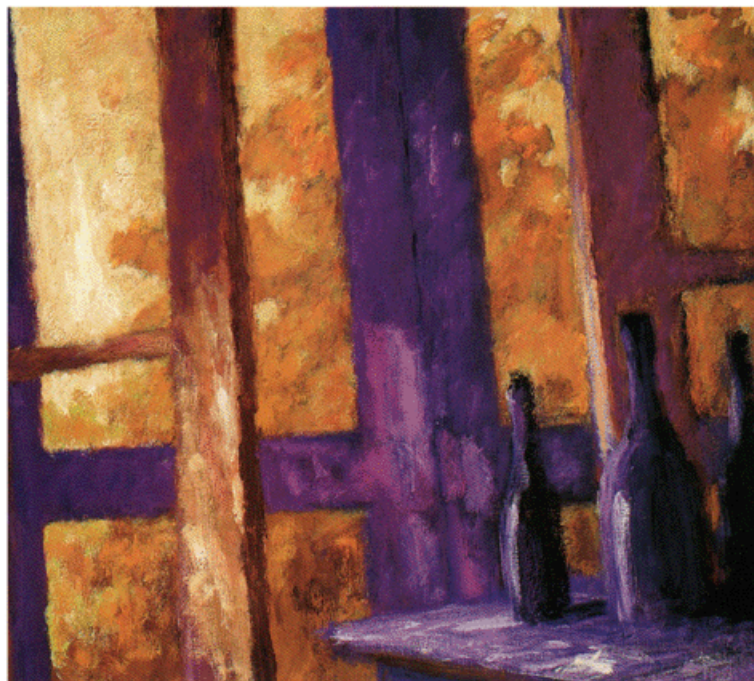


# COLORED WITH TRANSFIGURING LIGHT

## *The Interiors and Courtyards of Peter Agrafiotis*

The light in Peter Agrafiotis' paintings seems to come from another world. Ordinary household objects are transformed by it. Sometimes they turn strange colors, as if illuminated by the searchlights of an interplanetary space ship. Walls and cupboards glow purple, crimson, or blood-orange. Under the influence of this otherworldly light, chairs and tables seem to quiver with life. A house plant, a wicker sofa, a wine bottle become numinous presences, both real and supernatural.



3. *Still Life with French Doors*, 1996, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 40", PA166

Now and then the world outside these rooms seems magical and benevolent, like the green garden suffused with light in *Interior with Two Windows I*. At other times, the interiors and courtyards become shelters from a threatening environment, as in *Red Still Life*, where a fire – or perhaps only a violent sunset – seems to be raging beyond the kitchen window.

Peter Agrafiotis lives and works near the sea in Maine; and the light in most of his paintings, though intensified, is recognizably distilled from Maine light: clear, penetrating, as varied in mood as the Maine weather. A number of paintings in his current body of work, however (the Arch series) suggest a softer climate, and a more diffuse light, yet they have the same magical quality.

Often Agrafiotis' courtyards and interiors have the look of places where some tremendous event has just happened or is about to happen. As a result, every detail of the scene seems to vibrate with meaning.

*Interior and Balcony by the Sea*, for instance, might be the view that two lovers see as they lie together for the first time.

Other paintings suggest an event in the past, and the ghostly persistence of memory. These vacant rooms and doorways give the psychological effect of being densely inhabited. It is easy, for instance, to imagine that the armchair in the three versions of *Interior with Chair* was the habitual seat of someone important to the painter. This invisible person is portrayed in three different moods: at first familiar and domestic; then darker and more withdrawn; and finally at the edge of despair or death. Empty though it is, this chair is clearly haunted.

But these interiors, like other famous depictions of empty or nearly empty rooms, such as those of Edward Hopper, are also portraits of an interior landscape in the psychological sense. They tell us something about the painter; and also about ourselves.

When we look deeply into them, we project our own moods and memories onto those of Hopper or Agrafiotis.

Of course the same thing happens, in a less intense way, in real life. Depending on our state of mind, we may see the rooms we live in as warm and comforting, or as ugly, threatening or confining. A sofa may be a refuge: a tall desk piled with bills may seem a menacing presence. Peter Agrafiotis brings these vague perceptions into intense and sometimes even violent life. In *The Green Curtain*, for example, the back of a dining-room chair stares at us malevolently from huge green eyes formed by the curtain behind it: it is hard not to feel that

someone who sat there spoke cruel and terrible words. *Interior with Two Windows II*, on the other hand, seems to have been the site of some happy event – perhaps a declaration of love, or a conversation between old friends.

But whatever their psychological overtones, the memories they evoke in us, or the moods they convey, these pictures are also remarkable as constructions of color and shape. The way the layers of paint shimmer and change is continually fascinating, and so is the glow of the brilliant hues as they fade into darkness, while suggesting half-hidden or perhaps imagined details. Even if you turn them upside down or sideways, and consider them as abstractions, Agrafiotis' paintings remain original and beautiful.

Alison Lurie, 1997  
Pulitzer Prize Winner for "Foreign Affairs"