

The Big Picture

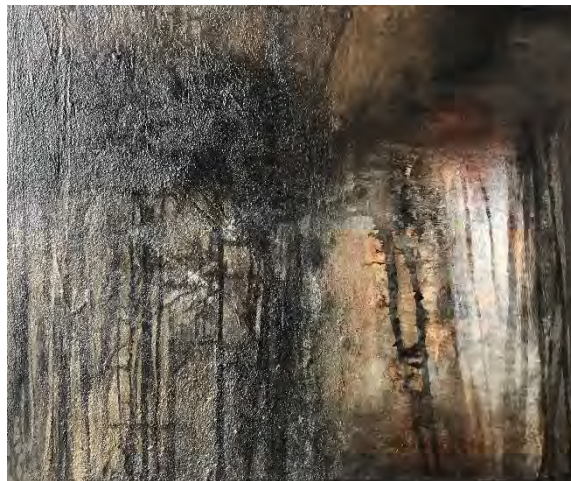
Robin Richmond, March 12, 2021



Heath I, Watercolour on paper



Heath II, Acrylic on iPad box



Heath III, Mixed media on canvas

It is exactly a year to the day that I went into a museum for the last time. One of the great joys of living in London is the access to free museums, and when I am stuck in my work – sadly a frequent occurrence – I grab my Freedom Pass and take the 19 bus down to the British Museum or the National Gallery, or the Victoria and Albert museum, always on my own, and often to look at only one thing. Pure heaven. In my old life, when life was “normal”, I visited one of these pleasure palaces every week. Sometimes I wrote blogs about what I was thinking and looking at. In *these* times *those* times feel innocent. Heady. Indulgent. Privileged. Complacent. Elitist. Smug. Unrecognisable. I haven’t been on the 19 bus in a year now.

Ho hum.

On March 12, 2020 it was the British Museum's turn to distract me from my rackets studio life and the place was eerily empty. I wandered upstairs to the Sutton Hoo treasures to say "hello" as I always do, and the atmosphere in the museum felt strained and uneasy. This is not hindsight, a projection through a glass darkly of this last year. I'm sure of this. Where was everyone? Museums are repositories of time and memory, and remind us that everything human perishes, but we leave human traces. Sometimes I think that is the reason why I paint - to leave a trace of me behind. *Ars longa, vita brevis*. Standing in front of the Anglo-Saxon hoard that morning a year ago I felt distinct shivers at the back of my neck. The British government was not to decree a national lockdown for another eleven days. This would have seemed inconceivable to me then and it is of course all too conceivable to me now. We are still in lockdown a year later. London is closed. The museums are closed. The Sutton Hoo treasures languish in the dark.

It's been a year of constant interrogation for everyone. A year of questioning our governments, the statistics, the narratives, the news, our love for others, our sense of mortality, our working lives. So perhaps it seems tactless to engage in thoughts about being an artist. I know I have written before about all of this. But perhaps it is actually a very good time to think. With so very much to lose in the world outside the studio perhaps there is relatively little to lose inside it. It's so obviously not important in the big picture. With few exhibitions on the horizon and scarcely any feedback save the peculiar verities of Instagram and Facebook - the new temporary galleries - might this not be the moment for me to reinvent, to stride out into the unknown. Be Brave. Resolute. Willing to fail. Change subject matter.... or stick? Stay true. Investigate. Go deep.

If you had asked me a year ago I would have predicted that a year of very little social contact, with no exhibitions to write about (my meat and drink); no museum visits; no theatre or concerts; no footling around in the souk that is T.K. Maxx; no cooking for friends and family; no babysitting; no teaching; no travelling; no eating out; and finally no one-person-shows looming scarily on the horizon would all be conducive to being immensely productive and wildly inventive. Friends have continually assumed that I, of all people, must be doing well creatively through this time as patently there are no distractions. Time is endless. Groundhog Day every day. I get it. I see how this might seem like

The Big Moment. After all, visual artists are not performers. We need no audience to make our work visible. On a desert island we can make art out of sticks and stones. I know. I've done it. Not for very long but I have done it.

And yet it has been a struggle. Not on any important scale. I know this of course. No one will live or die if I don't produce any paintings. Or blogs for that matter. Or change my subject matter. This sense of being becalmed has been truly surprising to me but I realise today the impulse to draw deeply from within one's own inner world - from where paintings mysteriously emerge - requires some sort of external source in the outside world. That awful word *inspiration*. With no museums, I have had to find another source and resource, and these have emerged from my daily walks through the city. For so many of us in London, the parks in their change of seasons over the last year have been unutterably beautiful. The light, even in rain, has been amazing. Sunrises, horizons, light, skies, weather, water and trees have always been my lodestones, but in this plague-year, observing urban nature has grown indispensable to me as an artist. I may be in a dark wood - in my own *selva oscura* - but it's my very own dark wood, and it's populated by new friends. My familiars. No longer able to salute a hoard of ancient treasures in the BM, or gaze at Giovanni Bellini's *Madonna of the Meadow* in the National, or have a coffee with William Morris at the V and A, this last year it has been London's parks that have given me so much. The trees are like old uncles - members of my family now. I have watched them slumber through two winters, blossom through two Springs, and burst into colour for a wondrous summer. Nature is my museum right now. She is the big picture for this moment.

She is speaking. I am listening.