

'A Sore Head'

The stroke happened in the night. Rob was in hospital for eight weeks, with a couple of shorter emergency visits some months later, because of seizures. Life had suddenly changed for him, for his partner Paula and their daughter Betty. But as he said, in his wry way, ... *at least I was alive ...*

Robert Welch is an artist, and during a career spanning thirty-five years he has made figurative paintings that I would describe as strong, beautiful and true. We all wondered what would happen to his art. When friends began to visit him in hospital they brought books about favourite works, with drawing materials, paper, sketchbooks. Even holding a pencil was difficult at first, but he persevered. *I didn't know why*, he said later.

Seeing those early marks was like hearing his first attempts at speech. With aphasia, thinking goes on as usual, but putting it into language is a problem. When I heard its effects I felt a wave of panic because I thought I was going to laugh, it was so surreal and comical. But Rob was laughing too, and after a while a new kind of conversation evolved, a mixture of his willingness to keep going and our guesswork and empathy. There was a shared patience, frustration and hilarity, and those who had worried about what they might find said they left the ward feeling elated. But there was anxiety too; from now on progress would be unpredictable.

Family, friends, doctors, nurses, speech therapists, physiotherapists, the Stroke Association, a support group for people with aphasia called Connect, and Rob's own hard work and stamina, have all contributed to his ongoing recovery. Movement and mobility have been largely regained and conversation is possible again, different in its pace and flow, and with some mixed-up words, but it can go anywhere and is lively.

The visual language in the drawings gradually became more complex, subtle and rich. They are made up of coloured lines and hatchings, with no figurative imagery. Rob had discussed with his speech therapist that one of his goals would be an exhibition of the drawings, together with his account of them. This became a reality, at the gallery at APT, Creekside, where he and I and 40 other artists have our studios. Guests arrived for a small reception, and, impressively, Rob gave a talk. I remember thinking that his willingness to address a roomful of people at an opening would have been unlikely, pre-stroke. Aphasia had in a way impaired his speech, but was now making communication very vivid.

Alongside every work was a label with a couple of sentences describing the way the drawings began, how each related to the others. Rob had dictated all this to his speech therapist, an exercise in how to put experience into words, how to speak his thoughts. Normally texts next to exhibited works have an objective, historical or educational tone, but these were different. They were raw and personal, a succinct account of what it felt like to be drawing. They were as direct as a stare, or a declaration.

I was already feeling a kind of vertigo. I had expected to see a struggle, perhaps an ungainliness compared with the paintings made before the stroke. Instead I was looking at, falling into, works which were articulate, unfamiliar and completely absorbing. Some were sparse and open, others were densely worked, intense. As I moved from one to another, taking them in, reading the commentaries, I felt as if I was being helped to understand how and why anyone might make anything, ever. The information was so fundamental it was difficult to hold on to, and so crystal clear I could barely grasp it. Words like stroke, therapy, recovery, did not come to mind, although they had once been part of the story.

I sometimes taught with Rob, in art schools. He was known for his directness, honesty and passion, all of it expressed without showiness or self-regard, but with unexpected twists, which made for humour. If he felt doubt he was frank about it, and in this way he got to the heart of things. I think these drawings have the same qualities. A stick of colour is gripped and made to move across a page. Colour answers colour, circuits and trails appear, double back, make shapes,

avoid each other, touch each other, group together, fall apart. It all looks unplanned, precarious, confident, achieved, teeming with life.

Some of the first try-outs in hospital were with brush and water-based paint, but dyspraxia caused by the stroke - difficulty in organising movement - confused things. The brush was too floppy, and sometimes dipped into a cup of tea instead of a water-pot. Felt-tipped pens were perfect, a huge colour range, rigid, graspable and easily moved around the paper. They could make long strokes or short jabs, and in variously sized sketchbooks, on different paper surfaces, they made different markings.

A few of the larger vertical works have just three lines in three colours, travelling from edge to edge, and somehow the big spaces in between are made active and eloquent. In smaller works there are looping lines that cross each other and then stop short, a beat away from the paper's edge. These intervals are like the phrasing of great singers or soloists, and I think of some of the musicians I know Rob likes - Chet Baker, Miles Davis - who take a simple song, explore it through timing and pitch, and convey feeling that way. Surprise comes into it too, expectations tripped up by a sudden shift of colour or curl of direction. The improvisations and irregularities bring liveliness and wit, but there is a beautiful, readable coherence to it all. It is language as sensation, sensation made into language.

This has been a new way of working as an artist, for Rob, and it continues to evolve. I don't know how much of it is innate, how much is still actively related to the years of painting and drawing before the stroke, or even perhaps is a result of it. I feel I don't need to know.

At the end of Rob's talk at the gallery, when he had somehow turned the account of his stroke and its aftermath into a tale of survival and optimism, he looked over to Paula and Betty and thanked them, and everyone there joined in with loud applause.

Mali Morris

London, February 2015