MIRROR
Arts University
Plymouth
Tavistock Place
Plymouth
PL4 8AT

Mon to Thur:
9am—5pm
Fri: 9am—4:30pm
Sat: 9am—1pm

Opening times are subject to change

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MIRROR is a public gallery, events programme and online resource supported within Arts University Plymouth. MIRROR commissions new work and produces exhibitions, events, residencies, research and student-led projects, with a specific focus on enriching the careers of artists based within the South West region.

Our free public gallery is open to everyone to visit and we look forward to welcoming you to our space.

LOOKING, LEARNING, BEING
DR RICHARD DAVEY

I do not remember the exact date when Richard Kenton Webb and I first met, but I do remember the wonder I felt standing in his studio in an old mill in Stroud, facing a wall covered in small works painted onto illustrations cut out of Grey's Anatomy. These miniature landscapes seemed to float in thin washes of paint over Grey's detailed anatomical drawings, offering a mesmerising and poetic vision of the world. This first visit was the start of a creative collaboration that has informed my writing and thinking for more than thirty years, inspiring ideas and prompting distinctive ways of seeing: discerning earth as pigment, light as spectral colour, and the landscape as a source of visual songs and sacred relationships. Since then, I have had countless conversations with other artists, standing in their studios surrounded by drawings, prints and paintings, but I see this visit to Stroud as the starting point for everything that has followed. As we bounced ideas back and forth between us as if playing a game of philosophical tennis, I gained a new perspective on the practice of painting. In the years since, the conversations we have had about his practice, his distinctive understanding and use of colour, theology, his latest philosophical inspiration, Milton, Shakespeare and in recent years, his Manifesto for Painting have opened up ever more expansive horizons, with our abstract thoughts, coalescing into words, probing the condition and experience of reality. We have wandered the border between the transcendent and earthly, witnessing the boundaries between self and other dissolve. But as our abstract thoughts have floated into ever more esoteric realms the paintings have always grounded us; their physical presence providing a tangible manifestation of Richard's ideas, bringing them literally down to earth, his natural pigments giving visible form to mystery, revealing in people, landscapes, and most importantly, The Sea, those eternal truths which Richard is constantly seeking to grasp and understand. And through this creative weaving together of ideas and images, I have discovered my own understanding of colour and been helped to develop my own 'manifesto' of painting.

What follows is the product of these conversations: some thoughts and reflections on the nature of painting and reality, which, although mingled with insights from other artists and writers, started in that studio in Stroud.

STUDIO – CAVE

Imagine you are living with others in a cave, chained up, only able to stare at shadows on the wall, thinking they are real, unaware that they are cast by objects being carried in front of an unseen fire at the mouth of the cave. Then imagine you are freed and allowed to go outside, but the light of the fire is too bright and hurts eyes that have become accustomed to the gloom and so you rush back to the familiar darkness and the reality of shadows. But one of those bound in the cave with you is forced to stay outside and endure the pain and discomfort of bright light. Gradually they are able to open their eyes, a little at first, but then more and more. Initially, they only see shadows and reflections, but then they see the objects being carried in front of the fire and then the night sky and planets and finally they are able to look at the sun and begin to perceive reality through the eyes of 'reason'. But coming back into the cave, the darkness dazzles them and when asked to

interpret the shadows they are not able to see them properly and so misinterpret them, leading those still inside the cave to disbelieve them and then kill them for trying to take them out of their safe place.

Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave' in the seventh book of The Republic, prioritises the Philosopher's light inspired 'reason' over the knowledge he believes most of us have, which comes only from the shadows of reality. In this realm, where what we see as real is only a shadow, then works of art, dealing with the stuff and matter of the world, are merely shadows of shadows, removed even further from truth and reason.

But now imagine moving from a world of sunlight into a cave-like building, through a dark corridor lined with canvases facing the wall and bookshelves filled with the the knowledge of those who have stood in the light and looked through the eyes of reason at reality. Emerging from this gloom you come into a room dappled with natural light, facing a wall on which you see the coloured shadows of the books that are behind you, volumes containing ideas by Levinas, Boethius, Shakespeare, Milton, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and many others who have looked directly at the Sun.

Webb walks along this dimly lit corridor everyday, coming from the light into his studio cave, where like his earliest artistic ancestors he paints images of the world on the walls. He may come into this space through the pages of the books he voraciously reads and reflects on, but he has come there after standing on Wembury beach looking out to sea, feeling the shingle and sand beneath his feet, and the metronome beat of the tide grip his soul, and he has also come there after years of walking the Cotswold hills of Gloucestershire, feeling the tread of our ancient ancestors buried under his feet and seeing wind looms in the sky, or feeling the hot mistral winds caress his cheeks on the hillsides of southern France.

As he stands there in the luminous shade of his philosophical and literary companions, Webb picks up a brush and holds its wooden handle. To his right is a table with carefully labelled glass jars, each containing the precious particles of 'ground earth' that he will bind with oil, like the spit or sap bound coloured mud and charcoal that the artists of Lascaux once used to bring painted light into these subterranean galleries. What differentiates Webb from Plato's bound cave dwellers is that he knows he's in a cave and he is not bound. He moves freely from outside to inside, from the physicality of the material world through the spectral colours of reasoned light contained in the words and poetry of his literary sources to the earth tones of the pigments he uses to make incarnate this coalescence of body and mind, landscape and philosophy.

Plato argued that Philosophers were those who no longer looked at shadows but looked at the sun and through the light of reason saw reality. Webb also looks at light and sees truth, but he looks at the light contained in pigment; the absorbed light of all those unseen colours that are contained in matter, not the visible colour we perceive on the surface, but that rejected tone that is reflected back to our eyes, the invisible colour beneath the skin, shimmering, iridescent, intangible, hidden. This is the light contained in the matter that surrounds us, the rocks of the cave wall across which Plato's shadows played.

Webb sees the painter to be a humble servant, pulling back the world's visible surface in order to reveal the light, colour, and ideas hidden within the stuff we hold, see, smell, taste and touch. But to be a humble painter rather than an imposer of ideas and forms, demands a playful practise, a constant pushing and pulling of pigment across the material surface of the canvas, a willingness to uncover, discover and not to know. The humble painter needs to work with their eyes open, ready to see what might emerge, prepared for colours to reveal themselves through emotions and memories. But through a playful practise each colour will reveal its true nature, its place in the language, exposing its archetypal form and giving access to the truths contained in this material light.

Rocks not only contain the history of the world, but they also contain the history of humanity: our settlements, our burials, our wars, our agriculture, our travel and our trade. Ground up, they become pigment, they turn to dust and shadow, ephemeral materials that pass through our fingers leaving nothing more than a trace, but pigments stain a painter's fingers, connecting them with this hidden reality. Embedded within their skin these colours connect the individual self of the artist with the world beyond, the universal, infinite other, binding the two together in what Levinas might see as an ethical relationship: a mutually co-dependent responsibility where the painter and his pigments need each other. The painter is not an illustrator but a partner, seeking to make visible the truths contained within this material world, even when those truths may not be visible.

Colour originates in light, but we experience it embedded in the surface of the world, a perceptual, material skin that shapes and forms our experience. The spectral colours of the rainbow merging into 'white light', the earth tones of matter coalescing into a black darkness. But mix white and black, spectral and earth together and we get grey, the colour of incarnation, the visible and invisible, physical and immaterial. Grey is the colour that supports all other colours, a servant colour, and so perhaps the colour of the painter, seeking to hold the balance between the subjective and objective, the self and other, the visible and invisible.

As I write this, I am back in that studio in Stroud, staring in wonder at landscapes painted over Grey's Anatomy, balancing the visible and the invisible, the self of our body with the other of the landscape. Webb's painting manifesto has never changed: The Painter is the material philosopher staring at the light revealed in colour, not dazzled by the sunlight of reason, but exposing the tangible truths that lie in the everyday phenomenon of carnal matter. The painter's role is not to explore the abstract concepts of the mind but like Jacob to wrestle with the angel: to grapple with the incarnate reality of physical things, which, in the process might reveal what is invisible and meta-physical as well.