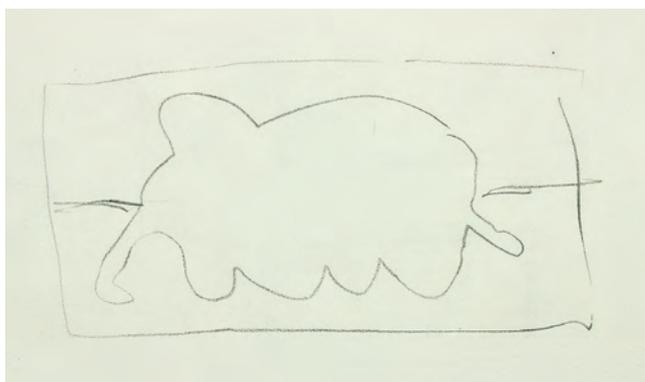


The Maternal Elephant



Eleanor Moreton

*'I also ask myself all the time what I'm really painting about; EMS, my mother, the SS Uganda's Africa run or the simple and beautiful formal relationship of a butterfly and the bars of a window? I'd say all of those things and also something like a personal turn inwards - it feels like a good time to both explore and reflect'*¹

David Webb, 2012

There is no greater love amongst elephants than the maternal kind. The female elephant gently guides and protects its young, touching it with trunk and legs: something so big caring for something so small. David Webb's mother made him a toy elephant when he was a boy. The beloved maternal gift, or the blobby grey memory of it, informs Webb's painting *Pachyderm*. Its edges, blurred and tentative, like a frayed childhood memento; its shape has transmuted to include memories of other childhood toys.

Elephants were often on his mind, listening to his grandmother's stories of her life in Tanzania. By the time he knew her (he calls her EMS in his work), she was living with his great-grandmother in a house in Devon. A house called Karibu – 'Welcome' in Swahili. A house of women.

His grandmother's stories were triggers for Webb's imagination. She had left her life in Mbeya, Tanzania with her three children after the breakdown of her marriage in 1955. She travelled from Dar es Salaam, along the Somalian coast into the Red Sea and up the Suez Canal on the SS Uganda. Webb describes these family stories as 'slightly imaginative'. What matters is not the exact truth but the sentiment that surrounded what happened. The partial, changing quality of her stories finds an equivalent in Webb's paintings, which extract what little is known of the past, presenting it paired down, like imprints on a boy's imagination: washes of restrained colour, pools of thin acrylic paint, every accident carefully considered.

When I first saw Webb's paintings I read them formally, as abstract paintings. Unaware of their narrative, I nevertheless sensed their nostalgia and, as I looked closer, began to read motifs that looked like boats, windows and pyramids. Things are seen oddly, alienated from us, either too close or too far. Or too high or too low. I was reminded of an essay called *The Open Window and the Storm Tossed Boat* by Lorenz Eisner.² Written in 1955 (the same year that EMS travelled from Tanzania) Eisner identified the boat and the window as iconic Romantic motifs. The view from the window is the traveller's view, or the would-be traveller, or the metaphorical traveller who stands on the threshold between their inner and outer worlds. The boat takes us away; or it takes others away from us. It is subject to the sea and the weather, just as we are subject to chance and things beyond our control. Both the open window and the boat, the iconography of passage, are metaphors of longing. Webb thinks of boats as a little like islands and is interested in the Uganda 'not only formally, but also for its seemingly merry encapsulation, playing out the story of EMS and her sad anxious journey'.



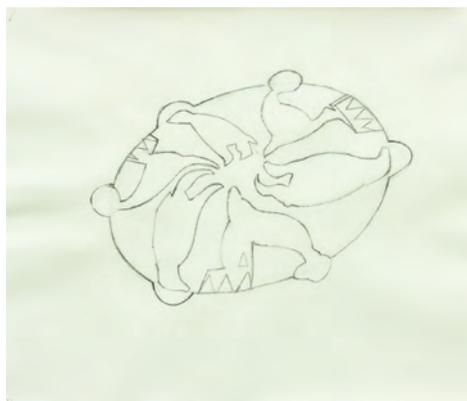
cover: David Webb, *Pachyderm*, 2012, pencil on paper 10x18.5cm. this page, clockwise from top left: David Webb, *Monarch (For EMS)*, 2007, acrylic on canvas 122x91 cm. David Webb, *Pachyderm*, 2012, acrylic on canvas 40.5x46cm. EMS and her children. Magamba, Tanzania, 1952, photograph.

Inevitably, the motifs in Webb's work: windows, boats and islands, migrating butterflies and girders, become shifty and evasive. In many ways it is easier to read them formally. Formal readings don't demand that we enter into someone else's world. They presuppose a pure, impersonal world without intimacy, operating like walls that prevent us from digressing, or mirrors that reflect only ourselves. Eisner's *Open Window* essay later informed Rosalind Krauss's October essay on grids, which suggested that behind every seemingly dispassionate Modernist grid lurked the emblematic Romantic 19th century window motif.³ I bring up Krauss's essay not only because Webb's work can be read within the tradition of abstract painting that veils Romantic iconography of passage, but also because it provides a pivotal moment after which it became possible for abstract paintings to accumulate meaning.

But to return to the story: EMS brought back postcards and photographs from the Uganda, including one of the boat's tourist nursery where his mother would have played during the journey. This is mid-century and the tables are decorated with jazzy Africa-inspired designs. Webb uses these as a starting point from which he extracts, through contour drawing, the shapes that will become the motifs of his paintings. The tabletops of the floating nursery are conflated with the Parcheesi boards Webb saw in a museum in Nova Scotia. Parcheesi is also a migrant: The Royal Game of India came, as Ludo via England, to America. The cruciform patterns of the boards are flipped vertically to become abstract paintings. This flipping between the flat schematic and a more traditional representation of space is part of Webb's own game-play.

In Webb's studio a small blocky painting, oblongs and triangles of earth colours set against a hot blue ground/sky, resembles the corrugated cityscape in Lorenzetti's *Allegory of Good Government*. Webb's painting is taken from a photograph of the Old German Hospital in Tanga where his mother was born. Built in German East Africa in the early days of the 20th century, the hospital's elaborate arches and decorative brickwork are incongruously in the style of Lorenzetti's Siena. This superficial relationship with the *Allegory* goes deeper. Webb finds his collection of postcards of Sieneese paintings. Their relevance, in the organisation of space and the simple figure/ground relationships, is clear: the fluctuating and multiple perspective points, the simplification of motifs. As Webb says, 'emotion simply conveyed through colour and shape'.

The shapes of his childhood have held well in his memory. By contrast we talk of the way things lose their colour over time – the pyramids in Egypt and Mexico, the interiors of our own churches – whilst retaining their form. Webb was surprised to discover that the chairs in the tourist smoking room of the Uganda, which he knew from his grandmother's black and white postcards, were in fact a brilliant blue. The reinvestment of things with colour may be one way to recover them from the past. In Webb's work, the play of colour and the inversion of tones is part of an attempt to retrieve and hold on to memories that are fading and imprecise.



clockwise from top left: David Webb, *Parcheesi* (Nursery), 2011, acrylic on canvas 45.5x61 cm. David Webb, *German Hospital*, 2011, acrylic on canvas 30.5x35.5 cm. David Webb, *Smoking Room (Red)*, 2011, acrylic on canvas 55.5x65.5 cm. David Webb, *Nursery*, 2008, pencil on paper 25.5x33 cm.

Webb believes he finally began to learn about colour whilst studying in Cyprus in 2001–2. He met the painter Geoff Rigden there who observed that he was painting the island with the palette of an Englishman. It was at this point that Webb made the huge conceptual leap necessary to convert the seen world into one of arrangements of shape and colour. He discovered those American figurative painters of the early to mid 20th century, Marsden Hartley, Forrest Bess and Milton Avery, who had transformed their own worlds into colour and shape. Back in England Rigden introduced Webb to some of those artists who had set up the Greenwich Studios in the 1970s.⁴ Webb's debt to the Greenwich artists is evident, and is what leads to the sense of formal completeness in his work.

Even at their darkest Webb's paintings have lightness and luminosity. Working and erasing until an essence of the original image or idea is all that remains, it is often at this point that the original motif is no longer readable. The painting has left the image behind. However hard won, they arrive at a point of ease and grace. There is no question that they can be a purely aesthetic experience and can meet their audience on the shared ground of beauty. Nevertheless, they have a narrative thread. They relate to specific memories, a journey, the passage of time: a very singular experience, a story. So the question arises, how can paintings and stories relate in general and how do these stories relate to these paintings in particular?

Webb describes painting as sometimes more like the intent to tell a story, rather than the mechanics of actually telling it. Something elemental and from the gut. It's a tricky thing. Painting lends itself more easily to the arresting than to the unfolding of time. The painter who deals with narrative is continually pulled back to their source. It's a complex negotiation but, out of its unnaturalness and ambivalence, it is possible that something unexpected may occur. Webb is a quiet and non-emphatic storyteller. His narrative takes its shape from the interaction between individual paintings. Like the uncertainty of memory, the chronology is fluid, the images partial and oblique. It is up to the viewer to piece things together, grouping trunk to tail, or separating into individual parts. Either way, as with the herd, these paintings are built on deep bonds, and therein reside the finest emotions of joy, grief, compassion and love.

1: David Webb, *Mother Hen*, Garageland 9 (2009)

2: Lorenz Eisner, *The Open Window and the Storm-tossed Boat*, Art Bulletin 37 (1955)

3: Rosalind Kraus, *Grids*, October 9 (1979), reprinted in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1985)

4: Webb was later to curate a show celebrating these artists. *Uncaught Hares*, Stephen Lawrence Gallery, London (2011)



David Webb, *Valletta*, 2010, acrylic on canvas 40x46cm.
David Webb *Parcheesi (Yellow)*, 2012, acrylic on canvas 122x122cm. Tourist Nursery, SS Uganda, c.1954, (post-card). All images copyright of the artist.

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