

norwich gallery

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dispatch 119



Stick Collector 2005 watercolour 25cm x 20cm

Paul Housley *Heavy Easel*

11 January to 18 February 2006

Opening Wednesday 11 January 5.30 to 7.30

Talk Duke Street Lecture Theatre 2.30

Films Thursdays 5.30 Norwich Gallery

19.01.06 *Rembrandt* 1936

84 minutes, starring Charles Laughton, dir Alexander Korda

26.01.06 *24 Hour Party People* 2001

117 minutes, dir Micheal Winterbottom

much better painter in 20 years time. I like the slow burn of painting. I like the idea of discovering new things. So many things now are just instant gratification.

LM What pictures do you go and see in London in the museums at the moment?

PH I'll go and see anything. It does not have to be something I particularly like. Sometimes you can have a reaction against things that can be a positive thing.

Some of the best things and most influential things are things I did not get at first. They creep up on you, or it slowly materialises. I did not think much of this painting but then you begin to see more in it and you realise that he, or she, is a really good painter. Sometimes you realise they are the most influential things. Some of the things you get into on Foundation or before, Bacon or Rauschenberg, the sort of people who are hovering between abstraction and figuration, while you are trying to understand the language of painting. Now I do not think a lot of those painters but they were important at that time. So you are constantly looking for refreshment. There are people you go back to. It is only the last four or five years that I have really begun to appreciate Cézanne. I had to reach a point where I had to understand about paint before I could really appreciate why he was so good.

LM I was also thinking about Sickert and Degas and their awareness of photography and how that related to their idea of a 'glimpse', to a memory. It seems something you are putting together again for us at this moment.

PH I still use photography, but not as much as I used to and I'm much more careful about using it. I'm trying to avoid obvious clichés with photographs. I'm trying to find something that allows you to do a lot with it. I think the good thing about using photographs, or why it became important in my work is because it debunks some of the nonsense about painting. It demystifies it a little bit. I love making paintings but I don't want to worship painting because then you become less of a painter. There are so many myths about art and the cult of personality.

LM The reason I remain interested in figurative painting occurred to me years ago in the National Portrait Gallery. I was looking at



Pet Sounds Green 2005 oil on canvas 46cm x 61cm

Lynda Morris I tried to find a title and subject for your exhibition and I started to think around the idea of 'Small Subjects'.

Paul Housley Titles and words are things I really like to play with, some of my titles seem quite obtuse and other times they are quite direct. I almost see titles as another piece of work. Some of them seem quite flippant but there is a point to them. If you know my work over a period of time there are several recurring themes and motifs that crop up again and again. There is a sense to them but it is not a particularly logical sense, more of a feeling. Getting it just right is important.

I really don't like smart work, I don't like clever work, I like intelligent work and there is a real difference between the two. As I get older I get away from anything ironic. I'm totally bored with it. As I said, sometimes things are obtuse but there is a kind of direct feeling behind it. If you think of Mark E Smith lyrics, to the casual observer they seem pretty obtuse and dense but there is a reality behind them. There is an intelligence and a passion behind what he says, which is flattened, partly to do with the Mancunian accent and that whole Mancunian personality. That is what I relate to and I like levelling things out and I try to avoid sentimentality. You try to counter-balance the natural sentimentality in the act of painting by giving it a title that somehow undermines or challenges that. Sometimes the titles are confrontational in that way.

LM A kind of realism?

PH Yes. A kind of generosity. I don't want to make paintings that are mean spirited. Some of the titles do have a dumb aggression to them, an aggression towards, quite often, the art world, or towards myself as well. I recognise the inbuilt ridiculousness of being an artist. You have got to be aware. To step outside yourself and watch something that is quite a ridiculous thing to do. And I think it is always good to have that somewhere in your mind. Ultimately the work has got to stand up completely on its own. You should not need to know anything about me whatsoever. If you know a bit about me you can see influences from the background affecting the work but that is the same with anybody.

LM In EAST 99 you had a big long wall of portraits, but in the recent work there are less paintings of people and more working from objects or from photographs that keep still.

PH One of the reasons I started painting from objects was because I wanted to stop using photographs completely. I found it was restrictive. So many people are using photographs. Obviously Luc Tuymans has been a massive influence on so

the Elizabethan paintings and then at van Dyke and there is only fifty years between the two pictures but there is such a completely different idea of what reality is, from the tightness of those Elizabethan paintings to the flamboyance of van Dyke just 50 years later. But if you think back to early photography, to Nadar and then Bill Brandt a hundred and fifty years later, there is a consistency. The longer photography exists the more precious is that idea of the ability of touch in painting to change with each generation.

PH I always regarded painting as an object and I used to make objects as well. I still thought of them as paintings. There has to be natural physical qualities to the work whatever it is, the actual physical touch sense to it. It is not flat. I've got to the point that I like thin stretchers and I like thin paint, I'm getting there but they are still physical to me. Between the image that I have thought about and this physical thing which is the painting. You are using an image but you are lifting it up and turning it round in your mind and coming back to something else to re-animate it as it were. In that way I see photography, on one level, as just a tool. It is just providing me with a starting point and something I can manipulate and change and work with really. And again with the object, I try and find fairly bland objects that have not got too much background behind them – the same with the photographs. I usually try and find fairly small photographs, maybe black and white, colour as well. Something that has just the right amount of information to give you something, but not to close you down. It allows you to put a lot more into it and to pull it apart and to reconstruct it. That is one reason I tried to stop using photographs to some extent because I was finding it too easy to find certain images that were interesting to begin with but it became a bit lazy.

LM Do you do drawings before starting a painting?

PH No I don't but I think the watercolours are a way of beginning to doing that. The best paintings are done quite quickly, there might be a lot of work underneath, a lot of failures and a lot of rubbish but when it comes together it comes quite quickly.

LM So you paint *alla prima*, right across the whole surface of the painting, wet into wet.

PH You dive in. That is what it feels like. You try to make it all work at once, in one spontaneous moment, like it dropped out of the sky. It should look easy.

LM How do you make the decision to do another version of a subject?

PH It's as simple as I can do a much better version of it. Certain motifs and images allow you to make quite a minor shift that changes the entire feeling of them. It is that loosening up and allowing things to happen and surprising myself. I like to finish stuff that is sometimes a surprise to me.

LM How do you settle the scale of a painting?

PH Scale is a subject in its self and sometimes it can be the only subject of the painting. That is why sometimes I still make very small paintings. I like the anti heroic element to it and sometimes scale is



Boring me with your suicide 1998 enamel on board 52 x 40cm

many painters, including myself. I thought the simplest way of stopping was just to have this thing in front of me and just to look at it and to start from there. Then I began to realise I looked for a certain kind of object and the objects themselves have a kind of back story but not a heavy, over laden story. The things I use have a certain kind of character to them.

LM I think of them as objects from charity shops that might unlock a memory?

PH There is an element of that but I like the idea of trying to get rid of 99% of any possible narrative, so it is a very base background with a lot of potential for the viewer to read anything into it. They are quite blank objects, so they are not pointed. So you have to concentrate on the actual painting, so you have to make the painting interesting. You don't want the object to be too interesting in itself. You want it to allow you to work with it so it forces you to actually make the new object, the painting itself, an interesting thing.

LM There are a lot of recent subjects - cowboys and soft toys, that would have been in a child's bedroom if you are looking back over 35 years.

PH I try to avoid sentiment but I try to return to what I was first interested in. You realise where you began to be aware of the visual world and where you began to be excited by it. So you go back to what excited you, bright colours, and I used to collect toy soldiers. It wasn't the fact they were soldiers but I used to like the idea of getting things in series that somehow visually worked together. It was the very basic beginnings of my visual education. So in some ways it was an acknowledgement of that, rather than an idea of childhood sentimentality, or trying to get back to childhood sentimentality. It was more trying to recapture that excitement and interest in actually looking at something and being engaged.

One of the things you find is that you cannot stand still in the art world. It is not exactly that you are on a treadmill. It works in two ways; first of all you have to be ambitious about the actual work, you have got to make better work all the time. You do feel this pressure to show the work better in bigger spaces or display it better and you get more ambitious about everything around you and it is very hard not to get carried away. You do not want to be enslaved by the notion of a career.

But at the same time you do not want to mug yourself. You mentioned about my background, there is the working class thing of always being slightly afraid that it will just all disappear. I like the fact that I will be a much better painter when I'm about 60 than I am now. The fact that I'm a much better painter now than I was two years ago, is the kind of ambition that really keeps me going.

LM You mentioned that you had been well taught on your Foundation Course and that had stood you in good stead over the years, who



The Roses in Blackpool 2005 oil on canvas 76cm x 102cm



Possessions 2005 watercolour 30cm x 24cm

an important way of doing that, of working against it. It was in some ways a reaction to some of that large scale male heroic painting of the 1980s, of large scale figures striding forward.

LM What are you getting out of making the watercolours? What is attracting you to them?

PH In a way it is like learning to paint again. A lot of it is in reverse to how you do things in oil painting. It suits my spontaneity. You have to go with it and be loose with it and at first nothing moves at all and then slowly something comes. Now the balance is more than 50 per cent of them hopefully amount to something. Even so you have to have the failures that is part of the deal. I think it is going to feed into the oil paintings. Basically it is just learning more and allowing me more possibilities. Which is what I was saying before – there is so much to learn, so many possibilities. Anything I can use or discard or learn, I like that constant grinding up of information and knowledge and possibilities, even if you discard it, it is forming your opinions and forming your notions of your materials.

LM And you tend always to work in front of the object or do pictures sometimes come from out of your head?

PH I tend usually to have some sort of starting point. When I do something out of my head it is contrived, you find yourself using something remembered or making something up. There is something about just directly looking at an object that stops you being inhibited. I think sometimes making art is a way of fighting your inhibitions.

LM I talk about it as 'under cutting'?

PH Unconscious is probably too strong a word. Half of the time your brain, or certain parts of it, are switched off.

LM I think of you as one of the generation of painters who came out of the teaching of Peter Doig at the RCA in the mid to late 1990s.

taught you?

PH I was taught by a guy called Bill Clark at Tameside College of Technology. I found out later that it was actually the same guy who taught Chris Offili. It was weird because knowing that, I could actually see his influence in his work. I met Chris Offili a couple of times and I mentioned this guy to him and he acknowledged he was a massive influence on him too. I think you probably meet, if you are lucky, two or three people in a life time that help.

LM What was special about his teaching? Did he teach in the life room?

PH He did a bit of everything. I came out of school and I wasted a couple of years at sixth form college doing A Levels that I did not bother taking because I was so disinterested. The notion of going to art college and just doing art - full time, it was a general release. I realised there was another world out there, another possibility. You can meet someone on Foundation who inspires you and gives you the confidence to think: I can actually do this forever. That is why a Foundation Course is so important. You are malleable and pliable if you meet someone at that stage, by the time you do a MA most people are stuck in their ways.

LM Did he teach formally about sight size and such things?

PH Not really. No. I can more or less say I have never been taught anything about painting directly.

LM What about tonal painting? Your work is quite involved with close tonalities.

PH It's all been trial and error, and any kind of natural ability I may have and just feeling my way through it. Even now the thing is going to be a surprise to me and I quite like that. I basically jump in and see what is going to happen.

LM As your work has developed in recent years I have begun to think about Edward Hopper?

PH I learnt by looking an awful lot at paintings. You try things out, things you have seen in other paintings. So in that sense you are taught by other painters all the time. Every now and again I think I cannot paint at all, it is not a depressing thing it is more a celebration or an acceptance and understanding that I have got loads of discoveries to make and I quite like the idea of being a

PH I think Peter Doig was important. On one level it was just the point of meeting someone who was becoming very successful. Someone who had found a way back in to painting and celebrating paint itself. Just actually getting on with the guy was an inspiration. I did not know any successful artists before that. His style of painting was definitely an influence on me. There are certain people like Luc Tuymans and Peter Doig where you get influenced and they re-awaken your painting.

LM Richter?

PH Yes but he was not someone I thought a lot about at the time.

LM What about Hamilton?

PH Of his generation he is probably one of the best. Even Hockney. I saw a couple of things he had at the Art Fair that were really nice. He can still do it. There are a lot of his things that are too twee, but he has still got it, that natural ability.

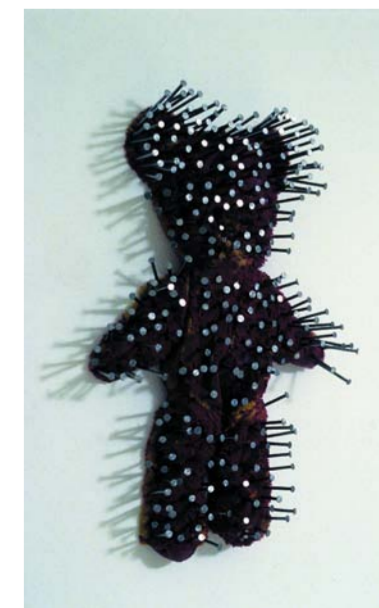
LM I once hung a large group of Hockney portrait drawings and prints from the 1970s and it was a great pleasure.

PH He has just done so much, he is constantly trying out new things and there are not many artists that get to his age and of that success that still do that. I know in one sense his work is quite cosy but he has not rested on a formula, he still mixes it up a bit, he still tries a few things.

LM What about American painters? You use England sometimes in your titles.

PH It is very easy to be parochial. I am aware of my background but at the same time I do not want to be a slave to it or to become a cliché. You constantly have to give yourself challenges or remind yourself that you don't want to become a professional working class person. You have got to constantly challenge yourself or people's perception of you. You have got to be awake to it. I am very English but at the same time there are things about being English, which I really do not like. It is a typical English thing of having a battle with it but I do have a thoughtfulness about how I play it and undermine it. On one level I celebrate it but it is a tricky area you have got to be very careful with. You want to reach as many people as possible but at the same time not to water it down. So it has to have a strong flavour to it but you do not want that flavour to be so narrow, so condensed that it is parochial.

There is a kind of romanticism to what I do. I am beginning to accept that, I used to fight it a lot more.



The Tennis Girl 1995 mixed media 50cm

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Paul Housley *The Boy is Made of Plastic*

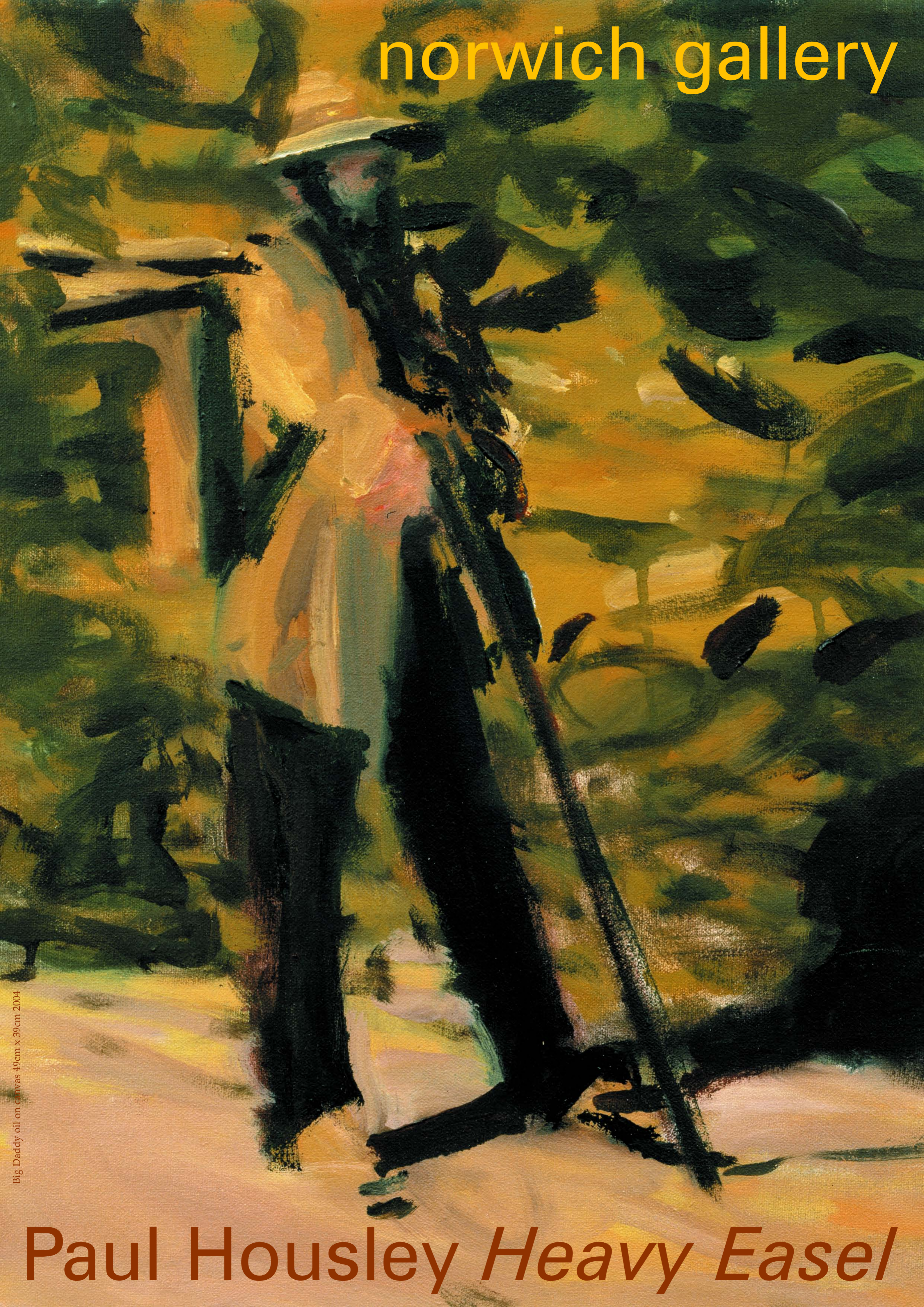
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Big Daddy oil on canvas 49cm x 39cm 2004

Paul Housley *Heavy Easel*