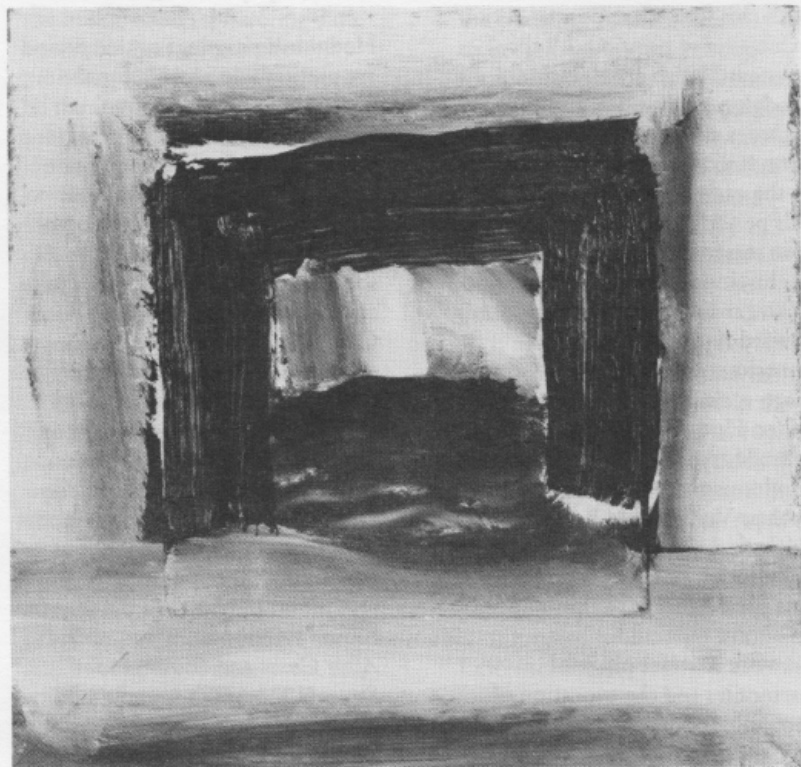


Howard Hodgkin
MATRIX/BERKELEY 147

University Art Museum and
Pacific Film Archive
late September - mid December 1991

After Corot, 1979-82



*The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script.*

*Then the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.*
—Wallace Stevens

On occasion, the MATRIX program serves as a venue for an artist of established reputation whose work has not been shown in the Bay Area. Such is the case with this first West Coast exhibition of paintings by the eminent British artist, Howard Hodgkin. This small grouping includes a selection of small-format works from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s. It was during this period that Hodgkin began to gain international recognition for his luscious, diminutive paintings. Disregarding contemporary trends toward reproducible, media-conscious art on the one hand and large-scale, heroic painting on the other, Hodgkin pursued the intimist tradition of European Modernism developed by artists such as Vuillard and Bonnard and the lyrical abstraction of Kandinsky. It is in his paintings of this period that Hodgkin achieved an almost miraculous balance between abstract pictorial harmonies and the evocation of remembered moments of intense feeling.

The sturdy froth of color and texture that comprises his images creates a “glancing, immaterial quality,” an impression not of the world as it is, but as it is remembered.¹ While the artist finds that “the subject matter of [his] pictures is often established in one sitting,” he may take up to three years to complete a painting, even one as profoundly simple as

After Corot (1979-1982).² Hodgkin’s process of recollection is related to that of the master mnemonist, Marcel Proust, whose all-over attention did not discriminate between the most significant details of memory and the most obscure. For Hodgkin, however, remembrance does not consist of an accumulation of such details, but rather of a making palpable of the depth of experience encompassed in a single moment.

Hodgkin’s paintings of this period are particularly notable for their psychological aspect, often focusing on moments of great pleasure or pain. *Sleeping Figure* (1980-1982), for example, is an astonishingly tender evocation of erotic familiarity, combining somehow equal parts sexual charge and detached reflection. Conversely, as the artist has explained, *Reading the Letter* (1977-1980) “is...a picture about a very anguished and personally unpleasant experience—a letter written to someone else, which...was very unpleasant for me to hear, and the picture is about the moment when it was being read aloud and I was in the room.”³ Other paintings, such as *After Corot* and *In Alexander Street* (1977-1979), suggest a more diffuse psychological ambience, akin to what Walter Benjamin described as “the everyday hour,” which “comes with the night, a lost twittering of birds, or a breath drawn at the sill of an open window.”⁴ “While his art touches common experience,” wrote Nicholas Serota and Robert C. Cafritz, “it is increasingly devoted to the pause, the silence, the ennui that follows conversation, anger, pain, love, rather than to the act itself.”⁵

The artist’s titles often suggest a setting or circumstance and, indeed, can be very helpful in leading our interpretation. Knowing the title of *After Dinner* (1976-1977) helps us to see the drowsiness of the gently quivering blues and the satiation of the settling forms and submerged crimson. *Goodbye to the Bay of Naples* (1980-1982) comes into a kind of focus once we know the locale: Mt. Vesuvius pops up in the background (splattering dark chunks of lava around the periphery?), while what seems to be the setting sun dips below the mountain’s shoulder, casting one last deep red reflection in the midst of the wind-flecked bay. In the foreground, Hodgkin has placed a disembodied phallic shape, alluding perhaps to a romantic encounter or simply to the sensation of an abstract sexual force.

The material support of Hodgkin’s paintings—their heavy frames and wooden grounds—is specifically chosen to offset the ephemerality of his subjects. “I sometimes go to immense lengths,” Hodgkin attests, “to, as it were, fortify [the paintings] before they leave the studio. The more evanescent the emotion I want to convey, the thicker the panel, the heavier the framing, the more elaborate the border, so that this delicate thing will remain protected and intact.”⁶ The artist also plays off fugitiveness against stability in his treatment of the picture plane. Recalling Vuillard’s interior paintings of the 1890s, Hodgkin establishes an emphatically flat and frontal picture plane through simple pattern-like compositions. This almost decorative surface is violated, however, by sudden

drops into space, the coalescing of imagery out of abstraction, and the sheer exuberance of the colors which seem ready to leap off their support.

For all the dynamism of his painterly manner, Hodgkin asserts the essentially classical nature of his approach, “where all emotion, all feeling, turns into a beautifully articulated anonymous architectural memorial.”⁷ While the challenge of classicism may be to fit feeling into pre-existing forms, Hodgkin, as a Modernist working in the classical tradition, goes one step further. He invents form, “finding what will suffice” as he goes, with such insight and assurance that, despite their seeming eccentricity, we can wholeheartedly believe in his paintings.⁸

Howard Hodgkin was born in 1932 in London. He lived in the United States from 1940 to 1943. He has been a Trustee of both the Tate Gallery (1970-1976) and the National Gallery, London (1978 to 1985). In 1985 he was awarded the prestigious Turner Prize from the Tate Gallery.

Lawrence Rinder

1. Howard Hodgkin, quoted in “Howard Hodgkin Interviewed by David Sylvester,” in *Howard Hodgkin: Forty Paintings 1973-84* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1984), p. 98.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 99.

4. Walter Benjamin, “The Image of Proust,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 203.

5. Nicholas Serota and Robert C. Cafritz, in *Howard Hodgkin: Forty Paintings 1973-84*, p. 7.

6. Howard Hodgkin, quoted in Deepak Ananth, "Hodgkin's Poetics," in *Howard Hodgkin: Small Paintings 1975-1989* (London: The British Council, 1990), p. 84.

7. Sylvester, p. 105.

8. Wallace Stevens, "Of Modern Poetry," in *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 174.

Works in MATRIX:

1. *After Dinner*, 1976-77, oil on wood, 30 x 38-3/4". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Graham Gund.

2. *In Alexander Street*, 1977-79, oil on wood, 17-3/4 x 20". Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Inc., Venice, CA.

3. *Reading the Letter*, 1977-80, oil on wood, 17-3/4 x 20". Private collection.

4. *After Corot*, 1979-82, oil on wood, 14-1/2 x 15". Private collection.

5. *Goodbye to the Bay of Naples*, 1980-82, oil on wood, 22 x 26-1/4". Private collection.

6. *Sleeping Figure*, 1980-82, oil on wood, 8-3/4 x 11-5/8". Lent by Terence McInerney.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Arthur Tooth and Sons, London '62; Kasmin Gallery, London '71; Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, *Howard Hodgkin, Forty-Five Paintings: 1949-75* '76 (catalog); M. Knoedler & Co., NYC '81 (catalog), '82, '84, '86, '88, '90 (catalog); British Pavilion, Venice Biennale, Italy, *Howard Hodgkin: Forty Paintings 1973-84* '84 (catalog; traveled); L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, CA '85; Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nantes, *Howard Hodgkin: Small Paintings 1975-1989* '90 (catalog; traveled).

Selected group exhibitions:

R.B.A. Galleries, London, *The London Group* '59-61; Hayward Gallery, London, *The Human Clay* '76; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Australia, *Sydney Biennale III* '79; L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, CA, *This Knot of Life* '79 (catalog); Museum of Modern Art, NYC, *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture* '84 (catalog); Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, PA '85, *Carnegie International* '85; L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, CA, *The British Picture*, '88 (catalog).

Selected bibliography (see also catalogs under exhibitions):

McEwen, John. "Four British Painters," *Artforum* vol. 17 (Dec. '78), pp. 50-55.

Hyman, Timothy. Interview in *Artscribe* no. 15 (Dec. '78), pp. 25-28.

Kramer, Hilton. "Howard Hodgkin," *The New York Times* (8 May '81).

Hughes, Robert. "A Peeper into Paradise," *Time* (29 Nov. '82), p. 88.

McEwen, John. *Studio International* vol. 196 (Jan./Feb. '83), p. 57.

Galligan, Gregory. "Howard Hodgkin: Forty Paintings," *Arts Magazine* (March '85).

Russell, John. "A Hodgkin Original," *The New York Times Magazine* (11 Nov. '90), pp. 56-61.

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