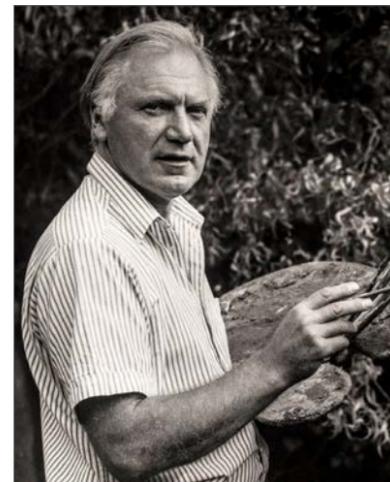


T O M R O B B





‘He took landscape painting to the edge of abstraction’

~ Ken Howard R.A., OBE ~

**It was such a pleasure to have Jeff Robb contact me and ask if I would consider writing a few words about his father, my dear friend Tom Robb. A review of Tom's work and life is long overdue so I am happy to contribute a few words myself.**

We first met in 1955 as students at the Royal College of Art under the tutelage of Carel Weight. Carel was a wonderful and much respected tutor and for those of us whose direction of travel was not directly into abstract art, he was a lifesaver. We would both spend long periods in the drawing rooms; I remember Tom was a fine draughtsman and it was a discipline which we both took delight in. We both exhibited with the John Whibley, gallery in Cork Street in the 1960's and later with David Wolfers at the New Grafton gallery and I still met Tom regularly at openings at the Russell Gallery. Walking into his solo show at the Whibley gallery in 1973 I remember been overwhelmed by his bravery; painting wonderful low horizons, topped by expansive English skies, all beautifully balanced. He took landscape paintings to the edges of abstraction at the time when few people painted in this manner, with large Hitchensque brush strokes and vibrant colours.

Tom was also a wonderful educator and I very much admired his teaching ethos. Believing strongly in the value of education, he really cared about his students, supporting them wholeheartedly. At one time I recall, he tried to get me a job at Hornsey School of Art, where he was teaching, but it transpired that I was turned down on the basis that they didn't employ ex -students as staff! A supportive friend as ever, with a wonderful twinkle, we were able to laugh about it. I very much look forward to seeing Tom's work back in the public eye, and reading this new monograph.

Ken Howard R.A., OBE

## On the edge of abstraction

In an artistic career of over 50 years, Tom Robb has painted in every genre, and in almost every style. And in this book, you can see figure studies with dazzling changes of warm and cool colour (pages 18-21); still lifes full of vigorous brushwork (22-23), a melancholic, exquisitely executed portrait of ‘Alan Powel in the squash court’ (6), and an intricate study of an everyday suburban backstreet (8), complete with trellis fencing, bicycles and washing on the line.

But it is as a landscape painter that Robb will be remembered, and this book focuses on two series in particular: his Thames river scenes of the 1960s and his more expressive landscapes begun in the 1970s and painted around the home counties and East Anglia. They are the high points of a long, illustrious career. They are also very different series, and in each I think he is responding to two of his painting heroes – Paul Cézanne and JMW Turner.

### The 1960s: the formal landscape

Just as Cézanne repeatedly painted Mont Sainte-Victoire at the turn of the 20th century, Robb would return, again and again, to the Thames in the late 1960s. And in the resulting pictures (pages 10-17), like Cézanne, Robb simplifies what he sees.

The landscapes become an arrangement of flat planes, every shape responding to another, every brushstroke clear-cut and in its place. Nature is seen through the purity and beauty of geometrical design.

Robb seems to want to capture the essence not the ephemera – you get the feeling that if he returned to this landscape a year later it would look the same. Like Cézanne, it seems, he is moving towards abstraction, not to escape from the world, but in search of its unchanging qualities.

The simplicity of the compositions and the clarity of the brushwork seem appropriate to the subject matter, evoking that sense of calmness and serenity you enjoy on a still day by water. The palette, so cool and muted there appears to be veil of British mist over everything, adds a further sense, that of melancholy. Again this seems entirely appropriate – although it is almost always high summer in this series, every image seems sunless and empty of people.

The image on page 15 is perhaps typical of Robb’s 1960s style. Except for a square of bright yellow-green on the left and one line of ochre on the right, the palette is a



*Like Cézanne, Robb makes the whole world – earth, water, sky, buildings – conform to a unity of style, to a harmonious sense of order*

mix of muted greys, blues and greens. The brushwork is controlled. Even the water and sky, where you might expect freer passages of paint, have been stilled, painted in off-white and flattened into the design.

Interestingly, the reflections of the trees in the water are not painted with vertical marks, but with horizontal strokes, stacked up on top of one of another almost as if they were an architectural feature. In the distance, actual architectural elements – buildings, maybe a bridge or a lock – are rendered with a similar palette and similar horizontal brushwork. Like Cézanne, Robb makes the whole world – earth, water, sky, buildings – conform to a unity of style, to a harmonious sense of order.

And yet, this image, like others in the series, is never entirely reduced to an abstract pattern. There is a sense of depth in this picture – and all the others in the series. The landscape recedes. Brushmarks are smaller in the distance. They get bluer, paler and less distinct in the background.

There is little or no conventional modelling of form, true, but nevertheless Robb encourages us to see three dimensions. In the image on page 15 – and those on pages 10-11 – he uses a patchwork of short, sharp brushstrokes to depict the trees’ foliage. By varying the direction, tone and colour of these strokes, Robb creates the impression of overlapping planes, and advancing and receding forms. The result: we enjoy the excitement and urgency of the handling and, at the same time, we perceive the trees to have an almost rock-like solidity.

There are, however, one or two images from the late 1960s in which you can see Robb developing a new freer style. In the sketch-like Thames Landscape 1967, for instance, the trees along the bank are not formed from angular and defined brushstrokes, but from loose curved and dabbed ones. It is almost as if Robb mimics the movement of water in his rendition of paint. As viewers, we seem to be bobbing along the river, watching the trees on the bank drift by.

*The brushwork is staccato and spontaneous – strokes are vigorously applied, twisted and abruptly ended. In the sky, clouds are scrubbed across the canvas. In the river, colour swims in the water.*

The autumn scene on page 17 has a similar expressive sketch-like quality. The brushwork is staccato and spontaneous – strokes are vigorously applied, twisted and abruptly ended. In the sky, clouds are scrubbed across the canvas. In the river, colour swims in the water.

The formality of the other Thames scenes – the restrained palette, the geometry of sharply defined shapes, the planes of colour, the mirror-like flatness of the water – has disappeared. The work is an expression of the experience of being in the landscape, rather than a distillation of its unchanging qualities.

### The 1970s: the expressive landscape

This autumn scene certainly looks forward to Robb’s bolder, more animated style of the 1970s. True, in some of the 1970s landscapes, such as those on pages 42, 44 and 50, Robb still uses the clarity and simplicity of his signature horizontal brushstrokes. But there is more urgency here than in his earlier work – a bolder palette, longer freer strokes. The landscape in these ‘horizontal-stroke images’ seems mutable, shifting, almost breathing in and out. The recognisable world is turning into dream shapes – soft, loose, romantic in mood and sublime in scale.

In most of the 1970s pictures, the handling is much more impulsive and gestural: bursts of explosive brushwork, spiky and slashing, seize the attention (pages 35, 40, 45); passages of paint are pulled across the ground to create rich ‘rivers’

*The landscape seems mutable, shifting, almost breathing in and out. The recognisable world is turning into dream shapes – soft, loose, romantic in mood and sublime in scale.*



of colour (28, 40); half-finished brushstrokes are scumbled over the canvas to create texture redolent of sand or rock, grass or stubble fields (31, 35, 45).

The palette is as exciting and varied as the handling. The land runs as red as the setting sun (page 40); bold blues and greens dominate (31); lean smears of ochre and pale blue sing from a monochrome background (30). Brushwork and colour combine to give each painting a thrilling immediacy.

If Cézanne was the guide to the early work, another of Robb’s heroes, JMW Turner, seems to be the inspiration here. There is a similar search for the magical effects of light, colour and movement, a similar sense of solid forms seeming to change into vapour.

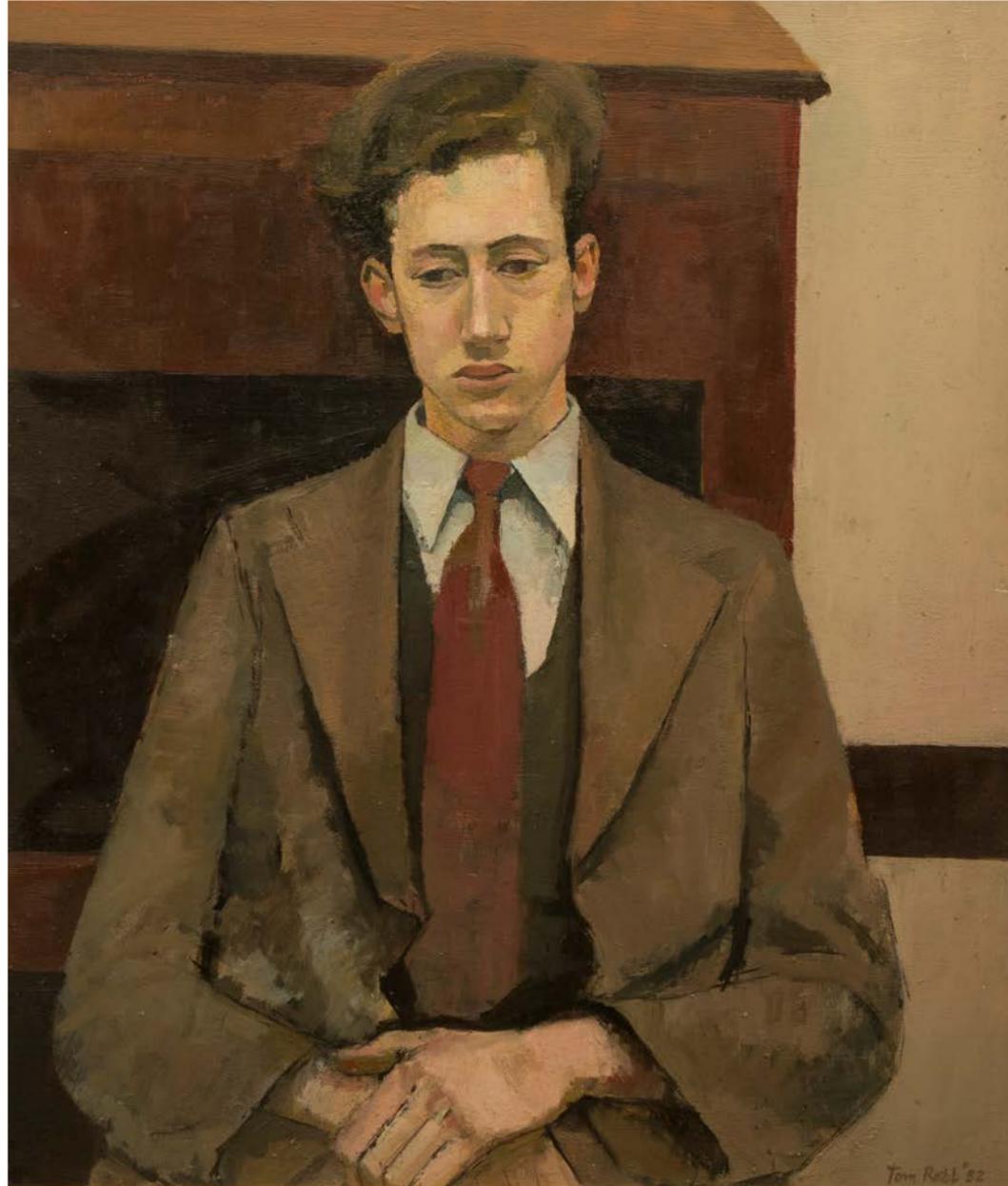
There is one crucial difference though. In Robb’s pictures, the drama does not take place in the sky as is so often the case in Turner’s paintings. The skies in Robb’s work are invariably neutral and calm, subtly changing in colour and tone, suggestive of vast space, of the endless and the everlasting. The land, by contrast, is unresolved, vital and alive; the violent storms take place there in a blizzard of brushstrokes. As a result in each image, there is an exquisite balance between sky and land, tranquility and turmoil, and control and abandon.

And of course there is a further dichotomy in his pictures: between representation and abstraction. We look for identifiable forms – fields and rolling hills, sea and rocks, the beach and dunes. And yet this illusionism is continually ruptured – the painterly world of brushwork and gesture, draws us seductively to the physical material, to the thickness of the paint, to the texture left by the hairs of the brush.

More importantly, perhaps, we are ultimately drawn to the emotions behind such expressive, gestural mark-making. In these works, Robb doesn’t simply describe a landscape, he describes what it feels like to be alive in front of it. Turner spoke of working ‘with an understanding of nature more profound than simply what the eye perceives’. And that is what is happening in Robb’s paintings.

If in the 1960s paintings, Robb looked beyond what the ‘eye perceives’ in order to create harmony and order; in the 1970s he looks beyond what the ‘eye perceives’ to do almost the opposite – to be true to his own feelings, to surrender to them even. In the 1970s, Robb was exploring human nature as much as mother nature, looking inward as much as looking outward. The result is landscapes that burst into life in front of your eyes.

~ Matthew Rake



Alan Powell in the Square Court, 1952, oil on board ~ 60cm x 70cm (Cat. No. TR\_1063\_60\_70)



Top Locks Landscape, Lathom Ormskirk, 1958, oil on board ~ 96cm x 73cm (Cat. No. TR\_1060\_96\_73)



9 Top Locks Lathom Ormskirk, 1958, oil on board ~ 122cm x 90cm (Cat. No. TR\_1061\_122\_90)



Lancashire Landscape, 1959, oil on board ~ 76cm x 61cm (Cat. No. TR\_1089\_76\_61)



Thames Near Marlow, 1967, oil on board ~ 76cm x 61cm (Cat. No. TR\_1081\_76\_61)



Thames Around Marlow, 1967, oil on board ~ 76cm x 61cm (Cat. No. TR\_1073\_76\_61)



Thames At Marlow, 1967, oil on board ~ 76cm x 61cm (Cat. No. TR\_1094\_76\_61)



Marlow In Autumn, 1967, oil on board ~ 76cm x 61cm (Cat. No. TR\_1078\_76\_61)



Thames At Marlow, 1967, oil on board ~ 76cm x 61cm (Cat. No. TR\_1086\_76\_61)



Thames Near Isleworth, 1967, oil on board ~ 76cm x 61cm (Cat. No. TR\_1091\_76\_61)



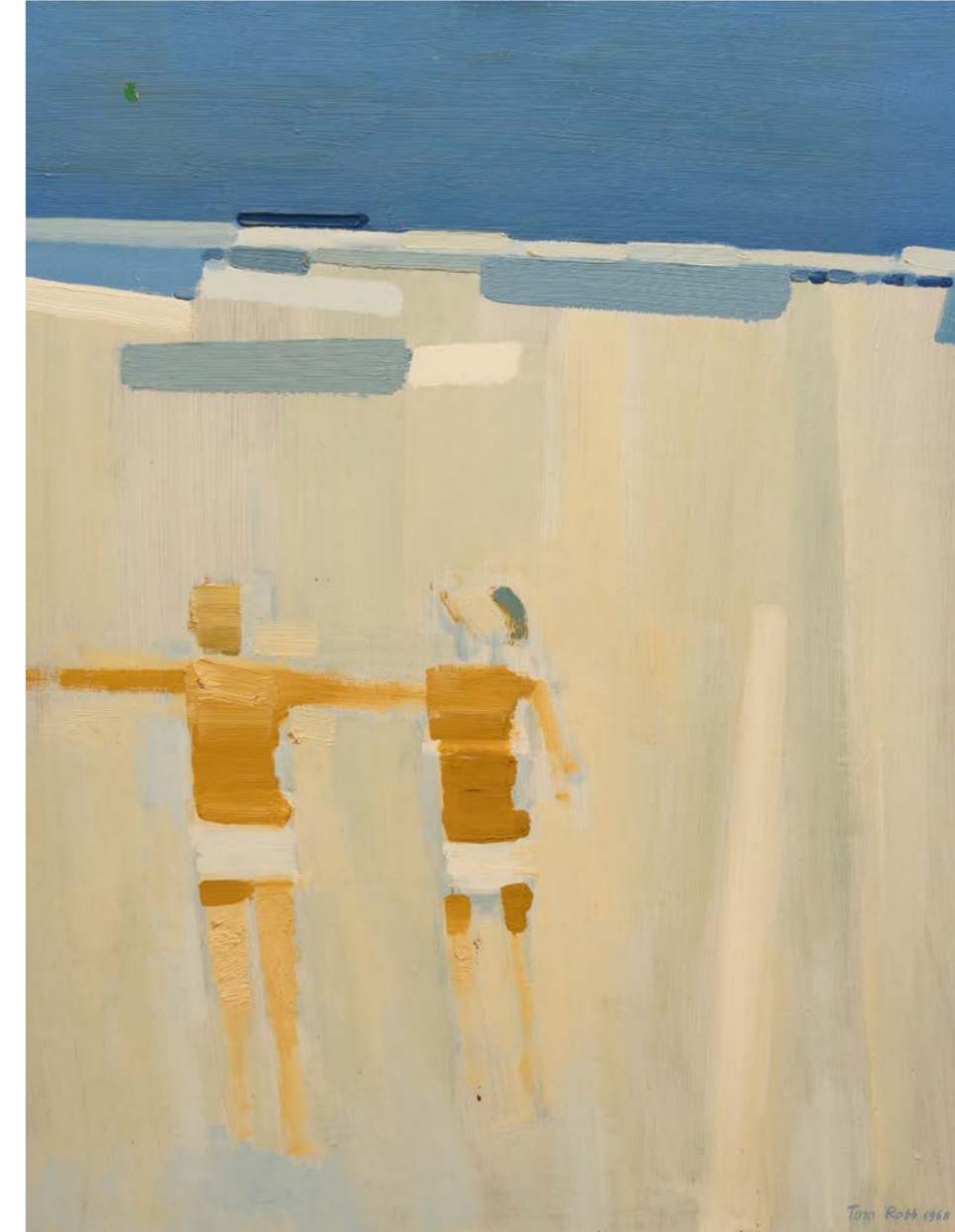
Thames Landscape, 1968, oil on board ~ 76cm x 61cm (Cat. No. TR\_1115\_76\_61)



Lakeside Evening 1968, 1968, oil on board ~ 61cm x 46cm (Cat. No. TR\_1174\_61\_46)



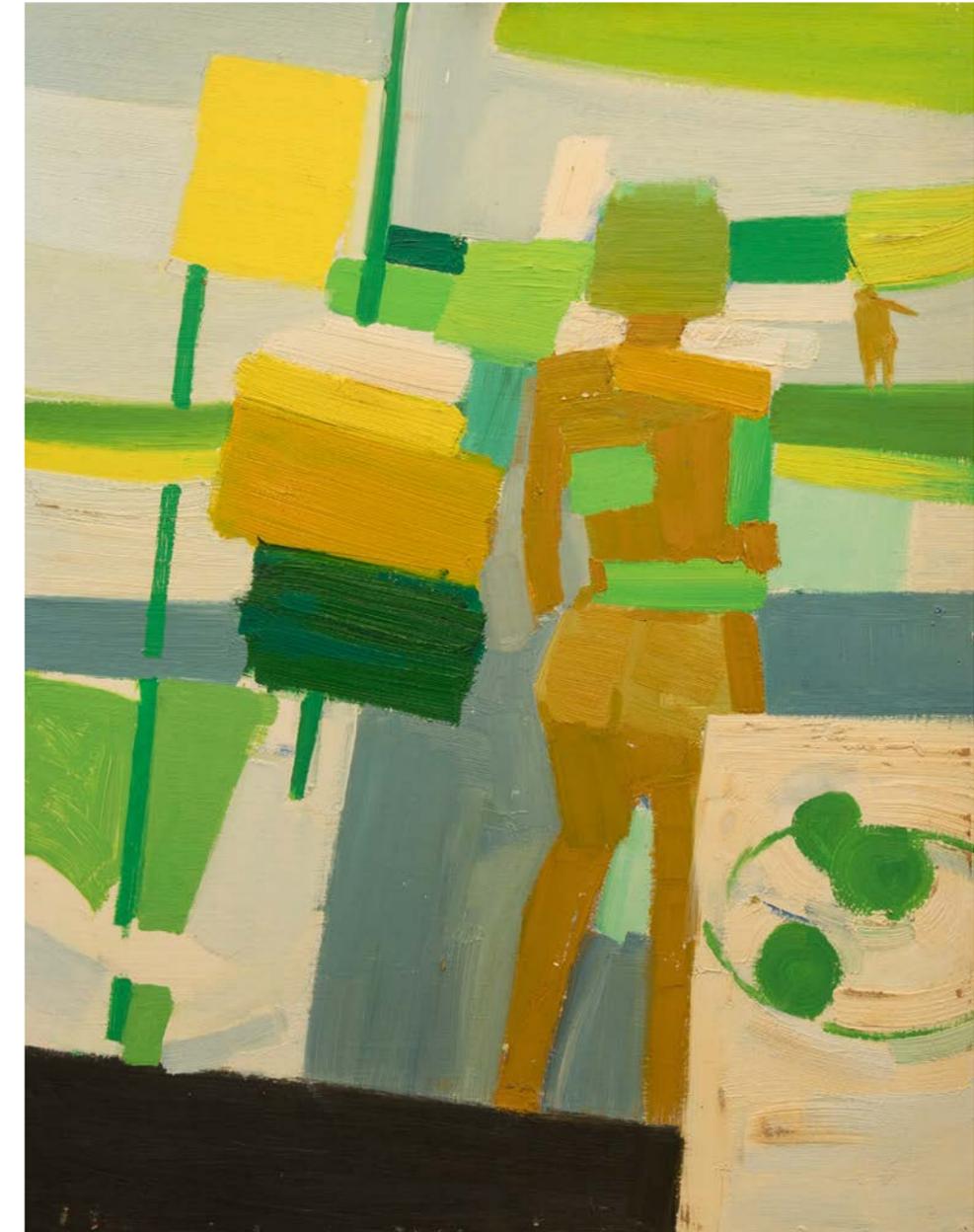
Ris, 1968, oil on board ~ 61cm x 76cm (Cat. No. TR\_1174\_61\_76)



Ris and Helen, 1968, oil on board ~ 61cm x 76cm (Cat. No. TR\_1109\_61\_76)



Dido and Aeneas, 1968, oil on board ~ 61cm x 76cm (Cat. No. TR\_1107\_61\_76)



Helen, 1968, oil on board ~ 61cm x 76cm (Cat. No. TR\_1108\_61\_76)



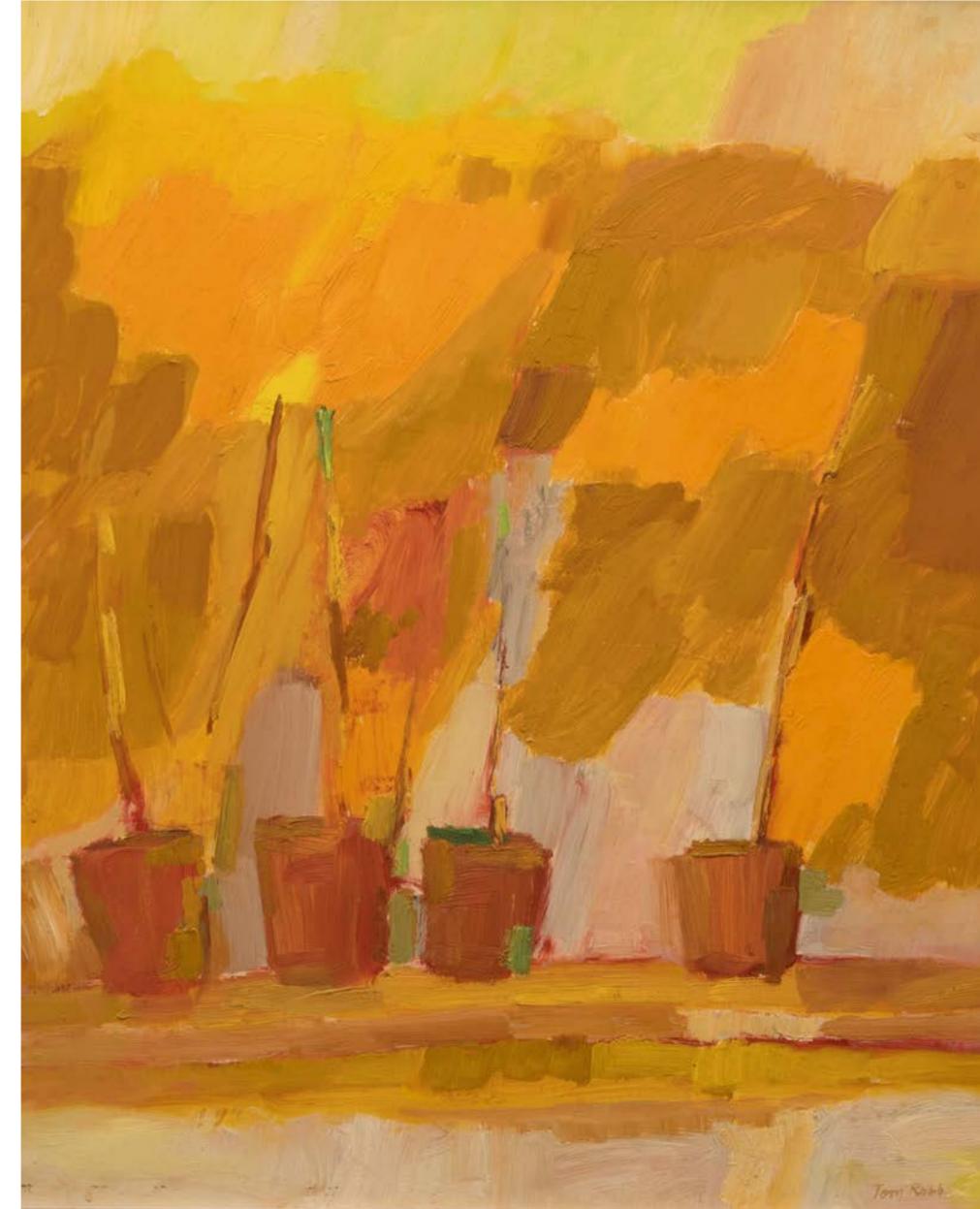
Spring Flowers, 1969, oil on board ~ 51cm x 60cm (Cat. No. TR\_1114\_51\_60)



Summer Flowers, 1969, oil on board ~ 51cm x 60cm (Cat. No. TR\_1113\_51\_60)



Winter Flowers, 1969, oil on board ~ 50cm x 60cm (Cat. No. TR\_1183\_50\_60)



Autumn Flowers, 1969, oil on board ~ 50cm x 60cm (Cat. No. TR\_1184\_50\_60)



Waves, 1970, oil on board ~ 76cm x 61cm (Cat. No. TR\_1104\_76\_61)



Corn, 1970, oil on board ~ 51cm x 41cm (Cat. No. TR\_1121\_51\_41)



Fields, 1970, oil on board ~ 76cm x 61cm (Cat. No. TR\_1147\_76\_61)



Coastal Landscape - Spring, 1969, oil on board ~ 76cm x 61cm (Cat. No. TR\_1148\_76\_61)



Dark Landscape - Evening, 1969, oil on board ~ 62cm x 46cm (Cat. No. TR\_1172\_62\_46)



Hampshire Landscape, 1971, oil on board ~ 102cm x 72cm (Cat. No. TR\_1133\_102\_72)



Coastal Landscape, 1970, oil on board ~ 75cm x 60cm (Cat. No. TR\_1127\_75\_60)



White Cliffs of Dover, 1970, oil on board ~ 76cm x 60cm (Cat. No. TR\_1128\_76\_60)



Hertfordshire in the Spring, 1969, oil on canvas ~ 75cm x 61cm (Cat. No. TR\_1129\_76\_61)



Corn Fields, 1971, oil on canvas ~ 76cm x 61cm (Cat. No. TR\_1138\_76\_61)



Hertfordshire Landscape, 1971, oil on canvas ~ 76cm x 61cm (Cat. No. TR\_1139\_76\_61)



Hertford Heath - Summer, 1969, oil on canvas ~ 76cm x 61cm (Cat. No. TR\_1149\_76\_61)



Winter Landscape, 1969, oil on canvas ~ 61cm x 46cm (Cat. No. TR\_1159\_61\_46)



Winter Landscape, 1969, oil on canvas ~ 46cm x 40cm (Cat. No. TR\_1164\_46\_40)



Coastal Landscape, 1969, oil on canvas ~ 50cm x 40cm (Cat. No. TR\_1170\_50\_40)



Harvest Landscape, 1969, oil on canvas ~ 61cm x 51cm (Cat. No. TR\_1156\_61\_51)



White Rocks by the Sea, 1971, oil on canvas ~ 61cm x 46cm (Cat. No. TR\_1158\_61\_46)



Beach and Rocks, 1971, oil on canvas ~ 76cm x 61.5cm (Cat. No. TR\_1190\_76\_61.5)



Landscape, 1971, oil on canvas ~ 76cm x 61cm (Cat. No. TR\_1138\_76\_61)



Summer Fields, 1971, oil on canvas ~ 76cm x 61.5cm (Cat. No. TR\_1188\_76\_61.5)



Winter Fields, 1971, oil on canvas ~ 76cm x 61.5cm (Cat. No. TR\_1187\_76\_61.5)



Winter Landscape, 1971, oil on canvas ~ 76cm x 61.5cm (Cat. No. TR\_1179\_76\_61.5)



Landscape at Dusk, 1971, oil on canvas ~ 76cm x 61cm (Cat. No. TR\_1146\_76\_61)



Evening Landscape, 1971, oil on canvas ~ 76cm x 61.5cm (Cat. No. TR\_1186\_76\_61.5)

## Biographical notes

- 1933 ~ Born in Edinburgh, one of five children, his father was an aircraft engineer for the RAF
- 1948 – 1953 ~ Attended Carlisle College of Art
- 1953 – 1955 ~ National Service in Germany
- 1955 – 1958 ~ Attended the Royal College of Art where he was taught by Carel Weight, Rodney Burn, John Minton and Rodgrigo Moniham
- 1958 ~ Married Jeannie Anne, they had two children Jeffrey and Liam
- 1965 ~ Started work at Horsey College of Art as Lecturer in Visual Research
- 1968 ~ Head of Foundation Horsey College of Art (students included Anish Kapoor)
- 1960 – 1970 ~ Group Shows at John Whibley Gallery, Cork Street
- 1965 – 1975 ~ Exhibited with the New Grafton Gallery
- 1971 ~ Solo show with John Whibley Gallery, Cork Street
- 1971 ~ Moved to Putney, South West London
- 1973 ~ Solo Show with John Whibley Gallery, Cork Street
- 1973 ~ Head of Department of Coordinated Studies Middlesex Polytechnic
- 1974 ~ Became a member of Chelsea Arts Club
- 1980 ~ Fellow of the Royal Society of Art
- 1983 ~ Head of School of Fine Art at Middlesex University  
A Painters Progress published (Ed Ian Simpson) lifelong association with
- 1983 ~ publisher Phoebe Phillips.
- 1986 ~ Chairman of the National Society for Fine Art Education
- 1986 ~ Pack Up and Paint (6 Book Series) published by Alfred a Knopf
- 1987 ~ Professor of Fine Art and Head of School of Fine Art Studies at Middlesex Polytechnic until his retirement from education in 1994
- 1986 – 2012 ~ Published 26 books on painting, drawing and collecting which have been translated into 16 different languages.

He continued to paint throughout his life

- Page 10 Alan Powel in the Square Court 1952 (Cat. No. TR\_1063\_60\_70)
- Page 11 Top Locks Landscape, Lathom Ormskirk 1958 (Cat. No. TR\_1060\_96\_73)
- Page 12 9 Top Locks Lathom Ormskirk 1958 (Cat. No. TR\_1061\_122\_90)
- Page 13 Lancashire Landscape 1959 (Cat. No. TR\_1089\_76\_61)
- Page 14 Thames Near Marlow 1967 (Cat. No. TR\_1081\_76\_61)
- Page 15 Thames Around Marlow 1967 (Cat. No. TR\_1073\_76\_61)
- Page 16 Thames At Marlow 1967 (Cat. No. TR\_1094\_76\_61)
- Page 17 Marlow In Autumn 1967 (Cat. No. TR\_1078\_76\_61)
- Page 18 Thames At Marlow 1967 (Cat. No. TR\_1086\_76\_61)
- Page 19 Thames Near Isleworth 1967 (Cat. No. TR\_1091\_76\_61)
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- Page 36 Coastal Landscape 1970 (Cat. No. TR\_1127\_75\_60)
- Page 37 White Cliffs of Dover 1970 (Cat. No. TR\_1128\_76\_60)
- Page 38 Hertfordshire in the Spring 1969 (Cat. No. TR\_1129\_76\_61) \*Canvas
- Page 39 Corn Fields 1971 (Cat. No. TR\_1138\_76\_61)
- Page 40 Hertfordshire Landscape 1971 (Cat. No. TR\_1139\_76\_61)
- Page 41 Hertford Heath - Summer 1969 (Cat. No. TR\_1149\_76\_61)
- Page 42 Winter Landscape 1969 (Cat. No. TR\_1159\_61\_46)
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- Page 52 Landscape at Dusk 1971 (Cat. No. TR\_1146\_76\_61)
- Page 53 Evening Landscape 1971 (Cat. No. TR\_1186\_76\_61.5)

