

Lockdown Blues...and oranges and pinks and yellows and....

Robin Richmond, May 3rd, 2020



The planet was a different place when I last published a blog. Very bad, very sad and very mad things have happened to me in my life, but I felt that the world, though besieged by chaos and unfairness, was fundamentally a safe and sturdy place. It had not yet begun to teeter on what we see now as its ruinously fragile axis. My short messages out to the world from museums, galleries and my studio, seemed perfectly valid and morally ok to me. Self-referential yes, but not offensive. Privileged yes, but not complacent. Personal yes, but not sentimental. I thought of these bits of writing as my attempt (self-evidently without proper punctuation or the tyranny of an editor) to transform the visual into the verbal for those without my good fortune to live in the best city in the world (!), to have opinions that are arguably contentious, and to see great exhibitions and travel to far flung places.

My view about this changed overnight.

I wrote a piece immediately. When the city I live in - London - went into lockdown so many weeks ago I could not paint. I could not resource myself in nature (my subject) and in the museums (my solace). I sat and stared at half-finished paintings on the easels. Romantic. Decadent. Redundant. From another life. How could I paint abstract landscapes when people were dying all around me, when I had to walk outside with a mental tape measure in my head, when the silence of the city streets was punctuated by the wails of ambulances, when my family and friends were immured in a screen?

Artists work in isolation, but this was a very different sort of isolation. At the beginning of the lockdown I had many friends writing to me saying “this won’t feel any different to you”, but it does feel different. This was no “artist’s block”. I have had loads of those buggers in 50 years of being a painter. That’s not interesting. And who cares? I remember hearing David Hockney in late March talking on the radio about making art in this crisis. He was going on - as he does so charmingly - about food and art and love, and I remember thinking it’s all very well for him in his spacious Norman farmhouse with his devoted assistants and his ciggies and his dogs. And I like him personally (he taught me) and I admire him (he is a generous teacher and a committed artist) and he is a thoroughly good soul.

So, the question of what artists have to offer the world in a crisis really bothered me for the first time in my life. I wasn’t sewing scrubs or masks (I can’t sew and I don’t have a sewing machine). I wasn’t volunteering (too old) I wasn’t adding to the health economy (far from the front line in my comfortable studio). I wasn’t wondering about my next meal or pay check, or lack of it. My biggest problem was that two years’ work was languishing in France ready for a one-woman show opening in April that never happened. The paintings I was working on from my trip to India this year were beside the point. What *was* the point anyway? One of the best pieces of advice I have ever been given is to “sleep on it” and luckily I did. The over powering sadness of what I wrote 6 weeks ago was awful. I couldn’t read it, much less publish it.

What has changed today? Why am I writing now? Well, I am working again. It’s what I do. Even if there is no one to see the paintings it seems to be the way I process my life. The numbers are getting better. The curve is flattening. Wouldn’t Giotto have loved that turn of phrase? There is the beginning of a glimmer of an idea of a germ of a plan that there is a way forward. Time has changed. It’s moving on and passing quickly. I am not home-schooling little ones (except for Art Club with my grandchildren on FaceTime) and there is more time to try new things. Time to be vulnerable and sad and make lots of mistakes in isolation, without an audience. Time to think. Time to fail.

“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”
Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, 1983.