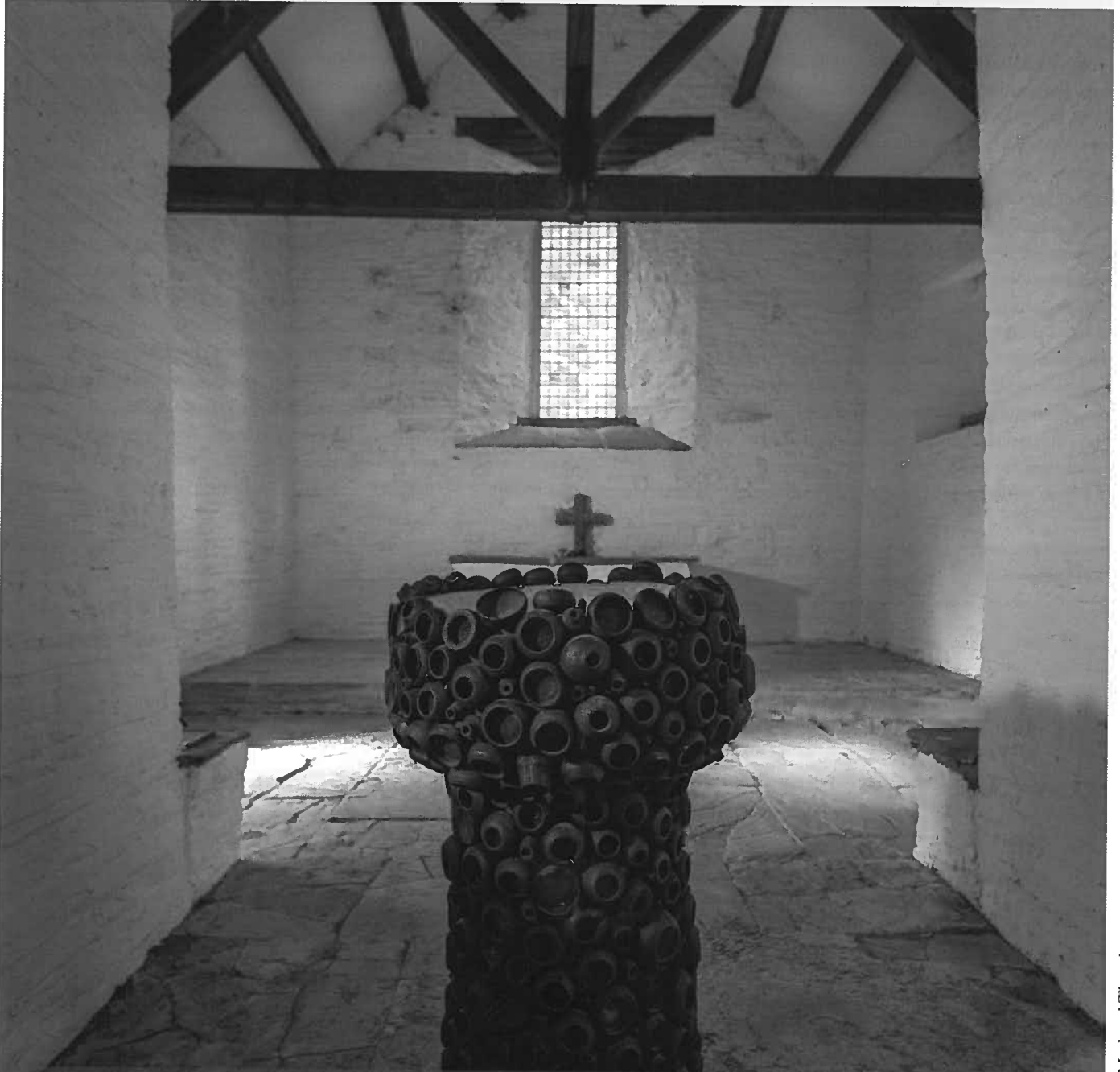


Art+Christianity

no. 119

The quarterly members' journal of Art and Christianity

Autumn 2024



- Jacquiline Creswell on Vessel: A+C's art trail in remote rural churches 2
- Richard Kenton Webb speaks the language of colour 6
- Emma Roberts delves into Anish Kapoor's 'Monadic Singularity' 10
- Maryanne Saunders on Michael Petry in Maine 11
- Charles Pickstone reviews *Ritual/Bodies* 14

The soul of a colour

Jonathan Evens interviews the painter Richard Kenton Webb

Richard Kenton Webb's central artistic practice is to communicate the spiritual significance of colour. Since the early 1990s, when he posed the question 'is colour a language?', he has pursued a personal pilgrimage into colour, following his belief that colour is the language of God – that is, the language of love. He developed these ideas in a solo show at the North Light Gallery in Huddersfield, 'The Colour of God', 2000, a series of abstract paintings which sought to imagine the heavenly tabernacle, as well as a set of works influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein's writings on language, from 2000 to the present.

Webb trained at the Slade School of Art and at the Royal College of Art; he is a course leader at Arts University Plymouth. Jonathan Evens talked to Webb at the time of his recent exhibition 'A Conversation with Paradise Regain'd and Samson Agonistes' at Milton's Cottage. He is represented by Benjamin Rhodes Arts, London.

JE: I can see that your life, teaching, and artistic practice are inseparable. How does your recent exhibition 'Conversation with Milton's Paradise Lost and Samson Agonistes' mirror your life experiences?

RKW: In 2011, I was well into my colour journey when my son encouraged me to respond to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. This conversation became my light/dark contrast. Milton's poem released my mind, conjuring doodles and ideas that became drawings and paintings. As I progressed through the poem, traumatic events unfolded for me, intensifying between 2014

and 2020. I was told painting is dead. I found myself fighting for survival. Whether in dreams or waking, prophetic images arrived to comfort me and enable me to make sense of my situation. This brought reassurance, but then the world turned dark with Covid and in the summer of 2020, they closed my degree course. The announcement of the closure came on the day that I completed Adam and Eve's descent into the underworld. Ironically, this was also the day I saw the vacancy for my current job to head up BA and MA painting, drawing and printmaking at Arts University Plymouth. On that same day, I was shortlisted for the London Sunny Art Prize which I went on to win.

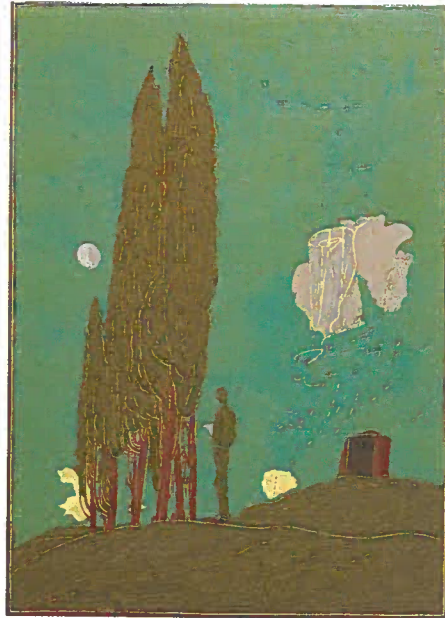
It was a strange and incredible experience, enabling me to find hope in a desperate situation. The poem moved me out of despair to discover hope because I knew we were heading towards redemption.

I found solace in the fact that Milton had experienced deep hatred throughout and after the English Civil War. He was in fear of his life. Despite this, he was able to express his love for his Creator so wonderfully in his poems. It was the same for me, a visual poet expressing God's grace. This is how an artist can make visible that which might not necessarily be seen.

I was extremely honoured to be invited to exhibit at Milton's Cottage in Chalfont St Giles earlier this year. After all, this was the place where the blind poet spoke his last two poems into existence. This coincided with a new publication, *Milton Across Borders and Media* where, in a chapter called 'The Synergies of

Richard Kenton Webb, left: *Servant*, 2021; right: *Grief*, 2020
Photo by Andy Green





Richard Kenton Webb *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 2018–23
Photo by Andy Green

Drawing and Painting *Paradise Lost*, I explore how Milton has been my companion, like Virgil to Dante, guiding me through the narrative of my own life.

JE: In reflections in your blog on ‘Starting a painting’ you wrote that artists need to be able to answer the question ‘What is your song?’ So, what is your song?

RKW: Colour. Hope. Wonder. When I look back at the ‘ploughed field’ of my life, it all makes sense. As a student at the Slade and at the Royal College of Art, I was an inheritor of a tradition. Our tutors made us consider our role as artists to society. We were expected to understand our place within a great ancient lineage.

I see myself within the English visionary tradition of William Blake and Samuel Palmer. Even during the years between 1992 and 2000 when I went into my ‘cloud of unknowing’, I was making work about the mystery of God and the eternal state of the Trinity. John 1 became my mantra, and I was taken up with the vision of Ezekiel. I then came through that period and dedicated my life to a response to colour as a language, because colour ascends to the Holy of Holies. This is why I use the word ‘love’ for this Holy of Holies.

In 2007, once that foundation of colour as language was understood, I set about trying to fathom the personality of each colour. 17 years later, I’m still at it. I’m now on green, and yes, my song of hope is still the same.

JE: What are the main points of connection for this unified song between your early and current work?

RKW: I have always attempted to be myself. Composition is paramount for me. By this I mean the dynamic of shaped line and form, as negative and positive space. I use rhetorical gestures to find a boundary, joining them to create one whole energy, in that touch of surface, texture, and the very physical playfulness of paint as ‘stuff’. It’s an alchemic translation of humanity, fused with thought.

This marriage of mute thinking with the materials is

transformed by my imagination to create a harmonious connection between my body and soul to express what I am carrying.

I allow myself to flow freely between the abstract and the figurative, but there has always been a narrative. Artists can swing way over the boundaries because we need to explore whether something makes sense or feels like home. This is where we can break, bend, and play with the rules to go beyond what we know. As Samuel Beckett said, through our curiosity, we can dismantle and debunk habit in our ‘suffering of being’. This is where an artist can make leaps of faith towards the ‘Other’.

JE: Where can we see your Holy of Holies in your work most clearly?

RKW: In about 2014, I made a small drawing of Judas betraying Christ, called *The Kiss*. At the time, I was immersed in *Paradise Lost* and I was very moved by God’s expression of love in Book III. I was so broken when I came to Plymouth. Through the lockdowns, I found healing by living like a hermit in a hut, in woods by the sea. I wanted to honour my God who had been with me through these trials and delivered me from such darkness. I reflected on my experience of Christ’s love and created a series of drawings about the Passion of Christ. More than any other work, these 24 charcoal drawings are my ultimate expression of God’s love and compassion. It’s my hope that this deeply personal vision will touch many hearts.

JE: Where might this understanding take your work in the future?

RKW: I am so focussed on exploring colour as ‘Other’. I’m excited for where this prophetic imagination could take me. This is what Blake calls ‘the creative imagination’. This is in direct opposition to the synthetic imagination. As Blake puts it, ‘Jesus the imagination’ as opposed to ‘Satan the selfhood.’ I believe we have only just put our feet into the ocean of colour; I’m looking forward to working on the sublimity of the colours blue and violet.



Richard Kenton Webb *Epiphany of the Other*, 2023
 Photo by Andy Green

My residency at the Albers Foundation in the USA in 2022 cemented my determination to make a manifesto through paintings and drawings. This body of work is about green. For me, green is about imparting colour as a language. Whilst there, I made 72 drawings, mainly comprised of what I called my 'philosophical investigation walks'. On return to Plymouth, I made two final walks, *The Saying* and *A Poem about Love*. *The Saying* is involved with Emmanuel Levinas's work about 'The Other' and *A Poem about Love* is to do with the Farewell Discourses of John, chapters 13–17. Now that I have completed my philosophy of painting, I feel led to conclude my manifesto with work about the future of painting in academia. TS Eliot's great poem *The Waste Land* has provided an opening for these new works: *Time (how much time have you got?)*; *The Call of the Visual Poet*; and *The Mantle of the Visual Poet*. These will be my call to the next generation of painters to pass on this noble and ancient language. I am now making a

conversation with Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, which I consider to be a morality play. This will take the form of seven triptychs discussing prophecy, humility, truth, wisdom, and kindness.

The colour blue is next and, after that, violet. Fathoming the personality and breadth of a colour's identity is a great journey, a pilgrimage of my soul, searching into the eternal imagination of the living God. It is only when I am fully submerged into a colour that its wonder, beauty, and sublimity open like a flower. This is how I can respond honestly and with revelation to what I find and receive. For me, this is an immersion into the soul of the colour. This is my pilgrimage.

Jonathan Evens is Team Rector for Wickford and Runwell, and co-author of *The Secret Chord*.