

February 10th 2018

Blockbusters and Smaller Pleasures



February: Musée Fabre, Montpellier



February: Royal Academy London



Titian: *The Supper at Emmaus*, c. 1534

In the last month I have been too busy making paintings to venture a look at anyone else's. I have been down a rabbit hole, working on paper for the Royal Watercolour Society Competition - happily successfully - and also grafting for my next one-person show next summer, sponsored by Monsieur Macron and the 5th Republic. Life in the studio is solipsistic and obsessive, so getting back in the world outside my head is very exciting.

It's been a treat in one week to see both a museum show in a quiet

provincial gallery in southern France, and then to venture forth to the new winter blockbuster at the Royal Academy in busy Piccadilly. Two diametrically opposed experiences, but each satisfying in their own way.

The Musée Fabre, on a cold February afternoon in Montpellier was almost empty. The penumbrous rooms of Flemish *genre* and still life painting had only the odd student peering in closely at buxom serving wenches with pearl earrings and at whiskery men in big hats. A few teenagers desultorily played “hunt the fly” in the Fabre’s collection of Dutch flower painting, tracking down *memento mori* hidden in the effulgent arrangements of flowers. I found myself thinking about Eliot’s lines in *Burnt Norton* “..to what purpose disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose leaves, I do not know.” There were no ropes to prevent close scrutiny here. There was no cracking tinnitus of audio guides. The long corridors lined with 19th century *grandes machines* were empty. Silence. Heaven.

The experience of seeing *Charles I, King and Collector*, at the Royal Academy was a million miles from this. This is an exhibition of brilliance and scholarship. It demonstrates the genius of the voracious art collector that was the doomed Stuart king. When he was executed in January 1649, he left behind over 2000 paintings, sculptures, drawings, miniatures, and tapestries by the likes of Holbein, Rubens, Van Dyck, Titian, Rembrandt and Mantegna among many others. This magnificent exhibition reassembles much of the work wantonly sold and dispersed in the Commonwealth Sale that followed his death. Every single thing is good. Most of the art is great. Nothing is mediocre. Everything is interesting.

A sea of white heads like my own, reverentially crowded every room. After all, it was a weekday morning in February. In the oral scrum I thought about the rich silence at the Musée Fabre. As I stood rapt in front of the Louvre’s *Supper at Emmaus* by Titian - working at the very height of his powers - I heard someone behind me say “I bought a loaf just like that this morning at Sainsbury’s”.

Eat your heart out Alan Bennett.

Robin Richmond