

Spaces of memory and solace

Review by Corinna Lotz, March 1st 2016 of Exhibition "Living Landscape" at Curwen Gallery, March 2016

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Robin Richmond gave up focusing on portraiture and moved to landscape in the late 1980s. She describes herself as a "traveller, a gypsy, a product of the diaspora like my forebears" – and yet her work of the last few years has a profound sense of place and moment.

With this, her largest show to date, the Curwen and New Academy Gallery celebrate two decades of association with Richmond. The show is accompanied by the artist's essay which provides insight into her aspirations.



Cumbria 2016 Acrylic & pastel on paper, 15 x 20 cm

Whilst chronicling her personal peregrinations and obsessions, the work stimulates meditation and mental reflection. The structure is formed by interplay of colour, light and form, rising from the earth below and moving down from the sky. Where the two meet is an area of intense activity. Sometimes sky and land are divided by a gash of colour, like a wound. Sometimes you feel the wind sweeping along a beach. Sometimes flames rise up while in others a mist shrouds a mountain peak.

Through varied and often mysterious layering of acrylic, pastel, gold leaf, etc. we share the mystery and beauty of places in Europe and America: a molten sea in Sicily, a sunset in Venice, the Île de Ré off La Rochelle in France, the mountains of Cumbria and the Lake District, ancient caves in Utah, the rocks of Monument Valley in Arizona.



Madonna dell'Orto, Leaving Venice at Sunset 2015 Acrylic on canvas, 121 x 157 cm

The spectacular *Madonna dell'Orto, Leaving Venice at Sunset*, draws together a host of influences. The artist was on an airplane leaving Venice during a sunset when she saw the lagoon turn to gold.

Madonna dell'Orto is the church where the grand Venetian muralist, Tintoretto lies buried. The glowing seascape has the grand sweep of Turner and the encrusted textures of Rembrandt, painters to whom Richmond has long been drawn.

The palette and the light on the clouds is reminiscent of Victorian painter George Frederick Watts. Like Watts' *After the Deluge, End of the Day and Sunset on the Alps*, her paintings are suffused with a sense of awe.

Fiery colours – from deep oxblood reds to tangerine yellows – blaze forth again and again in these canvases, often using earths taken from the place that has inspired the artist. A series made after a visit to Arizona in 2015 modulate deep purples, lilacs, with hazy yellow-tinged mesas rising up against the sky. There is a vast, lonely, almost sacred feeling.

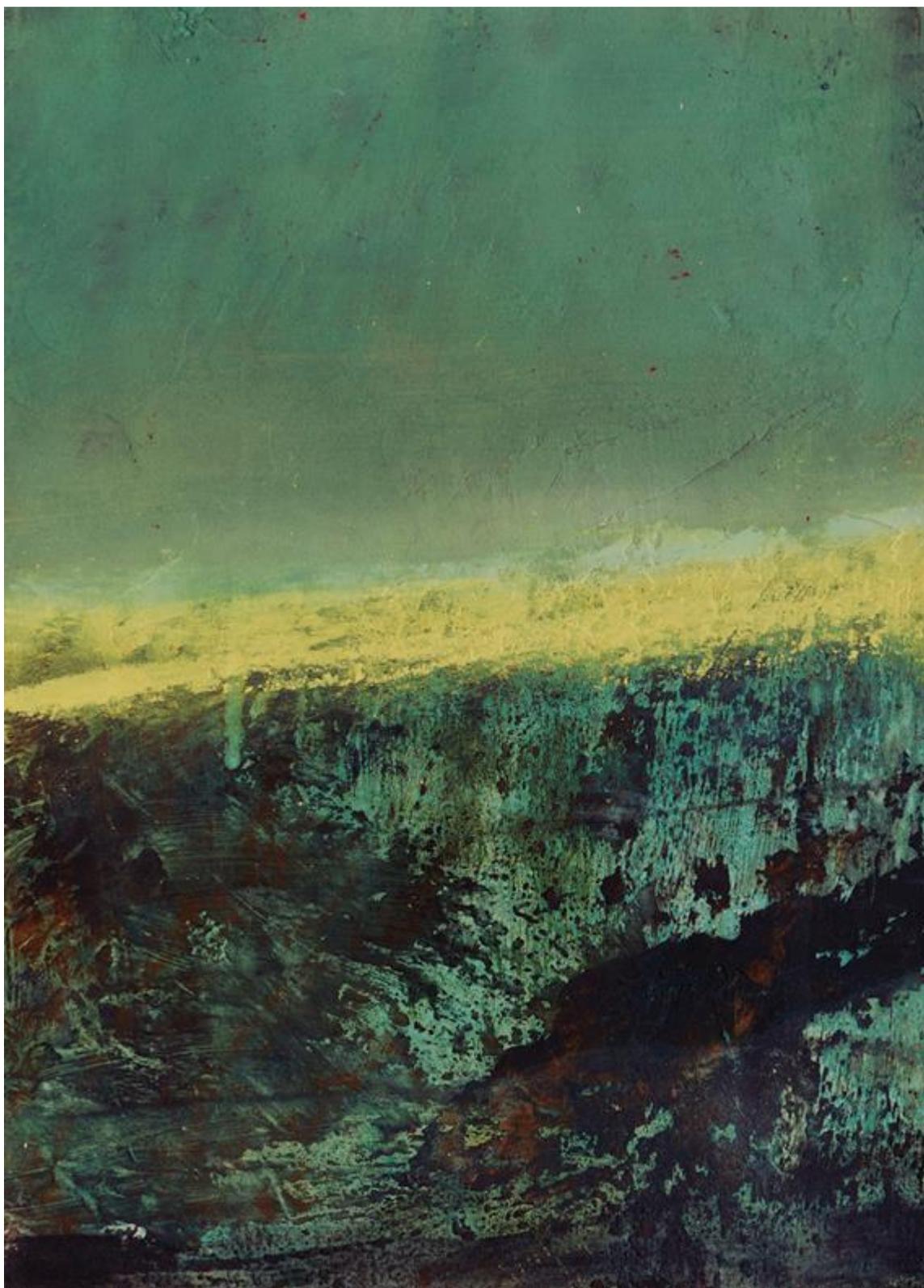


Weeping Rocks, Zion, Utah i - v 2015 Acrylic on 5 canvases, 164 x 29 cm each

A watery pentaptych (five-part painting), *Weeping Rocks, Zion, Utah* is a tapestry woven from trails of drips and falling colours: silvery greys, rusts, greys, blues, reds, umbers, aquamarines and mossy greens. The long vertical panels are quite abstract, and yet, as we know, rocks in nature are corroded and coloured by the age-long effects of water and minerals. So the artistic abstraction is a recreation of an abstraction present and experienced in the world of nature.

Alongside the contrast of warm and cool pigments, there is a superb fluidity, as the four elements – earth, water, light and fire – dissolve, combine and reconfigure. Subtly modulated tones evoke, but never describe, cloud, water, weathered rocks, distant valleys and skies. The colour shifts along with the textures and impastos, as the paint recreates the illusion of nature.

In these sonorous, colour-drenched meditations on the experience of unspoilt places, nature is not there as an external, unmoving *Other* but up close and intimate. The *Other* is inside us, immediately as well as mediated through the individual, the place and time.



Storm Leaving, France 2016 Acrylic & pastel on paper, 30 x 20 cm

Over her five decades as painter, Richmond has reflected on the artistic process, drawing on old masters' writings as well as 20th century abstract expressionists. She is inspired by Michelangelo's notion that the sculptor's concept arises from something buried deeply in the matter of stone itself.

She confesses to an obsession with materials, using bags of soil collected from places she has visited. Many works are made from earth materials she has ground down and incorporated into the surface of canvas or paper. Her landscapes are indeed abstract, but they play with illusions. She depicts compelling moments of abstraction which are endowed with a wealth of associations. Through textured and heavily worked surfaces, sensations, emotions and memories, not topography, spring to the fore.

Can an artist change another person's perceptions? Richmond believes that this is impossible – but that trying to do so "is a powerful impulse behind the making of all art". At the same time, she hopes fervently that her work will pull in the viewer to a place from which there is no escape.

Beauty, she believes, has become something of a dirty word, when there is so much cruelty and ugliness in the world, yet she also feels privileged to be an artist. "I can bring a vision of nature which is nourishing", she says. Her dream is making totally immersive large paintings in the spirit of Monet's *Waterlilies*.

The rich landscape abstractions gain a heightened poignancy in our epoch of runaway global warming and ecological crisis. An awareness of the dramatically changed relationship between humans and nature is at the heart of her *Living Landscapes*. We are drawn in through a sense of pleasure and the need for solace at a point in history when the planet is under threat as never before.

"We are on the planet for such a very short precious time", she says, "but – with luck and care – the planet mostly withstands our depredations and I find great solace in this thought."

1 March 2016

Living Landscape, paintings by Robin Richmond, is at the [Curwen & New Academy Gallery](#), 34 Windmill Street, London W1T 2JR, 3-31 March

Exhibition book published by Curwen Gallery in association with White Stork Press, £30