

The Art of Travel

From the rain in Spain to the soggy Thames

Robin Richmond, November 24, 2021



Salvador Dalí *Palace of the Air*, 1972-3, detail



Albrecht Dürer *St Eustace*, 1501



Lubaina Himid *Six Tailors - Materials for Change*, 2019

The last two years have convinced me that the greatest luxury in life is choice. The ability to make a decision is not one afforded to everyone, and in my privileged bubble I do know this. To question the why's, when's, where's and how's of our lives is a privilege which requires time, freedom, space and funds. Moving around the planet under Covid restrictions has made the very act of leaving one place for another – otherwise known as travel – a choice in a way it

never truly was before. It's a nerve-wracking experience that has oftentimes required some hasty packing, some false innocence, some real ingenuity, some wilful misunderstanding, some judicious (always legal) mangling and wrangling of the rules and much testing. All fine. Legally bland. I am a secret Annie Oakley at the 'ole borderline. Have vax, will travel. That's me. To stay engaged with the world is my sanity, and when I move around to reflect upon a sense of place, I know both that I am supremely lucky and that I am still me. Looking at art is a way of interrogating these reflections.

Lately I have been restless. Two weeks ago, I was in France struggling with my work, and then I took off across the border (hurray) to Catalunya, to paint the Alta Garrotxa peaks of the Spanish Pyrénées and to look at medieval buildings - a delight beyond measure. On a rainy Sunday afternoon, I found myself in Figueres. What to do? Test my resolve to be open-minded? To query my long-standing aversion to the work of the city's master? Why not? And so, with what I promise was an open mind, I went to the Salvador Dalí Theatre and Museum. I should have known.

It was the only museum in Catalunya that had a long queue. And reader, I queued. It is definitely what Dalí himself called "a surrealist object" and surrealist it is, but in the least serious manifestation of that most serious art movement. Freud on stilts. And as kitsch a place as there ever was on this earth and thus worth of a detour as the green Michelin guide is wont to say with faint praise. It was funny. Crowded. Zany. Badly displayed. Sloppily curated. Irreverent. Ridiculous. A theatrical colosseum (it was once a theatre) marvellously festooned on the outside with hundreds of plaster bread rolls and topped with huge eggs, it is dotted inside with cruddy plaster ersatz Oscars. Miracles of bad casting (in both senses) with all their seams showing like a lady's silk stockings. And there are plenty of pretty ladies - a hologrammed Mae West room is a highlight - and of course there are lots of pretty men too. There is a dutiful nod to art history here and there. A decadent version of the Sistine chapel ceiling thunders down with huge badly painted dirty feet. Much more a nod to fetishism rather than to Caravaggio or Michelangelo. A Venus de Milo with drawers in which to keep your unmentionables. Some amateur looking paintings. Very recognisable. Sort of Grateful Dead album cover art. Some of his own collection. Terrible prints everywhere. He is buried in the crypt beneath the stage. It's a trip.

In a surrealist jump that Dalí himself would have loved, my travels next took me to London to visit an exquisite show of Dürer at the National Gallery that advertises itself with the slightly disingenuous subtitle of Travels of a Renaissance Artist. One of my favourite poems, by Marianne Moore, opens with the line "Dürer would have seen a reason for living in a town like this" and the towers and castles in Dürer's magical landscapes beckon to a clear unfettered world of clean lines and crystalline blue air so beloved to the American poet. I thought of Dalí

when looking at Dürer's masterful prints. Salvador Dalí, ever the commercial machine, purportedly signed empty sheets of paper in order to maximise his revenue from prints. The great engraver, print maker and painter Albrecht Dürer from Nuremberg would never have stooped so low. Where Dalí goes low (to paraphrase Michele Obama) Dürer goes high. Very high.

This show is of a seriousness and intellectual gravitas that is a refreshment to the jaded, too travelled eye. Engravings, etchings, wood cuts and paintings glow in the penumbrous light of the Sainsbury wing. Works on paper must be displayed and conserved in dim light for preservation purposes, and one's first reaction is to feel that the gallery is too dimly lit. But let the eyes relax and the miraculous prints of this master of the German Renaissance emerge jewel-like from his notebooks and letters using his travels to the Netherlands, the Alps and to Italy as subject matter. The show posits him full centre of the European High Renaissance and it's a particular pleasure to see his work hanging next to his Venetian friend Giovanni Bellini. A great show.

My travels ended with a windy crossing over the choppy Thames to Tate Modern, to see the paintings, installations and sonic works by Lubaina Himid, an artist born in Zanzibar and now a long-time resident of Britain. Despite being a winner of the Turner Prize in 2017, her work was not familiar to me at all, as I confess to an aversion to the prize and no longer follow it faithfully. Himid considers herself an artist out of the mainstream - an outsider - and this existential stance permeates her work completely. Her work embraces the experience of being a highly politicised black woman, and eloquently addresses both the problematic aspects of black history through the centuries and also our feelings about the built environment and how we, as humans, interact with it. "The audience member is in the paintings" as she says.

This particular audience member was highly engaged. Some of the time. There is work here that is emotionally moving and intellectually stimulating and immersive. Lots of theatre (she trained in theatre design) and lots of sound. But ultimately, for all its strengths, this is a very muddled and disjointed exhibition. Many of the installations are just simply pretentious. Very Turner Prize. Signposting each room with wall statements (e.g. "How do you distinguish safety from danger?" and "What is the strategy?") is a silly, portentous and redundant curatorial intervention which does nothing to elucidate. "What happens Next?" is the last room, and this is a room of paintings. These are wonderful. Echoes of early Hockney jive with African masks and iconography and her zingy use of colour is superb.

Enough lateral flow and PCR tests and personal locator forms and grateful for the journey, I am now returned refreshed and energised to my home city with all the treasures and pleasures it affords to the restless traveller. So - to work.