

Elizabeth PEYTON (1965) USA

"Prince Harry (with Flowers)" (1997)

"[Elizabeth Peyton] painted Prince Harry repeatedly in 1997, the year that Princess Diana died. The motherless prince typically appears alone, a little-boy-lost look in his eye... What Peyton does here, and what she does best, is to record the transfiguring pressure of private life on public faces."



Elizabeth PEYTON, Prince Harry, (with Flowers), 1997
oil on canvas, 101.6 x 82.8 cm

Painted in 1997, *Prince Harry* is one of the most poignant and emotionally invested portraits in Elizabeth Peyton's oeuvre. Painted in December 1997 – the same year as Princess Diana's tragic death – it reveals the personal emotions of a very public figure, a young boy grappling with the loss of his mother under the intense scrutiny of the world's press. Like Andy Warhol's images of Jackie Kennedy after the assassination of JFK in *The Week That Was*, 1963, Peyton's painting takes as its point of departure an image in the public domain, a photograph of the young prince laying flowers left in tribute to Princess Diana.

The original source image, however, is merely a jumping-off point for Peyton. In contrast to Warhol's silkscreen process which replicates the impersonal mechanics of the printing press in such a way that the viewer becomes desensitized to Jackie's personal tragedy, here

Peyton's delicate, deceptively spontaneous brushstrokes heighten emotional intensity, bringing the viewer into communion with her subjects. Though painted from a paparazzi photo, Peyton's work reverberates with all the emotional energy of a candid family snapshot. Her depiction bypasses the aura surrounding his fame and public life, tapping into his personal history to create a portrait which is devoid of the voyeurism and the intrusive gaze of the media. Peyton herself has commented that what she is drawn to in her subjects is "that particular moment, when they're about to become what they'll become" (Elizabeth Peyton cited in: David Lock, 'Live Forever' in *A&M*, Issue 6, Summer 2009). Peyton's *Prince Harry* narrates a watershed event in the history of our generation's Royal Family, a moment at which, owing to great personal tragedy, a young boy was forced to grow up.

By taking her source photograph from the shared repertoire of our image-saturated culture, Peyton lends a certain familiarity and intimacy to the work which the viewer can share. Even if we do not recognise the specific source, we *feel* as though we do, as though this moment somehow shares in our own nostalgic personal histories.

Painting without hegemony, both her close friends and figures in the public eye, there is a democratisation at play in Peyton's technique that recalls Warhol's programme to rescue portraiture from its elitist past. Blurring social boundaries, Peyton's oeuvre presents a parallel aristocracy equally worthy of depiction, which responds in an intensely personal way to individuals whose lives and actions she deems heroic, noble and inspirational.

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Typically, Peyton prefers the intimate, off-duty moments where the true personality behind the mask might be glimpsed.

The brilliant luminosity and translucency of her style transforms an artless media image into an intimate and personal icon which throws into relief the way in which Peyton has drawn upon the history of devotional portraiture in her treatment of her unambiguously contemporary subject matter.