

On the eve of his first solo show at Gagosian, Gemma de Cruz meets Peter Davies

Peter Davies is an art-student idol. Before graduating from Goldsmiths' MA course in 1996, he had already been in a string of successful shows curated by Martin Maloney including "Die Yuppie Scum" at Karsten Schubert. Davies went on to make work for shows at Habitat (1997), *The Approach* (1998) and Maloney's cult exhibition, "Die Young Stay Pretty" (1998), at the ICA. When he was included in "Neurotic Realism 2" (1999) at the Saatchi Gallery, Davies's light shone brightly, but even so he still remained unrepresented in Britain. Thus the opening of Gagosian's London branch last summer was perfect timing for him. Davies was swiftly signed, and has since been making paintings for his solo show there this month. I popped round to his canal-side East End studio to get the bigger picture.

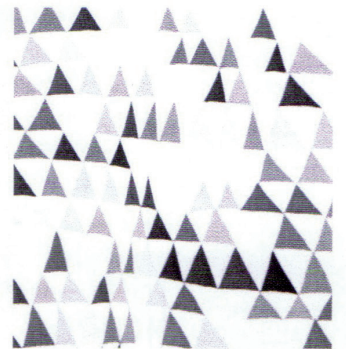
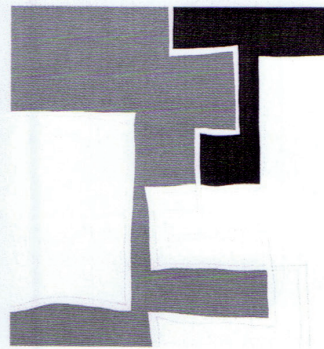
Davies has possibly the warmest studio ever: but considering the number of hours he spends there, this makes sense. He is completely at home, surrounded by books and

circles to large flat areas of overlapping colour. Alongside these he creates his text paintings, which provide a provocative account of whom Davies rates in the History of Art, and where they rank. In *The Fun One Hundred (Fun from Rear Version)*, 2000, Davies combined the two approaches, layering an abstract image and text together on to a single canvas. "That seemed like a really exciting thing for me," he says, "to try to understand the similarities between the two types of painting. There were lots of aspects that I wanted to see coexist. Initially, the text paintings had been a way of drawing attention to the abstract paintings. To combine the two, I had to find a way of making the text painting look a bit more abstract. Putting the white text on was like clouding the issue a bit, because you look at it and can't quite see what the background is, but then when you figure it out it was obvious all along."

This sets up an interesting kind of literal-versus-visual argument because, whatever you choose as



Peter Gets Spotted



art mags. As we talk, he will refer to a page in a magazine to illustrate his point. He lives and breathes art. Davies is friendly and chatty, but you are always aware of his serious intelligence at work, continually questioning what makes contemporary art engaging and trying to discover how he can fit into that category without compromising what he is genuinely interested in.

Davies has always made abstract paintings, which range from small, painstakingly laborious coloured-in

your mental point of reference when you begin to deconstruct the abstract image, you then find things spelled out for you in big white writing across the top. Does that halve the subjective experience – or double it? For Davies, sometimes abstraction alone can't push the button, partly because he knows how high the stakes are; and he doesn't see the point in making art that is an attempt to reinvent something from the past if you are unable to do it in a new way. "I

an artist who isn't afraid to show his influences. Photographs by Julian Anderson

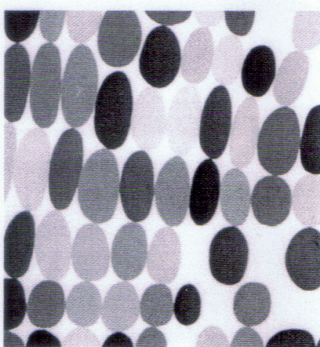
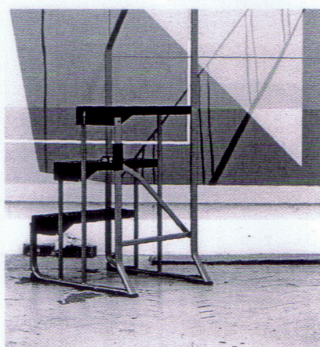
don't want to look like I'm copying something, because I'm not," he says. "The Hot One Hundred was a way for me to do bands of colour or stripes, but without the text it would have been nothing more than a variation on a stripe painting, and the world's full of them already. I would really like just to make stripe paintings, but I have an anxiety about that because I know how I would judge someone else doing that, although I'm not against seeing new ways of doing stripe paintings if they're relevant."

On one wall of the studio there are three paintings on the go which will be shown downstairs at the Gagolian. In these smaller works, Davies has looked at the bare basics of what interests him on a formal level. Essentially the works look like Op Art that wasn't made by a machine. So although the illusion is still there, it is counterbalanced by humour and a more emotional sense of colour. Davies makes these paintings using his contradictory style of doodle painting – but as in the blown-up doodle paintings of Jonathan Lasker, what looks haphazard and messy is actually intentional and controlled. "There is a finish that I always want, a particular graphic quality. It's not that I like spending ages filling in lines, but that seems to be the only way to get that finish," he explains.

What Davies highlights in this new work is a more relaxed attitude to his picking and choosing from art history. "During these recent paintings that I've been doing, it suddenly dawned on me that they had a look of Patrick Heron, Ben Nicholson or Terry Frost about them, and it horrifies me a bit because that's the stuff I hate – I want it to look like a de Kooning or a Schnabel or something. But you can use that information and represent it to the world, and all the boring stuff that was attached to their personalities and provincial attitudes to art has gone out of the window. It's been edited out of history because there isn't enough space in terms of our interest in history to listen to it. We don't have

to deal with that now, we just take what we want. In future generations people will do that to a greater extent."

Davies is focused on the way in which we accept that there is a visual shorthand that we take for granted. He is seeking a way to value the importance or the tradition of something without having to worship it or appear to be at war with it. He gives credit where it's due, so the ostensibly "hip" look of his work is played off against its content without any of the "it-looks-like" headache. What stands



out the most in Davies's ideology is that, while making his work in the day-to-day sense of going to the studio and getting on with it, he has taken on board what it means to do that within the context of moving away from the restrictions of the past. He's moved beyond the idea that it's wrong if you make something that looks like something else by incorporating an element of that idea into the work. He can be honest about the fact that he is serious and obsessive without



Stand up and be counted. **Top right:** *The Fun One Hundred (Fun from Rear Version)*, 2000, acrylic on canvas. **Facing page, left:** Peter Davies in his East End studio. **All other photographs:** details of paintings in progress in Davies' studio

becoming an art train-spotter. "There's so much space to fill in the gaps between each statement, and I think that's what art does nowadays anyway. There are the big statements like monochrome painting or box sculpture or whatever, and so many variations of those things that there's a sense of infinity, in that people now are filling in the gaps; it's like finding a new place between two other things. Things change quickly, but in very subtle ways. That can go on forever because, even if the gaps get smaller, there is always some space there. People could potentially make new art forever" **AT**

"Peter Davies", Gagolian Gallery, Heddon Street, London W1 (020 7292 8222), 15 March-21 April. "Complementary Studies: Recent Abstract Painting", Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston (01772 258248), to 7 April. Gemma de Cruz is a freelance art critic