

Richard Kenton Webb

Most schools of art are defined long after the fact, and purely as a consequence of our incessant desire to categorise everything around us. He was a Futurist, we tell ourselves. She's a Surrealist. Over there, we have an Impressionist, and so on. Richard Webb's work, I am thrilled to say, occupies a boundary layer where the abstract flirts with the figurative, and the softly surreal nudges against the hard edges of the explicit. He cannot be boxed, classed or listed, and his work is unlike anything else I've seen.

In physics, there are conditions of matter where (for instance) a liquid reaches close to freezing point, so that it is no longer liquid. But it is not yet solid. The substance enters an indeterminate state, not fully understood by scientists, known as a 'phase transition'. Webb explores an artistic equivalent of that ambiguous realm, and the results are unique.

Look at that imperial marquee from a romantic poem, assembled from slender poles clad in flowing silk—or is it? Can we see an inverted flying machine from a more technical era, all spruce spars and doped fabric, poised to arc confidently over an English hillside? What is that scaffolding, or aerial array, or ritually significant construction, poking out of ruffled water? A man in a rowing boat at the foot of this device grants us the comfort of scale. Then we're on our own, caught between the obvious and the mysterious. On the one hand, everything we see is specific, right down to the mechanical arrangement of the pieces: their load bearing, their engineering consistency, and the way all the struts and stanchions fit together into an obviously sensible whole. At the same time, we have no idea what this thing is, let alone how we are supposed to interpret it.

In other images, kite-like objects of playful or perhaps meteorological intent are caught in the winds of Battle-of-Britain skies, where clouds are seemingly connected by wire cables, and dotted lines signify—perhaps, always perhaps—the very shape of weather itself, or the paths of questing birds. Thunderous rain pelts onto a ruined tin shack, although it might be a deck chair on its last legs. An alien spaceship shaped like pieces of backbone rests on a windy hillside, its unearthly bulk supported by wooden beams. Everywhere in Webb's work, an apparent explicitness of form gives way to endless ambiguity. Any descriptions I come up with can only be drawn from my particular preoccupations, of course. You will discern your own clues. (Is that a giant *tooth* over there, constructed from plywood panels and billowing canvas sails salvaged from a tea clipper?)

Let me merely suggest that Webb's work is like a fantastic set of book plates for early 20th century stories of wonderment and exploration from H.G. Wells, Henry Rider Haggard or Jules Verne. It's just that you don't need such specific authors, or even, the tales themselves. Webb provides you with everything you need for a great set of adventures in that most exciting of all landscapes: your imagination.

Piers Bizony, January 2014

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