Review

Martin Myrone, The Blake Book

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rooting man’s inhumanity in “the Human Form Divine” rather than an abstract God. But lacking its counterpunch in “The Divine Image” from *Innocence*, the plate loses its qualifying irony as well as additional layers of meaning. I wonder also about the decision to stack the plates from *Europe* one above the other in a double line, a configuration that disrupts the linear sequence of the book. For those French visitors having trouble following the work because it is a difficult narrative and written in English, this presentation will be confusing. Wouldn’t one want to adhere as closely as possible to Blake’s intended visual order and thus mimic for the viewer the actual experience of reading the book?

Michael Phillips, who co-curated the major Blake exhibitions at Tate Britain and the Metropolitan Museum in 2000–01, deserves a lot of credit not only for assembling such a stunning array of artwork from so many different institutions and collections, but also for pulling it all together abroad. I suspect the negotiations were laborious and time-consuming. Difficult too must have been the logistics of organizing the details of the exhibition, from laying out the floor-plan to creating bilingual labels and publicity material. My one regret is that more of this energy wasn’t expended on the installation and on imagining the overall structure and design of the space, which is rather orthodox, moving us back and forth through a series of rectangular blocks. As we enter the gallery, the initial “confrontation” consists of three massive Stonehenge-like walls which magnify a portion of a watercolor and wash it in a pastel blue that blurs the represented form of an angel. These walls serve to thwart our entrance rather than inviting us in, and do not clearly enough direct our path. Located on the basement level of the museum, the entire space seems too small and confining, as if Blake’s work is once again contained in its volumes rather than being liberated from them. (Imagined figures like Orc and Urizen trying to jump off the walls.) Of course I realize that the fragility of these works on paper, many in watercolor, limits a curator’s options, and that they must be displayed under reduced lighting conditions. But one can’t help feeling the absence of an opening or vista, a circular passageway up or out as in the watercolor from Blake’s Dante series exhibited here, *The Circle of the Lustful* (1824–27), with its upswelling river of bodies. Blake himself might have wished for a bit more irreverent pizzazz in the overall conception and design. Standard labels and fonts—why not more variety and color? Blocked rectangles and lines—where are the circles and vortexes, the irresistible sweep upwards? Bacon and Cortot at the end—why not Ginsberg, the Doors?

In view of the quantity and quality of the works presented, however, these are small complaints. This is an ambitious show of great scope and power, sure to mobilize an army of new Blake converts on the continent. Even as I was leaving the exhibit something was already brewing. The gallery began to fill with French visitors murmuring excitedly about the works. Unexpectedly, a single guard began shushing them. He shushed three times, each more loudly, but to no avail. The murmurs grew to a buzz and then to a glorious din.


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selected by the book’s designer from pictures treated in the
chapters they introduce; at the same time, several important
images (such as the annotated Laocoon) are barely larger than
postage stamps.

The book’s focus is sometimes quirky, with breakout sections
devoted to such outliers as a single Tiriel design or The Fall
of Rosamond, an impressive stipple illustration after Thomas
Stothard, but Myrone covers most of the essential works as
well as a respectable number of unexpected ones. The usual
elements of a gallery companion—chronology, bibliography,
guide to collections—are present and competent, but a selec-
tion of reactions to Blake from “Creative Artists,” including
R. H. Cromek, James Joyce, and Georges Bataille, is very un-
even and seems perfunctory in comparison with the rest of
the book. The organization and layout of the volume, prob-
dably dictated by the designer of the whole guidebook series,
are vaguely postmodern, but the thorough index makes it
possible to locate topics efficiently.

Kevin Hutchings. Songs of William Blake. [Self-
published music CD with booklet <http://
www.kevinhutchings.ca/about>] 2007. Cana-

Reviewed by Brent E. Kinser

FAIRNESS requires me to preface this review of Kevin
Hutchings’s Songs of William Blake with a significant ca-
veat: I am no lover of academicized folk music, modern or
otherwise, and although the production values and the mu-
sicianship on this CD are first-rate, the overall sound and
feel of the disc remind one less of Blake’s immortal poetry
than of Christopher Guest’s parodic A Mighty Wind (2003).
Sahra Featherstone’s production choices, her clear ability be-
hind a mixing board, and the skill of the musicians she has
assembled for the recording make it a musically sound, ac-
complished performance. Although Hutchings declares in
the accompanying booklet that “the effort to set Blake’s songs
to music will always be audacious” and that “Blake’s creative
theory ... provides me with the poetical license necessary to
make of his Songs something new and perhaps unforeseen”
(9-10), it is hard to discern either audaciousness or newness
on a CD that is best described as a conventionally polished,
over-intellectualized folk recording, one that decidedly lacks,
especially in the vocal performances, the raw energy and the
soulful depth that give traditional folk music its penetrating,
heartrending identity.

This lack is disappointing, for the intent behind the project
is a sound one. Approaching the Songs as musical composi-
tions, even in the absence of authentic Blakean arrangements,
seems at least as legitimate as some of the other ways that crit-
ics have read Blake in terms of their constructed visions. We
have, for instance, Cunningham’s vision of Blake as madman,