

e-mail from Zaid Arshad on November 10, 2025:

Dear Aneesa, Ginger, Georgia, and Olive,

“I myself would not have garnered what truth I have attained, the culmination of my intellectual efforts, without pursuing the arguments of Ghazali and Avicenna, checking them one against the other and comparing the result with the views than have sprung up in our era, so fervently admired by self-appointed philosophers, until finally I was able to see the truth for myself, first by thought and theory, and now in my first brief taste of the actual experience. I feel able now to set down a view to be preserved in my name; and because of our close friendship, I want you to be the first to whom I express myself. Nonetheless, if I tell you of the highest levels I reached without first going over the preliminary steps that lead there, it would do you no more good than blind faith—as if you approved not because my arguments warrant acceptance, but because we are friends. I expect better of you than that. I won’t be satisfied unless you go higher, for this much can’t guarantee salvation, let alone conquering the highest peaks. I only want to bring you along the paths in which I have preceded you and let you swim in the sea I have just crossed, so that it may bear you where it did me and you may undergo the same experience and see with the eyes of your soul all that I have seen. Then you will not need to confine yourself within the limits of your knowledge.” — Abu Bakr ibn Tufayl, Hayy Ibn Yaqthaun (Philosophus Autodidactus), c. 1160 CE

I came across Procktor while I was working on my thesis, which partially concerned the history of print in Haiti. I found what I thought was a book called “Baron Samedi,” the name of a lwa (Vodou spirit), but it was actually a poster for an event or performance that took place sometime in the late 1960s. It mentions it is chiefly the work of two persons: Gervase Griffiths—who I come to learn was an aspiring popstar in a band called Noah and the Quince (sadly I have not been able to find any of that music), and a lover and muse of Procktor; and Patrik Steede, who was a very famous close friend of Derek Jarman (I couldn’t tell you what he did; apparently being Derek Jarman’s friend was the most important thing he ever did in his life).

I couldn’t tell you why they went to Haiti, either. But I was interested in the Procktor character who was mentioned alongside Gervase Griffiths, since it’s Procktor’s portrait of him that is pictorially associated with him, at least digitally. It’s quite good. There’s a pear floating above his head. I went on deeper looking at more of the works, enamored by his sense of tenderness and almost an air of being impasse. He has an ability to dignify the subjects—animate or otherwise—of his work without taking away from the honesty in the making of the thing. I don’t mean honesty in the classical sense, but what I mean is that if you consider his subjects over the years, it’s easy to see him as an ‘explorer type’ insofar as he spent a good deal of time traveling the world and stylistically documenting people who were different from him in various ways and to various extents. But I trust him somehow. I’ll put together my little abridged timeline below of Procktor’s life:

1936: Born in Dublin, Ireland to a family of four. His father was an accountant at an oil company.

1946: His father dies. He moves to London and attends Highgate School (a prestigious private prep school) and studies with renowned artists of the time, until his mother runs out of money.

1954: Conscripted in the Royal Navy and learns to speak Russian at the Joint Services School for Linguists. Works as a translator for the British Council and as art broadcaster for the BBC Russian Service.

1958: Accepted to Slade, where he became especially interested in Marxist Communism.

1964: Starts a drawing group at his home, frequented by both his mentors and contemporaries, many of whom were also queer men. It is also around this time (I believe) that he begins working as an art therapist with patients experiencing paralysis.

1965: He travels to America (a place he later refers to as “vulgar,”) in 1965 with David Hockney, Norman Stevens and Colin Self and later to North Africa, India, Nepal, China, Egypt and Greece. Begins teaching at the Royal College of Art.

1966: Procktor took up a temporary teaching residency at Iowa State University in 1966, where he would meet up with David Hockney in Colorado.

1967: Procktor goes on vacation in Italy with David Hockney and Peter Schlesinger. Hockney had brought along a box of watercolor paints, but quickly abandoned them in favor of color crayons. Procktor took to them immediately, painting directly from life, and there began a love affair with the medium.

1968: He produced set and costume designs for the theatre and ballet including an oft-cited rendition of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, which was accompanied by a series of drawings of cast members as their characters. This is also the year that he holds his first solo exhibition in New York, which he refers to as his “one-boy show.” The exhibition exclusively contained paintings of Gervase Griffiths. None of the work sold.

1969: He produced set and costume designs for Christopher Hampton’s *Total Eclipse* for the Royal Court Theatre, as well as drawings of the cast members, a promotional poster edition, and illustrations for the book version. He also produces the *Invitation to a Voyage* series of prints.

1973: Procktor married widow, friend, downstairs neighbour, and restaurateur Kirsten Benson after her husband James—also a friend of Procktor—passed away in a car crash. She had two children from her previous husband, Edward and Juliet. She sold her restaurant (Odin’s) to Peter Langan, and Procktor, Hockney, Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud all provided paintings to hang on the walls of Odin’s and Langan’s Brasserie (I think we should all eat there someday).

1974: His wife gives birth to their son, Nicholas. At the behest of Editions Alecto, Procktor took a set of small copper plates with him on his visit to South Africa in 1974. He left for the Cape in February with his wife and baby son. They began by staying at a flat near the coast, and then travelled to Stellenbosch, Johannesburg with a trip to Victoria Falls, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and back to Johannesburg, leaving for England at the end of March. His South African exhibition opened at Gallery 101 in Johannesburg on 22 March, and was shown in Cape Town and at the University of Stellenbosch. This did not include the six prints which Procktor had etched directly onto the plate. These were completed, with aquatint, back in London, and exhibited at the Redfern Gallery in October 1974. This is presumably when *Sarum* (*North-West View of Salisbury Cathedral*), is made. He also stars, as himself, in the David Hockney biopic, *A Bigger Splash*.

1976: Procktor’s painting *The Guardian Readers* was used as the cover art for Elton John’s album, *Blue Moves*.

1978: Procktor became one of a small group of contemporary British artists represented in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

1983: He was commissioned by the Imperial War Museum to paint the army in Belize.

1984: He was commissioned to paint a reredos for the St. John the Baptist's Chapel in Chichester Cathedral. His wife passed away.

1985: He was commissioned by the British Council to record the Queen's visit to Portugal.

1987: "There is a short scene five minutes into *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987), Stephen Frears' film dramatisation of the relationship between playwright Joe Orton and his lover Kenneth Halliwell. It is 5th May 1967, and Orton arrives at the Marylebone studio of Patrick Procktor, where he is to have his portrait drawn by the artist. Orton is played by Gary Oldman, and Procktor by his friend and one-time lover Derek Jarman. The scene opens with a close-up of a section of Procktor's painting *Long Live the Great Leap Forward*, borrowed from the artist for use on the film set. The work is one of a series of tableaux painted in 1966 and 1967, and here, as a scene within a scene, it adds a piquant layer of artifice. Visible amongst its male figures- all painted from photographs- are a dozen Chinese young pioneers waving branches aloft. Raised on a stage behind them stand a group of teenagers enlisted to fight in Vietnam, whilst to their right, as though projected onto the wall, are large heads of Bob Dylan and Chairman Mao. In front of Mao a headless figure perches part way up a blue ladder. The predominant pinks and oranges of the painting fill the screen, forming an exotic backcloth as Orton enters the frame in figure-hugging red t-shirt. He peruses the painted scene fleetingly before turning to face Procktor. "Bollock naked?" he wryly asks. "No, leave your socks on," comes the reply. We then see the artist at work, capturing Orton in ink line whilst his subject languishes on a day bed in white socks." — Ian Massey (leading—and probably only—Procktor scholar)

1988: He made a film, *My Britain*, which was screened on Channel 4, which featured a soundtrack of him playing the slow blues on the piano (...sadly I have not found it). And that year he also designed windows for the Aids Recreation Centre in Fulham.

1989:

1990:

1991:

1992:

1993:

1994:

1995:

1996: He was elected Royal Academician (Members of the Royal Academy of Arts of London, England are known as Royal Academicians. The post-nominal letters RA are used after the Academician's name. Founded in 1768, membership is limited to eighty full members, who may be painters, printmakers, sculptors, or architects, who are professionally active in Britain).

1999: On a late Saturday afternoon in the summer, a fire started in Patrick Procktor's Marylebone flat, owed to a forgotten cigarette and a flammable lounge chair. Although Procktor's son, Nicholas, escaped with minor burns and a few things were saved, the apartment was in effect, destroyed. Despite efforts towards rescue, many books, works of art and personal possessions (all uninsured) were lost to the blaze. Procktor was left homeless and in effect, destitute. His final years were spent painting simple still lifes. The fire, stately "fueled by heavy drinking and a tendency towards self-destruction," marked the beginning of a

descent into a “shambolic and dysfunctional life;” notwithstanding abnormal, if short custody battle following attempted murder allegations made by his elderly mother. Patrick Procktor died a few years later in 2003 at the age of 67. His final work was allegedly painted that spring, inspired by Robert Browning's "A Serenade at the Villa":

...That was I, you heard last night,
When there rose no moon at all,
Nor, to pierce the strained and tight
Tent of heaven, a planet small:
Life was dead and so was light...

You will find works of Patrick's that I selected for you to view. I think they give insight into how I see the work: he was somewhat of an elegant documentarian. I feel bad about the way he seems to often be written off as a clumsy drunkard who ruined his life as opposed to a wonderfully sensitive but complicated man who struggled with coping. What I appreciate about the practice is that there is some kind of feeling that there was an incessant need for it to exist, as if he was simply living an adventurous life full of curiosity and just so happened to be overwhelmed by things momentarily across life. Maybe this is vague. Maybe most (good) art is like that. I don't feel a strong need or desire to justify these thoughts with academic rigor, and I don't think you should either.

I think, organically, this show is about moving, distance, care, silence, and notes. I may be thinking about specific things, but the broadness in these words that fail to describe also have worth. In some way, too, the show is probably about an attempt to move towards a cross-cultural solidarity which doesn't forego any of the aforementioned ideas. Opacity.

I was watching a conversation a while ago with a curator in Germany, Yesomi Umolu, who co-organized an exhibition of Hubert Fichte's work—he was a queer German anthropologist who did what he called “ethnopoiesie,” which involved a radically gentle approach to the idea of “fieldwork.” He essentially wanted to spend time with people and get to know how they experienced the world, and I find that it comes through in the work. Anyway, this curator, she was being berated by a white German audience for ‘centering a white man at a time like this’ and it took another Black woman to say to the effect of, “she wrote a whole book about the exhibition! Read the book! For now, she is asking you, as German people, how do you feel when you see these things with your eyes.” It comes to mind as I'm putting this together. I'm not necessarily attempting to center Procktor, but perhaps the ideas that lay dormant in the work, and the ways other ideas which may have tangential relationships function in the work of others.

It was brought to my attention that another young American curator has ‘brought Procktor to the spotlight’ through Buchholz. I'm choosing not to care about this. I like the things they do, and I'm interested in something completely different here.

Somewhat on the topic, I should discuss the five works by Procktor that we are presenting. But first, look at them:

Without saying too much, this is my proposal to you all.

Aneesa, I know we talked about including the drawing I have, and I would still really love to show that, but maybe something else too? Maybe some of the new stuff you've been making while abroad?

Ginger, we discussed you producing a sound work, and I think that's a great idea. I'm excited to talk more about it.

Georgia, I had originally had some things in mind that I wanted to ask you about, but I changed my mind now that I'm writing this out and would rather hear what you think of all this first, then we can talk about what you have or what you've been working on.

Olive, I am imploring you to write a text for the exhibition, but to take it in any direction you would like. It does not have to explain or even address what's going on here. It could be a photo or a hand-drawn Ikea instructional booklet for all I care. I want you to think of some way that is semipersonal to you to address the task.

Once you have watched the movie, let me know some cursory thoughts and we will go more in depth. Happy to meet in person or online also.

I am overjoyed for what this is becoming!