A MANIFESTO OF PAINTING

RICHARD KENTON WEBB

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MIRROR
12 April – 31 May 2025

‘I believe that painting is a human language that will never disappear. From the dawn of time, materials and our imaginations have fused to create truly remarkable paintings and drawings - visual poetry that communicates a hidden realm.’

— Richard Kenton Webb

A Manifesto of Painting explored the timeless language of colour in painting, highlighting its materiality and emotional power. Richard’s journey, from teaching ‘the practice of colour’ to creating immersive visuals, reflects a deep connection to the physicality of paint.

Focusing on green, this exhibition at MIRROR invited viewers to experience painting as a slow, sensory, and expressive art form. The colour green has been Richard’s colour of focus since arriving in Plymouth in 2020, culminating in this body of work. This response to green is his Manifesto of Painting, a thesis expressed through visual language.

‘Painting is slow and counterculture, a refreshing non-electrical, physical activity. Simply put, painting is just mud on canvas, at odds with our instantaneous culture of taking and sharing pictures.’

Richard aligns himself with the English visionary landscape tradition, drawing inspiration from the works of Blake, Palmer, Nash, and Lanyon. As a painter, he weaves his personal biographical narrative into his paintings, channelling the raw energy and power of paint.

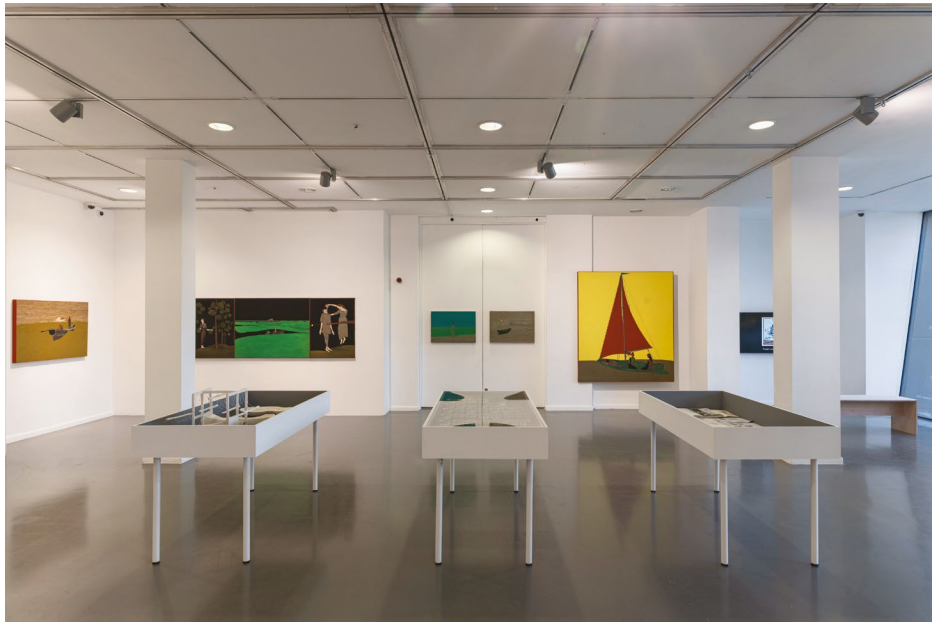
As a young teacher during the rise of BritArt in the 1990’s, Richard witnessed the absence of any practical approach to teaching colour. He often posed the question, “Is colour a language?” To help artists explore this question, Richard created tools like An Alphabet and A Colour Grammar to offer a structured vocabulary for colour. Each colour in the spectrum, from red to violet, is paired with a corresponding earth pigment, enabling artists to engage with colour as a language and express their ideas through the physicality of paint.

Colour is a tangible material - physical paint - that transforms painting into an immersive, sensory experience. This engagement with the physicality of paint allows alchemy to take place. Through their imagination, artists can translate emotions and memories into visual form. For this reason,

Richard makes his own paints and encourages others to do the same.

Since 1998, his work has been a continuous exploration of colour. From 2000 to 2005, he created 22 diptychs representing *A Colour Grammar*, followed by 22 sculptures titled *Colour Forms*. From 2007 onwards, he explored *Red and Orange*; then *A Warm / Cold Contrast*; then *Yellow in Tasmania*; followed by *A Light / Dark Contrast*, a 10-year conversation with Milton's Paradise Lost, completed in Wembury in 2021. Since moving his studio to Plymouth in 2021, green has become his primary focus.

Nemesis (detail), 2023
Oil on linen
183 x 396cm
Photography Dom Moore



Exhibition view of *A Manifesto of Painting*. Photography Dom Moore

An Awakening from Sleep, 2024
Oil pigment on cotton
184.5 x 160cm
Photography Andy Green

The Drama of the Green World: Poetic Diction, 2025
Oil pigment on linen
135 x 180cm
Photography Andy Green

The Call of the Reflective Poet, 2024
Oil pigment on plywood
95.5 x 264cm
Photography Andy Green

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 30 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 of 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 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 practice, 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 practice 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

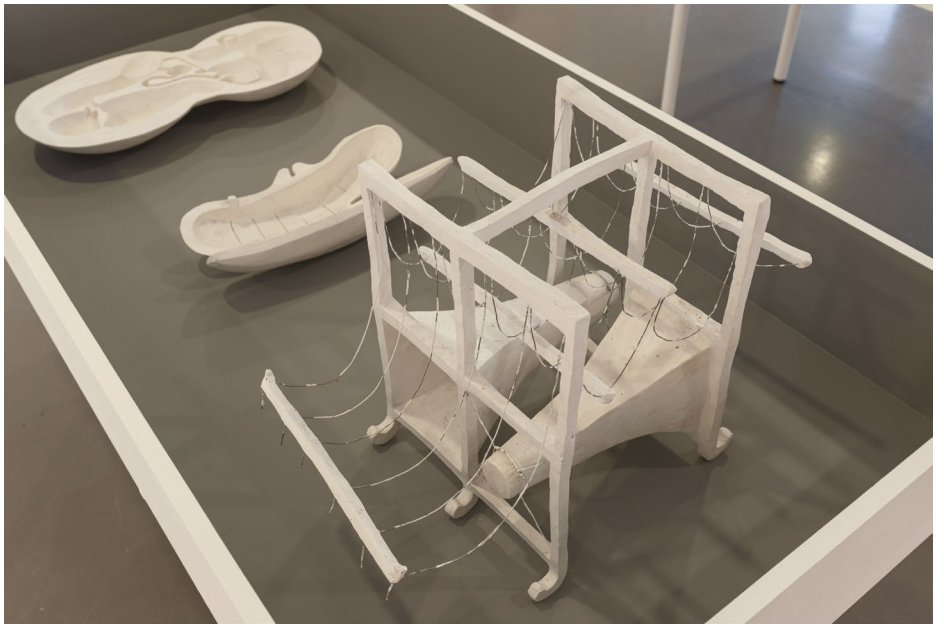
and invisible, physical and immaterial. Grey is the colour that supports all other colours, a servant colour, and so perhaps the colour of the painter, seeking to hold the balance between the subjective and objective, the self and other, the visible and invisible.

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 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.

Richard Davey, April 2025

Dr Richard Davey is a senior Research Fellow in Historical and Critical Studies at the School of Art and Design at Nottingham Trent University. Davey has written catalogue essays on Anselm Kiefer and for the Royal Academy of Arts, including the annual Summer Exhibition and has written books on artists Tess Jaray RA, Anthony Whishaw RA, and John Newling.

Sketchbook and drawings, 2020-25
Photography Dom Moore



Colour Forms, 2005-07
Photography Dom Moore

The Drama of the Green World: The Nature of True Happiness (Orpheus and Eurydice), 2025
160 x 160cm
Photography Andy Green

The Drama of the Green World: The Consolation of Painting, 2025
135 x 180cm
Photography Andy Green

RICHARD KENTON WEBB IN-CONVERSATION
WITH DR CHRISTOPHER COOK

CC: Physical colour seems to be the main theme in this exhibition, and I think we should keep coming back to it, partly because our current positions as artists seem to be fundamentally opposed - I haven't worked with colour for at least 20 years, and you've worked with very strong high-key colour systematically. Colour has become your guiding principle. So, it seems as if we're on opposite sides of the colour fence but, as we've both recognised, you have also made a fantastic suite of black and white drawings and prints, and I have been making colour paintings now and again, albeit secretly. So, we're not fundamentally opposed, and this is something that would be interesting to address: the difference for an artist when they work in colour, and when they're limited to black and white.

RKW: For the Milton work, I made a conscious decision to only use line because neurologically, line can refer to both our tonal brain and our colour brain, therefore the line is neither one nor the other. It's a complete fabrication of our brain. The lovely thing is that pure line can allude to tone or colour. So, when your work is all black and white, people - you know - go: "Oh, where's the colour? Has Chris got a problem with colour?" I think, no not really, because you could just be tonal, but there is also this balancing act where tone and line can suggest colour. And I would say your work is very colourful, even though it's not.

CC: There's a more serious challenge in terms of colour that I'd like to throw at you. You've talked about your childhood influences, and a lot about the sea, and for me that was a revelation because, although we've previously talked a lot about painting, and a bit about our lives, I'd never really registered how fundamental the sea was to your childhood. I feel we need to touch upon that as well, because the sea is very present in the exhibition - and the exhibition is in Plymouth, and you are in Plymouth, partly because of the new challenge of an institution, but I also think you would admit that you were drawn back to Plymouth.

RKW: It was the result of visiting for 10 years friends here in the Barbican, experiencing the city as a beautiful place. Some people don't seem to 'get' Plymouth. Also, I've known Cornwall since my twenties. I fell in love with Plymouth straight away. I get why it's called Ocean City because my experience of the sea was through my parents who were fanatical sailors. My mother was a domestic science teacher, and my father was a dentist. Their way of escaping was to get out to sea on a boat. We children were literally dumped at my grandparents in Itchenor. My parents were just interested in being together and sailing. Being the youngest, I tagged along. So, from the age of about seven onwards, I was in a boat, whether I liked it or not. And I got cold, I got miserable, but never sick. However, boatyards, antifouling, buoys, being at sea, not seeing land, fog, nearly dying many times, these were all part of just growing up. I never really thought about it, but it's slowly crept up. My sons would ask: "Where do you really want to live?" and I would say: "We need to be beside the sea, near that primeval sense of danger, difference and consolation".

CC: This might be because the impact of the sea may be not too dissimilar to how you talk about colour, the idea of the bodily resonance with a large colour field. The sea has a similar quality when you're observing it to that of a painting.

RKW: I think there's something about growing up from a child to a man, a rite of passage. The more I think about why I'm drawn to the sea, all I can say is that coming to Plymouth was like coming home. It's more about being beside the sea and it's just rather good here.

CC: When we encounter the exhibition, we do see fogs. There's certainly a lot of green. We are told that the underlying theme of the exhibition is the colour green, and that relates very closely to the ocean as well, doesn't it? There are also rites of passage in the paintings, where a wave is implicated, or a boat, or a flat horizon. So, after listening to you talk with Richard Davey about the work, my approach to the paintings changed, because the other dialogue you were having with him was between the idea of narrative as opposed to colour recognition. Which one would come first? Which was the way into the painting? Was it colour and surface or was it intellect

and narrative? There is certainly a tension between the idea of the paintings holding all that narrative and symbolism and yet being experienced firstly as a colour field. When you were talking about your residency at the Albers Foundation, it was that experimental colour as opposed to narrative that dominated the conversation.

RKW: I would say there are three or four aspects here. There's the narrative or there's something I'm really circling around. Then, there's the composition of that narrative and then, there's the physicality of the paint and finally, there's the colour. I think each one of those things is busy disturbing my sensibility and the viewer's sensibility. And therefore, as one's looking at the composition, it's as though the narrator is saying "I think I've understood this", then the colour comes in and says, "But what's that doing?". It's like spinning plates. But the narrative is at the beginning. This could be because I listen, and I wake up with dreams, words or quotes. I think "Why am I quoting Hamlet in the middle of the night?". I need to pay attention to this because it's an interesting quote and I haven't read Hamlet for a couple of years. But I've spent a lot of time with the play, and I've seen so many Hamlets. I go back to that play and I think: that's interesting, maybe I need to make something about this.

CC: Because you have read voraciously throughout your life. You've read enormous quantities of literature of one kind or another. And philosophy. Not so much fiction lately. But you're a big reader. The information that we have alongside the exhibition with the suggestions for further reading makes this the model academic show. It's very pedagogical. It wants to deliver messages. It wants to deliver ideas to awaken multiple possibilities. It's a brilliant show for an institution like Arts University Plymouth, but that's not how you'd really want the painting to be assessed fundamentally, is it? It's not necessarily beyond words but it's a different language and it's going to speak for itself.

RKW: Yes. There's a great little scene in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. And suddenly they see Camelot and they go "Camelot! Camelot!" and then he goes "It's only a model" like saying 'It's just a painting'. That kind of circling back to, it's just a painting, is really important. In the end what does the painting do when you're in front of it?

CC: Which is all very well, but I'd like to deal with the issue of how a painting has that immediacy, that presence, and yet behind it, we know that there is an awful lot of reading that has been absorbed to allow that painting to become possible. And of course, some people want to dig into that and understand it.

Maybe that's a good point to throw in here that your choice of colours seems quite historical, resonating with different cultures, from Greek and Etruscan. It's that kind of colour range. It seems to be based on earth colours but adds a couple of sea colours as well. Now this is probably not good for your ears because you're showing us a cabinet full of greens in the centre of the gallery. You're emphasising the range of possibilities that one colour can offer. But at the same time, I'm seeing a very historical register that seems to derive from your experience of places from Greece to Rome. A certain kind of black, a certain kind of terracotta, greens, and the yellow ochres in the large painting. When they're brought together, they suggest a more historical view of colour than an immediate one.

RKW: As a child, I was off sailing in a boat. However, every summer we'd go away on a family holiday. My parents would take us to places like Paestum, Pompeii, Herculaneum, Elba, Corsica and Florence for three weeks or a month. We'd take a caravan, stop, explore and do some water-skiing. We'd visit places to see some art because I'd already shown an interest. I come from a long line of dentists. So, it was very peculiar to have tendencies towards art. So, yes, I saw Etruscan art in Paestum, along with wall paintings. I was 'eating it'. Back then, you just walked in and didn't pay much. Most museums were empty and unguarded. So, I was experiencing a lot of these colours, plus a lot of paint and physical stuff. I loved that early Florentine and Sienese painting. Later, I returned to Italy for long periods.

CC: And so now, is it like the sea? Is that experience coming back through of its own accord?

RKW: Yes, it's unconscious.

CC: It is unconscious. You're not wanting to make deliberate reference to that culture?

RKW: No – you've pointed this out to me. I would say I'm not surprised because I found it very attractive from a young age. But the protagonists are those pigments. That's why I've got them out. It's those pigments and their personalities. I see them as personalities. When I make them into physical paint, I'm thinking "Oh, who are you?". I'm obviously pulling up stuff that's registering things like the terracotta tiles and Italian plates.

CC: What is quite curious about the places you've just mentioned is that you're seeing frescoes aren't you?

RKW: Yes

CC: And although the colours look very much like fresco colours, you're mixing them as oil paint, which is substantial stuff when you're applying it. I've seen you apply it in the studio with pallet knives, as well as with a brush, and with your fingers. And you know, it really is 'matter' isn't it? And that's a very different thing to take away from those Italian experiences because they're obviously painted very thinly. It's as if you're simulating the silver sand of the fresco that it goes onto. You're making that kind of surface in one go, rather than laying it down.

RKW: As I was leaving school and entering Foundation at Chelsea School of Art, there were De Kooning sculptures at The Serpentine Gallery. These were in clay cast in bronze but kind of floppy looking. And then I saw Frank Auerbach paintings at The Hayward Gallery. Those two shows were very physical. At Chelsea, I was taught to look in the Euston Road / Camberwell way. Trevor Felcey taught me how to look at things. Then there is alchemy. My thoughts and emotions are akin to William Blake. The paint and my imagination are part of my soul, becoming fused into a conversation. I'm constantly surprised and I go: "Did I do that?".

CC: We were talking earlier about a book by James Elkins entitled What Painting Is. In that book he proposes painting as a contemporary equivalent of alchemy because he sees these proto-chemists, the alchemists, as being absorbed in transforming matter, from base matter to red matter, to white - with the possibility of gold at the end if they got everything right - but points out that at the same time they were experiencing a spiritual and intellectual dimension to that process. So, when you see depictions of alchemical studios there's normally a priest within the same space. I'm thinking of Renaissance times. And so, he's proposing that painting has the ability to allow your imagination or your thinking to be modified by the stuff of paint. Therefore, it is an equivalent to alchemy. Is that something you'd agree with?

RKW: Yes. I'm saying this as part of the question, "Is colour a language?". Likewise, "If it's a language, how can I grasp this?" From 1995 onward, I was reading Jewish mysticism: *The Books of Bahir*, or *Illumination*, and *Sefer Yetzirah*, or *The Book of Creation*. *My Colour Alphabet* of 22 colours matches the Semitic alphabet, but with a duality of spectral-like colours and earth-like colours, like the dual nature of Jesus, who is both God and man. Finally, I made paintings of the ten names of God. There is, therefore, the Kabbalah grounding to my vision of colour.

CC: I'm glad you mentioned that aspect of it, because there is, as it were, an elephant in the room - well actually he might not be in the room, he might be in the room and outside of the room as well - but God is very much part of your conception of the world and therefore infused in your painting.

RKW: What I see behind each colour, is a kind of archetype. I see colour as the language of God. Therefore, by slowly entering each colour, I'm trying to fathom its form and comprehend the nature of each colour family. I'm asking each colour: "Who are you?". I've then found a kind of shape, an archetype within those colour families, hence I made the twenty-two sculptures. After this, I decided I hardly knew anything, and I started again with red. It's like, who on earth is this red? What is in it? What's its music? The whole Bauhaus - Albers, Kandinski and Itten - thing of coming up with geometric forms doesn't feel right. For me, colour is more fluid, organic and complex. I just don't feel it in my being like that. It's not squares and pyramids. Arriving at the Albers Foundation, I told the curator: "I think I've come under false pretenses because I think I disagree with what Albers was saying". Then when I saw the actual prints, I knew I was in the right place. There's real poetic resonance in the Soft Edge, Hard Edge screenprints.

CC: Can we move on to talking about the figures? Obviously, the figures are implicated in narrative, and we could consider the figurative works as opposed to the ones that have no figure. Earlier I described to you my different experience in front of those two types of your work, but if we think of that historical aspect of colour, the figures are represented in a similar way. What we have are figures more like those on a Greek vase or in an Etruscan fresco, with outlines. They have got features, but these are relatively muted. They have gestures, but they're a bit stylised as there is no attempt to mimic life. We clearly register them as figures, but you're not trying to make them come to life. Can you just talk us through that decision about the way in which the figures operate within the work?

RKW: The figures slowly disappeared after 1992, until eventually we were just left with clouds. Then we went into particle physics which became the start of the colour work, after the *Colour of God* show in 2000. After this, I was finding and making *A Colour Grammar*. The personality of the colour presented an archetype of form. Then the sculptures happened. If one then moves into red and orange, there were still forms to be found. However, as soon as I started the first colour contrast - *A Warm / Cold Contrast* - with two opposing colours, I made a series of 60 linocuts in six colours, three oranges and three blue-greens and blues, where it became a necessity for this contrast to be more figurative. The two contrasting colours I imagined as visionary landscapes. Right at the end, a person on a little bicycle appeared. That was a bit of a shock, but it felt right, despite not having a person in a painting for about twenty years. After returning from making *Yellow* in Australia, I started *A Light / Dark Contrast.* I then worked on *Still Life with Blackbirds* with crime writer, Dr Joanne Reardon. There was a van, there were people, there was a narrative, and I just thought, when I'm thinking of *A Light / Dark Contrast*, there's always people. Then I made my epic work, *Paradise Lost*, which took ten years. There were all these people in it because I was trying to express extreme light-dark contrast in line. This narrative world had figures, and I just loved the invention. I was like, "At last! I can do this stuff again". It was just so much fun inventing and playing with it. Then, coming to the colour green in 2022, I started thinking, "Why am I in Plymouth?". The heart of why I'm here is to teach, exhibit, and make paintings. Suddenly, we had people again and I thought, "Just jump out the airplane. It's people". I'm teaching here - green is about language. So, when I was at the Albers Foundation, I made my *Manifesto of Painting* because I thought, "My language is paint".

CC: Yes, that's absolutely right. And there are some paintings exactly like that. And then there are ones with two figures and sometimes with three figures, which provoke a different apprehension of those images because it's more like looking at a stage or a play.

RKW: That has come about because the subject comes to me, often in dreams. I was thinking, "Why am I quoting The Tempest in the middle of the night?'" I started to think that I needed to make something about this. The more I read essays on Elizabethan theatre, I realised that painting is so like theatre. It's all to do with those metaphors and gestures because there's hardly any scenery. It's an emblem of things. I'm realising this is the way I'm painting. Like the buoys and boats, they become emblems for other things. And so, this is all making sense, this rectangle or square, especially as you could set two other paintings next to it and make a triptych.

CC: You will often have a colour very close to the edge of the canvas that is like a border.

RKW: That's from my linocuts.

CC: It's partly from linocuts, but isn't one of the reasons you like it because of that idea of the stage, the separation?

RKW: Yeah. I want to stop. This is a painting. It stops here.

CC: In some of the images we see the kind of heroic melancholic figure looking away from the viewer into the depths onto the horizon. Are we right in assuming that's the artist - or perhaps the teacher - as with Casper David Friedrich?

RKW: The melancholy figure is the artist and the teacher. Being beside the sea and coming back to the sea, being beside mud. As much as you're with other people, you're always alone. We will die alone. So, there's things that we're deciding all the time about what we're doing and how we're doing it. We can talk to people but

essentially, it's just us. And if we get pain, it's our pain. I really like walking. And I like sitting down on a bench and just look at the sea. It's that bodily awareness of how you are also standing there - at one with the space.

CC: I'm quite intrigued that I respond to those two figureless paintings primarily before I look at the figures, as if they're the main event. I love that far wall with the two figureless pieces flanking the large work which is filled with this fantastic glowing golden yellow ochre in the centre. There is this drama of washing going on with the three figures together. The wall seems to form another kind of triptych where the two figureless paintings become a bit like the predella of a Renaissance altarpiece. They're an aside, saying that this is going on as well, alongside this human action, as though there are these allegorical aspects alluding to other realms, all happening at the same time. And I find that the allegory works more powerfully for me when I don't see a figure. It might just be me.

RKW: I can understand that. There are five paintings that are to do with *The Drama of the Green World* and in those paintings, I'm trying to express about the business of painting internally. Therefore, it's not about seeing a person, though there are people in some of them. It's just what's needed at the time.

CC: I'm putting you on the spot there because you're having to compare between works that you feel you've completed to your satisfaction, each at a separate point in time. It's an experiential thing - with the artist not there it feels as if the viewer is either looking through your eyes or experiencing it for themselves in this new world. In this figureless world, it becomes theirs. Whereas in the paintings that have two or more figures, it feels to me more like dramatic arts are involved, where the relationships between the figures become equally important as the relationship between the figure and the viewer.

RKW: This alludes to Shakespeare's theatre. There are points in the theatre when the actor is acting or doing stuff, and then they interrupt to tell the audience something that the rest of the people in the play can't hear, but the audience can go, "Okay, this is a soliloquy going on", and I would say that's what's going on in my painting a lot: it's the painter going, "I need to talk to you about something". In the painting *The Announcement of Spring*, the person is looking at us because the painting is the other way around. He is looking at the ocean. The ocean was talking to the figure, but it just wasn't working and in turning him, it made sense. Then one evening I was in front of the painting and I realised that what it was saying to me was, it was just like the person saying to me in soliloquy, "It's spring". That's why it's called *The Announcement of Spring.* The painting is saying, "Winter is over: it's time for spring now, and it's been a difficult time". I do think painting is about listening. The paintings give me hope and so I'll often paint something and then I almost hear the painting going, "Will you just pay attention and look at what you've painted". That's what I mean by alchemy. I need to hear that. The painting of the three people in the boat is a painting like that. And I would go into the studio and look at it and go, "That's really good news". I needed to have my eyes opened.

CC: And I think as artists we know a lot of energy derives from not knowing what the conclusion of the painting is until it's being made. And if you're not learning about yourself as well as about the painting whilst it's in progress, it falls flat to us. Other people might see some merit in it but there's no energy derived back from it, if that is the case.

RKW: The painting is getting our attention and it's exciting when we see something happen that we hadn't expected. That is the extraordinary thing – I'm in wonder of the narrative.

CC: Rather tentatively before we came in I said, "Do you mind me asking, do you like De Chirico?" and thankfully Richard said "Yeah, I love De Chirico" because I thought that might be just pushing the surrealist side of things too far. But clearly from that statement you just made, that idea of unspooling the unconscious through the act of painting, I would say it is central to what's going on in your work.

RKW: Yes, it's central. And I wrote that essay *Drawing as a Way of Thinking* in 2015. There was that fabulous exhibition in 1978 at the Hayward Gallery called *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*. I spent a colossal amount of money on a hardback edition. Some of the stuff

was just so wacky. And I still find Dada fascinating. It turns me upside down. It's unpredictable, funny and shocking.

CC: But you can see absolutely where it's come back through into this body of work. Even though that doesn't seem to be the spirit of the show, it's there as an undertow - thinking of tides - it's an undertow of surrealism and learning about yourself and about the world through making a painting, not through intellectual analysis.

RKW: Totally correct.

CC: Richard threw me slightly by choosing this work, *The Mantle of Painting*, to be projected as our backdrop, because clearly it's not in the exhibition. I promised to give Richard a couple of minutes to talk about why he's chosen this painting for this purpose.

RKW: It's not professionally photographed. It's taken on my phone which means it's bad. I've done this on purpose. We look at a lot of bad photos and it's digital. It's a badly photographed painting. It's at the very heart of what I want to talk about, which is the mantle of painting and being a teacher. I'm at this point in my life, asking, "Who am I passing this mantle of painting on to?". I feel as a painter it's been one headlong battle to stand up for painting, especially within academia for the last twenty years. It's what I feel I've been called to do. Scholarship is important. It's constantly challenged. In this triptych, the scholar has assassins and the teacher has assassins. All the time, they're saying, "No, you can't do that, we do it like this: You've got to write. Tell me about the painting. No. Write an essay about the painting". My life is about decolonising the curriculum. In the 1990s, art schools were swallowed up by universities. Since then, artists have been expected to conform to a word-based culture. Academia has been silencing the indigenous voice of painting. Painting is an ancient human language. It should be respected in its own right. The actual work should be the academic output. You should not need words. Let the painting talk. Likewise, this digital image is an anathema because it's not an actual painting. It's been transformed into everything that a painting is NOT. It has lost its soul by being digitised. What we have here is an angel putting on a blue mantle, alluding to John Milton's *Lycidas*. The painter is given a blue mantle on becoming a visual poet. That's what I'm trying to do. The painter is painting about going into exile. I have felt as though I'm in exile, away from the world. It's being in the world but not of the world. There's a prophetic edge. It's saying to society: "You can do things differently. You've got to see things differently". And I would say that we need digital as well as embodied arts. The embodied arts are so powerful because they tell you about being human. We've got to wake up. I would say I'm an optimist. It's half full, rain is coming. It's going to get better. That's why that painting is about spring. I'm announcing spring in winter. This is about hope and his beloved is singing a new song. It's all upbeat.

Dr Christopher Cook is a British artist known for his distinctive works in liquid graphite, often referred to as 'graphites'. His practice explores the enigmatic within the everyday. Cook has exhibited extensively, with solo shows across the UK, US, Germany, China and Japan and has works in major public collections, including the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

This conversation took place on Thursday 1st May 2025 during the exhibition A Manifesto of Painting, MIRROR Gallery, Arts University Plymouth, UK. The transcript of this conversation was edited for the purposes of this publication.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Richard Kenton Webb (b.1959) is an artist and educator. Represented by Benjamin Rhodes Arts, London, he has exhibited in the UK and around the world, alongside residencies in Paris, Rome, Florence and as far afield as China, Australia and USA. His work links colour and narrative, fusing his own personal drive to share, teach and inform.

Webb is one of the few British artists trained at both the Slade and the Royal College of Art. He studied under and alongside many well-known artists and teachers in studios where scholarship is celebrated. In 2016, he was shortlisted for the John Moores Painting Prize and in 2020, winner of the international London Sunny Art Prize. In 2025 Richard was shortlisted for the Jackson's Art Prize.

Having lived in Gloucestershire and taught at some of the UK's top art schools for 35 years, Webb moved to Plymouth in 2020 to head up Painting, Drawing and Printmaking BA at Arts University Plymouth. By April 2021, he had completed his Conversation with Milton's Paradise Lost – 128 drawings, 40 paintings and 12 relief prints spanning 10 years. This led to a commission of 12 drawings in response to Milton's poem, Lycidas, for the Milton Society of America; a chapter in Milton Across Borders and Media, Oxford University Press, 2023; and a solo show at Milton's Cottage in Chalfont St Giles.

In 2022, Webb returned to Plymouth from the prestigious Josef and Anni Albers Foundation Residency in Connecticut USA where he embarked on his Manifesto of Painting. This exhibition is the summation of his manifesto – a celebration of paint and colour.

Photography Luke Frost

Front cover image:
Nemesis (detail), 2023
Photography Dom Moore

MIRROR is a public gallery, events programme and online resource based out of, and generously supported by Arts University Plymouth. MIRROR is built on the legacy of The Gallery at Arts University Plymouth (established in 2006) and on the impact of the South West Showcase project.

MIRROR is dedicated to supporting the professional development of artists,with a particular focus on enriching the careers of artists based within the South West Region. We are committed to taking a long-term, regenerative and proactive approach to developing the arts ecology in the South West, whilst having a national and international perspective.

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