

Howard Hodgkin

Memories

Opening Thursday 21st November 2019, 6-8 p.m.
Exhibition 22nd November 2019 - 25th January 2020

Bright ochre-yellow dots dance on the painted surface – sandy motes floating in a beam of sunlight – next to a field of smooth, brilliant ultra-marine. A few colours and gestures conjure up a summer's day at the seaside: the calm expanse of water beneath the sun; the warm expanse of a sandy shore lit up by millions of suns. Howard Hodgkin simple name for this painting was Beach. It was created in 2015-16, the artist's final period. Yet, there is no hint here of unworldliness or waning strength, nor in any of his later works. On the contrary: the impact of Beach, with its deliberate juxtaposition of various shapes and colours, is a powerful one. We are granted the densest concentration of a glimpse of luminous summer. Here, Hodgkin appears to achieve with ease what he always sought to do, namely to convey in his paintings the deep emotions elicited in his encounters with landscapes and people alike.

A luminary among Britain's contemporary artists, Howard Hodgkin (1932-2017) was born, lived, and died in London. His works feature in the collections of many renowned galleries and art museums, including London's Tate and British Museum, as well as the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. He received numerous awards and prizes, including the Turner Prize in 1985, which was also the year Hodgkin represented Great Britain at the Venice Biennale. Moreover, Queen Elizabeth II knighted him in 1992; in 2003 she made him a Companion of Honour.

In terms of his treatment of colour, Hodgkin was an accomplished master. Often described as semi-abstract, his expressive prints and paintings at first glance employ a modern idiom; a few incisive gestures confer lightness and spontaneity. Their apparent impulsiveness, however, is underpinned by a profound interest in materials and techniques. In the 1970s Hodgkin exchanged his canvases for wood panels, preferably used ones acquired in India and various European countries. The wood grain, and any evidence of damage, or wear and tear, underscores the strong physical presence of his works. Another important – and autonomous – part of Hodgkin's oeuvre were his prints. These he often hand-coloured after an extremely complex printing process to create unique pieces.

Hodgkin's prints show with particular clarity his skilful use of colour. A highly sensitive, atmospheric resonance is always present. His seemingly reduced colour fields are sometimes superimposed, at other times placed side by side in stark contrast. The artist was deeply interested in the great British romantic painters including John Constable and William Turner. Even though it may not be immediately obvious, Hodgkin also painted landscapes. This is how he put it: "I am a representational painter, but not a painter of appearances. I paint representational pictures of emotional situations."

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Like Beach, the painting discussed above, many of Hodgkin's internal landscapes were related to natural environments. Other works appear to interpret weather phenomena. Take Dark Rainbow (2015-16), for example, a hand-coloured aquatint, or the hand-painted carborundum relief, Storm Cloud (2014). In their reduction to a few precise gestural colours they are akin to visualised Haiku, the short Japanese poems that never name the rich internal experiences that inspired them. The titles of Hodgkin's works hint at possible readings: in Blue Evening (2014), a deep blue and an intense red overlap to form a sunset – the dark of night already present at its core; the vibrant colours in A Glass of Red (2015-16) call to mind an evening with friends, good conversations and fine wine.

Some of Hodgkin's late works are now on display at Galerie Andres Thalmann in Zurich. His creativity never waned; his colours are as fresh and vibrant as they were in his early pieces. Nonetheless, some of his late creations evince an existential depth. In his aquatint print, Absolutely (2015-16), for example, various greens and blues evoke a space that tunnels towards infinity.

Alice Henkes