

Trees, Forests and Neural Networks

Robin Richmond, April 15, 2021



Trees: Ithaca, New York, 1989



Trees: Hampstead Heath, London, 2021

As my local art supply shop has been closed for months – deemed non-essential to some, but not to us artists – I found myself excavating in my old plan chest looking for some clean or semi-clean watercolour paper. Digging through years of sad, discarded failures down in the iron-age stratum, I found some interesting shards of paintings and also some complete, forgotten works. In particular there was a watercolour I'd done in 1989, destined (I think) to be part of my first exhibition with a marvellous gallery I had always loved – the Mercury Gallery in Cork Street. Long since closed.

I believe now that I kept this painting back for my own collection because it was resonant with both meaning and memory. Painted during a glacial winter in rural, upstate New York during which I began to find my subject matter as an artist, my presently locked-down urban state of mind has recognised a powerful synchronicity. Looking over snowdrifts into the deep forests above Cayuga Lake over 30 years ago, I can see the beginnings of an enduring obsession with trees and forests that prevails in my lockdown walks in London's parks today. And I can see how this visual trope translates into paintings in the studio, then and now.

This is both reassuring and disturbing. Does one ever change from the youthful self? Does a painter really ever truly develop?

What seemed to me to be merely observational painting in 1989 - snow-laden branches in creamy white light - now looks to me to be a meaningful, significant, and deeply personal metaphor for this plague year. Every nodule of branch and trunk feels like the representation of a moment in space but also in time. Where one line crosses another in a knotted tangle has an obsessional quality, as though the forest is a tangled, sentient knot of synapses. Every crossing of a line with another line is the firing off of a new thought. Science fiction? Lockdown madness? Tree-hugging heeby jeebies? Trees as neural networks in the forest brain? Oh yes.

More please.

We are constantly told that the pandemic has opened our eyes to the natural world. I think mine have always been wide open. Even too open. My paintings haven't changed that much and that is a revelation. I recognise my youthful self that has emerged from the plan chest. I am still trudging through the same landscape, focusing on the detail, and not seeing the big picture, trying to see the same forest for the same trees. I'm not wiser, but just a hell of a lot older.