

The face of suffering

By [Nick Hackworth](#) [Evening Standard](#) | 15 April 2003



Peter Howson is one of today's most interesting and powerful figurative painters. Unfortunately that's not quite the accolade it used to be.

Now 45, he is the most successful of the "Glasgow Boys" who emerged in the Eighties. Throughout his career he has been highly prolific and consistent, in both his distinctive, lumpen, brutal and almost comic style and subject matter. He is a painter of the people, setting scenes of degraded urban life through which walk a parade of boxers, drunks, businessmen, tarts, OAPs and football hooligans, all lifted straight from the streets of his home city. What he brings to these contemporary themes, above competent composition and draughtsmanship, is an intense, sincere and emotive power that should have earned him greater recognition from the art establishment.

That said, there is one weakness, exposed particularly in some of the paintings in this exhibition of religious work. His style, which is likely to have been set fast by long years of practice, has the advantage of making a Howson look like a Howson and was suited to some of the content of his earlier pieces. However, when illustrating the Stations of the Cross, the 14 stages in Jesus's short journey from the place of his condemnation to the place of his crucifixion and then burial, its heaviness and deliberate ugliness intrudes.

There have, in other works - notably a few oil paintings inspired by Howson's stint as a war artist in Bosnia - been hints of a looser, freer painter beneath the surface, but for now he remains repressed.

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Nevertheless the 14 small paintings here, and the accompanying series of preparatory drawings, are brave and successful engagements with a subject clearly important to Howson, who became a believer after rehabilitation from alcoholism. Effectively simplified, they focus on the human face of Christ, pressed against the muddy ground when he stumbles on in pain when crowned with thorns. Howson convinces viewers that his Jesus is a suffering man.

Formally the drawings, perhaps, are more accomplished, energetic but well-balanced compositions. Despite their virtues, Howson's works are unlikely to gain the public patronage they deserve, which is a shame for many things are contemporary, even paintings of Christ.

Peter Howson's work is showing at Flowers East, E2, until 11 May. Box office: 020 7920 7777.

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