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RIGHT:
The nights

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Peter Liddle

the painter who lives on the Lowther Estate near Penrith, looks every inch an artist. He has a natural flamboyance and sometimes an overwhelming volubility and enthusiasm. He is a large bearded man, wearing loud check suits with small eccentric touches like red shoe laces or black beret. He always has a good story to tell. And he always swears a lot.

He was born and brought up in Darlington but his connections with Cumbria began early in life. He had relatives here and would come over in the holidays and help out shepherding. So began his love of the landscape of the north. He sees Cumbria as his spiritual home. He went to art school in Nottingham and on



qualifying made his way to London, full of youthful optimism, intent on making his mark on the art world. He rented a studio in Chelsea for £2 a week and lived very frugally. Local traders took pity on him and gave him vegetables and pieces of ham as he conformed to their picture of the starving artist in a garret.

He was befriended by a well-established artist called Basil Jonzen who introduced him to the major London dealers, and so he got onto the London gallery circuit quite early in his career. It was a Bohemian hand-to-mouth existence. On

the first Tuesday of every month, he recalls, he and Basil would "do the galleries" working their way systematically round Bond Street and Cork Street with new paintings – very often Basil openly pocketing the small change in the catalogue bowl on the reception desks to buy drinks later. The gallery owners accepted this with tolerance and amusement as Basil was so well-known and liked.

"I owe a lot to Basil," says Peter. "He taught me everything I needed to know about galleries and introduced me to the people who could help me get established."

Just as Liddle was becoming known as a promising young abstract artist, his luck changed. He had been asked for four oil paintings for an important exhibition at the Leicester Galleries. He was working feverishly to get them all finished and dry in time, when Basil turned up at his studio, wanting Peter to join him on a pub-crawl. When Peter refused, Basil became angry and accidentally knocked one of the wet paintings off the easel with his silver-topped

cane. When Liddle threw him out, Basil put his cane through the window of the conservatory where he painted, swearing he would teach him a lesson – no gallery would touch him in future.

What seemed like an idle threat, spoken in anger, proved absolutely true. From that day on, all the galleries he had dealt with in London were suddenly fully booked. There was only one thing to do – get out of London.

So the late sixties found Peter Liddle in Cornwall with a part-time teaching job. From there he went to visit an aunt in Cumbria and stayed. He found work as a washer-up at the Haweswater Hotel where he could paint in a garage in his spare time. He has stayed in Cumbria ever since, except for a very short time when he was given the chance to learn film-making by Brian Forbes in his film school at Cookham. This made him realise that his destiny lay in painting, no matter how precarious an existence that provided. "I cannot escape being a painter because that is what I am," he says. But he has had to take some unusual jobs to stay solvent, including working in a shoe factory at Shap which only recruited women, or so he was told. He has been in Cumbria now for 20 years living in the same remote farmhouse with his wife Sandra and two children, now teenagers. He is a firm believer in fate and coincidence. When his work began to move from the abstract to the more figurative and the surreal, he learned, quite by



Peter Liddle

chance from a caption on a piece of sculpture in a shop window in Penrith, that Basil Jonzen was dead. He quickly gathered some paintings together and took the train to London. To his delight he found his previous galleries receptive to his work once again. He has been exhibiting there ever since, mainly in the Piccadilly Gallery in Cork Street.

His work has developed through phases over which he claims little control – he says he is simply the vehicle for his muse. He has moved through optics to seascapes and then on to a wonderful series of pebble paintings, every one of which sold. Then he did the mountain paintings for which he is best known in Cumbria. The amazing thing about these is that, when finished, other things can be seen in them of which Liddle says he was totally unaware when painting them. For instance a painting of a mountain stream reveals two hands frantically clutching a rock. Figures and faces can be seen in the rocks in other paintings. "Each painting is a miracle," he says.

When I last went to see him he showed me his final mountain painting – a misty landscape called "Voices in the Mist" which captures perfectly the eerie

experience of being on the fells in cloud. When it was completed he felt totally empty – the end of a phase. Then he was waiting for the next to come. He had no idea what it would be, only a sense of finality.

Subsequently it has come in the form of fragmented images, many of them people and faces. He was much influenced in this by the Gulf War. The creation of each piece is both exciting and weird. He feels as if he has been taken over and led by "The Muse" again, as he puts it. These latest paintings have just been on show at Keswick Museum but there is an opportunity to learn more of this intriguing Cumbrian painter later this summer when, along with artist Jonathon Snell who is also a psychotherapist and exponent of the Alexander technique, Peter Liddle will be explaining the spirituality of painting in three four-day workshops. Called "The Inner and Outer Landscape" they will be held at the Haweswater Hotel and at Brantwood.

Peter Liddle sees his life so far as a painter as an amazing journey – precarious and unpredictable – "like falling off the edge of a cliff," he says cheerfully.

I wonder where "The Muse" will lead him next. □



ABOVE: Protection racket

BELOW: Dangerous liaison

