

Grouse or No Grouse?

Robin Richmond, July 13, 2020



My Mother's Peach Tree



Fruit Trees



Two paintings in progress in the French studio

Henning Mankell's famously gloomy anti-hero, Kurt Wallander, has a disaffected father who is a painter. Wallander is the archetypal alienated poster boy for Nordic Noir and the father is a reflection in a glass darkly of the son, an homage to that other high priest of familial alienation and Swedish angst - that jolly old fellow Ingmar Bergman. Wallander's father has no name. He paints sunsets. Wallander says there is an explanation for this subject matter: "it was his way of keeping at bay all the things that were changing around him."

Indeed.

Wallander's father paints thousands of these sunsets. He paints them over and over again. The only difference between the paintings is that some have a grouse in them and some do not.

I've been thinking a lot lately about whether an artist should plough a well-worn furrow, or reinvent themselves with every new painting. I think I believe that there is a moral imperative to reinvent oneself in every new painting but I suspect that this is false heroics. I am plagued by the simultaneous conviction that "this time it will be different" and a fearful certainty that I've forgotten how to do it at all. The real enemy is boredom. Painting is a means to find out things, and a way of organising thought. Finding beauty. Learning without thinking.

I paint to find out what I'm thinking about.

Of course, what I have been thinking about is what everyone is thinking about. My strategy in battened-down lockdown London has been to look at what is closest to me. I see my small urban garden from my studio. I have followed the growth of blossom on daily city walks and done my 5,000 steps. The coming of Spring has been beautiful. The trees exploding into leaf. But the world has seemed small and confined, despite the plane-less skies and empty streets. My internal lens - long focussed on big horizons - has moved away from the macro to the micro as I garden and paint.

It's all metaphor for lockdown. No fields or skies or forests. I ending up doing ten lockdown garden paintings. They are very different from previous work and they have surprised me. I think, at first, I saw them as therapy, but now I see them as a new departure, in that horrible government speak "unprecedented". Perhaps not "world-beating"

Since I arrived in France three weeks ago, the minute it was allowed, my lens has widened once again. My focal length has expanded and lengthened. *Confinement* is what they call lockdown in French and how apt that term turns out to be. The trees in my field here have grown in my absence of 5 months. In their wild unconfined freedom from human intervention, they have flourished. Chastening - that thought. The peach tree I planted three years ago in honour of my mother has produced 3 kilos of delicious fruit for the first time. My father's tree, planted nearby (but not so near the peach that they can fight in the great beyond) is covered in walnuts. The garden is a life lesson. It's both confounding and very reassuring that despite the virus, natural life does go on.

So I am back painting trees and long views of skies and horizons. I am *déconfinée*. And there is not a grouse in sight.