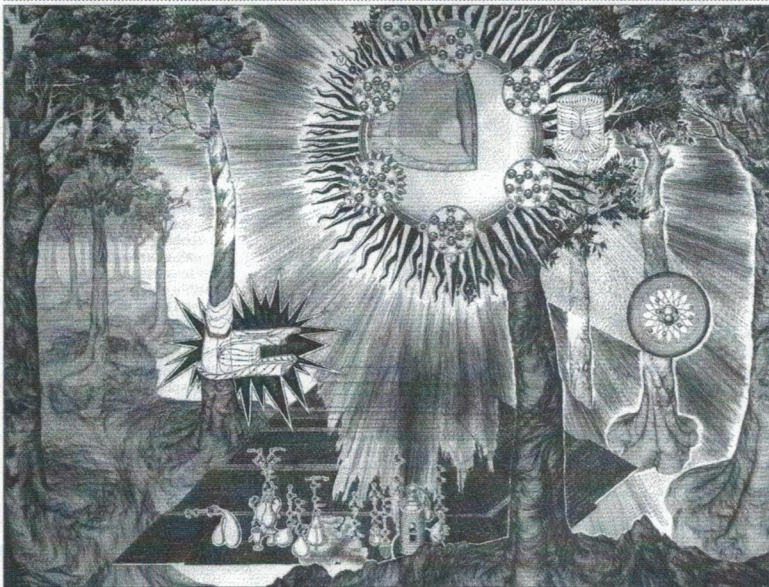


Blake's heaven



Burning bright Heiko Blankenstein, *Helioland*, ink on paper, 2005

Ossian Ward looks at how fans of this British visionary have ensured that his 250th anniversary is celebrated

The eccentric bard, artist and visionary William Blake once signed his name in a guest book, adding, 'Born 28 November 1757 in London, and has died several times since'. Blake couldn't have known how prophetic his premature epitaph would be, given that the erratic appreciation he experienced while alive would continue, post mortem, as his work was periodically buried and resurrected according to the tides of literary and artistic fad and fashion.

Earlier in this year of Blake's 250th anniversary, it seemed that this great Briton was again forgotten. No major events or shows were in the offing (arguably Tate had staged the definitive retrospective in 2000) and even the venerable Blake Society sent out a press release soliciting for suggestions as to how best celebrate. Worse still, Tate had recently failed to prevent the dispersal of the most important Blake discovery for over a century – a group of 20 watercolour illustrations for 'The Grave' – which were auctioned off piecemeal in New York at prices way below the pre-sale estimates.

However, as the day of the anniversary itself approaches, William Blake's fans

have rallied to his cause (and not just in this magazine, where he has been irreverently reborn as a London taxi driver). First, Tracy Chevalier released her novel *Burning Bright*, capturing Blake's move from bustling Soho to the verdant, marshy land south of the river, his 'lovely Lambeth'. Then there were a number of poetry readings and 'Mental Fight Nights' (the last of which is on November 26) and Tate Britain opens a

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display of his work on November 4. Finally, after its annual lecture, the Blake Society will commemorate his christening at St James's in Piccadilly on December 11, no doubt with a glass or two of port.

It's little wonder that we struggle to know what to make of a man whose language and ideas far outstrip our own in both complexity and imagination. But one of the most fitting tributes can be found in a small gallery in East London called the Drawing Room, a non-

commercial stronghold championing the art of draughtsmanship – the very endeavour that Blake held above all others. In fact, rather than becoming a painter, Blake saw the job of an engraver and etcher as 'very profitable and reckoned among the genteel trades'.

Much as Blake was influenced by the traditions of Greek and Roman antiquity – or 'the Ancients' as he called them – so have many subsequent generations of contemporary artists turned to Blake for their inspiration. The Drawing Room's show, entitled 'Every Eye Sees Differently As the Eye', is not selected from devout followers of Blake, but presents five young artists who likewise draw (and perhaps mentally inhabit) a world entirely of their own making.

The most striking similarities with Blake's illustrative intensity are immediately evident in a huge pen drawing, *Helioland*, by German artist Heiko Blankenstein. A burning sun irradiates its tree-lined surroundings with stylised rays (much as they do in countless works by Blake featuring fiery haloes), while on closer inspection the heat and light look to be generated by manmade nuclear fission, not divine energy. Blankenstein's green-tinted lightbox also sees nature being assaulted, this time by an aural barrage emanating from several stadium-sized amps and speakers dotted throughout his sprawling forest. Both images seem to

sum up Blake's belief that, 'Art is the tree of life; Science is the tree of death'.

Another artist adept at creating these sorts of self-generating landscapes out of pulsating, almost breathing lines of ink, is the Spaniard, Ernesto Caivano. Of the past decade, he has been beaver away in splendid isolation on his own personal, illustrated epic set in a futuristic fairytale forest called 'After the Woods'. The neo-Romantic narrative explores the faltering reunion of a knight in chunky armour and his long-haired damsel, who are destined to perpetually miss each other. An even more hermetically sealed world spills from the skilled pencils of Charles Avery, whose tale of the 'Islanders' squares on an imaginary community off the remote west coast of Scotland in which the dosing 'Time Watchers' slouch over pinball tables, suck pickled eggs and drink copiously.

In the eighteenth century, Blake's progressively flighty pronouncements and apocalyptic imagery led to him being branded as a 'madman' (and more politely as suffering from 'peculiarities'), yet nowadays, brave new fantasy worlds are only ever a channel-change or a mouse-click away. True visionaries come along a lot less often, but very few contemporary artists consciously go against the flow, especially at art school, to the point where they detach themselves from art world orthodoxy and stand alone. As well as seeing off 'enemies of the imagination' then, Blake's great legacy remains an enduring, frustrating originality. 'I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans / I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create.' *Tate Britain opens its Blake display on Nov 4 and 'Every Eye Sees Differently As the Eye' continues at The Drawing Room (East End) until Dec 2. For more on Blake events and the Mental Fight Club, go to www.blake250.co.uk*

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Blake's London

28 Broad Street, Soho
Blake's birthplace (Broadwick St).

Peckham Rye
Where the young engraver saw a vision of angels in the trees.

Westminster Abbey
He clambered over (and opened) tombs to draw the dead kings.

17 South Moulton Street
After only three years away, he came back to poverty and paranoia.

Bunhill Fields, EC1
The unmarked grave is long gone, but a monument marks the spot.