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**BLAKE**

R E V I E W

Martin Myrone, *The Blake Book*

Alexander S. Goulay

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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. (I 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.

Martin Myrone. *The Blake Book*. London: Tate Publishing, 2007. 224 pp., profusely illus., mostly color. £16.99/\$29.95, paperback.

Reviewed by Alexander S. Gourlay

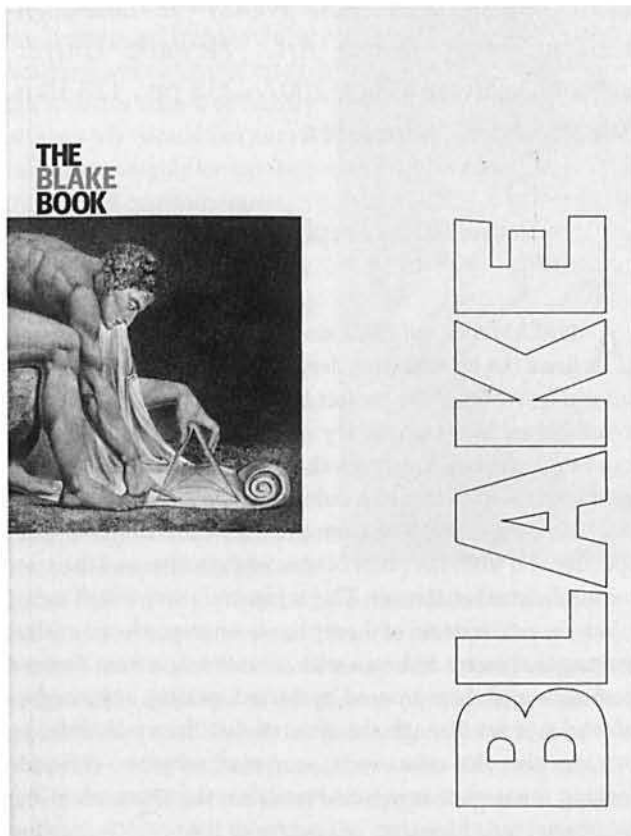
MARTIN Myrone's contribution to the Tate's series of guidebooks, *Essential Artists*, is a sensitive and impressive introduction to Blake's visual art. The series, which so far includes *The Rothko Book*, *The Duchamp Book*, and *The Turner Book*, is in hefty quarto paperback format, 10" x 7.5", a size that was more likely chosen for convenient portability than for optimal presentation of artworks. *The Blake Book* is not an academic text and would not suffice as the only textbook in a course focusing on Blake, but the presentation of Blake's art here is at once accessible to any interested person and yet sophisticated, intellectually rigorous, and up to date—it would be an excellent choice as a text to recommend to students or laypersons who want to learn more about Blake and his art on their own, or as adjunctive reading in a course devoted to Blake's writings.

Myrone, who is a curator at Tate Britain, often evinces impatience with and/or skepticism about particular trends in academic Blake scholarship in his commentary, but he has obviously done his homework. Museum professionals sometimes have an advantage over academics in grasping the original historical context of works of visual art, in that they are more likely to know well the other works, rarely displayed now, that constituted the canons and the contexts in which the artists worked. Myrone's take on Blake, informed by extensive reading in primary and secondary sources as well as daily access to both Blake's pictures and little-known works by his contemporaries, is fresh enough to startle a reader who is expecting the usual fare served in guidebooks for the general public; his broad introductory accounts of Blake's contexts are carefully framed and easily understood, his summaries of critical issues are both judicious and just, and his recommendations for further reading are cannily selected.

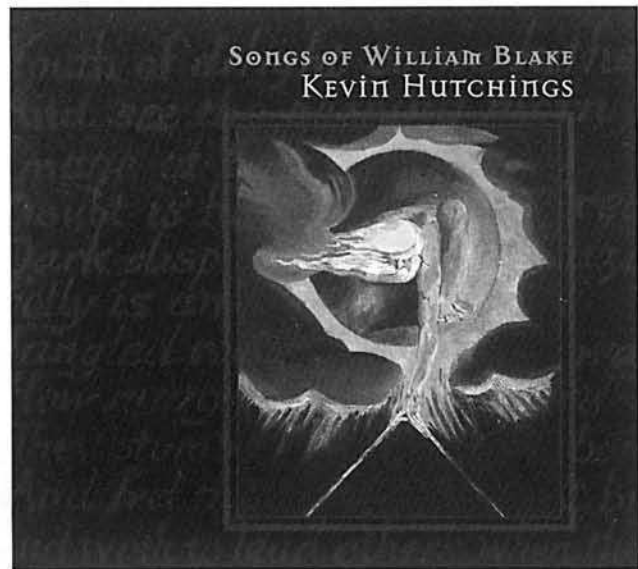
Although Tate Britain houses the greatest collection of Blake pictures in the world, *The Blake Book* is not unduly Tate-centric, either in its discussion or in its selection of works to reproduce. And although the focus is on visual art, Myrone includes substantial discussion of Blake's illuminated books and other texts, as well as a selection of prose and some poetry, and his grasp of Blake's literary contexts is impressive. The illustrations, over a hundred of which are printed in high-resolution color, come from a wide variety of collections around the world. Unfortunately, they are often disappointingly small, and though the color quality is at least good throughout, only a few of them successfully convey the effect that these works have when seen in person. Many of the largest illustrations are heavily cropped full-page "bleeds"

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 *Laocoön*) 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 selection of reactions to Blake from “Creative Artists,” including R. H. Cromek, James Joyce, and Georges Bataille, is very uneven and seems perfunctory in comparison with the rest of the book. The organization and layout of the volume, probably 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. Canadian \$16.99 from <<http://www.indiepool.com>>.



Reviewed by Brent E. Kinser

**F**AIRNESS requires me to preface this review of Kevin Hutchings's *Songs of William Blake* with a significant caveat: I am no lover of academicized folk music, modern or otherwise, and although the production values and the musicianship 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 behind a mixing board, and the skill of the musicians she has assembled for the recording make it a musically sound, accomplished 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 compositions, even in the absence of authentic Blakean arrangements, seems at least as legitimate as some of the other ways that critics have read Blake in terms of their constructed visions. We have, for instance, Cunningham's vision of Blake as madman,