

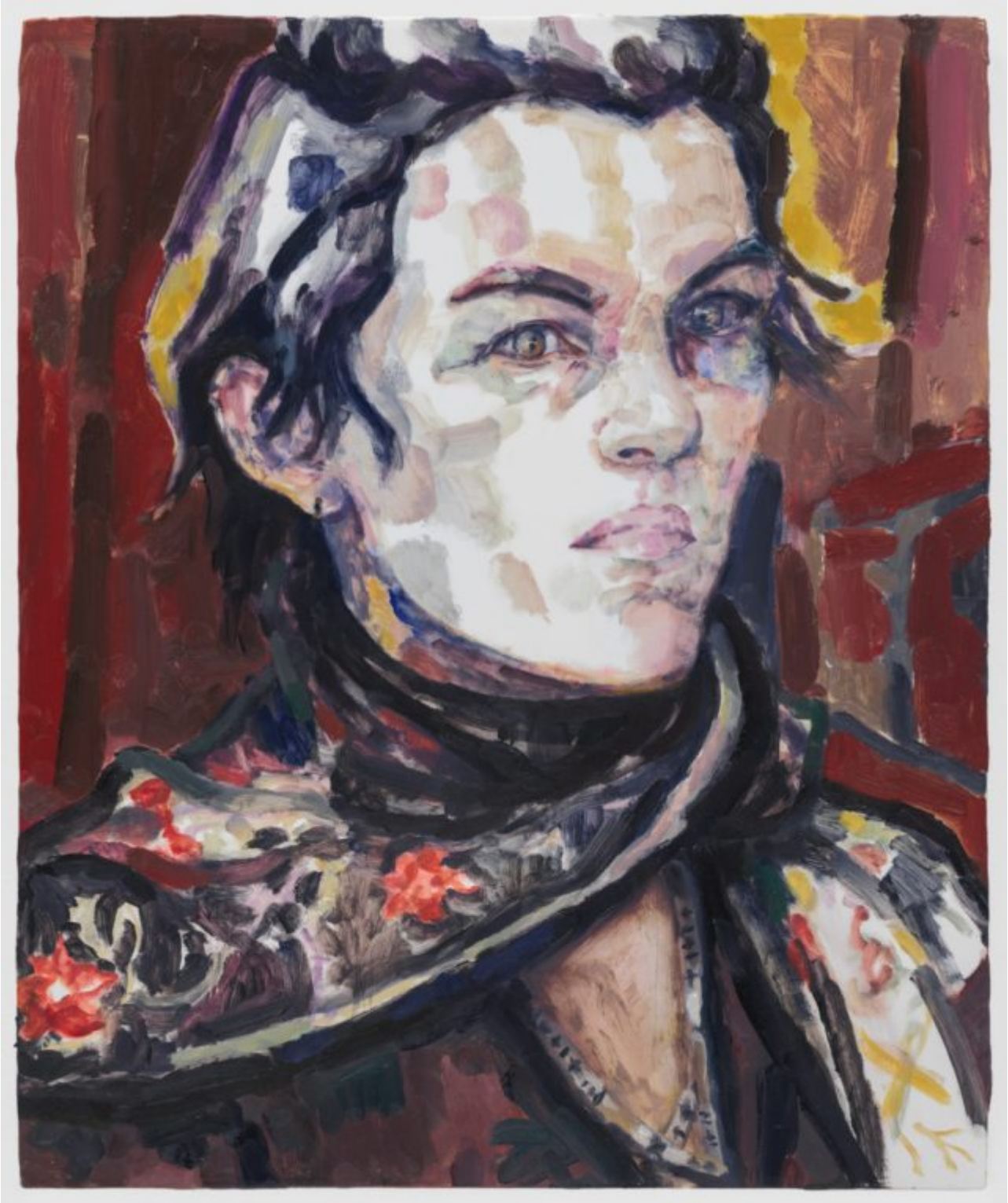
## **Art Agency, Partners**

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## **Peyton's Portraiture: "They're All About Love"**

**The must-see show in London**



Elizabeth Peyton, *Portrait at the Opera (Elizabeth)* (2016). Courtesy The Brant Foundation, Greenwich, CT. USA. © Elizabeth Peyton

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Elizabeth Peyton is known for her small, pensive portrayals of people, ranging from rock stars to figures from history as well as fellow artists, friends (and even her dog). Now she is the first contemporary artist to be given the run of the entire National Portrait Gallery (NPG) for “Elizabeth Peyton: Aire and Angels” (until 5 January).



Elizabeth Peyton is known for her portraits of people ranging from rock stars to figures from history (and even her dog). Here, her portrait of Kurt Cobain: *Alizarin Kurt* (1995). Courtesy The Brant Foundation © Elizabeth Peyton

Calling Peyton “one of the great contemporary portrait painters”, NPG director Nicholas Cullinan previously spoke on an *In Other Words* podcast (“[Expectations and Epiphanies](#)” published 31 January 2019) of his desire for her work to connect directly with the museum’s permanent collection, “because it’s in that dialogue where we can do something different”.

To this end, along with more than 40 works by Peyton have been installed in the gallery’s temporary exhibition spaces and her paintings and drawings have also been hung in four of its permanent galleries, sparking rich dialogues with some of the gallery’s best-known portraits. The juxtapositions offer new and decidedly different perspectives on all manner of artists.

In the Tudor rooms next to The Darnley Portrait (around 1575) of a bejeweled [Queen Elizabeth I](#), Peyton’s portrait of grunge music hero [Kurt Cobain](#), *Alizarin Kurt* (1995), bows his head, causing locks of brilliant orange hair to fall over his face. In this meeting, both the pallid monarch and the ashen-faced pop star seem to hover uncannily between life and death.

Sandwiched between a pair of posturing Elizabethan nobles, [William Cecil](#), the first Baron Burghley and [Sir Henry Lee](#), a ruby-lipped portrait of *Oasis* singer [Liam Gallagher](#), *Blue Liam* (1996), gazes out with a piercing blue-eyed stare, while languorous likenesses of fellow musicians [Jarvis Cocker](#) (*Jarvis* (1996)) and [Keith Richards](#) (*Keith (From Gimme Shelter)* (2004)) loll alongside a portrait miniature of the *Virgin Queen* (1572), this one by [Nicholas Hilliard](#).

Peyton’s lush images of 20<sup>th</sup>-century celebrities sit comfortably amongst the dashing, self-fashioning Tudors. Both Shakespeare’s flamboyant patron [Nicholas Wriothesely](#) the third Earl of Southampton—striking a pose in ornate armor—and

Peyton's platinum-haired *David Hockney, Powis Terrace Bedroom* (1998) seem equally dedicated to projecting a distinctive self-image to the world.



Peyton's juxtapositions pose questions about the nature of portraiture, identity and representation. "Elizabeth Peyton: Aire and Angels" © National Portrait Gallery, London

Elsewhere, Peyton's juxtapositions pose more questions about the nature of portraiture, identity and representation. The bravado of [Van Dyck's](#) swaggering (around 1640) self-portrait is more than matched by the quietly confident air of the women artists Peyton has grouped around him. Self-portraits by Gwen John and the 17<sup>th</sup>-century painter [Mary Beale](#) are joined by Peyton's 2010 portrayal of a young [Genzken](#)—based on a photograph from 1980 in which she glares impatiently out—and the artist's own fluidly-painted self-portrait, *Portrait at the Opera (Elizabeth)* (2016). Here the artist appears as an androgynous dead-ringer for actor [Leonardo DiCaprio](#), swathed in a scarf and wearing an alert, if wary, expression.

As a parade of her colored pastel drawings in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century galleries confirms, it does not matter whether Peyton is depicting the rapper [Tyler, the Creator](#), a brooding youth copied from [Michelangelo](#), the artist [Cy Twombly](#) or the fashion designer [Phoebe Philo](#), each is animated by her intense and affectionate scrutiny which transports her subjects into the immediate here and now.



Let loose among the Victorians, Peyton also challenges and complicates their sentimentality with her own versions of contemporary romantic love, as in *Twilight* (2009). Private Collection. Courtesy neugerriemschneider, Berlin. © Elizabeth Peyton

Let loose among the Victorians, Peyton also challenges and complicates their sentimentality with her own versions of contemporary romantic love. This is especially evident in the vitrine shared by a tiny and limpidly painted 2009 oil of the embracing teenage lovers from the film *Twilight* and Harriet Goodhue Hosmer's bronze cast of the clasped hands of the poet husband and wife Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In both instances, what could be cloying is instead tender and emotionally charged.

Downstairs in the exhibition galleries most of the work has been made in the last decade since Peyton's major exhibition, at the [Whitechapel Gallery](#) in 2009. Here she has also mixed things up by inserting a shadowy 16<sup>th</sup>-century portrait of the metaphysical poet John Donne who, with his large black hat and full lips, seems completely at home amongst her parade of romantically-rendered heroes through the ages.

The exhibition's title is taken from one of Donne's poems and it seems particularly appropriate given how in recent years Peyton's paintings have become increasingly spare, loose and fluid. Yet, while her figures seem increasingly to almost dematerialize, their presence has become stronger. A posthumous portrait of David Bowie (*David, March 2017* (2017)), splashily painted in vivid watercolor, has the presence on the wall of a firework. A tenderly translucent oil of Angela Merkel (*Angela, 2017* (2017)) shimmers with compassion and empathy.

It is almost as if each individual brushstroke has now become charged with Peyton's strength of feeling for her subjects. For, as she told me in an interview a few years ago, her work is "all about love—ultimately, all great art is about love".