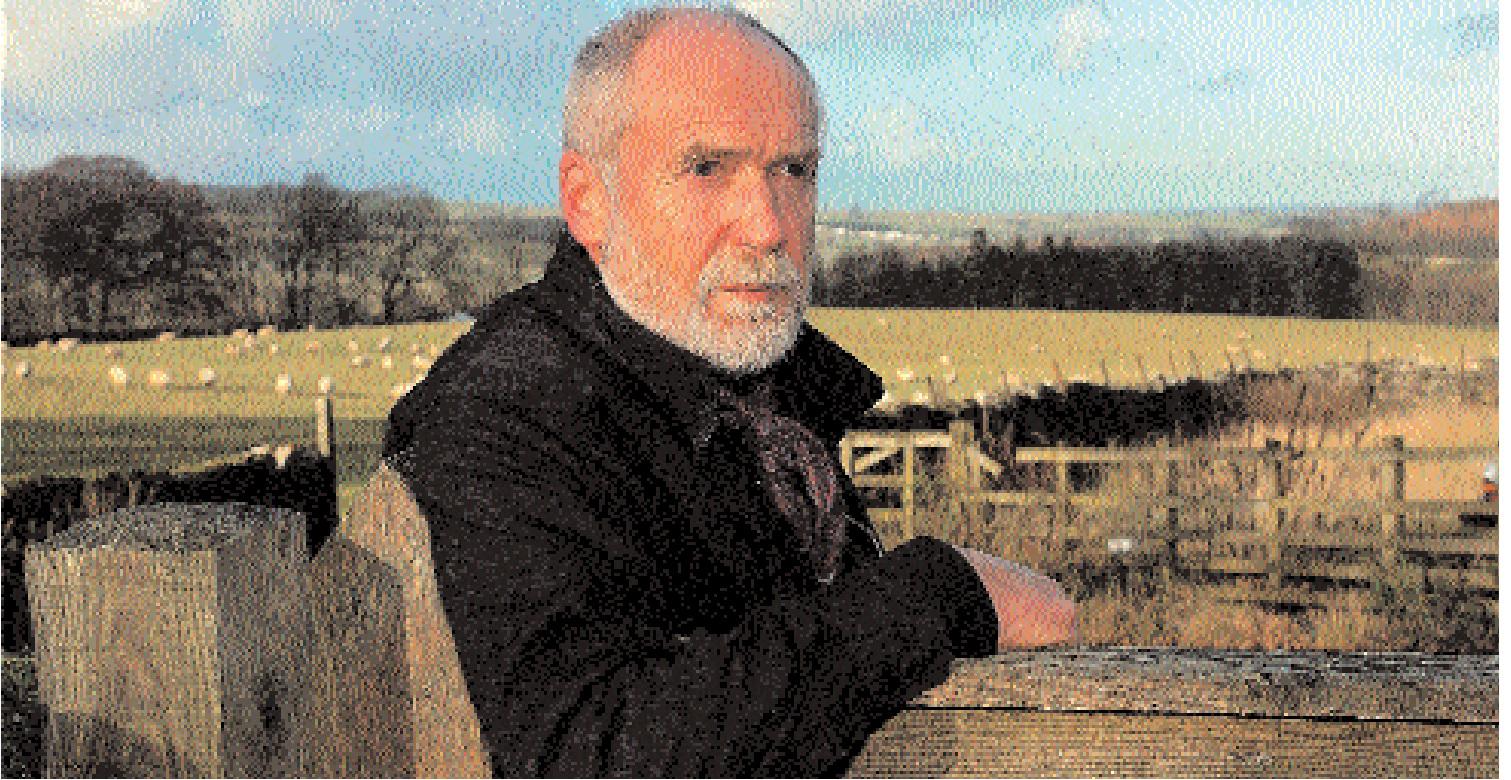


I've always lived life on the edge and I've never been afraid of falling off. That's what I try to put into the work. My best pictures come when I've put myself on the edge. So says the artist Peter Liddle in an interview with the writer Sarah Hall with whom he shares some familiar territory in the Eden Valley



ARTIST ON THE E

The Cumbrian artist Peter Liddle is something of an anomaly, something of a character, and definitely a brilliant painter. I have known these things about him for well over a decade since I initially saw and was profoundly inspired by his art. I went to school with both the Liddle children so we do go back a long way, and he was one of the local Dads who had to systematically ferry us rural kids forwards and backwards into Penrith for our less-than-salubrious nights out, before driving licenses were obtained by us brats and parental insurance premiums rocketed.

My first impressions of Peter were a little overwhelming - he's very, very tall, and has a colossal personality to match his height. He is not averse to cursing, politicking and bantering, all of which is accompanied by florid gestures while simultaneously rolling his own cigarettes. His sense of humour is boundless, and his laughter is booming and infectious.

But this is all pitted against an identity which clearly contains other extremes and depths - philosophy, gravitas, vision, and spirituality. All in all it's an awesome and potentially intimidating set of traits. It would be possible to write an entire biography on Peter the character, though at the age of only 63 it seems a bit premature. I suspect it would be a right rollocking good read too.

But forgive me, I don't really want to write that piece. Because here is a man who has dedicated

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LOUISE PORTER

his life to his craft, and that's a big thing to do, and certainly worth some attention. All too often it seems living artists (as with any socially outstanding or interesting figures), may suffer from the heightened celebration of their flamboyant and eccentric reputations and lives, invented or genuine, and an interest in what they eat for breakfast, rather than being paid the courtesy of focus on their art - that monstrous muse which often consumes an existence, and gambles with it.

So I hope here to concentrate on the latter, because it is still one fascinating way to come to know this man, and I'll leave his cornflakes undisturbed in their box with their plastic novelty item, if that's okay.

I first interviewed Peter ten years ago for a college project which I had to fight tooth and nail to get permission for - generally art departments like their students to concentrate on posthumous painters, ye olde six-foot-under-and-decaying masters, but I'd seen Peter's work in The Lion Gallery in Penrith, and something about it spoke to me.

It made me stretch my brain as well as appealing to the eye. Quite frankly I had a keen sense, even before being made privy to the illuminating insights of the artist himself, that here was a bloke, here was a scholar and an artistic broker, well

worth referring to while he was still upright and breathing, still cursing and smoking, still squeezing out his tubes of acrylic, loading up his brush and working.

So I put my foot down, I do that from time to time, it's no doubt highly frustrating for my superiors. And I stand by my original belligerence. The experience was in many ways a revelation. I was delighted that Peter agreed to be re-interviewed for a piece in this magazine. And I was intrigued to know what he had been up to since I had talked with him last. I'd seen him about a couple of times during visits home to say hello, always rushed, I usually am these days, and messages had been passed through the valley between us, in the way that messages are passed in valleys - of ten with a lot lost in translation. But artistically I felt I had lost touch with him and that was a shame. So I arranged an appointment, though appointment seems the wrong word, much too official.

Hobnob might be more appropriate, or hoo-down, or even hootenanny. Just as a decade before I was welcomed heartily into the warm rustic kitchen by his wife, Sandra, so this time I was made to feel most welcome with rosehip tea and an impressively towering display of biscuits. After quite a lot of yarning and catching up between us all, Peter took me upstairs into his arctic-cold studio, kindly lit a fire, and we began the interview. Well, that's not strictly true. I intended to begin the



EDGE

interview but to be honest the yarning went on for quite some time more - he is a fascinating man whose mind is engaged on many fronts and I can also be a bit of a gabber under the right circumstances. It's an unruly combination. And there was of course the matter of local gossip, the war in Iraq, religion, the best cities in the world, the year's strange weather, literature, jam, job seeker's allowance, drovers, and Ken Livingstone's underwear, all to discuss. You name it, and that subject probably got a look in to the conversation during the meeting. But at some point I actually remembered to switch on the Dictaphone and ask a few relevant questions. The answers were more than articulate.

Peter lives and works in a cottage in Whale, on the other side of my favourite, homespun, heritage-laden, ashes-to-be-scattered-off hill, Knipe Scar. For those of you unfamiliar with our scruffy manure-fragrant backwater, Whale and Knipe are positioned like little ballast hamlets against the mass of the Scar itself, not exactly stabilizing it, but definitely leaning-to. And for the soulfully, symbolically, sentimentally minded, including me I confess, this is not insignificant. I would like to think of us as kindred artistic spirits somehow, certainly we have similar and compulsive relationships with our trusty hummock, we commune with it, and I hope Peter will not object to me flattering myself by the



comparison.

He is extremely happy to call this place home, he speaks of it as a perpetual inspiration, he knows every inch of it, and has an intimate knowledge of much of the rest of the county also. Over the years he has had a very interesting way of capturing the locale in his creations. Some periods of his painting have heavily and specifically featured the Lake District landscape, others have rested from it - for example he focused for a time in the Nineties on figurative art which led to work and travel abroad, including Italy, with dance troupes - and yet more stages still have seen geography and geology used in a transitional way, as a bridge between two movements.

However, he does not describe himself as a landscape artist, but someone who has worked with the land. He has of late come back to concentrating on this scenery, exhibiting work on the theme of mountains (one of his most compelling and profound) at the Brewery Arts Centre in



Kendal last year, an exhibition which included both older work and newer pieces, ranging from 1974-2003. He admits that the territory itself has provided a sense of continuity in his craft and in his life, ever since he was brought up in it as a child.

Wherever I've gone, wherever the work has taken me, I always come back to the hills of home, he says.

But within this mode and medium of communication, this theme of the place, is something else, another realm of expression. If the artist is a conduit for his environment in some way, then the



environment depicted in his work is a conduit for another level of meaning. And it is perhaps this depth and symbolism which makes his work distinctly appealing and also challenging.

Even before entering the studio I knew to expect cerebral dexterity and an unabashed but modest defence of his portfolio, as well as the shockingly colourful language of a sailor (heavily censored for this article) and excellent tea. And I was not disappointed on any front. Throughout the interview Peter pulled out canvases from their snug storage spaces and placed them on an easel for me to look at, and for his verbal points to be illustrated.

He is both generous and uncompromising in the conveyance of his messages, and so he should be, they are worth hearing and seeing. He doesn't exhibit publicly very often, but when he does I implore you to stick those dates in your diary.

His scenic paintings of the Eighties and early Nineties have often been described as hard-edged. Peter credits the early influence of the Dutch masters for this technique. The images are stark, clean and clear, they have what can only be described as an austerity. They are simple in composition (here he notes the influence of Mark Rothko), and the colours often seem cold and crisp - blues, greys, greens. These tones seem especially fitting and suitable for the mood, climate and setting of the area.

There is a clarity to the work, but it is not that of a recorder or a camera. Accuracy is a term that should be used with caution when discussing art, tempered as it always is by subjectivity and personal creative agenda. Peter's work, even while it heightens certain principles and visuals - for example, the steeping of a ridge, the enhancing optical effect of a drop-off, the brightening of snow-light, the enaciating of rock - provides the most accurate painterly expressions of Cumbria I have yet come across. He's hit the nail on its northern head. There are no definitive portrayals of course, no more than there can be a quintessential and absolute New York novel, it's all about your favourite cup of tea. My own tea cup is permanently full in Peter's studio, and its content is exactly to my liking, in more ways than one.

I do not paint physical existence, I paint spiritual existence, Peter himself says, and perhaps this is what I find so captivating and genuine

about the work, because as Cumbrians and as cultural vessels we are not just filled up by a place through seeing it, we also sense it and know it and assimilate it via other means; we recognize it beyond its visual trappings, and when art describes those other aspects it borders on genius.

For his part in the Herbal, EG Tips or Tetley equation, Peter pours out a remarkable local infusion. He seems able to lay this place bare, restore it to its original form, its ancientness, its soul. Mountain ridges of ten seem prehistoric, or like dinosaur relics. Villas are empty, skeletal. The light is fresh, almost too purely born. It is an

In the past he has not shied away from selecting favourite local areas for artistic consideration - Wasdale, Derwent, Helvellyn - but he does revolutionise them. The perspectives and angles he chooses, and the depictions he creates, are of a filter from those to which the rose-coloured

arena before population. The emphasis is on the bones of nature, the rock, sky, water (mostly desolate tarns, seldom lakes with their connotations of civilisation), the elements at their most basic and minimal and uncultivated.

And yet, somehow, energy still floods from these pictures. The pieces possess an amazing luminosity not only because of the artist's technical style, but perhaps because of the quality of the landscape's autonomy. The artist describes the paintings as portraits and he does capture the spirit of the place as earnestly and fully as if he were painting portraits of expressive human faces.

Humans themselves and indeed other life forms are mostly banished from the composition, save for the suggestion of a form disguised within a cliff face or a pool of water, secondary, subsumed, or like figures in primitive mystical rock art.

I don't actually see them in the landscape, he says. Sometimes during a painting they can evolve, develop and I'll incorporate it.

The lone shepherd or walker of so many Lakeland paintings is eternally missing. The only truly discernible human presence is that of you, the viewer, alone. You are not accompanied in any way by sentimentality, sunsets, picturesque weather, idealised images, the usual suspects. It is a very primal, very feral arrangement. And here-in lies the difference and the importance of Peter Liddle's paintings.

He siphons out romanticism from a terrain historically saturated with it, and encourages a lot more participation and engagement from the onlooker than a lot of other Lakeland artists do.

I have never fallen into any school and that puts you in a difficult position, he told me. People look at the work on the landscape of this county and say, what are you up to Liddle?

Well, he's up to his own thing, as usual. He's not vulnerable to formula. He's not concerned with commerciality, mere aesthetic appeal and mass market. His canvas sizes, he tells me, are always dictated by the space in his car boot.

Peter's work is dually pro and anti-Cumbrian, its identity is fascinatingly bi-tonal. He has intimate knowledge and love of a landscape known and loved by many, and yet his creative expressions are uniquely original and independent in the face of heavy regional artistic dictation and perception.

I could even go so far as to say he explodes the centuries-old romantic myth set up by artists before him (and still prevailing) who created multiple renditions of Cumbrian splendour and beauty but did not challenge the viewer in any way via the subject matter, only roused them sentimentally, aesthetically and classically.

Peter Liddle is a man who likes to challenge.

It is not that he is a deliberate contrarian or maverick by any means, quite the opposite it seems, his proclivities genuinely propel him towards difficult and though-provoking levels. He says he is on a completely different wavelength. In the past he has not shied away from selecting

◀ favourite local areas for artistic consideration – Wasdale, Derwent, Helvellyn – but he does revolutionise them. The perspectives and angles he chooses, and the depictions he creates, are off kilter from those to which the rose-coloured eye has become conditioned and accustomed.

There are flat-stony summits, interruptive shadows, unmitigated rock features on fells behind which you suspect are the breathtaking views we all have come to expect.

To experience Peter's work is to consort with nature stripped of sensibility, devoid of human usury or government, nature at its wildest and most barren. Often the viewer is positioned right at the edge of a precipice, or almost there in the foreground, so that a visual invitation is implied – come on, step up, confront what is unsettling, do not be complacent.

I've given you a foot or two, do you look over, or step back and bugger off? Peter succinctly puts it. One of art's functions is to make people toss fear away . . . the majority don't want to know, they want to be secure. That's too bloody cosy, unreal.

There is an inescapable sense of personal engagement provided by his work, and a requisite environmental veneration, especially in the fell pieces. It is little wonder that Peter's most loyal customers are what he calls mountain people, those who can well appreciate what he is trying to communicate. He says he will sometimes have a conversation with a collector who might say to him: I've got this picture of yours of Scawfell, and there's nothing identifiable. But I can see some fantastic routes and I'm the only person who can climb them because I've got the picture. That picture might have come from a rock in my pocket, but in my mind was Scawfell. It's that old thing of seeing the world in a grain of sand.

As the aromatic rosehip brew continues to trickle into our cups and Peter throws another log onto the fire, I try to get to the core of his creativity.

It is about the wilderness, a Cumbria of its own natural volition, a Cumbria of a different integrity, slugging off the traditional romantic shackles. And it is about being placed on the edge. Peter says it himself.

I've always lived life on the edge and I've never been afraid of falling off. That's what I try to put into the work. My best pictures come when I've put myself on the edge.

It is a concept that is metaphorical. But it is also quite literal. Peter's paintings are a record of his own extreme relationship with the land. He says he finds a purity in the wilderness where he can hold communion with nature and gain strength. He has a favourite big rock on Knipe Scar that he lies on, meditatively. He walks, runs and bikes all over the county. He spends a lot of time alone on the fells and often visits the remotest of places, for days on end. He has a network of hearth sites that he visits and unearths when he needs them, and he earths them back up when he's done. He says in these locations there is hardly ever anyone else around.

Occasionally he will run into a shepherd who will say I've often seen your hearth and I know when you've been. In this way he feels a sense of belonging, and he has developed a natural ortho-

doxy, a religion of the region, and having practiced this in life, it then manifests itself in his work.

Of the genesis of this respectful doctrine he cites a near-drowning experience as a child, which converted him to a life of homage.

The doctor had to bring me round again, I actually died, he says. It was the most beautiful experience, visually it was absolutely phenomenal. The fact that nature had me, and then spewed me back out again, it was like being reborn. I got my spirituality in the landscape. Having that experience meant when I started looking at paintings I would find some could give me that spiritual feeling. As you get older you want to record that relationship with nature. The need to communicate something is really what art is about.

He pauses and then points to a picture of a fell on the easel.

Mountains can take you any time they want. I keep really wise. I respect that more than anything else that's physical. If I did in sheer excitement step back off some stupid ledge, he says with a wry smile, . . . on my descent, before I hit anything that hurt, I would think, well, this is better than the old folk's home!

I agree with his theory and say so, it's like a sailor going down with his ship, or like a woodsman carking it out in the middle of nowhere and being eaten by wolves. Appropriate to the last.

My head now on fire with ideas I feel decidedly less cold in the studio than I did earlier and I tell Peter there is no need for another log on the fire. I ask him what he has been working on lately? He says he has been braying rock up in the quarry on the back of the Scar and he takes me around the house and garden to see the results. His latest interest is sculpture and there are some beautiful

pieces, semi-abstract, and again possessing that aspect of complementing their natural state, so that a fluidity and an enhancement exists. Other pieces have been made from found objects, the local beck provides the artist with a variety of materials.

All kinds of stuff gets washed out of it after a storm, you wouldn't believe it, he says. He describes the process of sculpture as confronting stone, and says that he can tell if something lies within a formation, but that getting it out can be a canny operation. Sometimes you can see it, and then you take an axe at it and the bloody thing bounces off and you think, maybe I was wrong, this one is resisting. But you look again and still see it and then it is a question of lining up the molecules and seducing it out.

Once again I am made aware of a careful natural alliance, a treaty that exists between man and medium when it comes to Peter's work.

It is interesting to me that his relationship with the landscape has re-formed and taken him to another dimension, the third-dimension. He is also working with mixed media, painted backgrounds with moveable free forms set before them, such as a complementary juxtaposition of painted rock needles and pillars of actual rock.

This seems like such a unified period for the artist in so many ways, with such breadth and depth of expression, but conversely it also seems more concentrated than ever, a step closer in to



the land which he so respects and loves, for he now has actual portions of it between his hands. Peter has always had a thing about stone and rock, especially granite, which he believes is energy-giving. He says it never feels cold to him and it makes organic shapes which suit the work I do.

There is an inherent quality to the rock that he enjoys, . . . a timelessness, which has always been a total fascination of mine, my whole life.

I entitled my first dissertation on the artist Liberating the Landscape.

And, after ten years, I would not rename it now. I could go on all day talking with Peter about art, and life in general. But I am already behind schedule as usual. I thank Sandra for the tea and Peter for his company, and kiss them both goodbye, and I check my rear view mirror as I'm driving away. And there is Peter standing by himself at the gate of his house. It occurs to me that it's a really good spot his feet are planted on.

While he stands alone on his side of the Scar, and while he stands alone on his side of the Lake District art world, he may actually have found the very best location of all. This artist's passions and visions lie outside the safe, idyllic sublime, the picture-postcard, the tame pleasure ground mask of our county. They lie somewhere deep within the heart of Cumbria's anatomy, and somewhere out towards the very edge of human experience. Not a bad place to be, Peter.

INFORMATION:

Peter Liddle teaches painting classes in Askham village hall and teaches sixth form life-drawing at Ullswater and Queen Elizabeth Grammar schools in Penrith.