



ELIZABETH PEYTON

[PAINTER]

“DESCRIBING IS NO END OR BEGINNING.”

Feelings that Elizabeth Peyton associates with painting:

Vulnerability

Honesty

Fear

Relaxation

Elizabeth Peyton, born in 1965, is an American painter whose intimate portraits of her friends and heroes respond to an era in which our peers and icons seamlessly coexist. Prince Ludwig II, Kurt Cobain, and an eight-year-old Eminem are given the same special treatment in her work as politicians, friends, and partners. This makes it easy to see whom she admires, but I've always wondered why. The work goes beyond fandom and approaches something closer to devotion. I was curious about what she believes in.

I was a little nervous about interviewing Peyton because, ever since seeing her work in a small MoMA show on figurative painting in 1997, alongside that of Luc Tuymans and John Currin, I have counted her (and Tuymans) as a hero

of my own—and you know what they say about meeting your heroes.

Since that show, Peyton's artist books, paintings, and drawings have never failed to move me. Her use of paint is juicy and there is physical energy and raw emotion evident in her panels. To me, her pictures carry the seductive impulse that compels you to rip an image out of a magazine. They have the sincerity of a love song and the spirit of punk. I admire and try to emulate the courage she has to wade right into her obsessions and attractions and turn them into art.

We both live in the West Village in New York, and decided to do the interview at a nearby café. When Peyton arrived she was smiling and holding a new album by the Danish band Vår. We spoke about talented Danes, then got down to the business at hand.

—Leanne Shapton

THE BELIEVER: You've done so many interviews—

ELIZABETH PEYTON: Really? I don't do them that often, maybe a couple times a year. I feel like while I'm alive it's good for me to speak up for my work, because how I feel about my work and how I see it are so different from how I see it reflected back to me in other writing. So I feel like, while I can, even if I don't love doing it, it's good for me to talk. Even though I do feel strongly that the work should really speak for itself, and it does, and it will. But I think that clichés can happen and I think that people read stuff on the internet that so endlessly self-perpetuates.

BLVR: There are a few things I wanted to talk about today. Something that is on my mind a lot is photogenics, or photogenesis, if that is even a word. How people look in photographs versus how they look in life.

EP: I suppose I think about the photo thing quite a lot—I don't *think* about it, but it comes up all the time. I make pictures of people from life, and I make pictures of people from photos. There was one person I was painting a lot, this opera singer, and maybe for a year I was working from photos. I saw him perform—this is Jonas Kaufmann—I was making so many pictures of him and then I got to meet him. When I first met him and I saw the third dimension, I almost fainted. Not because I was—I mean, I was excited, but it just freaked my mind out to see the third dimension; I just knew his face so well from two dimensions.

BLVR: Did you think he was less attractive?

EP: It wasn't a better-or-worse, it was just weird; it was almost like his face had fallen. It was super weird.

BLVR: So he appeared better in photographs?

EP: No, you're putting words in my mouth; that's not what I'm saying at all. What I'm saying is two dimensions and three dimensions are very different and that's the difference between a photo and life.

BLVR: Did you have a chance to draw him from life?

EP: Yes, in my last show I made a painting from life and a drawing, and of course it helped all the—when he came to the studio I didn't tuck away everything, but there were a couple of pictures I was working on at the time and then I thought: Oh my god, he's going to think I'm mental when he comes here, there's pictures of him all over the place, and other people, too, not just him, but I kind of put it away. But when I was finishing those other pictures that I'd started from photos, it was just a whole—it was a different thing. I have this facial-recognition thing where I hear somebody's voice when the painting is really beginning to feel like the person. Either [I can hear them] speaking, or if it's a singer I can hear them singing.

BLVR: Wow.

EP: Do you know what I mean?

BLVR: Sometimes I can smell people who I'm thinking about—maybe I have the smell version of that. I think I do know what you mean. It's not aural for me, it's... scented.

EP: I think it comes from a similar place.

BLVR: Did you always look at pictures of people?

EP: Yes.

BLVR: Did you cut things out of magazines?

EP: Yes. Tons of pictures of gymnasts, Nadia Comăneci, like when I was seven it was ice skaters, Elton John, I'm not embarrassed to say Shaun Cassidy at some point—that's probably so before your time.

BLVR: No.

EP: No?

BLVR: I was born in '73. I remember Comăneci.

EP: Yeah, she was so inspiring. So for as long as I can remember I was looking at pictures of people and making pictures of people, too.

BLVR: Were you drawing from the photos?

EP: No. It was more imagination. I wanted to make a picture of the most beautiful person ever, like even when I was a little, little child I can remember doing that.

BLVR: Do you still tear things out of magazines?

EP: Absolutely, but often I'm freezing a frame on my iPad and then printing it out. But yeah, if I'm looking at a magazine I tear stuff out all the time.

BLVR: Along the lines of the photogenic thing, you've talked about the idea of "becoming" in a couple of interviews—about loving that moment when someone becomes who they are. Correct me if I'm putting words in your mouth.

EP: Yeah, it's one thing that I'm fascinated by.

BLVR: And do you think that is the moment at which the image they project of themselves is beautiful?

EP: People aren't so conscious like that, not so able to say, "Oh, I'm going to amplify this now." I think it's a product of, like, all things in the universe, a product of energy, in a way. That's the energy inside of them; you can just feel it, I think. When I was younger I think that I might have thought this is happening at a certain age, to people around me. I didn't really understand there's all kinds of moments as your life goes on, that you come into things and evolve again and change.

EP: Do you think you're photogenic?

BLVR: No. I mean, I don't know, but I don't think so. It depends. With a professional photographer I know I look much better [*laughs*] and it's usually a really nice experience. And I enjoy it.

BLVR: My favorite book of yours is one from 1998, of photos, drawings, and paintings: *Craig*. How did that book come together?

EP: That book came together because I was going to make

a book and I decided the book was going to be about Craig, and at the same time Princess Diana died, and of course I'd already been thinking about the royal family quite a lot, and something about Craig really reminded me how important art was. I mean, not that I didn't know that, but... I can't describe it. But there is a narrative to that book and it's about him *becoming*, and at the same time those young kids of Diana's becoming little men during her funeral, and I sort of put the two things together. Not in a really literal way, more, I just tried to do that intuitively, as it felt right, and it was also about me knowing Craig. [*Peyton coughs on a cornichon.*]

BLVR: Are you OK?

EP: I'm going to sneeze in a second.

BLVR: I also really like the Irish Museum of Modern Art book called *Reading and Writing*, where you selected passages from books to go alongside your work.

EP: I made that one, too. I made all my books. It's another one of those things—I feel like while I'm alive I need to make things as I see them, so that my work is presented the way I want it to be. 'Cause you know, after, then you have to give up. [*Laughs*]

BLVR: You'll roll in your grave and roll in your grave.

EP: Right, I feel like I'm fighting against something constantly, and if I can continually reset the tone, that's what I want.

BLVR: What do you think people are getting wrong?

EP: Well, I feel like there's always "Oh, she's that person who paints celebrities," which is really not as I see things. I really like to paint people who make art. And if they happen to be really good at it, they're well known, but it's a very specific group of people.

BLVR: I think that'll be what lasts, not the celebrity aspect.

EP: It's a reflection of the culture at large, I get it, but you have to remember why people are known, too, because they're



Jarvis, 1996. Oil on board. 11 × 14 in. © 2010 by Elizabeth Peyton. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise.

really special. Should I be painting the plumber down the street? Nothing wrong with plumbers or anything, and I would actually, maybe, if I met him, but it's not like it's a science project where I have to paint everybody.

BLVR: Well, thank goodness it's not. The thing that I liked about the Irish Museum of Modern Art book is that it got into your love of literature.

EP: Yeah, what a great opportunity that was. I loved laying out the literature, and I laid it out in order to go toward the terrible moment in *Madame Bovary* where she poisons herself.

BLVR: That's still haunting me. I actually asked my husband last night, if I committed suicide and he found me, would he try to save my life?

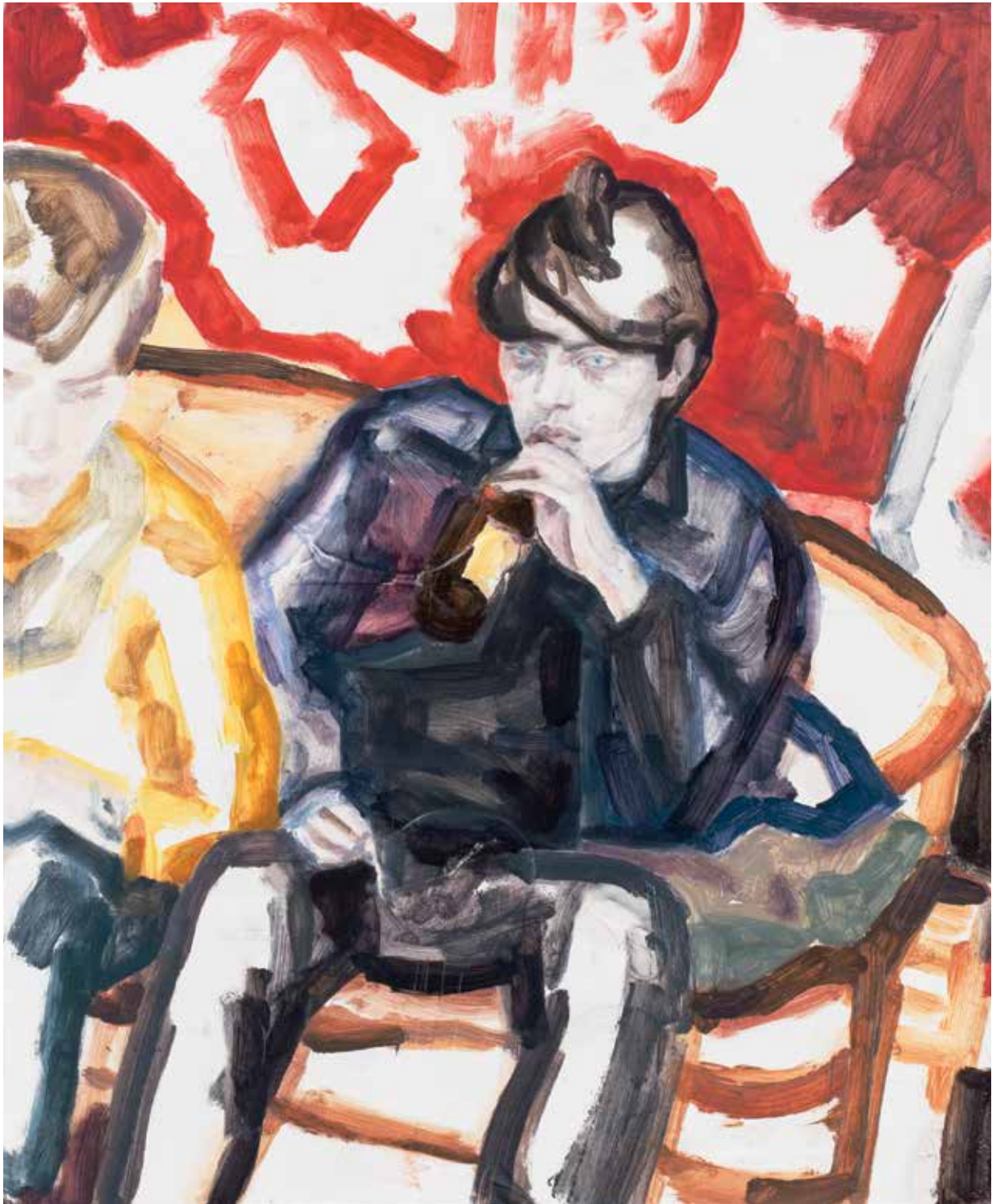
EP: Oh my god, what did he say to that?

BLVR: He said, "Of course I would, but that is a depressed person's thought."

EP: So brutal, that book.

BLVR: But what I wanted to ask is if you read contemporary fiction, too.

EP: Um, more lately. I have a dear friend who loves contemporary fiction, so he sends me things all the time. I don't get into everything. I love Junot Díaz, and I just got a pile of books by Javier Marías. But in some way, no. In general the answer is no, because I feel like I live in this world. I don't go out of my way not to read it, but I was reading somebody's book recently who is very popular and I just—it was



Elias Bender Rønnefelt. Oil on canvas. 10 × 8 in. © 2013 by Elizabeth Peyton. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise.

so cynical. It was really well written and very smart, but so cynical and hopeless. And I don't really think everything points to that. In art I want to get to another place, you know. I want that transcendent thing, whatever direction, painful or ecstatic, I want that. I don't want just nowhere cynicism.

BLVR: I have this test I do. I ask: does it cast a spell?

EP: That's a nice way to put it. Yeah. Does it get you into the trance of the language?

BLVR: I also have this sort of metric I use where I ask: is it illustration or is it art?

EP: Right.

BLVR: Whether it's a pair of pants or a book or a movie. Often what falls into the category of art is that feeling of "I have never felt this before," and what falls into the category of illustration is "This feels—"

EP: —familiar.

BLVR: Yeah. Like something I know and am happy to know.

EP: That's something I'm constantly thinking about painting, because when you're painting something that is representational, that's not the end. Describing is no end or beginning.

BLVR: Do you know when you've got it? Or does it take a little bit of time away from a painting?

EP: Yes, yes, all that, yes. Paintings take a long time. Often they'll begin and it's so great, full of possibility, and so exciting from the first go, but then there's a huge amount of time in between where... until I know what to do with it. And then it's a little scary, but then once I get into it, if it's going to work I can feel it, I know when it's done, I know when it's happened, when it got to the other place. Yeah, I start hearing the music or the voice.

BLVR: It's funny that you describe there being a scary moment—

EP: Oh, so many scary moments.

BLVR: I have a little nonprofit publishing company, and recently we published a biography of Martin Kippenberger, and there's this quote that I love that I think about all the time, where he says that if you aren't doing something potentially embarrassing, you're not doing anything really good.

EP: Yeah, I know a lot of artists who say that. That's almost what I want, what I ask for, because that involves some risk, and my work makes me very vulnerable, because I'm really being very honest about how I feel about somebody or something, or even what I'm doing. The paintings, they just can be out in the world, but it makes me very vulnerable. I always forget about that part of it, like when I have an opening, I forget how embarrassing it is. I'm proud of my work, but I think that it implies a kind of risk that's really important for making art: you have to throw yourself out there. And the more vulnerable you can make yourself, the better the work. Even if it hurts, you know?

BLVR: You seem to have known that from a very early stage—

EP: It wasn't like I knew that. It's interesting, I'm hearing in your questions a lot of assuming of articulated knowledge of the whole thing, where it was actually just like, well, that's just what I had to do. I couldn't have done it another way.

BLVR: I have a lot of admiration for people who can hear their own direction that way.

EP: Somewhere I think I must have known that I could take it. You know that I could just throw myself out there with everything. You know, painting, you're doing it alone but there's something very—

BLVR: Tough?

EP: —tough about it, it's just like throwing yourself off a cliff kind of thing.

BLVR: Sorry, I just put another word in your mouth!

EP: No, it's OK, sometimes I need them, it's good. It is an odd thing, how pain can turn into something positive. If the outcome is a very beautiful painting, it's so great. I feel very fortunate.

BLVR: I rely on pain for that kind of measurement sometimes. It was interesting to read that you swim a lot. I was a competitive swimmer—

EP: Really, wow.

BLVR: And literally, "no pain no gain" made perfect sense in the athletic world, so in the creative world—

EP: I think that sports and art are so related, right?

BLVR: I think so.

EP: Because everybody can be really talented, but to get to that other place is a whole other thing. It's magical. That's so interesting.

BLVR: Do you see yourself as an artist the way an athlete might see themselves as an athlete—that devoted and that disciplined? Do you draw every day?

EP: No. But yeah, it's the center of my life, it's everything, that's just the way it is, if you know what I mean. Yeah, I feel completely devoted, and I'm completely a believer.

BLVR: I wanted to ask you about Lucian Freud.

EP: I think he's amazing, but I didn't always, actually, and I was even against him when I was younger. I thought, Why would anybody spend their time showing how ugly people can be? And maybe that was a thing of youth. And I think that was just a life thing. I kind of started being strong enough to understand, or let in death as an idea, and that kind of changed my painting, definitely.

BLVR: When did—

EP: When my father passed away. And it wasn't that I made it happen; it was just another one of those things that was

just there and it just really changed my work. So Lucian Freud—I love those paintings now, I can really see them and feel them, and feel them as beautiful, as part of life. What about you?

BLVR: My theory about him—and I want to try this out on you because I've never talked to anyone about it, but when I saw the show at the National Portrait Gallery, it struck me that he was a landscape painter looking at humans as landscape—

EP: Right, well, they're so abstract—

BLVR: He physically looks like a hawk, and he's flying over these landscapes with this very, very unforgiving but very patient vision. I feel like he is a landscape painter of flesh.

EP: That's so true. Do you think he's sadistic?

BLVR: Sadistic like a hawk! Like a bird of prey. Maybe not sadistic, but there is a chill, but then there's so much love in how patient—

EP: Yeah, really seeing. Even if he's asking a lot of the person to sit every day, naked, upside down, whatever, or with another person or something. On the other hand, looking is a form of attention that feels very warm, I think. You know, it's very loving.

BLVR: There's that book by the man who was painted by him—Martin Gayford. Hearing about how those hours are spent is pretty fascinating. They would talk, he would cook. Again, that generosity.

EP: He was so beautiful.

BLVR: That nose. Another thing I like about your work is your three-quarter views and profiles. I like looking at people in profile.

EP: Oh, thanks, so do I. There's some great Oscar Wilde quote about profiles... People are so different from their profiles. It contains them in a totally different way.



LEFT: Flowers & Actaeon. Oil on board. 11 × 14 in. © 2007-2008 by Elizabeth Peyton. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise. RIGHT: Cezanne + Balzac. Oil on linen on board. 12 × 9 in. © 2009 by Elizabeth Peyton.

BLVR: There is something about unrequited love in a profile. Because you can observe them full on and they're looking away, so part of the exchange is not happening. I think a profile speaks of a rejection and thus there is more longing in it.

EP: Wow. I've never thought about it that way. I was more thinking silhouettes, you know, eighteenth-century, but there is such a difference in the pictures where somebody's looking straight at me. Very few people have just wanted to do that, just look straight at me. Maybe three or four people. Isn't that amazing?

BLVR: Do you ask them?

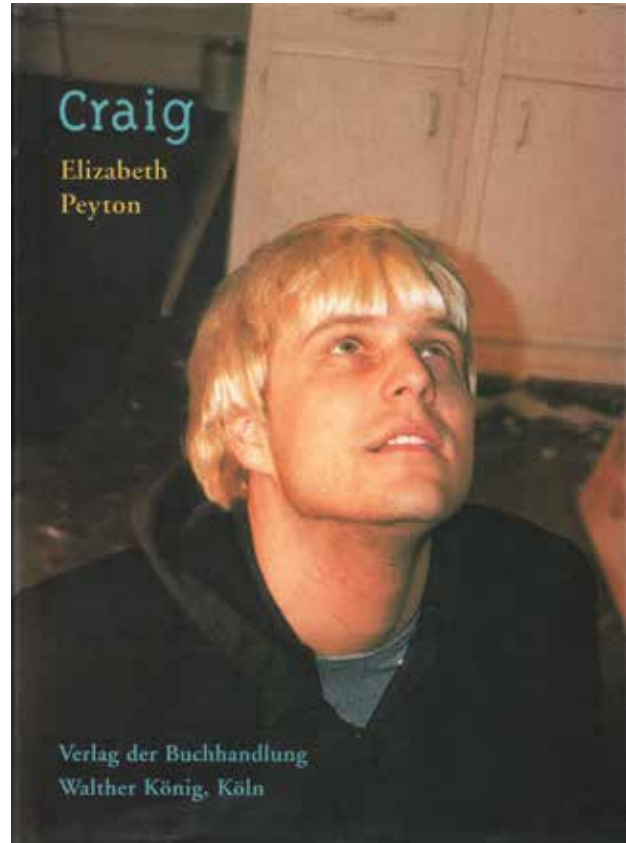
EP: I don't ask anybody to do anything. I just want to see, and so it's very natural but sometimes someone will ask me, they'll say, "Would you like me to look at you?" And I'll

say, "I want you to be however you want to be." But I might say, "Yes, look off to the side." There are two parts of it: one is that if somebody's looking at you straight on, I have no depth perception, but anybody has a hard time with the flatness of that. But sometimes I feel a little more free in the moment if it's from life, if the person's eyes are a little off because I'm not being looked at. But I love it when people just do it.

BLVR: Do you prefer working from photographs or from life?

EP: I love both. But when it's somebody who's living in the same time, I think a lot about—do you know the pictures that Stieglitz took of Georgia O'Keeffe when they first met?

BLVR: Yeah, beautiful.



LEFT: John McEnroe. Oil on board. 12 ¼ × 9 ¾ in. © 1995 by Elizabeth Peyton. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise. RIGHT: Craig. © 1998 by Elizabeth Peyton. Courtesy of Walther König.

EP: Yeah, and such a record of two humans. Being in the same room at the same time. These amazing people, and you'll never know, but that work is there. So exciting.

BLVR: I love the idea of sessions. The Peel Sessions, photo sessions, a sitting. Because it's time.

EP: And it's such a different kind of time. And then to make something that contains that time...

BLVR: And then you can hear their real voice.

EP: I'll also sometimes hear whatever I was listening to at the time I made the picture.

BLVR: When you travel, do you buy new sketchbooks to bring with you, or do you take along old ones?

EP: Oh, that's so funny, because I'm going on a trip tomorrow and it's a combination. If I need some new ones I get some new ones. I probably would prefer they not be brand-new, actually; I like just coming out of the studio and it being not a big deal that I'm in a different place.

BLVR: Do you do a lot of studies for your paintings?

EP: No. Sometimes I'll draw somebody before, but they're always totally separate things. There are no studies. It's more painting in the winter and drawing in the summer.

BLVR: Oh yeah?

EP: But it makes sense, too, the winter is for more-heavy things.

BLVR: Why do you think there are so many images of women done by men and relatively few of men done by women artists?

EP: Until recently, not that many women were allowed to paint.

BLVR: Did Camille Claudel ever do studies of men?

EP: Yes, oh my god, yes she did, and I'm sure she wasn't as crazy as everybody makes her out to be. Or I bet she was driven crazy by how oppressive everybody was to her, including, you know, speculating about the relationship she had with Rodin, which I'm sure was very important and electric, but—

BLVR: Too bad she didn't have interviews to do about her work.

EP: Yeah, exactly! But more and more one finds that there were a lot of women making art in different times but they just get cut out of history.

BLVR: In the *Reading and Writing* book, you have a quote from Balzac's *Lost Illusions*, where the character Lucien is wondering what women will admire about him, and the lines say the slenderness of feet and men with beautifully cut gloves. What do you think we fixate on in terms of male beauty these days?

EP: I don't know. What can you say about a man or a woman—I don't even look at people as men or women; I don't separate it so much. And I think maybe you can see that in my work. You know, a lot of people are quite androgynous in the work, and what is it about a human? I want to know about that. Just the way they walk, it's just so exciting.

BLVR: Do you think that when you recognize something in a person, it's reciprocated?

EP: Sometimes. I don't know which Goethe book it is... is it Goethe? I'm thinking of a book called *Elective Affinities*. There's some moment when the male character meets a woman at a party or something and it's like [*explosion*

sounds]. The whole world is changed. They see each other, and because they know they're not alone anymore, everything's great. [*Laughs*]

BLVR: I think that's a part of your work, too. That recognition.

EP: Right. Oh, thank you, yes. "I see you." Yeah. I'm making a choice. I want to celebrate "this." I think "this" is important. I think this is important in the world, you know? It's a classic thing, to make pictures of heroes and to have them on your wall so you can be motivated by them or look to them or—you know what I mean—be inspired. It's an eternal aspect of pictures of people.

BLVR: Who else is talking about their heroes in art?

EP: Um, Baron Antoine-Jean Gros, who made those paintings of Napoleon. Um, Delacroix. More recently, I don't know. I would hope that people are making pictures of people they really admire.

BLVR: I don't know if people are.

EP: Artists make themselves very vulnerable, and I find that super-heroic. Because you have to throw yourself out there and everybody loves it so much. Those opera singers go onstage and you don't know if they're going to get it out right and all that stuff. And they do, and it's amazing. I saw *Parsifal* a bunch of times in February and March, and one of the times one of the flower maidens just dropped, splat [*laughs*], and they're so professional: the two women next to her picked her up by her elbows and made her stand, and then someone from the back, dressed in a flower-maiden outfit but who clearly wasn't a flower maiden, came in and ushered her off and they just sang through the whole thing.

BLVR: Can you talk about how your work changed when your father died? Or is that...

EP: I noticed everything started going dark. In the paintings the colors started getting dirty, and everything was literally going black.

BLVR: Do you like Fantin-Latour?

EP: I love, love him, and there's that new book that just came out—so exciting.

BLVR: Yes, his group portraits are so bizarre and stiff.

EP: I have a friend, a painter, Andro Wekua, who said to me once: "I think just to be in your studio and paint some flowers is the most radical thing you can do." And I have to say, I totally know what he means, because I think you have to trust that you'll just bring whatever to it. All that stuff about the world and what you think and feel will all get into that painting. Often when I go to art schools, all the kids are struggling to put every single thing in, they're just so anxious about just painting, like it's not enough to just look at something and paint it or just make some abstract painting or whatever. I think not only is it enough, it's so hard, it's such a challenge, a real challenge.

I feel like I can give a lot to younger painters by just telling them to relax.

BLVR: I would have loved to have heard that. Did you take history at art school?

EP: I took loads of postmodern classes. And one class that really made an impression: Literature and Evil, taught by an artist named Bill Beckley, and that's where I was first reading Georges Bataille and things like that.

BLVR: That sounds good. I wish I'd gone to school.

EP: Do you still swim?

BLVR: I do, yeah, just laps. But I finished high school early and then went back and trained for the '92—

EP: You were in the Olympics?

BLVR: No, no, just the trials. But it was a very weird time; it set up this thing I'm preoccupied with, which is athletic and artistic discipline. I wrote a book about swimming last year.

EP: I'm getting a chill. I really want to read that. Did you ever run?

BLVR: As cross-training, but not really. I hated it. Too much stimulus. You can hear too much and see too much.

EP: I can see that. But sometimes I feel like when I'm swimming I can get a little anxious. Not too bad, but just because you're so cut off. Do you have the underwater headphones?

BLVR: I've used those, yes!

EP: I love them; I didn't even know they existed; it was like the heavens opened up. I couldn't believe it. I started running so I could have some exercise to do wherever I was. It's kind of like drawing. You can draw anywhere.

BLVR: It is interesting how many artists work out.

EP: I find my brain really opens up toward the end of a run and then I can think. Sometimes I'll visualize how I want—if I know somebody's coming over, I'll start visualizing a little bit how I might picture them. They might sit however they might sit, but I can sort of prepare. Yeah, you can limit the possibilities of what they can do by where they sit or what's next to them. Or don't you find... If I'm having trouble in the studio or later in the day, if I can remember and I just go out for a walk, everything's so much better when I get back.

BLVR: There is something about walking, too. I find I often like walking next to somebody, because the conversations that you have—you can have long pauses without the pressure of eye contact.

EP: But did you know there's something special that comes out in your brain when you're walking? They say that if you're having an argument with somebody, you should go out on a walk with them.

BLVR: Really?

EP: Because there's some special something that comes out in your brain. More than just endorphins.

BLVR: Maybe some compassion.

EP: Maybe. ★