

Peaceable Kingdom

Robin Richmond, September 10, 2021



Clockwise from top:

19th Century American Quilt, Anonymous; Robin Richmond: Peaceable Kingdom (Red Rock), 2021; Edward Hicks: Peaceable Kingdom, 1832

Over 30 years ago, snowbound on sabbatical in upstate New York, in an area known as the Finger Lakes, I discovered a landscape of red barns, winter-white fields and vast frozen waterfalls. Already a landscape painter by then, and all too aware that New York City and its museums were a good 5 hours away, I spent many hours sliding around in the slush in my third-hand Chevrolet Impala going from little town to little town. It became a vision quest for two old art forms - the Shaker chair and patchwork quilts. Missing “high” art, I embraced my love of “folk” art. My favourite acquisitions from this time are a 19th century Shaker chair and a tattered old Shaker quilt called “Peaceable Kingdom” based on a famous painting, one of 62 of the same subject and by the same artist that can be seen in museums all over America.

My favourite version is from 1832, and is in the Met. The artist is the Quaker minister and painter Edward Hicks. Some people say that these old quilts should be preserved like museum pieces. I’m afraid my family slept under this beautiful quilt

until it fell apart. I cut it into smaller squares to make table covers. They fell apart. Then, I made cushions. They fell apart. Then, I made table napkins. They fell apart. Then, I made handkerchiefs. They fell apart. Now, they are all fond memories. I still have the chair. It has made the journey from America to England to France where it now graces an old French *maison de maître*. Functionality, beauty and simplicity. The Shaker credo.

One of the things about the Finger Lakes is that the landscape itself is a quilt. The fields and farms are like Robert Louis Stevenson's *Land of Counterpane*, a favourite childhood poem. My paintings from this time reflect this patchwork world. Shapes are laid down on the paintings with no perspective. They tessellate like mosaic. They have a folk quality, with each section of painting joining its neighbour like patchwork pieces. I have only one painting left from that period that I kept back for myself, *Bear in a Tree*, which was the name for a specific quilt that I bought. It hangs in my London living room. All the others are long gone. Like the quilts.

But I am making new paintings.

I described my technique in the last blog, but it suddenly struck me today that the way I have been recycling old work and transforming it into new is very similar to the way the creators of patchwork have always used damaged but beloved old fabrics and transformed them into new creations. The quilt makers were the committed recyclers and upcyclers of centuries past. Beloved old dresses, dungarees, curtains and rags were quilted into complex, gorgeous bed and wall coverings, redolent with family history and memory. They invoke the passage of time. *Kintsugi* or *Kintsukuroi* in Japan is the repairing of a broken pot with powdered gold, silver or platinum, thus remaking something completely new and different out of the old. This feels a familiar process to me. I dream often of the snowy landscape in upstate New York and the Shaker villages I visited so assiduously years ago in my terrible car, and I desperately miss my favourite old quilt from this time in my life, long gone to quilt heaven. I hold tight to the message of the Edward Hicks painting that inspired it in these horrific war-torn times. Tomorrow is the twentieth anniversary of 9/11.

Hicks's painting was inspired by a passage known as the Peaceable Kingdom in the Book of Isaiah, 11: 1-9. It is about redemption and harmony among all living creatures.

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. *Isaiah 11: 6.*