

## 2. 'You Don't Know Who You Are'

As early as 1963, ecological and conservation themes had begun to creep into Peter's work, and nature gradually became the centre of his art. By the early 1970s, his career had flowed through fantasy pop art with diversions into commissions to pay the bills and his portfolio was becoming rather mixed. He lunched with David Larkin of Pan Books at Chelsea Arts Club to discuss the possibility of producing a book of his works. Leafing through his portfolio Larkin commented, 'You don't know who you are.' Larkin advised Peter to concentrate on nature and the environment, which he saw stuck out as key features of his work.

Phillip Oakes of *The Sunday Times* knew Peter through *History of Cinema* and introduced him to Francis Kyle, who had a gallery in Mayfair. Peter took in the five-by-four-inch prints of his works, which Kyle liked but commented, 'You have no subject', and urged him to become obsessed by something.

Artists become known for their distinctive approach and are best remembered for a limited range of subjects, such as Hopper for loneliness and alienation in American life, and Lowry on English industrial scenes. Peter did not want to get into portraiture – he knew he could not get inside the soul of his sitter in the way that Rembrandt did and he'd seldom painted true landscapes, preferring to assemble a scene from separate components. He needed to discover who Le Vasseur the artist truly was.

The 1970s saw the environmental movement growing worldwide. Although plenty of artists painted landscapes or animals few tackled conservation, and that was the direction Peter was moving in. On a technical level nature art requires a wide collection of abilities, as all manner of animals, plants and tribespeople within their landscapes had to be faithfully painted and not many artists have that range. Peter played to his strengths, and his pleasure.



*Jerry Lewis (1970), as modified*

Going beyond simply painting animals required a big imagination, the interest and the creative spark.

Although he was still on the list for the merry-go-round of charity and celebrity events, Peter told Linda that he no longer wanted to do ‘the London thing’. When he was in his early twenties it had been the life he’d wanted, and he had loved it, but after a few years it paled. He felt compelled to play the game, follow the circuit of cocktail parties and gallery openings and did not want to do that all his life. He regularly walked the streets of Soho browsing art supply shops, and returning towards Regent Street one day he passed along a narrow lane choked with traffic, with tables of diners perched only inches from the road. At that pivotal moment he realised he must leave London, though he knew that not playing the game would be a gamble.

In 1973 he and Linda married, sold the Dunstable flat and moved to Bude in Cornwall. A few years earlier the Hollywood actor and director Jerry Lewis had approached the Portal Gallery wanting a portrait, and leafing through the portfolio in Portal’s office, he was attracted by Peter’s work and gave him the commission. With some initial direction from the star, Peter painted him as a Pierrot clown seated on a camera dolly amid a circus. After his move

to Cornwall, Peter modified the painting by adding detail including Marcel Marceau, Picasso and Linda. In the background he painted a coastal scene with a ruined building on a headland, reminiscent of Cornish tin mines.

Peter drove from Cornwall to London for what proved to be his last exhibition at Portal in 1975. When he arrived for the opening, his works had been hung but there was no crowd – by some oversight the invitations for the launch and the catalogue had not been posted out and none of the pictures had sold. Uncharacteristically angry, Peter demanded the works be taken down. He contacted the King Street Gallery, part of the Windsor & Newton stable, and they took on the exhibition.

The move to Cornwall proved only temporary as Peter and Linda felt they didn’t fit into the existing community and Bude did not have the atmosphere they were seeking. In 1975 Guernsey-based reporter Joan Stockdale ran a piece featuring Peter as ‘a Guernsey artist in London’ and it prompted him to consider moving back to the island. Guernsey has a controlled housing market to prevent locals being squeezed out by second-home owners or the wealthy seeking lower tax rates, so Peter needed to check if he was eligible to return. Although he had been born in the island he’d not lived there since being evacuated and an advocate advised he must establish residency

before a new housing law came into effect. This left only a six-month window to act.

Peter suggested that Linda went to Guernsey on her own and stayed with his aunt to see how she liked the island. The reasoning was that if he had gone too his nostalgia may have nudged her into agreeing to the move. However, it was summer and Linda fell in love with the island and told Peter he should come out quickly so they could buy a house she had found. It was in the north of the island near the stables at Baubigny, close by a small wood and one of the island's many abandoned quarries. Peter knew that the move could be into the wilderness, as Guernsey had nothing like the arts community he'd known on the mainland and London would be a flight or a boat-and-train journey away. The first house proved too big for the couple, but after settling into the island they found the south-west to be the ideal place to live.

Doing up an old cottage would have been the ideal plan, but it would mean Peter's painting would come to a halt and his technical skills did not extend to such things as electrics. He held an exhibition in St Peter Port and got to know a local architect, the late Frank Timothy, who offered to build Peter an 'old cottage' on a vacant plot. Peter said he was not in the league to be able to commission such work, but the architect responded that he'd supervise the design and build for the fee of one painting

for himself and one for his business partner. His concern for the young artist was almost fatherly, and Timothy never asked for his painting despite Peter hinting many times. The Le Vasseurs bought a plot in St Pierre du Bois, close to the Torteval border and five minutes' walk from the sea, and in 1978 had a 'traditional' cottage built. It was not, however, traditional on the inside. Modern Guernsey houses are often designed on an upside-down plan, with living rooms upstairs to enjoy views of the coast or countryside. This idea appealed, so on the ground floor of the cottage is the bedroom, a bathroom, a studio for Peter and an office for Linda. The first floor is a single long room with kitchen at one end, lounge at the other and dining area in the middle. It was a permanent move and Les Arquets would become Linda and Peter's home for over four decades.

Peter's studio is on the south-west end of the house with good natural light, very plainly fitted out with a pair of easels, a worktable, and an array of painting materials. A knee-high bookcase runs the length of the room and is filled with reference works, chiefly on the plants and animals that became his obsession in the second part of his career. Newly completed works are hung or stand bubble-wrapped ready for the client or gallery, whilst prints of his older works are hung in the hall and staircase. On his move out west,

he adopted the trademark flat cap he went on to wear in every publicity still and to every gallery opening. Round-rimmed spectacles were added to his look later in life.

Linda found her way into his paintings, even as a topless figure in the early days. She smiled at *Beauty and the Beast* (1982) and shrugged, ‘When you’re married to an artist...’

Actor Oliver Reed ultimately owned sixteen Le Vasseur paintings. In the 1960s and early 1970s, he lived at Broome Hall in Surrey and then ‘downsized’ to Pinkhurst Farm, a Grade II listed Tudor mansion with a couple of acres of land near Cranleigh. In later years it was bought by comedian Jim Davidson and heavily modernised. Reed was a notorious drinker and hell-raiser, and Peter and Linda sometimes stayed at Pinkhurst, which Linda described as an ‘interesting experience’.

After the Le Vasseurs moved to Guernsey, Reed visited Peter and commissioned a work to fit around a doorway at Pinkhurst. It would be L-shaped, seven feet high and stretch across the top of the door, so Peter decided a circus theme would suit such a challenge. Two trapeze artists swung over the door, and at the base would be an audience looking up with a girl on a trapeze over their heads. Peter asked which girl Reed

wanted on the trapeze and he replied that he wanted the most beautiful girl in the world. Channel Television followed the work in progress and interviewed both artist and client standing either side of it. In his usual jaunty style Reed ad-libbed suggestions about the work on camera and when Peter batted them away Reed commented, ‘He may be small, but he’s bloody determined.’ Reed moved to Guernsey in the late 1970s for tax reasons, eventually buying a house on the west coast near Grande Havre. Artist and actor became ‘thick as thieves’ in Peter’s words, and Peter found Reed very funny and great company. Ultimately Reed sold his Guernsey house and moved to Ireland which became his home until he died in 1999 during the filming of *Gladiator* in Malta.

Moving to Guernsey did not mean abandoning pop art. From time to time, Peter returned to the fantasy collage for specific private commissions, which could feature members of the clients’ families, including *Phasmagoria*. He could revisit earlier themes and mix in new ones such as *Clown and Balloons* (1985) set in the Arctic, or *Cirque Dumas* set in the driveway of a French chateau.

*In My Beginning is My End* (1978) was inspired by one of T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* concerning the passing of the ages. It features Stonehenge, a partly disrobed Britannia and a unicorn. Linda was the model for Britannia,

Detail from the circus piece painted for Pinkhurst Farm



shown with helmet and shield partly hidden behind a stone and trident on the ground. Perhaps she is off duty, or has become less relevant in the modern world? The lion and the unicorn prowl free and the coastline is very much like the southern cliffs of Guernsey. A naked Britannia with her totems discarded had appeared paddling in a stream in *Britannia Bathing* (1965). That work also featured a coastal backdrop, abandoned cannon and overflying biplane. Although the pop-fantasy phase was a successful part of his career, Peter is rather like a rock star who tires of the audience calling for old favourites when he only wants to play his latest album. He prefers to look forward at his new projects rather than back at another age, and indeed, 50 years later he regarded some of those earlier works as 'trivial'.

During the 1970s Peter attracted international buyers, including a wealthy Iranian who was collecting industriously. He flew to London regularly, and on one trip bought a Le Vasseur from a gallery which interested him in acquiring more. At the client's request, and client's expense, Peter flew over to London and they met at the Ritz. The client brought an interpreter although he could speak English well, and he bought *The Intruder* which Peter had taken along. For a short period, Peter found himself on a 'golden treadmill' completing a painting a month for this same



client. Artist Partners would be contacted with the message that the client was coming to London, so Linda and Peter would fly to meet him with the newest work, then be put up at the Ritz. Once they were flown to Paris and stayed at the Hotel Frontenac, where they bumped into the Rolling Stones. Peter found it an odd experience to be effectively on call and pulled in out of the blue when the client demanded it. A plan emerged for Peter to tour his works but the only exhibition which came off was in Copenhagen. In 1979 the Shah of Iran fell, and presumably the client's fortune fell with him.

Peter set three of his major commercial paintings on the Moon: *No Change*, *The Intruder* and *Alien*. In addition, he completed

*In My Beginning is My End*  
(1978)

*Moon Fantasy* for writer Desmond Bagley and an additional commission featuring another client's family. In each there is an element of the ridiculous, with Peter aiming for a surrealist surprise in the manner of Magritte.

A LEM lands on the Moon, where a traffic meter awaits in *No Change*. The joke is that the astronauts will carry no change. Beneath this is Peter's deeper comment that wherever we go in the world, authority, bureaucracy and rules are always there, so perhaps even on the moon we will see no change.

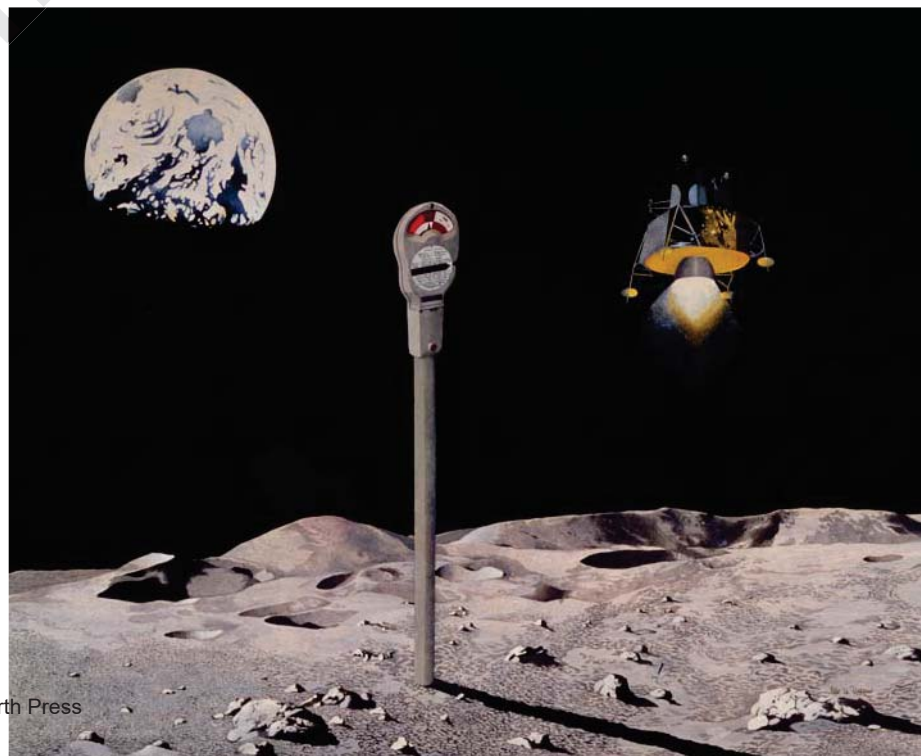
In *The Intruder* (1977) an astronaut walks across the surface of the Moon and encounters a Guernsey lily. 'Is this the triumph of nature over science?' Peter asks. As the work sold quite suddenly, Peter decided to repeat the idea in *Alien* (1981). This time the Astronaut encounters a rose, and Peter added a butterfly to make it a bit more dramatic. The question he poses is whether the astronaut or the life he discovers is the alien.

Thriller writer Desmond Bagley lived in Guernsey from 1976 and commissioned a portrait from Peter. The artist and the author met on a reception on board HMS *Guernsey* in 1979. Linda had been working for Radio Jubilee at the Princess Elizabeth Hospital, so Peter approached Bagley to ask for an interview on her behalf. It was not widely known but Bagley suffered with a stammer,

so rarely gave any interviews, but he agreed to give a pre-recorded one for Linda. Bagley had an interest in science and in 1973 became one of the first novelists to use a word processor. He is pictured in *Moon Fantasy* (1980) sitting on the moon accompanied by his wife Joan, who collaborated in writing his novels. On the screen of his Commodore computer is a manuscript entitled *Writer*, a semi-autobiographical contemplation which was not published until 2021. The Bagleys and Le Vasseurs remained friends until Desmond's early death in 1983. After Joan died in 1999 the painting went with the Bagley archive to Boston University.

A major commission for a Channel Islands client was *Maze* and proved to be the largest Le Vasseur artwork. Threading into the maze is a pageant commenting on the failure of humanity to learn important lessons from history, and points to what may be our ultimate destiny. Characters in the pageant follow historical progression, starting with the most ancient. The client's teenage daughter is the last figure in the scene, wearing her 'modern' attire; modern being the later 1970s. She meets a lion at the centre of the maze, an ironic touch suggesting that as we work though history surprises are waiting for us. The tree featured in it is Victor Hugo's 'Oak of the United States of Europe'. Hugo was in exile in the Channel Islands for

Clockwise from top right:  
*Alien* (1981); *No Change*  
(1970s); *Moon Fantasy* (1980)



Right: Detail from *Maze*  
 Below: Linda posing as a nurse for CTV  
 Facing: Linda and Peter pose beside the complete *Maze*, late 1970s

nearly two decades and he planted an acorn in the garden of his home at Hauteville House in Guernsey, in the hope that it would grow to see Europe united and at peace.

Peter was fascinated by the possibility of this concept and had experimented with it in a picture shown at one of the Portal shows. On getting a commission for a mural-sized piece he revisited the theme, first making preparatory sketches of individual costumes then a smaller version of the work. After visiting the client's home in Jersey, he embarked on the 20ft x 8ft piece (6.1m x 2.4m) in three canvas panels. Peter's cottage was too small for him to work on the project, so a friend who lived near Victor Hugo's House offered him space.

The creation of *Maze* was featured in a series of slots on Channel Television, at a time the late Peter Rouse was presenting. CTV usually followed the standard local television news format of establishing shots on location, with a short interview bookended by comments from the anchor, but Peter asked if this could be livened up. It fell to Linda to be dressed as a subject that Peter could paint and insert into the scene. Given the complexity of many historical costumes, the most practical thing was to wait until the parade of history



reached the First World War. Linda said she'd like to be a nurse and after a little research mocked up a uniform. Peter directed the CTV crew's filming as Linda walked into shot to the point where he called her to stop. She then adopted the position he wanted for the picture, and the shot concluded with a fade-out on Linda and fade-in on the image. In fact, Peter had already painted the nurse into the maze, but mimed drawing for the benefit of the camera.

One of Peter's more ambitious political works is *Full Circle* (1977), his only comment on the scourge of terrorism and painted at the height of IRA violence. Inside a bedroom new life is being created by the couple making love, whilst outside the window life is being destroyed as a bomb explodes in the distance. The vehicle is a Humber 'Pig', the British Army troop carrier that became emblematic of 'the troubles' on the streets of Belfast.







*Full Circle* marks a moment where Peter begins to comment on current affairs through art, in a way that was rare away from purely propaganda pieces or political cartoons. This is one of the works that Oliver Reed bought.

*In Me Are Many People* (1979) is a tribute to the writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008). It was painted in recognition of all those who still suffered in communist countries for their views and beliefs. In 1945 Solzhenitsyn was accused of spreading anti-Soviet propaganda and sent to a labour camp, then internal exile until exonerated in 1954. His writings ultimately became a thorn in the side of the Communist Party, and he was expelled in 1974 after an unsuccessful attempt by the

KGB to poison him. He lived in the USA until allowed to return to Russia in 1990. The writer is depicted in a blank square with St Basil's Cathedral, Moscow, in the background and snow blowing in from the Kremlin. It is one of a small number of Le Vasseur portraits.

*Scales of Justice* (1982) is another political piece, springing from Peter watching the news and wondering how the spending on defence could be better directed. 'Is there a balance our world should strike?' he asks. 'Or must the greater part of our wealth go on tanks and planes, nuclear and biological, chemical weapons and missiles.' The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in 1989 would see a brief easing of global tensions, and Peter painted *Glasnost* (1990) to mark that hopeful turn of events. It depicts a rather fanciful, almost fairy-tale St Basil's Cathedral, in a wintry setting but with the ice thawing as relations between east and west warm.

Below: left, *Scales of Justice* (1982); right, *In Me Are Many People* (1979)  
Facing: *Full Circle* (1977)

