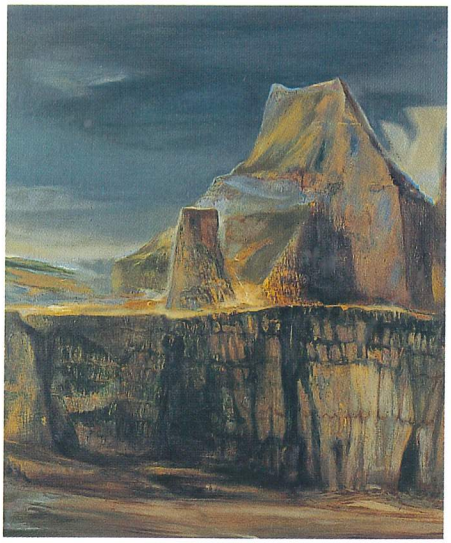
Richard Kenton Webb

by CHRISTOPHER COOK

I studied with Richard Webb at the Royal College of Art, and since then we have met intermittently, both exhibiting with the same London Gallery. The advantages and disadvantages of inside knowledge and its effect on creative response and critical detachment is a fitting issue with which to open a discussion of his work, as the artist, painting intuitively, yet also from the perspective of a committed Christian, faces the onerous problem of reconciling his art's duty to his religion with its duty to itself.

My own perspective is that of the doubter, working from an unstable position, using paint to propose questions. The process requires a wrestling with doubt over the validity of the evolving images. This doubt is for me an essential feature of creativity – providing, as it were, the protagonist's own opponent in the contest that is art, so that the record of the contest is of the highest intensity. Doubt thus becomes the necessary check on dogma, and when considering the basis of Richard Webb's work, a fundamental question for me has been how someone with a firm knowledge of a life to come (and the contingent perspective on this one) can invest his life and his art with the spirit of inquiry that promotes a meaningful interaction with the world.

Richard Webb was converted to Christianity (he describes it more as an overdue admission) whilst at the Royal College. His conversion had a marked effect on his paintings. Great variety and experiment gave way to a more intimate approach, in which religious events were conveyed in a quality of light that owed something to Rembrandt. Their evocation of his conversion gave those small works an authoritative poignancy, but there was soon the question of how the practice of Art – essentially structured around the ego (in the Post-Renaissance West) – could contribute to this stunning giving of the self to a higher self. Despite this question, irrelevant until this century in which painting lost its primacy as disseminator of inspirational images, traditional options nevertheless remained: art as icon, allowing the transference of devotion to the appropriate divinity; art as devotion, conveying gratitude to that divinity; and art as mission, to convert souls to that divinity. Whilst all three rôles are touched upon in Richard Webb's new paintings, there appears a further one: a questioning through paint the expression of that divinity, and the form of his devotion. This is why many of the recent works radiate a purgatorial spirit. He is a fervent reader of the bible, but has also been deeply affected by the *Divina Commedia* of Dante, where an inescapable visual reference is to Gustav Doré and (for one fascinated by landscape) to a *Purgatorio* of majestic, melancholic landscape that dwarfs the poet and his guide. A



Richard Kenton Webb, Worship, *1991, oil on canvas, 91.4 x 75 cm*

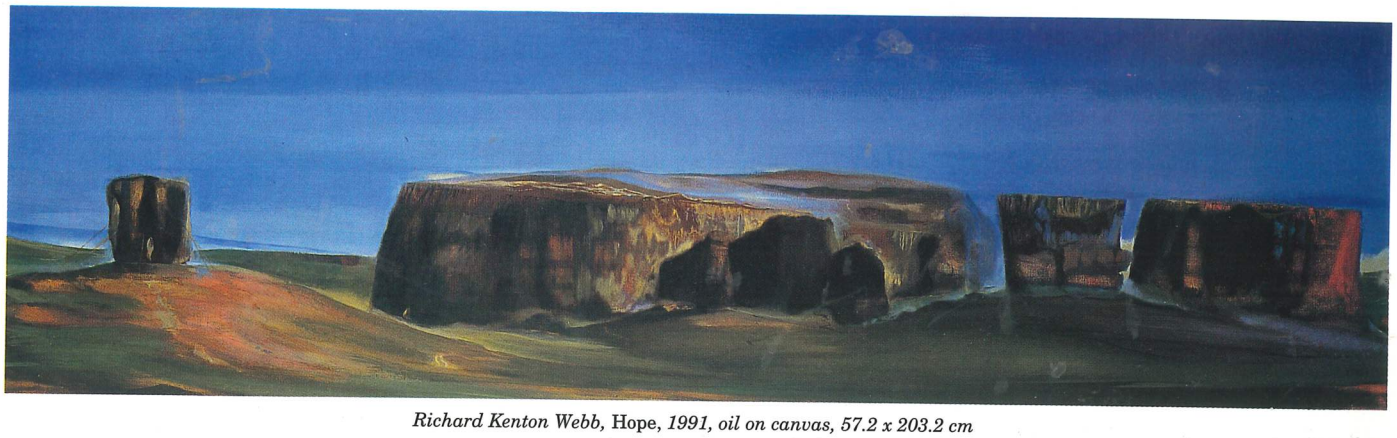
fundamental aspect – of Dante's text and Doré's engravings – is one of vastness, the intimation of an infinite space to come, but also an expanse in which to assess and to contemplate, to begin to see clearly. For Richard Webb also, it is ground for wandering, on a physical and psychical level. It is not an end in itself (an object to revere) but a viewing platform. This in part explains the extraordinary luminance within his landscapes, the paint applied thinly so that the glow of the ground persists, sometimes as if that glow were itself the theme. *Quarry* is a typically sublimated landscape, the title evoking the pursuit of the intangible as well as indicating the evolution of the escarpment, which is conveyed in a dry cerulean blue and ultramarine. Non-naturalistic colour is an integral element of Richard Webb's method and vision, a compelling means of transfiguring reality. Human presence is evoked as clearly in the geometric forms of the hills as by the props that support the quarry face, and what the artist begins to propose (with an eye to Poussin) is structure – or its absence – as metaphor for spirit. In *Hope* there is again an escarpment, and this time it is more dramatic. This is rock (reverberating towards Moses and Abraham) as stepping stone to sky, but here there is only *hope*; a spectacular nature – given grand scale by the track suggested in the foreground – undermines its contemplative possibility. The huge boulder to the left is propped with wooden shafts to preserve its extraordinary aspect, revealing here a sentimental preservation of that beauty, and an unstable 'rock of ages'. This is perhaps metaphor for the artist's dilemma. Though he does not wish nature to become a false idol, the influences of figures such as Ruskin (though his skies became filled with ecological doubts) and John Martin (see *Worship*) can sometimes induce him into the picturesque, where intensity is illustrated rather than evoked, and a slackness overtakes the images.

When I visited Richard in his studio in Stroud (where he has lived and worked since 1986), he presented me with C.S. Lewis's short novel, *The Great Divorce*. Lewis remains one of the most compelling of religious writers by virtue of his imaginative vision, and this short novel is no exception. Sinners are taken by celestial bus from an endless grey suburb to what will be seen as heaven if they remain. The suburb they left will then be seen as purgatory, but if they choose to return it will become hell. The major theme is pride, but a passage significant to my discussion occurs when an artist 'ghost' (recently arrived by bus) has the motivation for his earthly art explained to him by an artist 'spirit':

> When you painted on earth – at least in your earlier days – it was because you caught glimpses of Heaven in the earthly landscape. The success of your painting was that it enabled others to see the glimpses too. But here you are having the thing itself. It is from here the messages came.

Nature as reflection of the divine imagination, as the valley mist struck

Richard Kenton Webb, Company of Heaven, *1991, oil on canvas, 99.7 x 160 cm*



Richard Kenton Webb, Hope, *1991, oil on canvas, 57.2 x 203.2 cm*

Wordsworth, is also Richard Webb's perception. But Lewis's vision reopens the dilemma: by giving only glimpses, when his faith is unshakeable, he would be toying both with himself and his audience, and yet if he strives to make a landscape deliberately awesome and suggestive, it may lose its connection with the everyday world, and its transformational power become dissipated. In paintings such as *Triptych III* (1989), the landscape is charged with biblical grandeur, but alludes to its manifestation in Italian art, whereupon the atmosphere becomes fantastical. Now his landscapes, though they dwell on a fugitive light, have become starker, and carry a more powerful sense of experienced place. In this he has perhaps learnt from Paul Nash, whose examination of nature, although highly poetic, is also a quest for structure.

There is however, another strand to his current work. In his studio I found him engaged with a series of small collaged drawings, employing images cut from old medical and botanical journals, in a similar way to Surrealists such a Max Ernst, to provide an initial surprise and dislocation on which subsequent marks and images can feed. The results provide a rich vein of source material of both a formal and a narrative kind. The method is nevertheless a curious one for an artist like Richard Webb to employ, and perhaps begins to reveal the artist's very real need for doubt, 'a throwing up into the air', as he expressed it, within an utterly secure belief. This method represents an acute study of nature – human nature – and attempts a journey back millions of years towards the lizard centre of our consciousness, over which have been laid innumerable checks and controls, including, of course, religious codes. To question where the sense of the spiritual emanates from (the intuitive centre or the intellectual overlay) is an appropriate and important task, given the confusion currently surrounding the word spiritual, due to its over-usage in the context of nature. I think Richard Webb still feels a great cause for his art, and is constantly examining and broadening his own methods, because it enables him to relate his religious knowledge to contemporary experience and theory.

His is a contemplative but not a passive personality, and he recognises the importance of setting himself tough pictorial problems as analogies for philosophical ones. In *That Hideous Strength* (1989–90), the title relates to the evil he wished to contain in a small circle of impasto white to which the eye is immediately drawn. For him the painting is an enactment of deceit. I found the white circle an unlikely visual equivalent, and was quick to (mis)read it as the more obvious symbol of a singularity, contrasted with the fragmentary forms and colours that occupy the shallow space around that whiteness. The misreading was abetted by the fragmentary forms' genesis in the 'surrealist' collages, investing them with a writhing imperfection. Richard's insistence that the allure of evil should be capable of such deception does not redeem the plain visual fact. It indicates, however, that his theme is an intricate and ambitious one. In *The Sixth Hour* his intention was to address the particular purgatory of Gloucestershire directly, a classical English landscape harbouring all kinds of disconcerting activities. It is a lugubrious and claustrophobic painting, three totemic forms standing as sentinels to a dull black sky. Black is often so used, a cloth-like, devotional black, perhaps a vestigial memory of his Catholic upbringing. The painting is not successful, in that it does not pose the critique he intends, nor does it acquire a new strength; but it represents an important transitional phase that led him away from the narrative works of the late '80s towards a new openness and a determination to deal with the here and now.

As figures disappeared, so the key contest within the work became that between the structured and the amorphous, whether in a landscape arena as in *Quarry*, or on a formal level, to facilitate a more direct discussion of the root and the living form of his own religion, as in *Ladder* (1991). In this painting the forms are amorphous yet still earthly, and an alchemical undertow in subject and method begins an entanglement that is furthered by the ambiguous inscriptions. In *Zeal* a red crystalline form dominates the canvas as metaphor for a religious rigour (hinted at by the boulder in *Hope*). Rigour might have been given fervour by the red of the crystal, but there remains a great inertia, both formally and in the handling, which suggests that the meticulous structure of the crystal is too intellectual a symbol – or a symbol of too intellectual a divinity – that the paint is not able to carry off. *Hope* is subtitled 'Song to Mark', and a number of other paintings are songs to other people, including one to the artist's mother, who has recently died. These subtitles reveal not only Richard Webb's deep involvement with music but also suggest a longing for a new kind of structure, a lyricism, in the working practice. Beyond the lyricism, because these are songs *to*, there seems also to be a longing to *give* more effectively. This attitude would seem an appropriate means of separating the paintings, and the emotions that give rise to them, from the huge edifice of faith, that they may rejoin the warm, loose flow of humanity. And this is the achievement of his most recent works. *Tenderness* (1991) was painted as one of a series of three, and its tranquillity has a strange ancestry, as it was based upon a collage that incorporated images of a buddha and attendant fairies. For the artist these signified deception – a falsehood – and once again he chose the more difficult method by making deceitfulness alluring. However, when the idea was developed on the canvas, those resonances were transfigured. The radiance of the buddha is made less specific, the paint rubbed back to the ground to produce an otherworldly flare of light which hovers above a viridian sea, whilst flowers of light (originating in the flowers of that botanical textbook) create a 'flutter', a presage of glory; stirrings in the imagination of the painter have found positive and poetic form from an inauspicious seed. Missionary pyrotechnics of earlier works are hereby subsumed in these subtle radiances and visual flutters.

The vision of Richard Webb is a vision of a world on the point of change, and through his art he learns what change means; but this point of change, in an age of technological and psychological frenzy, is one of calm, and also of patience. In the painting of that title, its colour transposition based on an acidic green, a listening station is nestled silently in the land. Again there is *attendance*, in absolute silence, and perhaps this ability to wait eventually led to the painting *Company of Heaven*. In this work both certainties and doubts break open into a visual

music, an epiphany embracing both those states. It could have derived from the sky of *Tenderness*, but it has nothing to do with the collages, as it reveals a more internal – a more personal – extension. It is not an easy painting to read, particularly if surrounded by the figurative works – an open technique is combined with a colour scale that gives the image the air of a colour negative. Yet this proves an inspired visual equivalent for a state of heightened spiritual experience, a glimpse into the *Paradiso*. Thin paint is draped over thin paint, forms begin to emerge – wing forms, curtain forms – and then flow back into the whole; a landscape in the sky is suggested, but this too will not resolve. Jagged arabesques suggest something of El Greco's ecstatic skies. It is a delicate yet essentially resolute painting, reflecting a rare moment of imaginative inbreathing, a moment of suspense. In allowing himself to shed formalism, Richard Webb reveals a profound 'letting go', and thus a considerable development in his work. While not driven by Doubt itself, by constantly reassessing and extending the role of his creativity, he allows his religious convictions to achieve their most potent form. It is a form founded more on humility than on rigour.

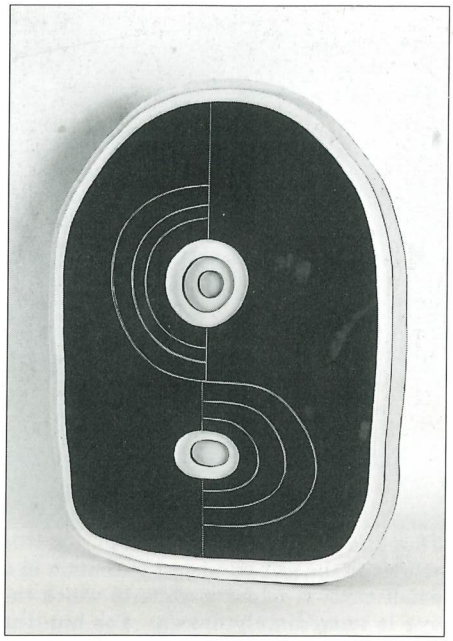
Richard Kenton Webb, 11 March–13 April, Benjamin Rhodes Gallery, London.

Michael Rothenstein's Boxes

by DAVID COHEN

The art world being the way it is, few people who saw Damien Hirst at the ICA earlier this year will also have seen Michael Rothenstein's boxes, shown at the Royal Academy in February. The ex-Goldsmith's young turk has his following, and Rothenstein, Royal Academician, *éminence grise* of British printmaking, and scion of one of the art world's patrician families (son of Sir William and brother of Sir John), has his. Professionally obliged to see both shows, and depressed by both, I noticed certain similarities.

It is not just the obvious common themes: preoccupations with violence and decay, and a fascination with boxed space. More striking is how Rothenstein's attitude towards technique anticipates, in a bizarre sort of way, that of Hirst and his generation. I'm thinking especially of the found object. Once, the Dadaists and Surrealists would really 'find' an object; the chance discovery would prove a vehicle for the marvellous, the unexpected. The Surrealists valued Lautréamont's 'chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sweing machine and an umbrella'. But in the hands of subsequent generations, the found object has become a formality. Going out in search of suitable



Michael Rothenstein, Curve and Curve II, *1966, painted wood, 89 x 67.5 cm*

bits of junk has become as academic as 'pointing up' was in nineteenth-century sculpture. Breton records how he and Giacometti went to the flea-market and made a single miraculous discovery. Michael Rothenstein, who has made the found object central to his art, spends days on rubbish tips, car junkyards, abandoned factories, or out in the fields and woods, and comes back loaded with bits of screwed-up metal, cogs, wheels, planks, crates, slices of tree-trunk. 'An awareness of possible gifts that any environment can yield is never quite forgotten', he says, and he keeps stores of found objects for future – and repeated – use. He has pioneered innovative ways of printing in relief from his found detritus, an extension of the frottage of Max Ernst. (The characteristic Rothenstein wood-grain impression, incidentally, was anticipated in the 1890s by Munch). The quantity of objects he is prepared to 'find' in my opinion undermines any magical or poetic qualities in the process of finding. Despite his persuasive texts about such expeditions, a trip to the rubbish tip is really no different from placing an order with Cornelisson's for so many tubes of oil, so many bottles of turps.

From Rothenstein's collecting strategy, it is only a short step to that of Damien Hirst and his colleagues, who do not soil their hands in junk yards: they simply contract professional fabricators, shop in department stores, or – if the work is for the Saatchi collection – buy wholesale! The difference between the 'pleasing decay' and weathered look of Rothenstein's assemblages and the slick, pristine, coolness of Hirst's installations is superficial. Underlying both men's art is an impulse to denigration: the difference in style is a difference in generation.

Of course, this comparison is extreme. Rothenstein, who is now in his eighties, is a deeply earnest, sincere man, devoid of any of the opportunism or careerism of the Goldsmith's generation. Whatever his shortcomings, he seeks meaningful personal expression in his art. Another way he anticipates the new generation, though, is in the brazenness with which he borrows from contemporaries. But whereas certain Turner Prize nominees make a fetish out of plagiarism, Rothenstein completely lacks any anxiety of influence. He uses screenprints of a car crash, and multiple images, uninhibited by the precedence of Andy Warhol. He paints over screenprinted idioms in the manner of Robert Rauschenberg, or fills a box with soiled brushes after Arman, or prints photographs in the negative, after Richard Hamilton. Mel Gooding, the author of the first monograph on Rothenstein, attributes his lack of concern with formal indebtedness to the urgency and inquisitiveness of his artistic character, which in turn results from the lost years of his youth, when for sixteen years he was incapacitated by myxoedema. The symptoms of his then incurable disease were depression, anxiety, and disturbed vision.

He recovered in the late 1930s, in time to take part in the Recording Britain project, making watercolours of historic landmarks threatened by the war. His allegiances in the 1950s were neo-romantic (he made his home in Essex, near to artists like Bawden and Ravillious) until he studied with S.W. Hayter in Paris, and this changed his outlook. He caught the bug of experimental printmaking, and was also inspired by Hayter to value chance effects. Rothenstein has since aspired to Hayter's notion of 'an interdependence of idea and technique', that is, a unity of image and process. Some of Rothenstein's prints are indeed extraordinary, but the boxes lack any of their sparkle; indeed, they challenge an admiration for his prints with the doubt that daring technique alone is what made them so attractive in the first place. Just as the found object is a tired convention in Rothenstein's hands, so his use of the box format is highly questionable. Again, there is nothing terribly original about using boxes: the obvious precedents for Rothenstein are Miró, Arp, Paul Nash, Louise Nevelson, and – relevant because Rothenstein's boxes grew out of earlier abstract assemblages – Ben Nicholson's carved reliefs. Above all, there is Joseph Cornell, whose enchanting, idiosyncratic boxes are reliquaries, imbued with the most intense and poignant poetry. The box was so appropriate to Cornell because of the private, obsessional, and fragile nature of his longings and fantasies. They evoke at once the doll's house and the antiquarian's showcase. With Rothenstein, there is absolutely no sense of privacy, of the box as site of the hidden or the enclosed. But neither are they stage sets. One wonders if they have any intrinsic need to be boxes.

Rothenstein sees his project in terms of 'affirmation and defacement', the title of a 1976 series of screenprints which are a sort