

**Richard Kenton Webb: first solo show of paintings and sculptures
Assembly Rooms, Chichester, September 1982**

Introduction by Sir Lawrence Gowing from catalogue



Dancers, 14-sided screen, acrylic on board, 1982. Photographed outside the Slade School of Fine Art, London.

Richard Webb has been painting rather differently from any of his contemporaries at the Slade or anywhere else known to me. His gift is in the mainstream of modern talent, the magical endowment of sheer visual felicity which has supplied the enchantments of painting for fifty years. From the start, whatever he did evolved its own kind of enraptured appropriateness, its own self-sufficiency in rhythmical patter and bright but never predictable, colour. It had at once a freshness of its own, but a familiarity too, the endlessly welcome fulfilments of the most lasting, most lovely modern tradition. Webb was different in quite another respect too. His pictures have always had a content to their contentment; they were about something. They were about bodies and the delights of a very physical good life. Often they were about dancing, and they were concerned too with serious counterparts of enjoyment. I remember equally a grave monumentality and (I think) a quite solemn Crucifixion, affirmative and life-enhancing as the theme for the painter worthy of it. Webb's ability to become engrossed in the bodily subject and play on it with a festive seriousness that discovers continually rich delights is beyond anything I know among his contemporaries. Look at the curling momentum with which the lines of movements meet and marry with the picture shape until every part of figure and field has an exhilarated liveliness of its own. The crook of the knee for example, is found to contain a noose of curving line that fills with its own colour; the line through arm and shoulders gathers a lilting and plunging vehemence as it drives the musical design along.

Just lately the round dance which has been Webb's favourite subject for years has been recognised as one of the oldest and most meaningful there are. It has been identified with the Dance to the

Music of Time – the great Poussin which is not only the best loved picture in London but one of our most treasured themes. With the melody of the Poussin to base his variations on, his passion and his invention have taken off. The rhythm has seized him. The mutual agreement and agreeableness of the movement occupy him endlessly. The sequence of bulge and hollow, the convex and concave, answer each other as if physical buoyancy and its satisfactions were inherently the measure of a lovely dance.

The original resourcefulness with which Webb elaborates his variations on a theme is more various, and more inspired than any young painter I know. With the Dance to the Music of Time the figures were allowed to waltz away across the leaves of a folding screen, leaves of different sizes which punctuated the row of dancers with a rhythm like their own and when the hinges were folded alternately in and out, allowed one to look along the row from either end, relating near and distant, connecting one knee, one shoulder, with another so the dance took on a renewed and visual impetus outward along one face of the zig zag sequence, brushed with lovely boldness and brilliant on white and black along the other side, again discovering links, relationships, congenial analogies with one another, as dancers do. Then he moved the great screen out into the open air and painted it there more freely than ever, as if dancers related not only to their dancing companions but to the trees, to the life of nature and the light which played along the folds. Then they *turned* into trees – and turned into skeletal sculptures to be seen outdoors – more skeletal and schematic than altogether suited him, as a matter of fact. But no fear; the next variation was as well fleshed, as richly natural as ever. With the screen came a plaster relief, painted with the same design, but none the less sculptural in its sensitivity to relations between the changing surfaces. Webb is almost as committed to sculpture as to painting and, like Matisse – Webb understands him better than any – of his followers – calls on each for support with the other.

It is a long time since a young artist's originality was so continually delightful. In these last years at the Slade there has been a great deal to admire, but if there was one painter whom one could count on enjoying whatever he did – and count on, I am sure for a long time to come – it was, and is, Richard Webb.

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