

THE LIVING MOUNTAIN

I am sitting in Richard Hearn's studio in the Burren in County Clare. Before me are the five large paintings of 'The Living Mountain.' Behind me, out the western window that occupies most of the opposite wall, is the mountain itself, grey and impassive.

The paintings look out at the mountain, and the mountain looks back.

The paintings themselves are neither grey nor impassive. They are charged. They pulse first with energy, urgency and colour, and then, as you sit longer, tenderness and delicacy. In my novel, *'This is Happiness'* there is a line that says, 'It seems to me the quality that makes any book, music, or painting worthwhile is life.' And what I feel, sitting here in the company of these works, is just that. The *life* that is in them. It is as though the mountain has travelled down and through the artist and arrived in another form here in front of me. Sit before these five large paintings and you feel the mountain come alive. You feel its otherness and its individuality, its strangeness and its beauty. And you know you are amongst works that revere and honour place.

That place is The Burren.

The Burren, which draws its name from the Irish word for 'rocky place,' is a unique landscape. Composed principally of a limestone pavement, it holds within it an insoluble contradiction, for although at first sight simply rocky, it is in fact a mosaic of habitats. Here both acid- and lime-loving plants can exist side by side, Arctic and Alpine in the same place. Woodland plants grow where there are no trees. In Maytime, from its million crevices, burst gentians, orchids, cranesbill, wood anemones, and dozens more.

But it is also a place of stone. Filled with prehistoric monuments, cairns, walls. People have been living here for millennia and have left their marks. Which reminds me of Robert McFarlane's celebrated book, 'Landmarks' and Nan

Shepherd's 'the Living Mountain', both of which I know Richard has read, and which, in turn, have left their mark on him.

When Richard shows me an aerial photograph of this mountain that he lives beside, I expand the image to extreme closeup, and immediately it feels like a detail from one of the smaller paintings.

I turn to them along the northern wall. Each has the force of a concentrated essence. I feel a robustness and energy not only in the colours but in the shapes, and in the brushstrokes themselves. Here is a meeting of vision and action, stillness and motion. I let my eye stay on a single canvas, see the absolute individuality of its character, and then pull away to see it as part of a living whole.

The same thing occurs with the large paintings. Trace the flicker of blue across all five canvases, think water in all its iterations, and then remember that the mountain is called Turlough Mountain, and that the word 'Turlough' comes from the Irish words for 'disappearing lake.' The lake appears and disappears even as I am looking at it, the next moment the blue is a mirror of fallen sky. Then of course it is neither of these. It is itself, inexplicable and irreducible, beautiful, and also, somehow *right*. This, it seems to me, is the response we all feel in the presence of great art. It is the thing that calms the soul.

To be clear, Richard is not looking at the mountain when he paints. But in front of these canvases what I feel is that the mountain is not only looking at him but is in him. He has been walking and climbing in it for years, he wakes and sleeps with it *right there* at every breath. So though he works with his back to it, inevitably it is here. The paintings are not representations in the ordinary sense, but are in the extraordinary one, the mountain *re-presented*, presented again, in a different medium, with all of its contradictory and mysterious and ultimately unknowable character remade here through the hand and the spirit of a remarkable artist.

It is alive. And like all living things, the longer you look the more you see.

But I must leave the studio soon, and so pick a favourite to study. And moments later—*Look at the fringe of white light leaking down in this one*—pick a different favourite.

Don't bother choosing, I tell myself, they are all part of one, living expression. Just sit and know that you are in the company of the extraordinary.

Soon after, driving away, I look to the mountain itself. It seems changed now. It is changed by my experience of it in the paintings. No longer grey and impassive, it is more full of character, mystery, beauty, and yes, *life* than when I arrived.

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