

***Paul Nash: Modern Artist, Ancient Landscape***

**Tate Liverpool, 23 July - 19 October 2003**



Paul Nash, *Equivalents for the Megaliths*, 1935, oil on canvas, 457 x 660 mm © Tate, 2003

Paul Nash has remained relatively little known among the leading figures of his generation in British art such as Ben Nicholson and Henry Moore. He died young, aged 57, in 1946 and having lived through the difficult depression and war years missed out on the vigorous postwar public support for experimental art which helped raise others to international standing. A memorial exhibition at the Tate in 1948 and a retrospective there in 1975 had been the only major surveys before the show at Tate Liverpool in summer 2003.

Nash's early death is only one factor in the cautious reception of his work. His principal interest, landscape, has not carried the prestige in other European countries that it has in Britain. Nash, unfortunately for his reputation, has become known largely as a watercolourist, while he himself valued his oil paintings and invested most of his ideas and attention to oil painting, regarding the easier to sell watercolours in part as a way of making a living. Much of the richness of his work comes in the second half of his career, from the late 1920s onwards, when he evolved a personal modernism informed by both abstraction and Surrealism. But Nash had established a national reputation earlier, in 1918, for his work as an official war artist at the western front, and was then faced with a decade of Bloomsbury domination of British art with little incentive from colleagues or the market to explore anything new. Nash's 1920s work is worthy rather than innovative, and that too has cast a shadow over his reputation.



The Liverpool exhibition was a survey show, but a carefully edited one. Watercolours were shown only in certain places: at the beginning of Nash's career, when it was his principal medium, during the first world war, when he was sketching at speed close to the front line, and at odd points - the Surrealist moment around 1937 is an example - where he used the medium to realise different ideas from his oil paintings. The result of this sparing use of watercolours was to make Nash look less like a representative of the late picturesque, less the heir to Cotman and the early English watercolourists, whom he admired and who did indeed influence some of his work, but who in no way account for his prestige as a modernist. Secondly, the 1920s were edited down in such a way that the staidness that dominated British art, Nash's included, in the decade after world war one was little in evidence. The exhibition moved quickly from Nash's work at the front in 1917-18 to the revision of his art that started in 1929. The renewal of his art can be dated thus with certainty because it was conscious on Nash's part, the product of his own dissatisfaction with what he had been doing. The range and richness of ideas in his 1930s art gives an indication of how repressed an artist Nash had become. At the same time a flood of ideas bearing in at one time can have a disconcerting effect and it is this which the Tate's exhibition highlighted and sought to explain.

What was it like, the question was in effect asked, to be a British painter at a time, the early 1930s, when Surrealism was beginning to be a force in this country, while even Cubism was not securely embedded? Wyndham Lewis's Vorticism had died with the war, as Nash himself noted in 1933, and seemed a distant memory. What did modernism mean for British art in the early 1930s and how did it correspond to ideas of Britishness? Nash was keenly aware of this question, which is one the exhibition picks up on, not least in its title, 'Paul Nash: Modern Artist, Ancient Landscape'. Could one be a modernist in terms that would be comprehensible in Paris and retain allegiance not just to Nash's established subject, landscape, but specifically to the idea of 'ancient' landscape? Landscape, involving distance in space, raises questions of compatibility with the shallow space of Cubism, but if distance means not only distance in space but also in time, as 'ancient' implies, the problems of being a modern artist are redoubled. What this exhibition achieved, through a very detailed study of Nash's 1930s and 1940s work, was to show how these problems presented themselves in Nash's work.

One view has been that Nash was overstretched in his efforts to accommodate the new. It is a view that elevates the traditionalist Nash, the established middle of the road landscapist of the 1920s. The Liverpool show suggested something different: it proposed not that a major change of direction was anything other than difficult, but that the anxiety and unease that the conflicts within Nash's painting from 1929 present on the surface were part of the positive quality and character of his art. Nash's Britishness may at times sit uneasily with his modernism. But that was part of a strategy in the 1930s - how consciously arrived at it is hard to say - to use modernism, both abstraction and Surrealism, to challenge, even subvert, accepted ideas of landscape within English art.



Nash was friendly with several eminent British archaeologists of the interwar period, followed excavations at Avebury and Maiden Castle and particularly liked sites such as Badbury Rings that were not under excavation and remained untouched and overgrown in what he liked to think of as a natural state. Though in some respects he shared a Chestertonian romantic view of early Britain, Nash with his paintings of megaliths and stone circles was neither a sentimentalist nor the equivalent in art of popular historians of the 'our island story' genre, who tried to buttress national identity during the difficult period of economic depression and fascism by romanticising Britain as a country which gained strength from its long and unbroken history as a nation.

Instead, Nash made British landscape, its natural contours and archaeological features, personal and compelling by using abstraction and Surrealism to make it strange, to subvert its normal and expected appearance. Some of Nash's art looks rather mild-mannered now, his Surrealist personages a little less fearsome than they were probably intended to be. But some paintings, such as those where megaliths are transformed into modern materials or become infused with vegetable or semi-human life, show how he plays on our expectations of traditional landscape views only to undermine them with objects that are intrusive both as forms and because they are marked out as Surrealist which, by the standards of English landscape art, means foreign. The recurrent feeling of anxiety in Nash's later painting arises out of this sense of invasion, the presence of the alien.

Looking back from the later work to the earlier, to the dark ink and wash drawings around 1911-12 with which the exhibition starts, one finds already there the unsettling feel for a nature that is not necessarily beneficent or supportive. Not that these pictures contain Surrealist presences. Indeed it is the absence of figures but experience of presentiment, of some likely occurrence or undetermined event, that arouses our responses. The tradition of landscape Nash came from was not a topographical one, and the early drawings seen in retrospect look like Surrealism waiting to happen. The argument that Nash's later work is implied in the earlier can be made equally well through his first world war drawings of the shell-holed terrain and water-filled crater pools of the Flanders battlefields. Nash's anger at nature so maltreated is here revealed and it should not be surprising to find Nash's later work giving birth to monsters. The war was a permanent mark for Nash and others of his generation, an experience repressed over the following decade but not expunged. Nash's Surrealism was a late manifestation of the movement entirely within the Hitler period, and is easily thought of for that reason in terms of the irrational in fascism. But Nash is best seen as an artist of two world wars, with the trauma of the first concealed by efforts in the 1920s - political as well as cultural - to impose a sense of business as usual. When that policy came unstuck with the depression and the rise of fascism, there were two forces working on Nash to unsettle his art: memories of world war one and fear of it happening again.

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