

HOSPITALFIELD

Mick Peter

Gerroff!! (Or User Feedback)

27 May – 31 October 2021

An Interview with Helen Nisbet



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Hospitalfield invited curator **Helen Nisbet** to interview artist **Mick Peter** for this printed booklet to accompany his exhibition at Hospitalfield:

Helen Nisbet: Mick Peter's work brings together sculpture and cartoon, combining the style of editorial illustration with industrial materials such as acrylic composite, steel, concrete and plywood. Resulting installations are at a human scale - viewers interact with characters and weave in and out of giant renderings of everyday objects like popcorn, chalkboards and trouser zips. The sculptures embody a sense of mischief nodding to political satire. We want to know what they get up to when we're not there. His installations often take over whole rooms, 3D objects are rendered flat and paused in time like a comic strip frame.

Peter's ability to playfully articulate tropes of human behaviour through simple line drawing is impressive. Using the mechanisms of illustration to present layered meanings and ideas, the works talk about art and the act of making, they interrogate visual representation and highlight the absurdity of miscommunication whilst maintaining a lightness and democracy that ensure they remain interpretable and relatable.

At Hospitalfield Peter has made *Gerroff!! (Or User Feedback)*. Within the beautiful gardens, a series of three sculpture groupings are his first drawn works created specifically to be shown outside, and they are the third of the annual sculpture commission at Hospitalfield. These vignettes imagine a sculpture park where the generic art historical forms are viewed, climbed, explained, peed on and prodded. Complementing his commission are 20 tables, in the newly refurbished cafe, covered with illustrated visual references taken from the Hospitalfield's collection, gardens and Peter's own materials.



Peter Arno, The New Yorker, 26 December 1953

Let's begin by talking about your work at Hospitalfield, how did the commission materialise?

Mick Peter: It's been slowly evolving from the original pre-Covid date. We postponed for a year, and now here we are already! In a way this has allowed for a bit of a control freak's cosmic realignment, I've ended up making a commission for the café as well as the original sculpture commission. I've also been able to let the technique for the sculptures gain a little refinement and the drawings for these groupings have evolved a bit over the past year also. It seems appropriate as these sculptures are more 'luxuriously' made than any before and will be the first 'drawn' sculptures I've made that can go outside. It seems a big thing to me but maybe it'll seem to have more continuity with previous works for other people.

And how have the Hospitalfield buildings and gardens informed the work?

The new formal garden I love....one of the groups of sculptures is sited in there, a kind of traffic island in the middle of the spokes of all the little paths that radiate from it. There's also the way the rest of the grounds are used freely by locals and dog walkers etc. (though you could be a local dog walker of course). It seems pretty democratic and has a lot to do with the Hospitalfield ethos both now and historically. That came into my thinking, people are going to have private moments with these objects which is lovely to imagine. The sculptures are about people and 'types' as much as they are a gag about how public art is viewed.

This sense of giving space to private moments is within the whole commission. The tables in the café are adorned with delicate illustrations inspired by the collection and items that could be found in the gardens. There are fir cones, flowers, half played games and feathers alongside keys, industrial paint and trinkets. They link to the history and structure of the place whilst also giving permanence to the evanescent - the things that last, the things that don't.

A bit like a fly in amber, the material I've used has this quality to it, the permanence of inlaid objects and delicate things that are embedded in a solid surface. It's also my favourite game of flatness again, things viewed from above that I've drawn that have been engraved on the table surfaces. This point of view should be fun, everything is to scale, it will feel strange and fun to put your arms, phone, a plate, on it and disrupt/add to this surface image. All the drawn objects are casually arranged to suggest that they are a moment in time rather than an orderly presentation of artefacts.

Tell me about your work process, your time in the studio, how ideas develop...?

So much drawing... multiple sketchbooks, lots of looking. I guess that's normal really, isn't it? I tend to have a few strands going on, really incredibly slow drawings, quick drawings, sculptures about sculptures, sculptures about drawings. I make works in groups or series normally (an attempt to remove that authority or importance of the singular). There is a narrative or a unifying plot or visual gag always. For me the fabrication is another chance to slow down to look at what has come from a drawing. With the sculptures and tables I filled the incised line work with black acrylic composite. It's a slow process but a chance to spend time with the drawn image. When you polish it back (a pretty slow tortuous process) the precision of the lines is revealed, it's as exciting as developing a photograph and seeing the image appear. The only downside of all the power tools is that you can't work through your music playlists....

People are often carrying things in your work. In your 2019 solo exhibition *To Me, To You* at Baltic, Gateshead, a sculpture was assessed, lugged and shifted before its final display in the gallery. In *Pyramid Selling* at Tramway in 2015, a tremendous zip was dragged along by a labourer and a giant cement block negotiated by two tired technicians. Playfulness around scale, and an ability to demonstrate the weight or physicality of a thing is something I've seen in your practice from the beginning.

I think this is motivated by a demented desire to transform the whole environment of a show, really break the clean order of a space. I like making sculptures about recognisable stuff and playing with their scale....it means you sense the 'wrongness' and feel the scale and weight of objects. Also you've got that weird thing where you're navigating the objects in a way that is on your terms, your line of sight so when a character can't quite pick something up it's funnier. In the Baltic exhibition that was the whole extended joke, a sculpture with physical weight but no intellectual weight, no authority as it had been modified to make it easier to carry. I hate to say I'm 'interested in' things as it sounds a bit vague... but I am interested in the way sculptures in cartoons can be such an effective cipher for a whole movement or type of art encounter. It's that affectionate pastiche thing.... a piss take with real love for the butt of the joke.

There's also voyeurism - people peeping, prodding, viewing through gaps. This lends itself to theatricality, the possibility of a chance encounter or secret interaction - audiences watch someone working alone in an office, they witness the plight of daily labour and are invited to spy through gaps in windows.

I think of that like making the biggest container for a private joke ever. It's like when you see someone laughing at something they're reading on a train but you can't see the text that's made them laugh. If you have bits of a work that two people can't see at the same time, you'll see people describing it to each other in between taking a peek. There's something

really beautiful about that. It worked so well with the *The Regenerators* at Glasgow International and with *To Me, To You* at Baltic. This new work doesn't quite use the same method but the surprising locations of the objects will hopefully cause people to have room for a little bit of private mirth!

I'm interested in the materials you use; they tend to be quite lumpy and industrial - Jesmonite, latex, resin, cement... for this show you're working with HI-MACS which is more often used to create worktops in kitchens or bathrooms.

Taking materials and then using them in a slightly wrong way is very appealing. I wanted to use HI-MACS because of the density of the colour, it really is strange as there is no grain or texture it's hard to process what you're looking at. With earlier work in Jesmonite it was more about obscuring what the cheap materials were by using it as a coating. This HI-MACS material gives you the sense that there is no armature, no interior. The best way of describing it is that it's like a stick of rock, wherever you slice it or snap it the picture is still very much in it and of it.

Your work is often concerned with epistemology - questioning what it means to know something, or poking and prodding at an assumption of knowledge. I think this is true of many cartoonists, and the comparison of your work to the stuff of cartoons is often described.

You've got all the nice words! In newspaper cartoons or *New Yorker* cartoons you're doing something quite sophisticated when you 'read' them, you have to understand the textual part of the gag, the language or the shorthand of cartoons, as well as the thing being presented, all at once. I guess my favourite kind is the literalisation of metaphor, showing just how far drawing can go as an idiom. The tension is often between text and image. I suppose for me the location of the objects acts as the text, as the thing it's creating that dynamic with. I think my take on the accessibility of the idea is allowing the work to show the conceptual joins.

That comes from cartoons... (e.g., Peter Arno's New Yorker Cartoon on page 2).

And like a cartoonist you are able to indicate the mood of a moment - curators in high waisted jeans, an awkward dad with fashionably cut jeans (and no socks?), a passive aggressive neighbourhood watch tote bag. Who are these people?

A mixture of people I've seen and drawn, of types. Drawn people also have their own typology, it's part of the drawn language and how people recognise it. It's a bit like using a person in a bowler hat with an umbrella to signify a salaryman even though codified hat wearing is no longer a reliable guide. My artworks come with people already looking at the artwork in the 'wrong way', it puts people at ease. The way that they respond to the work is really refreshing, they laugh, they chat, they take selfies, suddenly the 'rules' have all been binned.

We were both in New York at the same time in 2014 - I was working there and you were over for a group show - *Puddle, Porthole, Portal* at SculptureCenter in Queens. I remember being on the roof of The Met and you sketched this very specific man, in shorts and cowboy boots, with long flowing hair and a moustache - he appeared in a work you made a couple of years later. He was so much of that moment but also a universal trope, this hipster-y guy having a beer in the Manhattan sun. Is this how you work? Sketching, storing, creating characters over time?

That guy with the cowboy boots was amazing! Yeah, I store up lots of drawings, heads mostly, the rest of bodies are hard to draw. Joking aside, I tend to mix and match parts of people quite a bit from my sketchbooks.

On that trip I remember us visiting some good second-hand bookshops in between deli sandwiches. I bought Kurt Vonnegut's *Slapstick* on your recommendation - the one with the excellent cover by Paul Bacon - a

clown's face hosting the book's verbal tic "hi" and "ho" in each eye. Vonnegut, like you, often uses physical comedy - exaggerated characters, ridiculous situations.

His books are really attractive with their invasive rhetorical stuff, grotesque stuff, world weariness, exasperation about the political, weird little drawings. So much to like about them. Slapstick starts off talking about the 'situational poetry' of Laurel and Hardy and then veers off into a story about Dr Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain, former US president, whose campaign slogan was 'lonesome no more'. I think after the recent election we should probably read it again!

Yes, I was trying to remember the name of that character. I read it when Obama was president but I think it would feel really different now.

I know that you get a kick out of good graphic design, that the style and form of classic, pre-digital book design informs the feel of your work.

Yes, in a big way. It's because a lot of it is physical cut and paste (I like to chop up my drawings/sources) and there is a lot of overlap in roles, between designer and illustrator. Much of this is how good designers and illustrators can make 'hardworking' pictures, portmanteau images that encapsulate so much. I'm thinking especially about book covers, magazine adverts and posters.

And back to literature more widely; you read a lot, does this feel like wider research, something more holistic or do you feel that reading directly impacts the work you make?

Bit of both, it depends what the book is. Probably structural ideas for projects a little bit....there's always the pictures too

You said you read Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* during lockdown - it's really good isn't it!

And full of imagery that seems like it could only exist in writing somehow, it's bursting with ideas and vicious humour.

You recently pointed me in the direction of Peter Bichsel's short story *Stupidity is Power*¹ (translated by the brilliant writer Lydia Davis) a sort of parable on the politics of daily life, alluding to the politics of global society. There's something about this exploration of power and stupidity at all levels that is central to the tone of your work. In Bichsel's story there is a line about people, even those at bottom of the hierarchy, needing "someone who is even farther below him to oppress", and I see these little displays of authority in your work - the pantomime of workplace hierarchy, finger pointing, finger wagging, the woman poking a stick at a sculpture here at Hospitalfield.

The people in the work are regular people. In big art institutions there are so many interesting people 'behind the scenes'. I feel, in making stuff in a workshop, I'm more comfortable at that 'level' or feel a great deal of empathy with anyone who has to make an artist's ego a reality. Even though I'm really hands on I still need expert help, but these relationships are what makes being an artist really interesting. I'm very uneasy about feeling too self-important or anyone taking me too seriously!

And yes, Bichsel, so good! You get the sense of how closely he watches and records. His writing strips away anything that's not working hard. His work is definitely akin to the best parables, even his essay writing, texts that seem as if they could have always existed. That essay is great and his stories are magic too, though there isn't much in translation. Lydia

¹ <https://www.musicandliterature.org/features/2019/3/26/stupidity-is-power>

Davis did translate another one of my favourites which is all about language and objects, A Table is a Table²

Always the same table,' said the man, 'the same chairs, the bed, the picture. And I call the table a table, I call the picture a picture, the bed is named bed, and people refer to the chair as a chair. But why, really? The French call the bed "lee", the table "tahbleh", they name the picture "tahblo" and the chair "shez", and they understand one another. And the Chinese understand one another too.

'Why isn't the bed called picture,' thought the man and smiled, then he laughed, laughed until the neighbours knocked on the wall and shouted 'Quiet!

So perfect. I really loved this story.

And while we're talking about love, I really feel affection or sympathy in the bones of what you do - the exasperated dad, bleary eyed administrative boredom, back breaking labour, people trying their best.

Exactly, they're all feelings we've had. If I'm drawing people I tend to be making the expressions they're making, it's a bit like people who stick their tongue out when they're concentrating I suppose, almost like that stops them speaking and increases the focus.

And the sculptures of sculptures! In this commission these generic sculptures embody tropes in western modern art history, I guess they represent 'art' and looking at art?

Western Modern Art History. You've saved up the biggie for the end there Helen, this is where I should really hit peak interview response but maybe the answer is more prosaic.... I'm sympathetic to how it feels like there is a codified way of looking at all this stuff when you visit a gallery,

² <https://www.thewhitereview.org/fiction/a-table-is-a-table/>

in any era. How long should you stare at an abstract painting, should it be less than looking at one that's full of peacocks and grapes? That said, in using the language of something quick (a lowbrow drawing), I'm inviting people to relax a bit and not stress about looking at the work quite quickly. I won't be timing them anyway. In terms of the sculptures that loosely represent art history I chose them because I liked them certainly. They're also drawn in a less stylised way to assign them a different role in the scene, the thing that is being looked at by the 'cartoon' people even though they're all pictures really.

**Yes, I like to finish on a question that's complicated to answer!
Thank you Mick this has been interesting and enjoyable.**

Helen Nisbet is a curator and writer, she has known Mick Peter since the early 2000s.

Mick Peter's exhibition *Gerroff!! (Or User Feedback)* is open at Hospitalfield until 31 October 2021 marking the launch of the Garden & Garden Buildings at Hospitalfield.

Mick Peter will be in conversation with **Roger Malbert** in a public event on Saturday 19 June at 3pm.

For more information please see the Hospitalfield website:
www.hospitalfield.org.uk

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