

EYES WIDE OPEN

Maria Finta

From the publication
Peter Smith: *You May Find Yourself*

STEP RIGHT UP, FOLKS! See through the eyes of Peter Scott Smith: microscopes, telescopes, periscopes and kaleidoscopes ... all these and more!

There: in Toronto. See Peter standing on the corner of Spadina and Queen, eating a hot dog and waiting for the late-night streetcar to take him home.

Here! Marvel at Peter, untethered by time and space, travelling through the cosmos or the 21st dimension, in awe of creation ... his mind a giant satellite dish.

Then weep as Peter lies strapped to a hospital bed, unable to speak — yet with eyes wide open.

As Peter's wife, I recall him at work in his studio. I had seen him frown at the components of an art piece; heard him hammering and sawing. Knew he was spattering paint, sticking on pictures and stickers — wrestling with forms, designs and ideas.

I also remember my husband lying alone on the bed, wandering the labyrinths of his mind, alienated from daily life. Peter: one moment moody and stubborn, combustible with alarming volcanic emotions. The next moment, gentle and vulnerable as a child; full of wonder; laughing, mischievous, affectionate and creative.

He loved the visual rawness of all untutored artists — that unpolished complexity that some call “art brut.” And while his own work often embodied such qualities, it was too canny to be considered “brut.” Capable of the finest lines and classical but expressive forms, he rejected these for something more personal and idiosyncratic. He always felt like an outsider to the art world.

When I first met Peter, he was a fledging artist of twenty-eight. He embodied the archetypal role of “starving artist,” living in his bare-bones loft and supporting himself in any detestable way he could. “Detestable,” because these jobs were not his artwork. Mostly, he lived to paint. I was captivated by his single-mindedness and felt I had discovered the real article — full of passion, intensity and uncompromising vision: dedicated to the timeless ideals that have animated all artists; possessed by a spirit....

Back then, disgusted by the conventional, easily trod paths, Peter railed against academic art. Yet he admired expressive painters such as Kokoschka and Soutine. I was confused by his deep admiration for Rembrandt, but I paid attention and tried hard to learn what it was that impressed him. Hoping to become his muse, I sat for my portrait. I watched Peter attack the canvas and slash away, swearing, sweating and smoking. He would stand back from it, squinting intensely, frowning fiercely, then jump again into the fray. From my point of view, an interesting picture was emerging. But in a short time he would impatiently destroy the piece. What was it, I wondered, that he wanted?

As we rummaged around in Toronto’s curiosity shops together, we always found images and objects to inspire us, taking it all in — together. Sometimes it was the images of another artist, but just as often it was scientific diagrams, photos of natural phenomena or even oriental carpets. In art books we were both attracted to medieval art, native art, “non-art.” We were captivated by Bruegel’s and Bosch’s complex, fantastical worlds. Could Joseph Cornell perhaps be a soulmate?

Searching, searching, searching. One day it’s Rembrandt, the next day it’s comic books!

However, we didn't know that Peter was walking so near a mental precipice. Forces beyond his control gradually took possession of his mind. Peter slipped into a vortex of hellish hallucinations and murderous voices — a diabolical world of conspiracies and poisonous intentions. For a while, he was almost out of reach and drowning. A man held captive by “evil spirits” and tortured. Peter's shining youthful vitality, sucked into Alice's rabbit hole — on a very bad trip, indeed. A place where there was no more art and all meaning was distorted.

Eventually, as his parents and I stood by him and urged him to come back to us, some treatments slowly started to free him. A delicate green shoot of hope emerged from the earth of his soul. We all learned to nurture it, and finally he did, too. But years had been lost.

Peter began again. What ultimately rescued him from his personal abyss seems clear to me: love and art. The impulse to draw was revived in him, and soon he was using the woodcarving tools his father gave him, teaching himself a new medium. One day, I was stunned to see a beautiful woodcut print, then another. Peter seemed to have been reborn in a new incarnation. For a while he was shell-shocked, but — gradually gathering energy from the internal combustion engine apparently intact in his soul — he expanded outward.

Eventually Peter achieved a balance, with new medications, the love of the rest of us and his love of creating. At times, he was still very fragile. Even when apparently stable, he had to remain vigilant to keep the old demons at bay. If, for instance, we ventured again into the heart of the city, he was apt to suddenly express an urgent need to retreat to the safe haven of our apartment.

“It’s all going too fast ...” he’d mutter, a haunted look on his face. Often he’d retreat alone into long, long “naps,” then stagger out of bed to settle into his favourite chair with coffee, cigarettes and the ever essential pen and scrap of paper. Moments of clarity he guarded jealously. They were mainly spent with his first love, art. Though this could put a strain on our relationship, I was mostly in awe of his regeneration and cherished his creativity.

A new vision emerged for Peter. He wrung and sweated it out of himself. Toward the unexpected end of his life, cut short by pulmonary fibrosis, he was as happy and confident as I had ever seen him. His muses had become dollar stores, nature, books, science, ideas shared with friends — anything that came his way. Themes surfaced and submerged. Peter was still searching, but now he could take hold of his visions — pull them from chaos into the light of day as tangible, coherent *art*.

I think of Peter’s life view when I recall a traditional Jewish story: there was a rabbi who kept in one pocket pieces of paper on which were written: “You are made of dust and to dust you shall return.” In the other pocket, the paper read: “You are made in the image of god; a little lower than the angels.”

Peter had come back from a place we all take pains to avoid; from the darkest reaches of despair, meaninglessness and hopelessness. Loosed from the mind-forged manacles of rationality, he learned to balance on the border between reason and awe. His visual statements raise more questions than answers.

If you look searchingly at his work, you will see what Peter was observing with those unique eyes of his — it is up to us to “connect the dots.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maria Finta was born in 1955. She has tried almost every type of job imaginable and has some university and college education, including at various art schools. Peter Scott Smith and Maria met in Toronto when he was twenty-eight, pursuing his art with admirable intensity. Maria was a full-time student at the Toronto School of Art and a part-time artists' model. Together, they formed an alliance against mediocrity, hopelessness, conformity and mental illness. Eventually they married. Several years ago, the couple purchased an old farmhouse northeast of Toronto, where Peter worked as determinedly as ever at his art until he sickened and died. Maria still lives there with three cats and two dogs, hoping to establish a non-profit art/spiritual retreat in Peter's name. It is a work in progress.



Room

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P. SMITH

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