

Review of William Blake at Tate Britain: 'For the pictures'

Susan Matthews

Blake's work has long presented Tate with something of a problem: as curator Martin Myrone explains, prints, watercolours, and tempera do not easily fit a collection mainly comprised of oil paintings.¹ From 1923 to 1967 Blake's works had their own room (with a custom-made mosaic floor) and from 1979 to 1989 the work was displayed in glass cases a bit like the reptile house at the zoo. Apart from a recreation of Blake's 1809 exhibition in a single room in 2009, this was the first major Blake exhibition at Tate since 2000 when Robin Hamlyn and Michael Phillips had presented Blake as radical artisan, printing press centre stage. His artistic journey began as apprentice to engraver James Basire working in Westminster Abbey, imbibing the images of Gothic architecture. The first section of the 2000 exhibition was titled 'One of the Gothic artists'.² Blake's work, in this version, heals the division of art from craft. He is equally a writer and image maker. At the Ashmolean in 2015, 'Blake: Apprentice and Master', curated again by Michael Phillips, once more presented a craftsman, toiling to perfect tiny images via a technically challenging process.

Writing in the *Telegraph* about the Tate show, Alistair Sooke thought that not much had changed over twenty years: 'to differentiate itself, the new exhibition re-positions Blake — presumably for publicity purposes — as an "artist for the 21st century".'³ To see the new show as a cynical repackaging of the same old material is to miss the point. The first room (which Sooke considered 'especially dull') was devoted to Blake's time as a student at the Royal Academy. Here was Blake working within a classical visual language based on the human form. Over the door was a quotation from the *Descriptive Catalogue* which Blake composed for his one-man show of 1809. The effect was to frame this as the third iteration of an exhibition that had

¹ Martin Myrone, 'Blake the Artist: At Tate and Abroad', in *The Reception of William Blake in Europe*, ed. by Sybille Erle and Morton D. Paley, 2 vols (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), II, 679–92 (p. 681).

² Robin Hamlyn and Michael Phillips, *William Blake* (London: Tate Publishing, 2000), p. 30.

³ Alistair Sooke, 'William Blake review, Tate Britain: an incandescent imagination smothered by dull curating', *Daily Telegraph*, 9 September 2019 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/art/reviews/william-blake-review-tate-britain-incandescent-imagination-smothered>> [accessed 20 April 2020].

proved disastrous for Blake in 1809 and underwhelming for Tate in 2009.⁴ In 1809 Blake wrote that ‘There cannot be more than two or three great Painters or Poets in any Age or Country; and these, in a corrupt state of Society, are easily excluded, but not so easily obstructed’.⁵ Grandiloquent to the point of madness in 1809, this claim seems unsurprising today: Blake, Turner, and Constable are indeed the stars of the Romantic period. Whether Blake stands the comparison *as painter* with Turner and Constable is another question, and one that this exhibition set out to answer. The first room showed Blake setting out to rival Raphael and Michelangelo. We could look over his shoulder as he learned cast drawing at the Royal Academy with both cast and his student sketch reunited. The image that greeted the viewer as they entered the exhibition was *Albion Rose* (modelled on Leonardo’s Vitruvian man). This form of art, Blake believes in 1809, is the ‘great Origin and Bond of Society’ and a public exhibition is ‘the greatest of Duties to my Country’ (528E). In the artist’s lecture which accompanied the exhibition, Laura Grace Ford connected Blake to Walter Benjamin and Mark Fisher in a socio-geographical expedition through London which brought into new focus the poverty and the wealth, the commerce and the madness of the London street.⁶

To address the ‘Public’, though, they have to turn up. The exhibition poster added a subtitle, ‘Rebel, Radical, Revolutionary’, that suggested a doubt as to whether the story of his professional struggles, his ambition, failure, and resentment, would in the end bring in the crowds. Entering Tate Britain at the Manton Street entrance, visitors saw the lobby painted blood or flame red and a huge reproduction of *The Ancient of Days* covering a wall. A ‘Content Warning’ completed the anticipation: ‘The art of William Blake contains strong and sometimes challenging imagery, including depictions of violence and suffering. Please ask a member of staff if you would like more information.’ *The Ancient of Days* provided catalogue cover and poster. In the Tate shop you could buy an *Ancient of Days* tote bag, fridge magnet, and A5 notebook. The same image was projected onto the dome of St Paul’s for four nights to mark Blake’s November birthday. Viewed on St Paul’s it came with a surprise: the long hair and the beard of the old man were animated as if fluttering in the wind, the red became redder, a

⁴ Press release, ‘Tate Britain to re-stage William Blake’s 1809 solo exhibition’, 17 December 2008 <<https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/tate-britain-re-stage-william-blakes-1809-solo-exhibition>> [accessed 20 April 2020].

⁵ *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. by David V. Erdman (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 528E <<http://erdman.blakearchive.org>> [accessed 28 April 2020]. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this online edition.

⁶ ‘Laura Grace Ford on William Blake’ <<https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/william-blake-artist/laura-grace-ford-on-william-blake>> [accessed 28 April 2020].

somewhat comic and oddly benign Father Christmas. Blake scholar Jason Whittaker found the irony irresistible, tweeting:

basically for the next few nights, St Paul's is dominated by a 30 meter high image of the God of this world, or Urizen...
... or Satan. The Church of England is saying COME AND WORSHIP AT THE TEMPLE OF SATAN!!! (@Blake2_o, 28 November 2019)

For Whittaker, as for other Blake enthusiasts, this is Urizen, one of Blake's cast of invented characters. To spot the irony you need to understand Blake's attitude to established religion. Speaking to the *Guardian*, curator Martin Myrone instead described the projection as 'a moment to realise a version at least of that lifelong dream of Blake's to be an artist with real public impact who was being seen on a large scale'.⁷ The difference is telling. Unconcerned with the context of Blake's myth, Tate offered a 'Blake for all' in which (as the catalogue explained) 'everyone's opinions can matter, everyone can have a say, express a viewpoint and understand in their own way'.⁸

It would be tempting to cast this interpretative free-for-all as a modern misreading. Except that Blake's contemporaries mostly failed to understand his visual text in relation to his invented myth. In this exhibition the relevant context was spatial and temporal, not textual or mythic. *'Europe' Plate 1: Frontispiece, 'The Ancient of Days'* was dated 1827 and offered as the last image on which Blake worked, the final image in the show. We cannot know what meaning Blake attached to this plate in the year of his death. Nor do we know which St Paul's Blake would have seen if he could have witnessed the projection. Was this 'the high dome of Pauls' filled with the 'hum of multitudes' described in 'Holy Thursday' of *Songs of Innocence*? Did it recall the lost 'St Paul's Church' where Blake had set the *Penance of Jane Shore* exhibited in 1809? Blake believed in 1810 that 'Monuments so Painted must make England What Italy is an Envied Storehouse of Intellectual Riches' (581E). Projected onto the dome of St Paul's, it was possible to experience the vast scale that Blake had imagined.

A genuine interpretative free-for-all, of course, does not exist. Meanings arrive preset by reviewers, and in most cases these took their cue from the subtitle. In a five-star review Laura Cumming created a suitably revolutionary Blake: 'His whole being was devoted to freedom, his art

⁷ Mark Brown, 'William Blake's final work to be projected on St Paul's Cathedral', *Guardian*, 28 November 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/nov/28/william-blake-final-work-ancient-of-days-projected-st-pauls-cathedral>> [accessed 28 April 2020].

⁸ 'Introduction: The Making of a Modern Artist', in Martin Myrone and Amy Concannon, *William Blake* (London: Tate, 2019), pp. 9–23 (p. 14).

a perpetual call to arms.⁹ According to Jonathan Jones (five stars), ‘This is the art of revolution all right, but not according to anyone’s book but Blake’s own.’¹⁰ Tate’s exhibition website claimed Blake as newly relevant to today: ‘His personal struggles in a period of political terror and oppression, his technical innovation, his vision and political commitment, have perhaps never been more pertinent.’¹¹ Cumming saw ‘premonitions of our present times: factionalism, violence, stupidity, oppression’. According to Matthew Collings, ‘A Jeremy Corbyn god rolls a sun along the ground as if he’s rolling away Boris Johnson’s no deal: a British lion laughs.’¹² We create our own Blake and today we might focus instead on *Pestilence* or *The House of Death* presented in the exhibition as part of the History of England. But critics were not wrong to see a radical Blake. The fourth room offered the plates of *America* laid out on the walls. There you could, in theory, read the great hymn to freedom — ‘Let the slave grinding at the mill run out into the field, | Let him look up into the heavens and laugh in the bright air’ — except that few visitors are likely to have decoded the tiny writing. As Alistair Sooke rightly observed:

Those few collectors who did buy the distinctive, hand-coloured ‘illuminated’ books that Blake mostly printed during the 1790s while living in the London suburb of Lambeth [...] did so not for their words but for the pictures. Visiting Tate Britain, you immediately understand why: Blake’s unique books are perversely small. Nobody in their right mind would print text in such a minuscule, illegible, off-putting fashion.

Like Blake’s few contemporary purchasers and patrons, this exhibition was interested in the pictures not the words. Room 3 gave pride of place to twenty-two images from the Books of Designs: tiny images from the Lambeth prophecies printed with the words masked out for purchasers who could not or would not engage with the poetry. In Tate’s own copy B, Blake added new titles which avoid any reference to his invented mythology.

⁹ Laura Cumming, ‘William Blake review — a rousing call to arms’, *Observer*, 15 September 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/sep/15/william-blake-tate-britain-review>> [accessed 20 April 2020].

¹⁰ Jonathan Jones, ‘William Blake review — blazing heresies from the artist who blows Constable and Turner away’, *Guardian*, 9 September 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/sep/09/william-blake-review-blazing-heresies>> [accessed 20 April 2020].

¹¹ William Blake, Tate <<https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/william-blake-artist>> [accessed 20 April 2020].

¹² Matthew Collings, ‘William Blake review: Be drawn into a weird and wonderful fantasy universe’, *Evening Standard*, 9 September 2019 <<https://www.standard.co.uk/go/london/arts/william-blake-exhibition-review-tate-britain-a4231921.html>> [accessed 20 April 2020].

The Preludium to the *First Book of Urizen* is captioned ‘Teach these Souls to Fly’ (Fig. 1). Plate 16 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* appears with the inscription ‘Who shall set’ | ‘These prisoners free?’. To plate 7 of *The First Book of Urizen* Blake adds the words: ‘I sought Pleasure & found Pain.’ | ‘Unutterable’. This is the historical ‘Blake for All’, a version which allows the viewer to make their own sense of the pictures. What strikes the viewer is the intensity of the saturated colour which rivals that of the twelve large colour prints, brought together later in the exhibition. A focus on Blake as a colourist made it doubly appropriate that the exhibition gave Blake’s wife Catherine, who worked alongside her husband to print and colour the images, almost equal billing, placing Blake’s drawing of her alongside his imaginative image of himself in the first room.

Since this was the exhibition that Blake never had in his lifetime, it made sense to include a recreation of the 1809 one-man show. In contrast to the 2009 recreation, which attempted to gather together the surviving works



Fig. 1: William Blake, Plate 2 of *Urizen*: ‘Teach these Souls to Fly’, 1796(?), relief etching, ink and watercolour on paper, 109 × 102 mm. © Tate Britain, London. CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Unported) <<https://www.tate-images.com/preview.asp?image=No3696>>.

from the show itself, this was both more selective and more evocative, providing a sense of the dimensions and the atmosphere of the upstairs room in which the original exhibition was set in the house where Blake was born and where his brother still kept a shop. Windows offered a distant glimpse of London, the light slanting in over small dimly illuminated works. Poorly lit, an image such as *Christ in a Sepulchre Guarded by Angels* did not invite closer study. But the intermittent digital restoration of *The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan* and its companion picture *The Spiritual Form of Pitt Guiding Behemoth* brought murky pictures dramatically to life, sparkling with gold flecks. This was 'The Grand Style of Art restored' in a different sense than Blake intended. Blake's unrealized ambition to create paintings for churches was digitally evoked by superimposing *The Crucifixion: 'Behold thy Mother'*, a watercolour created for Thomas Butts and exhibited in an earlier room, over the altar of St James's Piccadilly, the church in which Blake was baptized. From these rooms, which scaled up Blake's paintings, the visitor walked down a dark corridor, sharing Blake's despair as he recognized the failure of his ambition to address the public.