Interview: Howard Hodgkin
True colours

He is a painter who 'hates painting'; a tortured soul who terrifies interviewers; a father who came out as gay in his forties. Now, at 73, the subject of a major Tate retrospective, Howard Hodgkin finds he has more energy and ambition than ever, he tells Rachel Cooke

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I am terrified of meeting Howard Hodgkin. A tiny part of me keeps hoping that he'll cancel, and I will be off the hook. Why? Oh, where to begin? For one thing, he doesn't much like doing interviews, and there are lots of things - pretty much everything, it sometimes feels - that he simply won't talk about. He takes criticism badly but, confusingly, some compliments don't seem to go down a bundle, either. His emotions are very near the surface, and you can provoke him to hot fury or to tears almost before you know it. He is clever and well-read. But most of all, I am crippled by my own deep admirationof him. Next month, a massive retrospective of his work opens at Tate Britain. I first saw this show in Dublin at the Irish Museum of Modern Art where it induced in me a feeling of such pure covetousness that - I swear that this is true - at one moment I found myself slyly checking, first, the positions of the room's security cameras, and, second, the capacity of my handbag. The sudden tingling that had started up in my fingertips felt positively dangerous.

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But he doesn't cancel, so I proceed to his house, which is close to the British Museum, sweaty of palm and white of face. Hodgkin likes to interview his interviewers so, first of all, we go down the road for a cup of coff ee. The table we choose is round and tiny and my back is - literally - against the wall. He considers me with his pale blue eyes, and then he asks me about the show: did I enjoy it? 'Oh, yes,' I say. 'It was great.' I should stop now, but I don't. 'It was especially great the day I went because no one else was there. No crowds!'

Silence. Oh dear. Obviously, it is a bad idea to tell an artist that no one is visiting his show. Not just bad; cruel. In any case, it is not true. In Ireland they have been packing them in. I know this for a fact. I just got lucky. I look at Hodgkin. His friend Bruce Chatwin once wrote that you could be 'captivated by his smile, or frozen by it'. At present, however, there is no smile at all. The seconds pass. Then, at last, he says: 'Yes, that must have been very nice.'

He smiles, very kindly, and I am captivated - though that could just be the relief speaking.

After the coffee we walk back to his house. His front door, as he now points out, is 'not quite black' - a distinction that brings to mind the famous Towel Incident. Much as Hodgkin dislikes being described as a colourist he is, of course, quite particular about colour. On holiday in Italy with his friend Julian Barnes, Hodgkin saw a black towel in a shop window. He went inside to buy one but none of the seven or eight that the shopkeeper offered him were sufficiently black. Eventually Hodgkin persuaded the shopkeeper to produce the towel from the window. This towel was very, very slightly blacker than the others. 'A sale was concluded,' notes Barnes, dryly (you can read this account in a new book, Writers on Howard Hodgkin).

Anyway, beyond the not quite black door, it is gloomy, but then you step out of another door on to a metal walkway and into his studio, and all is light. This space used to be a dairy, and has white walls and a glass roof. The paintings all have their backs to us, so the only colour comes from two weary mustard armchairs. I feel a bit like I've stumbled on a stage set.

Falling into his armchair, Hodgkin looks beautifully patrician, but gloomy: the Emperor Hadrian on catching sight of yet more Northumbrian rain. In a way, it is odd that he wants to be interviewed in his studio. It is a place associated with pain and strife because, even after all this time, he still dreads painting. 'I spend much more time building up to doing it than doing it,' he says. 'Dread is a part of it. One more mark and, if it's the wrong one, [the painting] is ruined.'

Does he still feel like he might not be able to pull off his next picture? 'Yes, always. All the time. There are no moments of great hurry. It's always slow. Very slow. And then, sometimes, you could come in here and find me paralysed. The only time I enjoy it is when I've finished a picture. But I don't enjoy that for very long, because then the process starts again.' He pauses and then says quietly: 'I hate painting.'

But he gets there in the end. The Tate show gathers work from all six decades of his career, and it is wonderful. Hodgkin's paintings have so much to do with feelings - his, and your own - that they are difficult to write about. As Julian Barnes has written, they speak to the eye, the heart and the mind - but not to that part of the mind that articulates. Still, the critics will say a great deal about this show; I cannot see how it can fail to pick up rave reviews. In my view it would be worth seeing it for three paintings alone: Downstairs (1958), Fisherman's Cove (1993) and Dirty Mirror (2000), all of which hum

with life but are also works of technical genius.

But what do I know? When I ask Hodgkin if he would have gone on painting even if people had been appalled by his efforts, he says: 'Well, many people seem to be!' I think this siege mentality of his comes from a feeling, one he has had since childhood, that people, especially British people, look down on painters, treat them as hobbyists. Paintings, yes; painters, no. But there is also this idea that painting is quaint. He doesn't think video art has wiped it out just yet, but still ... 'A well-known critic said to me: painting isn't really about anything except having fun with the brush. It made me very worried. It made me realise what an enormous gap has grown up between painting and the world outside.' Here is a possible reason why the man who hates Dictaphones agrees to talk to people like me: to plug this gap.

Howard Hodgkin was born in London, part of a family of, to pinch from Chatwin again, 'well-ordered minds and well-furnished houses'. His great-great grandfather discovered Hodgkin's disease, and cousin Dorothy won the Nobel prize for chemistry. More significantly, Roger Fry, the art critic, was another cousin, and Roger's sister, Margery, was an encouraging friend to Hodgkin as a boy; he remembers visiting her house, which was filled with furniture from the Omega Workshop. This may be one reason among many that he paints on board (and even on found objects, like breadboards), and that his frames are part of the picture rather than a final embellishment.

But his own parents were less glamorous, and certainly not interested in painting. The family lived in a red-brick house in Hammersmith. His father worked for ICI, and was a keen plant collector; his mother liked to paint botanical watercolours. The only painting of their son's that they ever owned, they eventually gave to the Tate; it never quite settled in at home.

Hodgkin doesn't much like talking about his childhood, which is a pity, because from the outside it is a perfect narrative. 'I was nine when I first said I was going to be an artist,' he says. 'Being an artist means being your own person, so it is quite a thing to decide when you are nine.' And all the more so if everyone is against you. Hodgkin's mother wanted him to be a diplomat, a barmy idea given how stubborn he is. In 1940, when he was eight, he was evacuated to Long Island, during which time he was taken to visit the Museum of Modern Art. No doubt all those Matisses were very exciting but he has other memories of his stay: a neat lawn; a woman's disastrous facelift. Overall, the impression must have been of great colour, inside and out; when he got back to Britain he must have felt as if he had walked into a sepia photograph.

After the war an inheritance meant he could go to Eton. He hated it, but at least he had a wonderful art teacher, Wilfred Blunt, (brother of Anthony, Poussin expert and spy). In his rooms at Eton, Blunt had Moorish arches, built for effect, and a display of artefacts that included an African carving of a dog with an erect penis. The only thing that Hodgkin seems not to have liked about Blunt was the fact that 'he took up italic handwriting and taught it to the boys'. He laughs. Even so, he kept running away and was eventually told that he wouldn't be allowed back to school unless he saw a psychiatrist - only, cleverly, he persuaded this unsuspecting shrink that what he really needed was to leave Eton.

So off he went to Bryanston, and another great art teacher Charles Handley-Read. What constitutes a great art teacher? 'They taught me to look. They didn't say: hold a brush like this. They taught me to put myself in the place of the artist when I looked.'

After Bryanston he went to Camberwell Art School where his teachers included Victor Pasmore and William Coldstream, and to Corsham, where he later taught. He found art school 'very conformist, but fascinating. The girls were extraordinary because they looked like the girls you find in Augustus John. They all dressed the same way, with long skirts and dirty faces. Young men had to make a living so it was mostly full of nice girls copying the old masters and painting in khaki and grey. Khaki and grey were Camberwell colours, you see.'

I think of his boiling orange, his trembling red. So he reacted against all that khaki? 'Well, I would have done if it had all been a bit more real!'

At 23 he married another artist, Julia Lane, and they had two sons. He now had a young family; money had to be made. Did that make him anxious? 'It made me extremely anxious. Nowadays young artists can become very rich very quickly. But there was hardly an art world at all when I was starting.'

He taught a lot, something he liked - perhaps too much: 'If you're not careful, you're painting vicariously, your students are doing it for you.' The rest of the time he thought about painting. It was hard to get going. 'One of the strangest things about being an artist is the way it subsumes everything else: relationships, the world outside. All ordinary life has to be pushed to one side. When I was a young artist, that was very difficult. Someone once said to me: "You're not really a painter, are you? You never paint any pictures."'

Did he fear being ridiculous? 'I didn't fear it. I was.' The paintings he sold were all to people he knew. He did not have his first show until 1962. Most people think that he only really got going in the late Seventies, and when they say this they nearly always ascribe his maturity to the fact that he left his wife and came out. Chatwin called it a 'sharp and unexpected swerve', and a 'new-found engagement with the erotic'. Hmm. Chatwin probably had his own naughty axe to grind here. Hodgkin has always said that this explanation is too neat, and it is not hard to agree. At the Tate show you can see change, but not the moment of the change; his development as a painter is more incremental than the amateur psychologists realise - and in any case sometimes he will fl ip back on himself, nodding to earlier styles and colours and moods.

Are life and art so intimately linked? Not always. In life, a man can be one thing and then another; they do not necessarily cancel one another out (for the record, he has been in a relationshipo with Antony Peattie, the music writer, for two decades). But work is something else - you plug away at it every day; you push life, whatever may be happening in it, to one side. His work evokes a memory of emotion - not how he feels at the moment he is painting.

Hodgkin dislikes the mystique attached to art, the idea that Pollock 'vomited the pictures up'. This stuff doesn't acknowledge how lonely it can be, staring at a piece of board, waiting to make your mark. He then reads me something a critic has written about the artist's lot and, not for the first time this morning, tears roll softly down his face.

It would be wrong to think of this big retrospective as in any way valedictory. He has, he insists, more painterly energy than ever, and is still extremely ambitious. Lately his work has changed again. The biggest picture at the Tate, Undertones of War (2001-03), is black with brooding, and so sparely done that the wood underneath it can still be seen. It is quite diff erent from anything that has come before.

But if you like his orange and his red, do not despair. We talk about the recent Samuel Palmer show at the British Museum, and he tells me that it has moved him to paint an 'after Samuel Palmer'. Then, to my amazement, he shows it to me (he never lets people see him paint, and only rarely reveals work in progress). It is dazzling, like staring at the sun. In taking inspiration from Palmer, he is placing himself in the British landscape tradition to which he so obviously belongs. But there is something else here too - a debt owed has been layered on with the paint. This makes it very touching. 'It's ... lovely,'

I say. He nods. This time, it is my lip that's trembling.

· Howard Hodgkin opens on 14 June and runs until 10 September at Tate Britain, Millbank, London SW1 Howard Hodgkin: The Complete Prints by Liesbeth Heenk and Howard Hodgkin Paintings by Marla Price are both published by Thames and Hudson, £29.95 and £60 respectively. Writers on Howard Hodgkin is published by Tate Publishing, £14.99

Life story

Born Gordon Howard Eliot Hodgkin, 6 August 1932, Hammersmith.

Early career Studied at Camberwell Art School and the Bath Academy of Art. First solo exhibition 1962, Arthur Tooth and Sons London.

1960s Taught and collected 16thand 17th-century Indian painting.

1984 Represented Britain at the Venice Biennale

1985 Won the Turner Prize

Honours CBE 1977 Knighthood 1992 Hon D Litt London 1985 Honorary fellow London Institute 1999 Hon D.Litt Oxford 2000, appointed by the Queen as a Companion of Honour (2003).

They say: 'He is a man who loves and hates with a passion, and is very emotional. He will cry very easily and flares up, both in terms of colour and of temper, very quickly.'
Nicholas Serota, Tate director

'There is a lyricism in his work that is very English and can be traced back to Turner. I think Howard is steeped in Turner.'
David Sylvester, critic

He says 'I've retrospectively regretted the knighthood. I try hard to get it chopped off whenever I can.'