

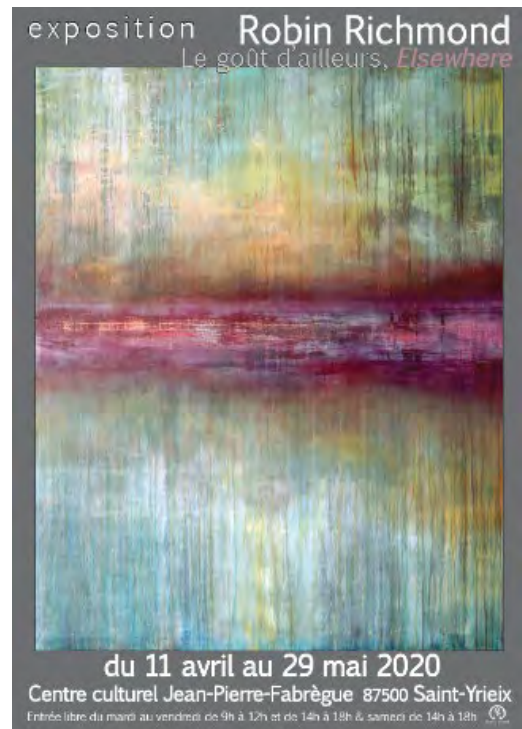
Elsewhere, or the Taste for Other Places

(Le Goût d'Ailleurs)

Robin Richmond, March 12, 2020



Puja, India



Next month I have a one-woman show opening in France with this title. It's an honest description of my working life, because I am a restless person. In this upcoming show there are paintings of Scotland and Sicily and France and Vietnam and Laos and Cambodia and Japan and India. Perhaps this restlessness arises from my peripatetic childhood, having been transplanted from America to Italy at a very young age. Now I live between central London and rural France. As the French say: "the path is made by walking it".

It is two weeks since I returned from India. I have been before - in 2004 and 2006 for extended periods - but this trip was different. I went alone, and my mission was to make paintings of India, about India, in India. I found myself in the privileged position of being able to rouse myself from the stupor of a grey London winter to enter, albeit briefly, the glorious cacophony of the Indian colour world. Four of these paintings are in *Visions 2020* at the Bankside Gallery, London, opening March 27th in the Spring show of the Royal Watercolour Society.

India was an instant transfusion of energy.

It was bewildering, confusing, overwhelming, and demanding - a trip into the heart of darkness and into my own head. India has always done this to me and it

seems to have this effect on others too, for, at the risk of sounding like a travel slogan, India is as much a state of mind as a latitude and longitude. It's not a coincidence that so many seek personal growth in this country. Its ancient polymorphous culture invites self-reflection. Its philosophies challenge one's concepts of time. Perceptions shift and twist in the brilliant light. Emotions are exaggerated. One's sense of colour alters.

Everything seems *more*.

When I last painted in India, I was a narrative figurative painter, and this observational process was the one I used to start my painting regime this time.

I was disciplined. I worked 5 hours a day. But I realised quickly that I was no longer interested in transcribing the heart-clenching beauty of the people and the landscape that I loved so deeply. This knocked me sideways. I was shocked. I scrapped many days of work and started again. It was hard. Lonely and alienating. I hated what I'd done.

Years ago I rented a room in a French hotel for ten days and tried to paint a famous view that Matisse had immortalised in 1907. I hardly left the room for my entire stay and when I did, and saw my painting outside in the fresh air, I felt ill. It was so derivative. I might have been a forger. I felt like a criminal. I ceremonially cremated the painting on the beach. Very Indian. Death by fire. The friendly hotelier told me that I was in a long line of artists who had done this. Artists really are a confederacy of dunces.

And this was how I felt in India.

What came out of this trip was a series of abstract paintings. Perhaps I could have done them in Islington or the Périgord but I doubt it. I had to breathe Indian air. Eat Indian food. Talk to Indian people. Drink huge quantities of *chai*. Have deep discussions about buttonholes with tailors. Watch sunsets. Gaze at the moon. Stumble over cow pats. Risk my life on the roads. Partake in the ritual of *puja*. Bargain with *tuk-tuk* drivers. Inhale the mixture of sweetness and decay in the alleyways. Suffuse my eyes in the markets. Swim in colour. Just be there. Just be present.