

What do we see when we look?

By Philip Hoare

What do we see when we look? What do we feel when we see? It's an exchange of energy. Between what you see and you feel and what you create. It's right there in front of you and me.

In an eyrie of the Fitzwilliam Museum, in a dreamy and distant room, William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* appear before me, as if by magic, as though he were singing them to me. In the faint light, the fragile, frail prints, so utterly vivid and strong, lie before me like butterflies, trembling like flowers. Wreathed in vines and trees and human bodies that look as though they are embroidered, while wild animals snarl and crawl fit to leap out at you out of the life, they are tiny, these pictures, smaller than a paperback book you'd slip in your pocket.

And they burst like universes.

They are accompanied by verses which read more like prayers or extended states of grace. all written in reverse, in mirrored handwriting so as to print the right way around. These are Blake's Auguries of Innocence, and they allow you to

Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

It seems barely probable that they were produced on a mechanical press. These miracles of imagination and technical invention were created in an age of industrial revolution by Blake and his wife Catherine, following instructions given to them by William's younger brother Robert with whom he communicated daily and hourly, even though Robert had died six years ago.

Today we would regard these works as the product of one artist, two people (three, if you count the spiritual form of Robert). And their power lies in their reproduction, and Blake's training as commercial artist (a power he shared with Albrecht Dürer and Andy Warhol). They are contained in Blake's beloved 'bounding line'. That's why they seem so modern, so new, from the future, like pages from a fanzine or cels from an anime cartoon. They were their own means of reproduction, and they emerged, on paper still damp from the press, like eighteenth-century Polaroids, ready to develop in the light.

It is only in their physical presence - rather than reproduced in books - that you realise how they glimmer with gold paint highlights added by Kate Blake. They are new icons, and they come alive, radiating as if radioactive with ancient sunlight. Blake called them his Illuminated Pictures, modern medieval illuminations. He might have been a monk, toiling away at his desk.

And as they tumble out of the dark archives, those plants, people, animals and holy landscapes perform their parables for us: The Tyger, Sick Rose, The Little Black Boy, The Chimney Sweep, The Ecchoing Green, The Crystal Cabinet. They fall out of a lost paradise, caught between heaven and hell.

Then, in the quiet afternoon light of the museum's study room - there's no one else about - another item appears by my side. It looks like a Tupperware box. It might as well contain the archivist's lunch. But nestled in the tissue inside, lie William Blake's spectacles.

The archivist holds them up to my eyes. Suddenly, I'm seeing what Blake saw. Evidently, his near sight was very good, since the prescription for these lenses is for long-sightedness. They allow him to see the world, from the streets of Soho to the riverside of Lambeth, from the shores of Felpham in Sussex to the hills of Hampstead Heath. Was he wearing them when he looked up into the trees of Peckham Rye and saw angels up there? Did he peer of his bedroom window and see God in Poland Street?

For a moment, before my eyes, all of Blake's world is framed in those spectacles. The spectacle of his life and art. When he tried to explain Blake's visions, Jacob Bronowski concluded that the artist saw what he imagined. That was how powerful his dreams were: they actually took physical shape, in his mind, in the trees, in the skies, on paper, in paint and ink. Fantasy became reality and vice versa. Blake didn't need those spectacles to see through time and space.

All he needed was already in his head.

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You can fall into Suzy Murphy's world, like an open window or an unblemished soul. Her paintings are full of forgiveness and gratitude and they offer a vision of love. As Blake said, Everything that is, is holy. Murphy may have once danced on tour with The Clash to Mikey Dread (I was in the audience at the time), but she is full of innocence as well as experience, like the little book she is waving in front of me.

It is numbered thirty-two in a sequence of such books - the Roman numerals in white on the black cover give it the air of a missal as much as a sketch book. Blake kept similar books. They're now guarded by librarians with Kalashnikovs.

Suzy flicks through the pages of XXXII filled with her sketches. They peer into infinity in the palm of her hand. She made them during a residency at Upton Grey, bestowed on her by a friend. 'It felt like I found a little piece of Jerusalem, at Down Farm' she wrote in her book, 'Blake's Albion, nestled in the fields, meadows and woods of Hampshire. Sometimes you find heaven in the most unexpected places'.

Immersing herself in the English countryside, Murphy sketched as she walked, filling them in with oil colours when she came home. She was almost unconsciously channelling the visionary artist in the process. 'So much stuff came from that... so many of those images I was aware of Blake and particularly things like the Harvest Moon and the sense of the richness of England and Jerusalem being *here*.'

'Blake has always been in my studio', she says. 'I've always had a copy' [of *Songs of Innocence*] where I work, ever since I was very young. I suddenly had the idea that I wanted to explore it more, to be more conscious of it. As an A-level student I used to go to the Tate and the Blake room - you know, that darkened room - tragically they don't have it anymore.

He has always been there. So I thought, instead of it just being there, why not make it conscious?'

The results are Murphy's gloriously swirly and radiant scenes, innocent and knowing, imbued with Blake's stars throwing down their spears and the emblematic windows of home drawing us in. We are sheltered and exposed at the same time. At any moment an angel might appear in those trees, John Milton might fall out of the sky, or a rose might sicken and die. Or someone might sing about heaven as a place where nothing ever happens.

'I'm trying to paint a feeling', Murphy says, peering at me through the window of her own spectacles, 'but not in a totally abstract form...but rooted in the physical symbolism of the world we inhabit, because we both exist simultaneously in both dimensions, spiritual and physical'.

'It's complex and challenging to find the balance of both form and abstraction. I feel the paintings have to hold both dimensions, the equal weight, to succeed', she says.

Speaking in her sequestered west London studio, surrounded by large canvases whose paintings have been concentrated into this series of prints, she tries to work it all out.

'People have very different brains. Blake taps into this well of not just understanding but something much deeper than that. I'd read those poems and not understand I'd never really understand them, but there were lines that would stay with me forever. My favourite poem as a child was 'The Little Black Boy' - I always loved the lines

And we are put on earth a little space,
That we may learn to bear the beams of love

and I couldn't understand what that was about for so long and one day I was in Hyde Park and I suddenly understood what it meant for me - that it's so hard to accept love - it's so hard to allow that universal love'. I remark that Blake's art has a healing power, and she agrees. 'He comes to you from your own experience...'

I tell her that these pictures - particularly the symbolic window in them - remind me of the Blakes' own rural retreat, to Felpham in Sussex, living in a cottage by the sea, through out from under the thatched eaves, to see the sea at the end of the street. It was there that Blake saw infinity on the horizon. The idea of reputation or commercial ambition was far away. He was a very practical man - in his tradesman's clothes - although Murphy recalls the time Kate placed an empty plate on the table before William, as gentle reminder that they needed money to live. Blake was by definitely unworldly, since he lived in other worlds. He didn't necessarily need to prosper in this one. He only ever sold sixty-one copies of all his books in his lifetime. He died a pauper, in his rented rooms off the Strand. But he died singing, with Kate at his side, looking out of their window at the golden bar of the river Thames outside.

'He was fascinatingly brave, in that he didn't hold onto any of that, and I think his spirituality, his religion was so deep and so part of him he really did think of it as, "this is the illusion, you know, the real world was other..." '

'I think all artists have to have a bit of that', Murphy concludes, firmly. 'My images arrive to me fully formed in my head... from my imagination. I walk, I see things, I let it absorb into me.' As she set off on her new mission, she had Blake firmly by her side.

'Obviously I was reading *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, I know them pretty well... I put lines under particular lines that resonated for me in a landscape form, and then I would let it sit with me. There were lots, and then I let the two kind of come together, but not in a deliberate way, not like 'Oh, I've got this line, now I'm going put an image to it'. No, I'd let it sit there, and settle, and then I would work, and then it just came together...'

I say that they reflect the innocence to Blake's kind of nursery rhyme, an almost childish look at the world - the experience is you being out there, looking at the world, and experiencing it. Innocence is the imagination and experience is the actuality. That the state of innocence can actually be regained, not lost, by the state of experience.

'I think that's what drew me as a child', Murphy replies. Making the new work 'made me go back and read the Old Testament.. I hadn't really read it, before'. Being half Irish, born in the East End, Murphy was brought up as Catholic - it's no coincidence that one of her central images presents an idealised church, reduced to a tower, a roof, and a cross. 'You are always Catholic', she says. 'I love the idea of it - saints and sinners... It's so human, Catholicism, it allows for imperfection.... We're all just struggling through this... and Blake saw that'.

This new work, like every new work, suspended in the air, with its distant deeps or skies, its child-like flowers and blue clouds very like whales, announces no great resolution or grand design, just more questions for Murphy, for her creative identity - perhaps even what she believes in, in her core.

They are very dream-like, her images, I say.

She looks over her shoulder at them, her paintings lined up against the wall, like a line of children, waiting their turn. 'They're really about my subconscious', she says. 'I hope they express some sort of subconscious truth. By being me, being everyone - being human really.'

'It's just a journey to make sense of', she says. And it occurs to me that she might not have had to stir at all to make them.

All she needed was already there in her head.