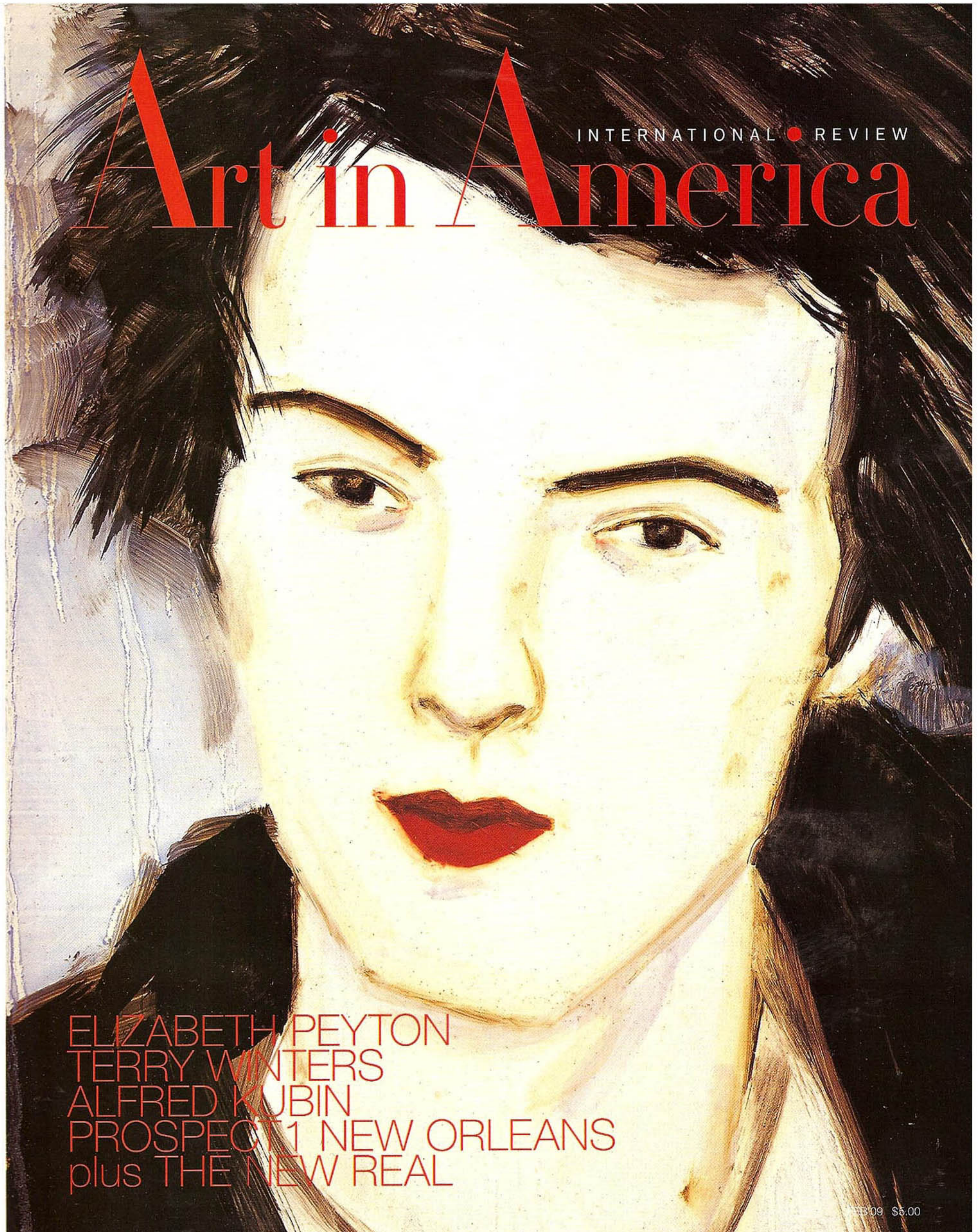


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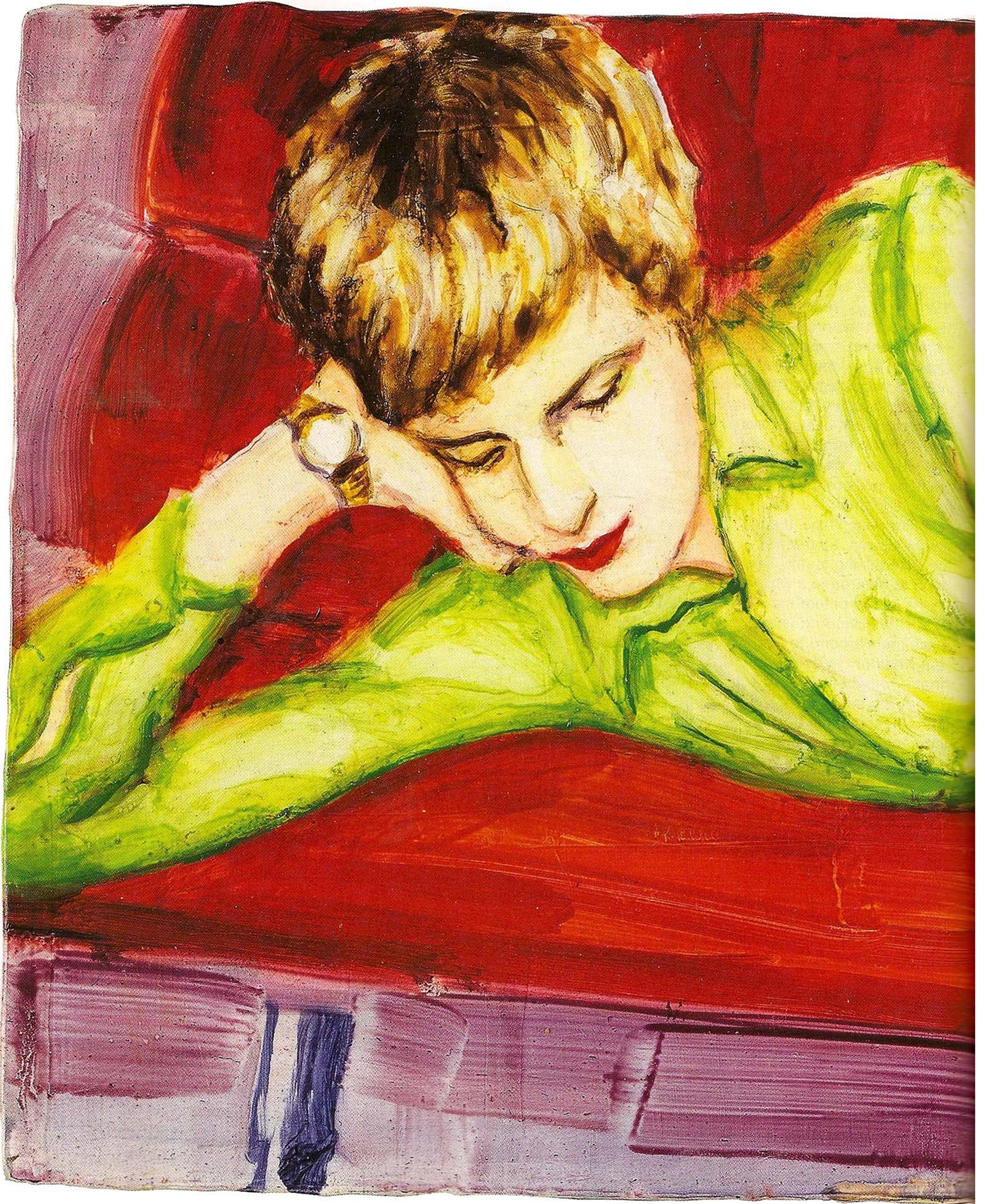
Tscherny, Nadia, "Beautiful People," *Art in America*, February 2009, Cover, pp. 98-107 (ill.)

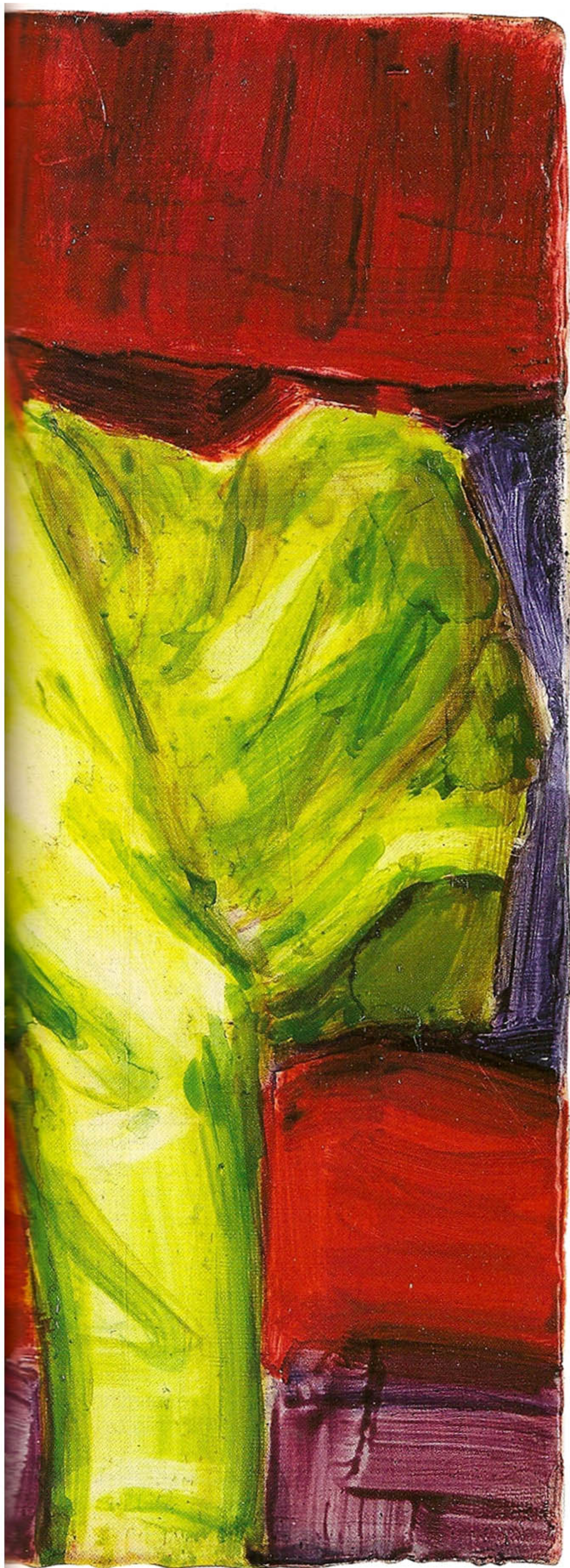


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# ELIZABETH PEYTON BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

Art-world denizens and rock 'n' roll idols inspire Peyton's portraiture.

Her first retrospective is traveling internationally.

BY NADIA TSCHERNY

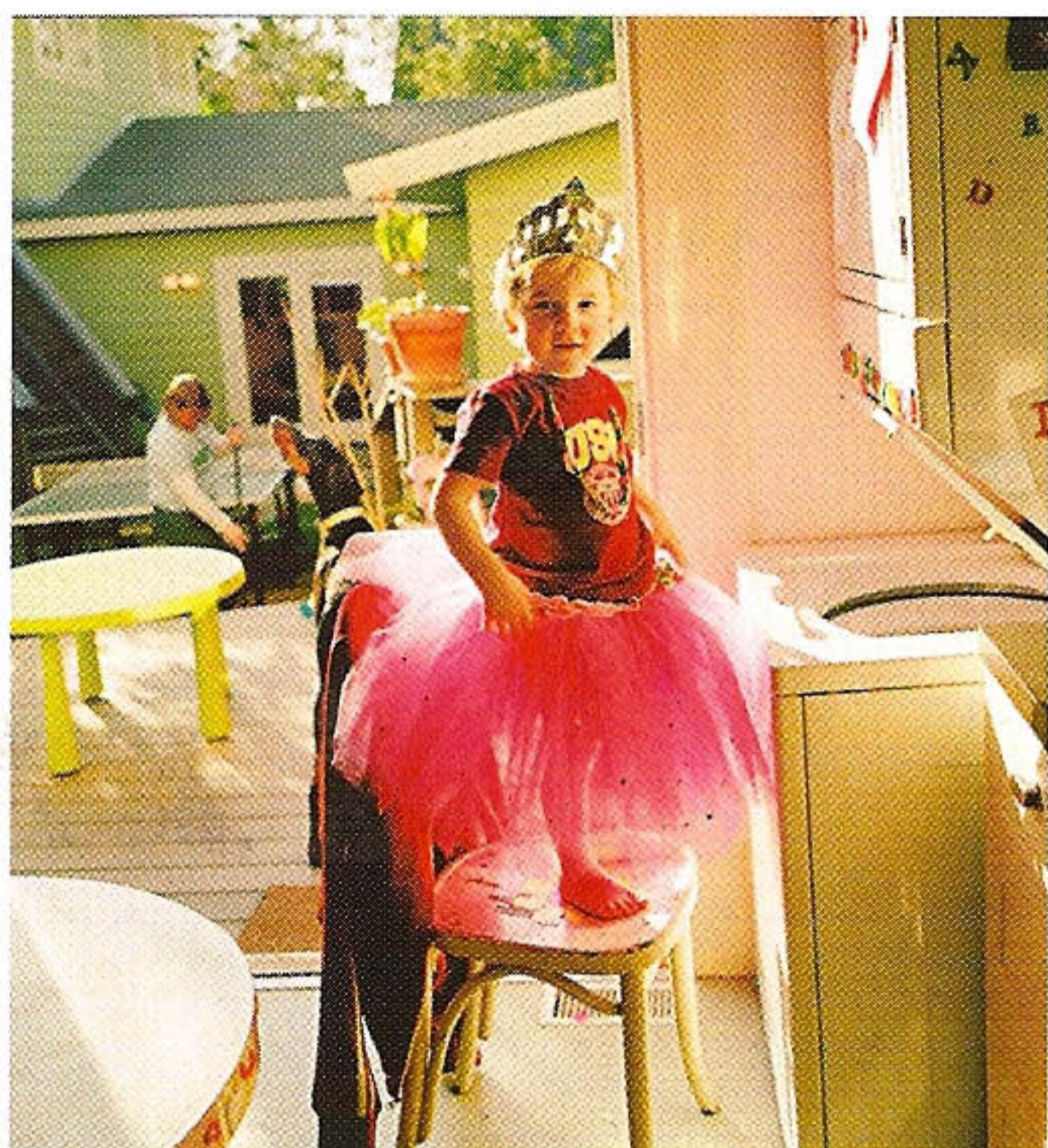
AT NEW YORK CITY MUSEUMS, this has been the season of the female gaze, with three major exhibitions devoted to women who focus their keen observation on the human face and figure: "Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave" at the Museum of Modern Art, "Catherine Opie: American Photographer" at the Guggenheim [see *A.i.A.*, Dec. '08] and "Live Forever: Elizabeth Peyton" at the New Museum. Despite striking contrasts of style and intention, their works share certain concerns that have been central to the art of the last 20 years, including public versus private identity, sexuality and gender, beauty and perception. Peyton is perhaps the least self-analytical but most consistently self-referential of the three, having declared her interest in portraying only people she cares about deeply. Except for mining her own memories and imagination, she doesn't venture far from the hip precincts of contemporary culture.

Peyton also seems the least deliberately political, despite the impression given by the New Museum's election-season choice for the catalogue cover of a 2001 portrait of Al Gore titled *Democrats are more beautiful (after Jonathan Horowitz)*, and by the selection, for the opening announcement, of the gender-bending *Princess Kurt* (1995), based on an image from a concert video of Kurt Cobain performing in a crown and chemise. The work presents a coincidental but thought-provoking parallel to Catherine Opie's *Oliver in a Tutu*, a photograph widely

Elizabeth Peyton: *Piotr on Couch*, 1996, oil on board, 9 by 12 inches. Seattle Art Museum.

All photos this article courtesy Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

**BUT FOR MINING HER OWN MEMORIES AND IMAGINATION, PEYTON DOESN'T VENTURE FAR FROM THE HIP PRECINCTS OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE.**



Above, Catherine Opie: *Oliver in a Tutu*, 2004, C-print, 24 by 20 inches. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Right, Peyton: *Princess Kurt*, 1995, oil on linen, 14 by 11¾ inches.

Below, Marlene Dumas: *Male Beauty*, 2002, watercolor on paper, 49 by 27½ inches. Courtesy Galerie Paul Andriessse, Amsterdam.

Opposite, Peyton: *Jarvis and Liam Smoking*, 1997, oil on canvas, 12 by 9 inches. Collection Tiqui Atencio.



used by the Guggenheim to promote her exhibition. Opie's portrait of her son, a relatively gentle essay on gender identity compared to her portraits of queer society, is still a trenchant comment on nature versus nurture in the raising of boys in America. *Princess Kurt*, however, is less a statement about gender politics than a combination of Peyton's own early and enduring fascinations: rock stars, royalty and male beauty. Her ideal of the latter, a conspicuously feminized one, is exemplified in the portrait of the young Gore, nearly unrecognizable with his pale, delicately chiseled face, deep blue eyes and ruby lips. Notwithstanding its partisan title, Peyton's seductive portrayal seems to be controversy-proof, especially in contrast with, say, Dumas's *Male Beauty* (2002, in the show at MoMA), a raunchy Rodinesque watercolor based on a pornographic image that represents a man exposed and dehumanized. Dumas deals boldly with not only sexual politics but racial politics as well, a pressing issue for her since her South African childhood. Peyton, unapologetically, finds her subjects almost exclu-

sively in the insular, mostly white circles of her friends, celebrities and historical figures.

And yet, when the three women appeared on the scene in the 1990s, Peyton did as much to shake up the artistic status quo as the other two. Exhibition curator Laura Hoptman's catalogue essay charts Peyton's unlikely emergence via small exhibitions of small pictures—one mounted in a room in New York's Chelsea Hotel, another in a working-class London pub—and her subsequent ascension to international fame as a chronicler of New York's downtown art scene and the cultural icons embraced by its members. Hoptman also mentions her own role in positing a critical context for Peyton's paintings through a high-profile "Projects" exhibition at MoMA in 1997

that grouped Peyton with John Currin and Luc Tuymans. Figurative painting that was grounded more in illusionism than expressionism had long been dismissed by critical and market forces, and portraiture seemed beyond the pale. Hoptman recalls her colleagues' skepticism when she chose to champion a new kind of figurative painting "without private jokes, cynicism, jargon, and built-in critical attitude."<sup>1</sup>

In fact, Peyton was the only one of those three painters who completely fit that bill. Her pictures—then as now—have a disarmingly simple and ingenuous quality, unencumbered by heavy theorizing. Add to that her celebration of physical beauty, another longtime taboo



## THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF HER VISION BECOMES APPARENT WHEN A PHOTOGRAPHIC SOURCE IS COMPARED TO THE PAINTING IT INSPIRED.

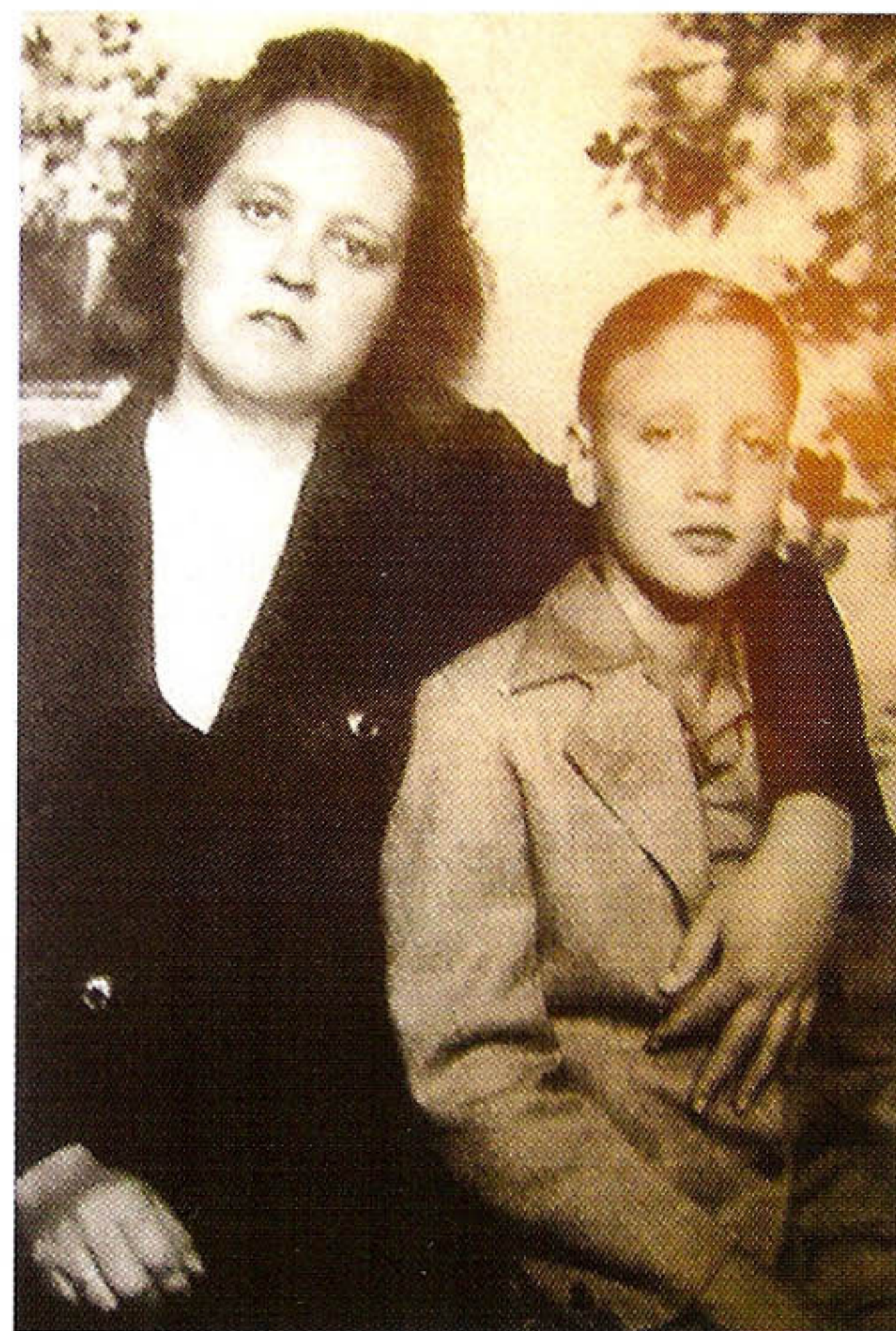
of most serious art, and you begin to understand how Peyton's inclusion would cause rumblings at MoMA. But many critics, following Hoptman's lead, applauded Peyton precisely because of her retrograde yet refreshing determination to portray people she admired. The extent to which the pictures appealed to a large public, and still do, suggests that Hoptman's desire for relief from "anti-visibility" was shared by many.

The New Museum presentation was essentially chronological, which underlined the evolution in Peyton's choice of subjects from historical figures (Queen Elizabeth II, Ludwig II, Marie Antoinette among her favorites) and celebrities (many of them rock stars, such as Cobain, Sid Vicious and Jarvis Cocker) to people in her art-world circle (Tony Just, Ben Brunnemer, Spencer Sweeney, Pati Hertling), whose fame as her subjects has sometimes come to eclipse their professional reputations. Though for recent portraits Peyton generally identifies her subjects with first and last names, earlier efforts typically had first-name-only titles. If one wasn't savvy about current art or music, a roster of artists represented by Gavin Brown (Peyton's longtime dealer) or back issues of *The Face*, *NME* and *Creem* magazines could serve as a directory of her subjects. Peyton collected photographs from these magazines and other sources for pictorial inspiration. (A selection of this material, supplemented by her own snapshots of friends, is included in the exhibition catalogue in a section called "Ephemera.")

In terms of visual impact, the paintings deliver way out of proportion to their very modest size (typically around 14 by 11 inches). Peyton's compositional intelligence confers monumentality. In the best works, her mastery of color and pattern is reminiscent of Matisse. The pictures achieve a jewel-like luminosity from the application of diluted oil paint, which slides across the smoothly sanded gessoed supports like finger paint on glossy paper. Cultivating a rather spontaneous-looking technique, Peyton combines a loosely brushed treatment of clothing and background with more delicately rendered and distinct faces, so that the likenesses distilled from photographs are immediately recognizable. The analogue in her colored-pencil drawings is the concentration of detail and hue in certain areas (a detail of physiognomy or decor) with a gradual fading away elsewhere.

As rendered by Peyton, the subjects possess a certain individual presence even though most share the same fashionably androgynous physical type and cool, if not effete, temperament. The transformative power of her vision becomes especially apparent when a photographic source is compared to the painting it inspired. A dowdy black-and-white shot, for example, of the child Elvis Presley with his mother, seated before a sad floral backdrop, metamorphoses in Peyton's hands into a soigné family portrait before a Matissean background of stunning chromatic appeal. (The 1997 work, not in the exhibition, is in the catalogue.)

Peyton does not like her works to be called portraits, and she does not take commissions. This distinguishes her from Andy Warhol, with whom she is often compared and whose influence she frequently acknowledges. Considering her interest in beautiful and famous people, Warhol is an obvious antecedent, as he is for so much recent art that deals with celebrity and pop culture, from Nan Goldin's to Stella Vine's. However, the differences between Warhol and Peyton are more notable than their similarities. His portraits are blatantly detached, frankly commercial and meant to magnify their subjects' already larger-than-life qualities. Hers are more casual and motivated by a highly personal canon of celebrity. When Hoptman asked Peyton how she chooses her subjects, Peyton replied, "Well, there's no choosing. It's just who I'm very interested in, and identify with, and see as very hopeful in the world."<sup>2</sup> Peyton's and Warhol's use of photography is also fundamentally different. The photographic source remains visible as the underlying form in Warhol's portraits, while for Peyton the photo, following its compositional contribution, as she puts it, has "got to get lost."<sup>3</sup> Warhol often chose photos that had been created specifically for publicity. Peyton looks for more candid records of life's small details.



Gladys Presley and Elvis, ca. 1945.

Opposite, *Gladys and Elvis*, 1997, oil on canvas, 17 by 14 inches.



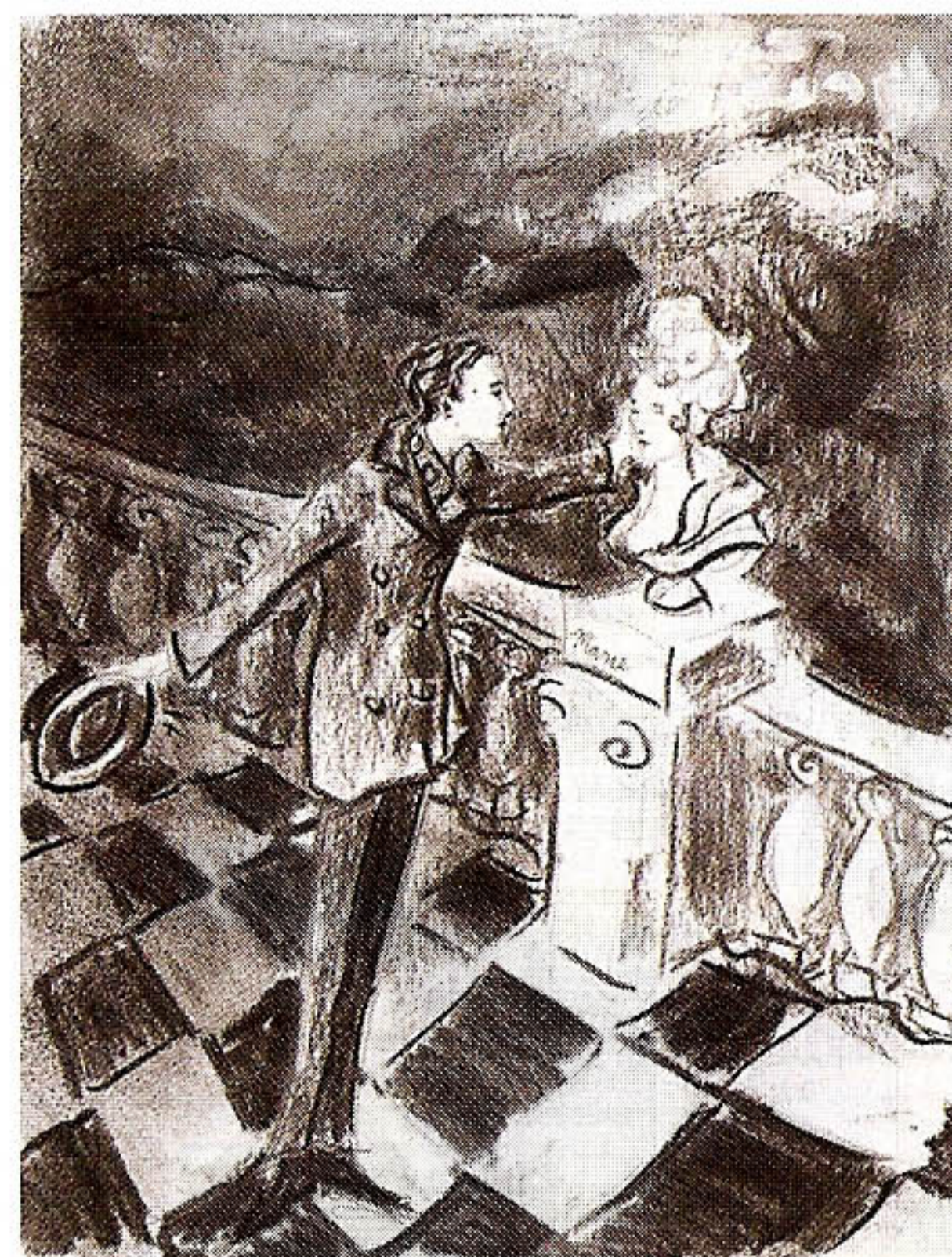


THE PICTURES ACHIEVE A LUMINOSITY FROM THE DILUTED OILS THAT SLIDE ACROSS THE SMOOTHLY SANDED GESSO LIKE FINGER PAINT ON GLOSSY PAPER.

John Giorno, the subject of Warhol's film *Sleep*, wrote in an essay for the exhibition catalogue that Peyton reminds him of a young Warhol. He cited her use of pop colors, but he might equally have pointed to the way she insinuates herself into the company of beautiful people as a virtually invisible observer. The act of watching someone unawares—a paradigm of the theoretical “male gaze”—is turned on its head in a number of her intimate portraits of Tony, Rirkrit Tiravanija (her former husband), Nick, Kurt and others sleeping. These portraits suggest an ease and unself-consciousness in looking, something that Peyton apparently struggled with at the start.<sup>4</sup> She quietly but persistently undermines the notion of the possessive gaze as a male prerogative. But she also repudiates the inevitability of objectification by the artist—a defining characteristic of the male gaze in classic feminist theory—by pointing out that she prefers to choose male subjects “who objectify themselves, which is a female trait.”<sup>5</sup> Peyton credits love as her motivation to portray, but bristles at critical attempts to divest her of the artist's privileged position by categorizing her as a prisoner of “teenage lust and longing.”<sup>6</sup> Her art seems to question the continued relevance of the monolithic concept of the gaze as a sexist assertion of superiority and control.

Peyton may share Warhol's fascination with beauty and star quality, but her pictorial affinities are less Hollywood glam than English estheticism, with its tradition of portraiture reaching back to the late 18th century. Though she does not claim Gainsborough as one of her art-historical muses, surely a debt is due to the virtuoso of Romantic portraiture. Peyton's portraits of Tony, in particular, with his tousled hair and angular features etched on a pale face, are reminiscent of the style of emotional immediacy and glamorous ease that began with Gainsborough and continued on through Sir Thomas Lawrence to John Singer Sargent. From David Hockney (whom Peyton has painted), specifically from his colored-pencil portraits of the mid-1970s, Peyton has adapted a drawing technique that conveys a typically English combination of casual intimacy and refined beauty. Adding more of these accomplished colored-pencil drawings to the exhibition would have provided a welcome balance to the equally evocative charcoal drawings—*Princess Elizabeth's First Radio Address* and *Ludwig Caressing the Bust of Marie Antoinette* (both 1993) among them—with their retro, mid-20th-century look.

The 19th-century exponents of this portrait lineage belonged to the Aesthetic Move-



Above, *Ludwig Caressing the Bust of Marie Antoinette*, 1993, charcoal on paper, 13¾ by 10¾ inches. Collection Karen and Andy Stillpass.



Left, *Pati*, 2007, pastel pencil on paper, 8⅝ by 6 inches.

Opposite, *Luing (Tony)*, 2001, oil on board, 14 by 11 inches. Collection Dianne Wallace, New York.

## IN RECENT CITYSCAPES, PEYTON CAPTURES THE TRANSIENT BUT LIVELY BUSTLE AT GROUND LEVEL AND THE MONUMENTAL PERMANENCE OF THE ARCHITECTURE ABOVE.

ment, the rarefied world of Whistler, Wilde and company, to which Peyton is strongly attracted. She often cites the Victorian as well as the Edwardian eras in her interviews, and has several times spoken of the formative influence of a Masterpiece Theater program on actress and royal mistress Lillie Langtry, whom many artists clamored to depict.<sup>7</sup> In particular, Peyton empathizes with Wilde and his sensitivity to youth and beauty, expressed by his infatuation with Bosie (Lord Alfred Douglas) of the "red-roseleaf lips"—whom Peyton has painted several times from photographs—along with other *raffiné* Englishmen such as Rupert Brooke (Yeats's "handsomest young man in England"). Copying images of these historical figures, Peyton also adapts their mood and look for her portraits of music idols such as Liam Gallagher and Jarvis Cocker.

"Live Forever," the exhibition's title, clinches the spirit of romantic idealism that makes Peyton's work galvanizing. It's an invocation of Shakespeare rather than the lyrics of "Fame!" His *Sonnet 55* (which prefaces Peyton's 2001 book, *Prince Eagle*, a tribute to Tony's resemblance to Napoleon) may be something of a mantra for Peyton. Her paraphrase of the Bard in an interview is a clue to understanding her commitment to portraiture: "Shakespeare wrote to this young man and said that all the wars in the world can happen, everything can change, but I'm going to make art inspired by you, and you'll live forever. That's a beautiful idea."<sup>8</sup> Confering immortality is, of course, a fundamental mission of portraiture, as is Peyton's more selfish motive to "hold on to people that I love, a way to stop time."<sup>9</sup>

Ludwig II, who caresses a bust of Marie Antoinette in one of Peyton's drawings, could serve as an emblem of Peyton's own devotion to portraiture. This is one of several of her works that take portraiture itself as a subject. Another depicts Queen Elizabeth II admiring a portrait of her ancestors; still another shows the protagonist from Stendhal's 1830 novel *The Red and the Black* admiring a small portrait of Napoleon. Yet as Peyton enters middle age (she was born in 1965), the concentration on the portrait may be growing problematic: some of the people who now move her (Joe Montgomery, Gavin Brown and Matthew Barney in the show), themselves middle-aged, have evidently not been selected for their dewy beauty. Peyton has forsaken the allure of surface beauty in favor of a deeper engagement with the signs of experience and maturity; opinion on these recent works has been divided.<sup>10</sup> In the portrait of Barney, the frown and sunken eyes suggest weariness or the burden of concerns, but it's not enough to keep us engaged: yes, we miss the sparkle of Peyton's signature style. She has darkened and muddied the colors, and, in a new, rougher pictorial treatment, the brushwork no longer glides but appears hesitant, even awkward.

Peyton may be searching for a fresh start, and with one of the most recent works in the show she seems to have found it. *West 11th Street, Greenwich Avenue, and 7th*

*Avenue, New York City, 2008* captures the quality of a New York street: the transient but lively bustle at ground level and the monumental permanence of the architecture above. It suggests that Peyton might do for the critically neglected genre of the cityscape what she has done for portraiture. ○

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Peter Schjeldahl, "The Talk of The Town—At the Museums," *New Yorker*, Dec. 17, 2001, p. 38. <sup>2</sup> *New Museum Paper*, vol. 5, Fall/Winter 2008, p. 4. <sup>3</sup> *Index* interview, Elizabeth Peyton, 2000, with Rob Pruitt and Steve Lafreniere, online at [http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/elizabeth\\_peyton.shtml](http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/elizabeth_peyton.shtml). <sup>4</sup> "Blithe Spirit: A Conversation with Elizabeth Peyton and Cheryl Kaplan," *DB Artmag*, no. 18, 2004, at <http://www.db-artmag.de/2004/3/e/2/207.php>. Peyton explains, "For a while there are barriers. I'm pretty shy with the camera. It takes a lot for me point [sic] a camera in somebody's face. I can do it better at a distance. Tony was a special case, he was open and didn't make me feel self-conscious for wanting to look at him." In the *Index* online interview, she said, "Tony was the first person who let me look at him that way and not feel violated or think it strange." <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* The idea that the possessive gaze can be the result of an appreciative, rather than simply destructive, view of beauty is explored in Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1999, and Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2001. <sup>7</sup> See, for example, Linda Pilgrim, "An Interview with a Painter," *Parkett*, 53, 1998, p. 59. <sup>8</sup> From the 2001 interview "Elizabeth Peyton Talks with David Shapiro," online at <http://www.theblowup.com/archived/elizabethpeyton/page4.html>. <sup>9</sup> Quoted in Susan Elgin, "On painting the icons, face by famous face," *The Daily Iowan*, Nov. 9, 2006, Section: 80 Hours ([www.dailyiowan.com](http://www.dailyiowan.com)). <sup>10</sup> Jerry Saltz, for example (in "Elizabeth II," originally published in *New York Magazine*, May 19, 2008, online at <http://nymag.com/arts/reviews/46791>), calls them "tiny, dazzling portraits of radiant middle age," while Roberta Smith wrote that Peyton's second style hadn't gelled, and that at the conclusion of the show, "Ms. Peyton is shown heading in several promising new directions, although unsteadily" ("The Personal and the Painterly," *New York Times*, Oct. 10, 2008, p. C29).

"Live Forever: Elizabeth Peyton" debuted at the New Museum, New York, and opens this month at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis [Feb. 14–June 14]; it goes on to the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London and the Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht. Curated by Laura Hoptman, the show is accompanied by a 255-page catalogue that includes contributions from Iwona Blazwick and John Giorno.

**NADIA TSCHERNY** is a New York-based art historian.



*West 11th Street, Greenwich Avenue, and 7th Avenue,  
New York City, 2008, 2008, oil on board, 9 by 6 inches.  
Collection Mitzi and Warren Eisenberg.*