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**FROM TRADITION TO MODERNISM:
BRITISH LANDSCAPE PAINTING
IN THE POSTWAR PERIOD**

A thesis submitted to the University of Kent
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in History and Philosophy of Art

by

Imola Antal Mavity

September 2008

Abstract

In the immediate aftermath of the war which threatened sovereignty, fractured geographical and political identities and cultures and left the land scarred and damaged, landscape became invested with deep and special significance. During this time, Romanticism unsurprisingly re-flourished and the first psychological accounts of the phenomenology of place and space started appearing. Landscape painting became a visual manifestation of national identity which had acquired a great meaning in these circumstances. Whilst relying on established notions of the British visual tradition, the introspective nature of wartime Neo-Romanticism ultimately allowed for the liberation of landscape painting from ideological constraints and the ease with which it assimilated modernism. War not only strengthened the idea of place and the landscape as a redemptive genre, but equally, in a counter direction, it encouraged the idea that art should set itself apart from society entirely, either as a perceptual investigation divorced from social enquiry, or as complete formalism. Modernism had brought a new emphasis on aesthetic appreciation and a reaction against mythical, historical and narrative tendencies in traditional landscapes. The work of Monet and Cézanne was redefined in a contemporary context and British artists, such as Lanyon, Heron and Frost, influenced by European and American postwar modernist models started experimenting with new approaches to landscape. In view of these foreign influences, the need to establish the existence of a strong, innovative home-grown avant-garde became imperative. As institutional support in the arts increased, regional cultural communities such as St Ives were rejuvenated and British art started being promoted abroad. This thesis demonstrates that landscape painting was an enduring and adaptable genre which significantly contributed to the integration of British art into modernism.

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Introduction

In 1956, the curator Andrew Forge introduced the landscapes shown in the exhibition *10 Years of English Landscape Painting 1945-1955* held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts as remnants of a disappearing, marginal genre in Britain, superseded by a different kind of art inspired by the urban and industrial. This show was held at a time by which the influence of Matisse and Picasso had been fully assimilated and the new American painting had just started exerting its authority in London. Gear, Heron and Lanyon were some of the artists whose work was on display. Adopting a position popular with 'progressive' contemporary critics such as Lawrence Alloway, Forge described these works as 'naturalistic', dismissing landscape as a genre for its limited underlying ideology, technique and visual representation.

In the crucial years after the Second World War, active attempts to revive European culture and debates about the future of art added to the existing strain on the London art world to establish itself as an equal of Paris and New York. Forge implied that landscape painting was unlikely to help British art meet such expectations. However, he identified some potential in the unorthodox angle of the subject. He described landscape as 'complex' and 'problematic', in the sense that it was difficult to place in a contemporary climate in which a dependence on reference was increasingly seen as regressive and new abstract idioms were predominantly associated with urban imagery. At a time when the economy was beginning to regenerate, national identity was no longer linked with rural values, therefore there was a strong feeling that the landscape genre, which had been traditionally associated with the idea of the countryside, would have to change or be no longer relevant to contemporary art.

In this thesis, I argue against Forge's analysis to show that, in the postwar era, landscape became a conduit for modernist innovation, preserving its valued status, even as its functions changed considerably. The postwar period in Britain (1945-60) marked the transition from a time of economic hardship to one of steady growth in all areas including culture, where the newly found Arts Council acted as the helping hand

offered by the welfare state. The 1950s especially represented a defining period for British culture, beginning with Labour's defeat by the Conservatives in 1951. This change in government produced a shift from state control to increased individual freedom which was reflected in the art of the decade. During the ten years covered by Forge's exhibition, the focus shifted from cohesive movements, which had dominated early avant-garde trends, towards art as an introspective activity of the single artist. The influence of two important prewar European vanguard movements, Surrealism and Constructivism, had profoundly influenced British art up to this time. The reliance on their manifestos faded however in the 1950s with the emergence of the new American painting which took over the artistic hegemony of the Parisian school.

Romanticism had an important role to play in the shaping of postwar landscape painting, yet the associations it had acquired during the Second World War were no longer valid. By 1956, the idealism and generic symbolism of wartime art were gradually fading as landscape became a reflection of the modern artist's personal response to the world. Issues which were instrumental in causing this shift were radical discoveries in technology and science in the aftermath of the war, social change and a renewed focus on introspection in art. The struggle between abstraction and representational art became an ardent issue, as Cold War reformulations promoted Modernism as an American achievement in Europe. Modernist abstraction took over from Romanticism as a means of artistic expression which would stand for the freedom of individual creativity and originality. It seemed, however, that many British artists continued working within the romantic universalist tradition, reinventing the picturesque, making it relevant to the postwar climate as bearer of radical ideas. The strong link between tradition and modernism in postwar landscape painting is the main subject of this work. It presents a broad overview of the changing significance of landscape in the postwar period demonstrating the multi-directional development of this traditional genre following the Second World War.

This thesis has been made possible by important research which set the foundations of studies in postwar British art. Margaret Garlake's *New Art, New World: British Art in Postwar Society* (1998) provided the first extensive socio-historical contextualisation for the art of the period. Michael Bird's recent *St Ives Artists. A Biography of Place and Time* (2008) offered a long-awaited ideological

placing for the landscape painting produced in the region of West Penwith. Andrew Causey's *Peter Lanyon. Modernism and the Land* (2006), even though focusing mainly of the work of the artist in question, introduced significant new ideas about a nationally nurtured modernism. James Hyman's *The Battle for Realism: Figurative Art in Britain during the Cold War 1945-1960* (2001) was mainly concerned with postwar figuration, yet offered, by association, valuable research on the development of abstraction in Britain. The compilation of essays *Artists and Patrons in Postwar Britain* (2001), included an important survey of French and British postwar abstraction by Fiona Gaskin, as well as an essay by Margaret Garlake on postwar constructions of national identity in a cultural climate especially susceptible to foreign influences.

In addition to such art-historical sources, numerous exhibition catalogues, reviews, articles and books present an unmediated insight into the way postwar writers and artists perceived the significance of landscape. My work primarily draws on such sources in its assessment of British postwar landscape painting. It adds to the existing literature by exploring the multifarious functions of landscape, i.e. as national identifier, purveyor of tradition, preserver of regional values, means of modernising and internationalising British art and by developing a humanist form of abstraction which would challenge the formalist doctrine. Further roles include that of landscape as psychological enquiry in the form of gestural automatism, landscape as formal aesthetic exercise and ultimately, landscape as experience and phenomenological identification of the artist with the environment.

This thesis is by no means exhaustive and is ultimately limited by its own ambition to cover as many areas as possible in which modernism was activate in postwar British art. In this respect, it is useful to specify what has not been included. While drawing from some important sources of cultural cross-disciplinary knowledge, my focus was predominantly on the art itself, the mutations in significance of landscape as an artistic genre, captured at a particularly fruitful time in the history of British art. A recurrent endeavour was to provide a visually theorised assessment of alternatives to modernist formalism in postwar landscape painting through the study of artistic practice. In this sense, this thesis may differ from other considerations of the same subject, such as Fiona Gaskin's recent PhD thesis on the relationship

between the postwar landscape and the Cold War, which indicates towards a closer evaluation of the historical and political context in which postwar art was produced. An aspect which is not given lengthy consideration is the human figure and its postwar representations, except for the instances when it becomes relevant in relation to landscape painting i.e. the interest in organic and anthropomorphic form. Another aspect which remained uncovered is the realist landscape painting of the 'Kitchen Sink' artists and the Euston School, priority in this instance being given to the way modernist abstract idioms were assimilated into British postwar painting.

Each of the chapters of the thesis describes a different facet of postwar landscape painting, with the conclusive Chapter Seven providing a synthesis of the ideas introduced throughout the work. Chapter One examines the role of landscape as a marker of national identity. It takes up the question of whether there is a specific way in which the British visual tradition is perceived and how this has affected postwar perceptions about landscape. From the late 1930s to the late 1950s, the national identity of British art was subjected to various challenges. During the Second World War, the imminence of the Nazi occupation urged art patrons to preserve the idea of native creativity and freedom in order to counteract Fascist propaganda. The landscapes of the neo-Romantics provided an example of an imaginative original art, unpoliticised and steeped in tradition. Landscape painting acquired a redemptive function as the land became a metaphor for national endurance. Following the war, conservative critics feared that a national art which had developed from its own strength, in isolation, would be rendered obsolete as artists regained contact with the *École de Paris*. However, attempts to reiterate the importance of a quintessentially British visual tradition, marked by a predilection for naturalism, lyricism and the narrative, would be displaced by the growing interest in experimentation with foreign modernist models. The establishment of a strong national high art was once again threatened in the early 1950s when American mass culture flooded Britain. Landscape was losing its wartime connotations as a symbol of 'Englishness' and it would soon break away from ideological constraints as a liberated French and a strong new American modernist abstraction would gain influence in the London art circles in the 1950s.

Three critical stances predominated in this period: while conservatives such as Ayrton and Ironside re-evaluated British art in the frame of a reinvented national tradition, progressives such as Heron and Alloway were eager to see it part of a European modernist lineage and, respectively, of a contemporary international avant-garde, whereas non-conformists such as Berger and Read promoted social responsibility and individualism in art. The introductory section of Chapter Two provides an evaluation of such views and a theoretical framework for ideas which will be elaborated on in future chapters.

The main body of Chapter Two focuses on the art of St Ives, which reflected all these critical implications. Epitomizing tradition and innovation, St Ives was, on the one hand, a model of regional culture, on the other, the place where a highly sophisticated form of internationalist modernism was developed. An idealised and romantic view of St Ives persisted as unspoilt by industrialisation and scenic inspirational setting for the production of traditional picturesque forms of painting. The old St Ives Society was however superseded by an internationalist form of abstraction introduced by Nicholson, Hepworth and Gabo in the late 1930s, in which constructivist experimentation allowed for the discovery of innovative ways in which to perceive space in art. In the 1950s, the focus shifted from the idealism of Constructivism to local themes of landscape and community illustrative of the wider socio-historical and cultural changes of the postwar era. For a native artist such as Peter Lanyon, the early art of the 'primitive' Alfred Wallis redefined the idea of landscape as the manifestation of regional identity, his work reflecting his objection to a history of outside exploitation of his homeland. For others such as Wynter and Bomberg, landscape became a psychological outlet, as well as a symbol for the unexplored unconscious, for creativity. Artists such as Heron and Hilton used the subject as a pretext for formal experimentation, or exploration of organic form. For Frost and Lanyon, however, landscape painting was born out of the perceptual experience of the environment. While the Arts Council promoted St Ives art nationally through an important display such as the Festival of Britain in 1951, the British Council as well as private American galleries were instrumental in disseminating it abroad. The landscape painting produced in postwar St Ives provided a means of internationalising British art by establishing the presence of a capable

home-grown avant-garde generating a typically perceptual form of modernist abstraction.

Chapter Three takes a closer look at contemporary criticism about the relationship between modernist abstraction and postwar landscape painting. Patrick Heron argued that there was a switch from 'abstracting from' the visual world in the manner of the early European modern painters such as Cézanne and Monet, to a new self-reflexive abstraction marked by the total loss of connection with the real world. The second perspective was championed by Lawrence Alloway, who supported radical new forms of expression which focused predominantly on a process-oriented, gestural, anti-compositional form of abstraction. In many ways, the differences in their views illustrate a change of loyalties from the prewar *École de Paris* to postwar Tachisme and American Abstract Expressionism. While the art Heron promoted was chiefly concerned with the aesthetic exploration of pictorial space and form, the international modernism backed by Alloway focused on paint as matter and gestural automatism. An interesting argument taken up here is the extent to which humanism prevailed in postwar abstraction. It is shown that, Tachisme, while maintaining the focus on the creative process, inadvertently contained allusion, both as a result of the human gesture which produced the marks, and through the reference unconsciously encoded in its imagery. In British painting, this dual focus on reference and process was of particular interest and artists such as Bomberg, Hilton, Frost, Feiler, Wynter and Lanyon sought precisely this reconciliation in their work, surpassing the limitations of modernist formalism and forging typical individual ways of painting in non-figurative modes.

Chapter Four concentrates on the impact of the art of the older and newer *École de Paris* art on the British artists' approach to landscape in particular. There was an mixed reaction to French art in postwar Britain. On the one hand, the great exhibitions of Picasso, Matisse, Braque and Rouault held in 1945-1946 were seen as a long-awaited reconnection with Paris, still regarded at that point as the centre of the international art world. On the other, the creative wartime British art, produced in isolation from any European mainstream was feared to be threatened by this influence. Moreover, the opposition to French art was conflated with the efforts of Sylvester and Heron to establish a School of London which would equal Paris. Some

postwar British criticism such as that of Heron, was critical of the new *École de Paris*, yet faithful to the old *École*; his aim was to institute young British contemporaries as the genuine followers of the early modern masters, henceforth elevating the London art world to the status that Paris once had. The change from pre-war to postwar readings of Cézanne and Monet was visible in the change from an interest in the synthetic aspect of abstracting from nature in Cézanne's case and the rendering of fleeting visual motifs in the case of Monet, to the dissolution of form and the sheer involvement in the mark-making process in their late work, a point introduced in Chapter Three. Impressionism was reinterpreted to suit contemporary needs and internationalise a more accessible form of gestural abstraction. Such readings of early modern art overlapped with the influence of postwar Tachisme before the impact of American Abstract Expressionism in the mid-1950s. It seemed that the work of an artist such as Nicolas de Staël was assimilated particularly easily (e.g. by Heron, Hilton) due to its ability to bridge the gap between the discoveries of the old European avant-garde - particularly the legacy of Cubism and Cézanne - and abstraction. Conversely, a gestural, more self-reflexive form of Tachisme such as that of Georges Mathieu echoed the automatism of American action painting and inspired a more intuitive form of abstraction (e.g. Gear, Bowen).

Chapter Five reassesses the status of British painting by comparison to the New York School and the role of landscape in defining this status. The political context British culture found itself in during the Cold War allowed for the welcoming reception of all things American, including New York School abstraction. Contemporary critical views from both sides of the Atlantic (i.e. Heron, Robertson, Alloway, Sylvester, Berger, Fuller in England, and Greenberg, Rosenberg, Fried in the United States) set the scene for the impact of the important American exhibitions held in London in 1956 and 1959. These had a similar resonance to the exhibitions of Matisse and Picasso in 1945, although the state British culture found itself in greatly differed through its having benefited from exposure to the influence of the old and new *Écoles de Paris* which opened access to liberal and individual forms of expression. A comparison of a typical form of modernism produced by the regional St Ives avant-garde and the globally publicized movements of the New York School shows that significant ideological and aesthetic similarities existed between the art of the two centres. There was a mutual interest in psychological enquiry and formal

abstract investigation, but the aspect which set them apart was the predominantly empirical or perceptual nature of St Ives art. While Heron ultimately concluded that American art was mainly a mediocre stylistic influence and reiterated the importance on the reliance on the outside world, the pro-American Alloway altogether dismissed the interest in landscape as a setback to innovation in British art. It seemed that, despite technical correspondences, St Ives abstraction (and, in great lines, European abstraction) differed from American abstraction through its humanism and reliance on perception, rather than on a systematic quality and strict formal allegiances. Ultimately, the vagueness in international recognition of St Ives art could be chiefly attributed to its persistent ties with landscape, an external subject, which was considered outmoded.

Chapter Six continues exploring parallel tendencies in American and British postwar art, considering the means by which the subject of landscape challenged the formalist norm in postwar abstraction and allowed for experimentation with alternatives to mainstream idioms. The focus of this chapter is a trend called 'Abstract Impressionism', derived from Abstract Expressionism – yet often neglected in histories of mid-twentieth century painting. A rediscovered empathy for nature complemented the predominant concern with conceptual formal issues in mainstream abstraction with perceptual interests. This was instrumental both in the devising of formal analyses and modernist genealogies for Abstract Expressionism and in the development of new departures from this increasingly academic mode. Its theorization by Elaine de Kooning in America and Lawrence Alloway in Britain noted the occurrence of such a reaction in postwar art. This trend influenced by late Monet was characterised by gesture painting taken in new directions marked by the evocation of natural forms, allusive colour and light, patterned brushwork, and contemplative mood, with a predominant lyricism and a visual attitude to painting and its plasticity. In Britain, a similar non-formal idiom developed as early as 1933 when the term 'Objective Abstraction' was coined by Moynihan in reference to the work of a group of painters who, rejecting geometric abstraction, believed in a nature-inspired art ruled by an unpredictable internal (plastic) logic of its own. Two decades later, the fresh excitement of the New York School for the work of Monet affected Britain as well, with a comprehensive collection of the French Impressionist's work being shown at the Edinburgh Festival and the Tate in 1957. Its reception was enthusiastic,

yet conventional critical views of Monet's work conflicted with contemporary interpretations. One year later, the ICA's Lawrence Alloway introduced to the British public Greenberg's connection between the late *Nymphéas* and New York School abstraction and organised the exhibition *Abstract Impressionism* which gave the trend its name. Together with Heron, he showed how Monet was implicated by non-figurative painters in a reassessment of French Tachisme and American Action Painting.

Chapter Seven provides a reflexive synthesis of issues raised throughout the thesis. It studies the interrelation of three core issues in postwar landscape painting: the romantic tradition, the influence of modernist formalism and the new phenomenological considerations of 'place'. These three aspects naturally moulded into a new form of modernism in Britain which transcended its originally set out parameters by formalist critics.

A long-standing standard in British art, the Romantic tradition, supported the notion of the invented landscape, the 'landscape of the mind'. Neo-Romanticism was a reaction to naturalism, through the intuitive perception of the natural environment; a nostalgic neo-Picturesque outlook on landscape offered an idealised view of the country during the war, landscape signifying national identity through nostalgic imagery, historical reference and the idea of neutral untamed nature. This explained the subsequent liberation of landscape from ideological constraints of any kind, as well as the ease with which it assimilated modernism.

With the onset of modernist formalism, a reaction against mythical, historical and descriptive tendencies became evident in landscape painting. The focus was redirected to eyesight as an aesthetic conduit, as postwar reinterpretations of Monet reconsidered landscape as a visual object. This formal approach overlapped with the experiential, phenomenological approach to landscape. While the first mostly relied on the aesthetic aspect, the second focused on the perceptual awareness, the dynamic, embodied experience of the landscape. In this subjective approach, the artist is an insider, entirely identifying himself with the environment. Its historical precedents are sought in the work of Courbet and Cézanne, natives of the land they explored as subject. Parallels emerge between their work and the postwar work of Lanyon, for

whom landscape became a complex experience, subsuming historical, anthropological, social aspects and carrying multiple layers of personal meaning. Drawing on the contemporary theories on phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I have tried to show that in the work of Lanyon, Frost, Bomberg and Hitchens, the artist becomes an active participant in a landscape which is no longer a vista, captured from a static viewpoint, but an all-encompassing experience, explored physically, mentally and sensually.

The Conclusion presents a brief assessment of the notion of 'place' – a discussion initiated in the last chapter – elaborating on its changing connotations in modern British painting. 'Place' was re-evaluated in modernist terms by Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland, who sought to 'extract' the intrinsic character of a specific place on a purely intuitive, individualist basis. They enabled the shift from aesthetic to phenomenological considerations of place, reverting to introspection and personal metaphor. Whilst the specificity of place was annulled as concept in formalist modernism, British artists such as Lanyon and Frost translated romantic considerations through the phenomenological identification with their environment. Imagination, the tool of the romantic artist was thus replaced by perception and experience in postwar painting.

An awareness of the changing meanings of modernism has been central to the present research as well as the acknowledgment of a renewed and distinctive form of modernism which was developed in Britain after the Second World War. Landscape painting became a means of assimilating modernism to the existing tradition, encouraging painters to develop fresh interpretations of the subject. Through a mutual exchange, modernism enabled landscape painting to maintain its traditionally respected status, saving the genre from extinction, while landscape painting allowed for the development of an alternative reading of modernism which transcended its standardised formalist parameters.

Chapter One

Tradition, Nationalism and the Postwar Landscape

This chapter opens the discussion on landscape painting with an assessment of the relation between artistic production and the creation of national identity in wartime and postwar Britain. It starts from the idea that art, and specifically landscape painting, has been a visual manifestation of formulations of national identity and in some cases, a shaper of such formulations. The first section provides a selective overview of contemporary multi-disciplinary research on the subject of landscape and its adoption as a national identifier. It shows that contemporary writing tends to focus on the circumstances which have helped towards the production of landscape painting, as well as its public reception. The discussion about the notions of 'Englishness' or 'Britishness', seen as invented concepts, and the nation as an 'imagined community', presents nationalism as a construct developed as a result of temporal, local and theoretical factors. The limitations of seeing landscape as an exemplifier of national identity are also being introduced into the argument. This section also shows that the defence of a painting culture with low self-image was frequently overwhelmed by outside influence. In this sense it attempts to define Englishness and identify native characteristics and strengths, offering an overview of established notions of the British visual tradition in painting and discussing the importance of landscape in shaping these.

The second section attempts to identify the ways in which nationalism manifested itself in British wartime and postwar art, specifically through landscape painting. From the late 1930s to the late 1950s, the national identity of British art was perceived as being subjected to various more or less justified external threats. Initially, during the second world war, the imminence of Nazi occupation brought about new incentives to preserve the individualist and creative character of British art in order to differentiate it from propagandistic forms of art and censorship. As a declaration of the nation's independence, the wartime government and institutions sought to strengthen the population's morale by reinforcing social unity and solidarity and promoting traditional values. The landscapes of the neo-Romantics were favoured as an example of imaginative original art, unpoliticised and neutral, with a penchant for historical tradition and immunity to outside influences in the "island fortress", a

common perception of Britain at the time. Meanwhile, their art had also a powerful redemptive function; the land, a physical and universal expression of the national self, spoilt by the technologism of war was seen as a metaphor for national endurance.

This model of national art was carried on to the postwar period. At the end of the war, patriotic feelings flared up again when the newly found freedom of English artists to travel and regain contact with the Parisian *École de Paris*, together with the influence of the exhibitions coming from the continent, seemed to threaten the original art of the wartime years. The supporters of the neo-Romantics emphasised the need to hold on to an art of British tradition, the importance of preserving its visionary and poetic qualities and the interpretative freedom of subject matter. Some artists and critics attempted to counteract the perceived dissolution of a national art of such qualities, through a renewed vehement proclamation of what was considered ‘English’ or ‘British’ in art, e.g.: a predilection for painting above all art forms, a specific interest in landscape painting, a re-definition of British visual tradition as romantic, lyrical and strongly anchored in the observation of the visual world. A further threat came in the early 1950s through the introduction of American mass culture to Britain and fears that the established British high-art would suffer from its effect. Towards the mid-1950s this outlook had changed. The need to prove the existence of a strong, innovative national art became more imperative with the work of *École de Paris* artists being exhibited in London. Later, New York School abstraction infiltrated British high art and especially painting, most forcefully. The chapter concludes with an acknowledgment of institutional promotion and support of national postwar art by governmental organisations such as the Arts Council and The British Council.

Landscape, Tradition, Englishness

James McNeill Whistler once claimed that, “There is no such thing as English Art. You might as well talk of English Mathematics. Art is art, and Mathematics is Mathematics”.¹ This view of the nineteenth-century pioneer of ‘art for art’s sake’ was questioned by wartime nationalist forms of art and their theorists in Britain. In 2003,

¹ James A. MacNeill Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1967), 171.

Corbett, Holt and Russell argued that the development of English art between the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the Second World War was separate from the general course of European art which was traditionally based on the development of movements and trends². They focused on the relation of English art to ideas about landscape, cultural space, nationality, gender, and colonialism, linking these with the issue of identity. They relied in great part on the discussion of the concept of ‘Englishness’ and attempted to answer two questions: is there such a thing as a specifically English landscape, and is there a specifically English way of representing it? ³ This subsection deals, albeit succinctly, with finding some answers to these questions, focusing mainly on the theorisation of the concept of national identity in the late wartime and postwar period.

In the lecture series ‘The Englishness of English Art’ (1955), the (Jewish, German-born) architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner spoke of the nation’s great “inferiority complex about its own aesthetic capabilities”⁴; he saw this lack of confidence as working to the detriment of English art which he considered as still inseparable from the achievements of continental art. The historian even implied that ‘Englishness’ is at odds with the modern age, claiming that, “If England seems so far incapable of leadership in twentieth-century painting, the extreme contrast between the spirit of the age and English qualities is responsible,”⁵ thus suggesting that English art was still attached to old-fashioned values. Pevsner introduced the notion of a “geography of art” – an art specific to the place where it was produced – which he saw as “no more a science than the history of art”, while admitting it had some limitations.⁶ Like Pevsner, the journalist and intellectual Anthony Hartley wrote about the cultural impasse Britain found itself in during the late 1950s warning

² David Peters Corbett, Ysanne Holt and Fiona Russell, *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past 1880–1940* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

³ Catherine Brice, “Building Nations, Transforming Landscape,” *Contemporary European History* 16, no. 1 (February 2007): 118.

⁴ Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art* (London: Architectural Press, 1956).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁶ However, Paul Zucker, a contemporary reviewer wrote in 1957 that Pevsner was successful in identifying the existence of “a national continuum of specific character, based on typical psychological qualities and artistic preferences in every country.” Paul Zucker, review of *The Englishness of English Art. An Expanded and Annotated Version of the Reith Lectures*, Broadcast in October and November, 1955, in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15, no. 4 (June 1957): 49.

against the dangers of its insularity resulting from a sole reliance on tradition and provincialism.⁷

Margaret Garlake has argued that one of the important questions postwar theorists of art had to answer was which line of tradition a newly formed national modern art would best integrate into. "A near-consensus defined the historical tradition as originating in a linear medieval art which disappeared for several hundred years until it re-emerged in Blake."⁸ Conducting case studies of the art of Hogarth, Reynolds, Blake and Constable, Pevsner identified the tendencies of English art for the Picturesque and the narrative. He saw as its characteristic traits "imagination, fantasy, irrationalism" (yet in many cases he seemed to focus on the exceptional which he presented as the typical).

Pevsner seemed to be accepting the Ruskinian argument that 'progressive' English art was essentially naturalistic, and the belief that this tradition limited the scope of British art in the early twentieth century.⁹ Two decades after Pevsner's book, this critical outlook had not changed significantly. In the introduction to a 1975 history of British painting, David Piper wrote that "any account of Englishness of English art must begin with geography, with the obvious fact that Britain is an island."¹⁰ In the tradition of Ruskin and Pevsner, David Piper gave considerable attention to the impact of the climate in the definition of a national art. These writings stressed the linearity, rather than the painterliness of English art and blamed even the lack of monumentality and the preference for small-scale easel painting on the British weather.

Furthermore, the qualifier 'romantic' was rather inappropriately but irreversibly attached to the concept of traditional English painting. Traditionalists such as William Gaunt saw a prototypical original art of the nation developing in a

⁷ Anthony Hartley, *A State of England* (London: Hutchinson, 1963). This is an insightful examination of the frustration of British intellectuals; it presented the loss of British power in the world as misunderstood by the international community.

⁸ Margaret Garlake, "Between Paris and New York: Critical Constructions of 'Englishness' c. 1945-60," in *Art Criticism Since 1900*, edited by Malcolm Gee (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 187.

⁹ William Vaughan, "The Englishness of British Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 13, no. 2 (1990): 22.

¹⁰ David Piper, *Genius of British Painting* (London: Weidenfeld Nicolson Illustrated, 1975), 25.

direct line from Blake ('linear') to Hogarth and then Gainsborough ('lyrical' and 'spontaneous'), to Constable ('spontaneous' and 'personal'), to Turner, seen as the epitome of English 'romanticism'.¹¹ Both artist-critics Gaunt and Ayrton spoke of an English tradition with adjectives such as 'linear, romantic, poetic, visual, rhythmic'. Along the same lines, the critic Eric Newton wrote of 'linear asceticism' and 'romanticism' as typical of British art, claiming that, "William Blake, who worked within a strict linear convention, was both a romantic and a mystic and it has been frequently demonstrated that both romanticism and mysticism are as congenial to the British temperament as they are uncongenial to the French."¹²

In Patterns of English Painting (1954), Newton regarded Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland as two of the nation's greatest artist working in the Blakeian tradition, in a "strong vein of romantic symbolism", which was seen as "a typically British gesture of revolt against puritanism of form"¹³ – in this case, again, English romantic art was offered as a superior alternative to the classicising tendencies in European avant-garde art. This approach was supported by the writing of the critic Herbert Read who frequently characterised contemporary British art as romantic by nature, since it was northern and expressionistic. He promoted 'romanticism' as a characteristic of national art which worked as a counter weapon against the French cultural invasion of the *École de Paris*. Meanwhile, he stressed that the 'expressionist' qualities visible in some of the emerging British modern art (such as the sculpture of Henry Moore), was an aspect which distanced English art from the French tradition, as seen in the work of artists like Rodin and Maillol.¹⁴

Recent writings on the subject have provided more expansive interpretations of national identity in art, as well as more pluralized notions of 'Englishness'. In 1993, William Vaughan recalled Nikolaus Pevsner's lectures when he noted that 'Englishness' was often considered as a restrictive adjective describing the work of the artists of this country as insular, isolated from the modern world and "doomed by

¹¹ William Gaunt, *British Painting from Hogarth's Day to Ours* (London: Avalon Press & Central Institute of Art and Design, 1945).

¹² Eric Newton, "Patterns of English Painting," *Britain Today* 222 (October 1954): 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Herbert Read, *Contemporary British Art* (London: Penguin Books, 1951), 30.

their very national character to remain in the second rank”¹⁵. Janet Wolff maintained that “we should [...] expect to find the fluidity of political conceptions of national identity matched by equally mobile definitions of the Englishness of art”¹⁶, while Philip Dodd concluded that “the Englishness of English art... is not a ‘given’, does not have a settled and continuous identity, but has been constituted and reconstituted at various historical moments – for very different purposes.”¹⁷

Throughout history, landscape imagery has been a powerful idiom through which communal and national identities have found expression. The role of landscape has been instrumental in a wide cultural realm and inter-disciplinary research on the subject has been a strong feature of cultural criticism in recent decades broadening our conventional use of ‘landscape’ as a concept and category. An important contribution was made by the historical geographer Stephen Daniels who concluded his book *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States* (1993) claiming to have identified “the power of landscape as an idiom for representing national identity”¹⁸. Daniels, for instance, has been concerned less with the aesthetic qualities of pictures but the circumstances that produced them and the public responses they received over time. Recent criticism on the subject has also offered abundant evidence that the ‘Englishness’ of English art resided in the minds of its beholders and the thinkers of the nation.

The geographer Benjamin Reynolds observed that throughout the past century, the connection between the English rural landscape and English national identity has been too readily accepted as a standard. “The public is bombarded with a plethora of odes to ‘olde England’ through song, book, and calendar glorifying this green and pleasant land.”¹⁹ The reality and truth of such a notion is doubtful and the question

¹⁵ William Vaughan, “The British Landscape Tradition”, in exh. cat. *Towards a New Landscape* (London: Bernard Jacobson Gallery, 1993), 85.

¹⁶ Janet Wolff, “The ‘Jewish Mark’ in English Painting: Cultural Identity and Modern Art,” in *English Art, 1860-1914: Modern Artists and Identity*, edited by Lara Perry and David Peters Corbett (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 184.

¹⁷ Robert Colls and Philip Dodd (eds.) *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920* (London: Routledge, 1987).

¹⁸ Stephen Daniels, *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1993); Garlake, “Between Paris and New York”.

¹⁹ Benjamin Reynolds, “Rural Landscape and National Identity in Popular Culture,” Environmental Discourses and Popular Culture Module, MSc Public Understanding of Environmental Change ,

which several theorists have asked is whether the notion of ‘nation’ is equivalent with that of a ‘imagined community’.²⁰ Ann Bermingham referred to this aspect when she wrote that, “Landscape painting’s relation to nationalism has been its imaging of imagined homogeneous communities. In doing so it mutes class and racial diversity while embracing industrial capitalism and imperialism. Supported by assumptions of Enlightenment universalism, nationalism becomes wholly naturalized when reinscribed into landscape imagery.”²¹ Bermingham meant by this that the versatility of landscape often provided a universal safety blanket under which all social differences could be evened out as it was redefined as a national unifier. Daniels and Bermingham referred to the concept of ‘imagined community’, coined by the political historian Benedict Anderson, which originated from the idea that a nation is a community socially constructed and ultimately imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group; the notion of nationalism thus originates from the fact that its members preserve a mental image of their affinity.²² Nations and nationalism are, in fact, inventions and part of a construct, their main interest being the cultural factors in that construct, most particularly those of landscape and territory.²³

A further aspect of this critique has been the emphasis on a conception of nationalism as instable and fluctuating with regard to the time and place it may have been generated, as well as the significance it may take. Ann Bermingham agreed with Daniels that the picturing of the nation is not a monolithic process and that, “There is no centre from which a national vision emerges, nor do images have stable meanings. Cultural icons like the dome of St. Paul’s or John Constable’s Hay-wain [both discussed in Daniels’ book *Fields of Vision*] are the discursive sites of ongoing ideological struggles, and their power stems from their ability to accommodate different visions of nationhood as well as other forms of identity (local, regional,

(London: University College London, 2003).

http://www.powel=pressburger.org/Reviews/44_ACT/ACT-DiscoursesEssay.html.

²⁰ Daniels, *Fields of Vision*.

²¹ Ann Bermingham, review of *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States*, by Stephen Daniels, *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 5 (December 1995): 1520.

²² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991).

²³ Brice, “Building Nations”, 119.

religious, or social).”²⁴ By such examples, Daniels illustrated the way in which landscape imagery overlapped with historical narratives that not only created but also questioned national identity.

As for the temporal dimension in which notions of nationalism may have developed, recent writings have dwelled on modernist or constructivist theories of nationhood, which see nations and nationalism as phenomena that arose subsequent to the French Revolution, linked to aspects of modernity such as capitalism, industrialisation, the birth of the bureaucratic state, urbanisation, secularisation.²⁵ In England, landscape has often been regarded as a manifestation of national identity which has developed from the late nineteenth century onwards from a truism which has been assimilated and naturalized in popular culture. David Lowenthal illustrated this when he wrote that, “the now hallowed visual cliché - the patchwork of meadow and pasture, the hedgerows and copses, the immaculate villages nestling among small tilled fields - is in fact quite recent. [...] only after the pre-Raphaelites, did the recognisably ‘English’ landscape become an idealised medieval vision, all fertile, secure, small-scale, seamed with associations”.²⁶ Going back in history, the cultural historian Fred Inglis argued that this vision of England was instituted by the Romantic movement from 1770 as a reaction to the Industrial revolution and subsequent urbanisation.²⁷ This line of thought argued that the constant changes in the appearance of urban developments have caused the public to find the timeless notions of national identity present in the fields, lakes and moors of the countryside.

Most issues related to national identity, such as geographical affiliation and place, revolved around the time and socio-historical context which generated the need for such formulations. An art of national identity was often linked with the English and specifically southern landscape tradition. Corbett, Holt and Russell showed that by the turn of the nineteenth century, the North was largely viewed as an area spoiled by extensive industrialisation and urbanisation, whereas the South was often depicted as a rural conservation area in which the English past was protected, and with it the

²⁴ Bermingham, review of *Fields of Vision*, 152.

²⁵ Brice, “Building Nations”, 119.

²⁶ David Lowenthal, “British National Identity and The English Landscape,” *Rural Studies* 2, no. 2 (1991): 220.

²⁷ Fred Inglis, “Landscape as Popular Culture,” *Landscape Research* 12, no. 3 (1987): 20-24.

traditional spaces of English identity. Like Inglis, they argued that often English identity was constructed by idealising subject matter that invoked a pre-industrial past. Therefore there was a need to transcend some aspects of harsh contemporary reality and romanticise the past in order to offer an ideal alternative to the present.²⁸

Inglis claimed that such representations of England have become the most widespread because they are the most popular²⁹ and Lowenthal showed that many artistic and literary figures have become symbols of Englishness due to the fundamental association with different parts of this countryside: “Wordsworth graces the Lake District, Constable decorates Suffolk, and Hardy enhances Dorset”.³⁰ In general, cultural theorists have regarded the need for finding a visual manifestation for national identity as an idealising, and often misleading pursuit. The nation justifiably sought to be represented by an image of what it dreamed it was, rather than what it was in reality. In *Visual Methodologies* (2001), the social geographer Gillian Rose claimed that it was doubtful whether any image could be a mirror of reality, as it was impossible to achieve the objectivity required.³¹ Therefore the production of the image can never be simply ingenuous and images are not open windows onto the world but are rather interpretations of it.

William Vaughan approached the subject of national identity with great insight in many of his writings on the subject, pointing out the ambivalence of the notion and its subjective nature. He particularly sought to rationalize the specific wording of the idea of national identity in Britain, in formulations such as ‘Britishness’ and ‘Englishness’³². He noted that these terms were frequently and inappropriately interchanged, as a sometimes unavoidable consequence of imperialist historical habits. He also warned against the dangers of equating landscape with national identity and mainly that of reducing the genre to a exclusive vehicle for patriotic sentiments to manifest themselves visually, thus overlooking the creative potential of British artists:

²⁸ See Corbett, Holt and Russell, *The Geographies of Englishness*.

²⁹ Inglis, “Landscape as Popular Culture”, 20-24.

³⁰ Lowenthal, “British National Identity”, 205.

³¹ Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies* (London: Sage, 2001).

³² See “Looking into England,” report of a conference organised by the British Council and the Centre for British and Comparative Cultural Studies (Coventry: University of Warwick, 12-18 December, 1999).

Painting landscapes is something that artists in this country have been particularly good at over the last two centuries. So much so, in fact, that the practice has come to be talked about as being essentially 'British', or, to be more truthful about the matter, 'English'. It has taken its place alongside other national institutions, such as pubs and parish churches, afternoon tea and Savile Row suits. At first sight, there may seem to be little harm in this. After all, haven't these artists largely been depicting native scenery. And what is wrong with a little pride in a national achievement? At second sight, however, the habit might not seem so innocent. For what might seem to be a little disingenuous boastfulness can easily become a form of restriction. This limitation can affect both the practice of artists and our own perceptions about this country.³³

Vaughan noted that due to its predominant use as depiction of scenery in Britain, and its increasing naturalism, there has been a strong tendency in this country to use landscape painting as an embodiment of Englishness, which ultimately limited the people's understanding of a rich and varied practice, as well as their sensitivity to the diverse functions of the land. He insisted that, "whatever it is that is best about the landscape art produced in this country over the last two centuries, it has to be something more than the celebration of a fictive national identity."³⁴

Pointing to further inconsistencies in the theorisation of landscape painting in Britain, Nicholas Alfrey argued that the English landscape tradition has not been accurately chronicled and that, "In the vacuum left by the absence of any Authorised Version of landscape history, a number of artists and writers have woven the theme into surveys of their own. John Piper, Michael Ayrton, Kenneth Clark, Nikolaus Pevsner and Peter Fuller have all made the attempt. Some recurring preoccupations run through these accounts: the defence of a painting culture with low self-image, frequently overwhelmed by outside influence; the attempt to define Englishness, and to identify native characteristics and strengths."³⁵ All of these issues will be examined here in an attempt to determine the relationship between landscape painting and national identity in wartime, and specifically as carried on into postwar British art.

³³ Vaughan, "British Landscape Tradition", 85.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁵ Nicholas Alfrey, "Undiscovered Country" in exh. cat. *Towards a New Landscape* (London: Bernard Jacobson Gallery, 1993), 17.

Aspects of National Identity in British Art Before and After the War

The roots of postwar debates on national identity and culture can be found in developments which facilitated such interests in wartime Britain, and specifically in England. It has been a common observation that the concepts of 'Englishness' and 'Britishness' "have undergone their most fruitful periods of formulation during years of national decline or emergency".³⁶ This was the case of WWII when nationalism acted as a means of balancing society "by subsuming potentially disruptive elements within a coherent and unified whole."³⁷ Significant studies on the subject of tradition, national identity and culture were undertaken by Robert Colls, Philip Dodd, Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, Rob Brookes in the late 1980s and early 1990s.³⁸

At the end of the Second World War, the British population expected considerable positive changes, yet, instead, Churchill's government proclaimed as the main significant 'positive war aim, the aim of Victory, seeking means by which to distract critics of this unilateral strategy. It was in this context that the need arose for reinforcing social unity through tradition and national identity. Brian Foss wrote that, "the Government took a logical and pronounced interest in bolstering morale and a sense of national solidarity by evoking and elaborating national ideals and characteristics. Many of these were remarkably anachronistic or disingenuous (the characterisation of rural Britain as the repository of the most essential of the country's values, for example), but all were described as being traditionally, specifically and broadly British."³⁹

The myth of national identity was promoted as a counter-weapon to Fascism, with a special concern to avoid the narrow-minded anti-intellectualism of the National Socialist society. As defining positive features of Britishness were "independence of mind, the attachment of importance to the individual, the championing of diversity"⁴⁰,

³⁶ Brian Foss, "Message and Medium: Government Patronage, National Identity and National Culture in Britain, 1939-45," *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 2 (1991): 52.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Colls and Dodd (eds.), *Englishness: Politics and Culture*; Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.): *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Rod Brookes, " 'Everything in the Garden is Lovely': The Representation of National Identity in Sidney Strube's Daily Express Cartoons in the 1930s," *Oxford Art Journal* 13, no. 2 (1990): 31-43.

³⁹ Foss, "Message and Medium", 52.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

and the promotion of a free culture even in times of national crisis. Herbert Read supported in many ways the idea that artists, more than any other members of society could use their art as a mobile of internationalism in order to transform society; he thus encouraged the positive anarchic role of art, which he considered “the definition of [a nation’s] civilisation – of its conception of the purpose of life and the meaning of existence.”⁴¹ The juxtaposition of freedom of artistic expression in Britain and state control of artistic expression in Germany was paralleled by each country’s definition of what might be called its unique visual tradition.⁴²

Kenneth Clark, the chairman of the War Artists’ Advisory Committee (WAAC) was opposed to the promotion of British art as propaganda, which set it in contrast with the state of culture in Nazi Germany. Clark considered the centralised control of the arts as detrimental to an artist’s creative development, because it “tended to coarsen his style and degrade his vision”⁴³; instead, he encouraged aesthetic qualities and historical tradition in art. Clark’s seemingly unofficial status and apolitical stance helped educate the British public about the idea of a unified national culture, which he wished to make accessible to the masses. Foss wrote that “The extraordinary conditions of wartime witnessed a number of developments that were important in Clark’s views on the education of public taste: a growing interest in the arts; a population deprived of many of its peacetime activities; an unusually close identification between artists and the rest of society; and the development of an opportunity for the Government to act as an art patron on a large scale.”⁴⁴ Clark emphasized the importance of an independent government patronage of the arts, apolitical and capable of artistic discernment⁴⁵, however in exercising almost total control over the arts in the late war years, his approach “embodied the patronising and elitist presumptions of a class-based liberal Toryism”.⁴⁶ His concept of ‘natural taste’ clashed with the idea of having to teach this to the masses, and therefore was in many ways precisely what it attempted to avoid: one-sided and dogmatic.

⁴¹ Herbert Read, “Is British Art Fighting?” *Art & Industry* 232 (May 1942): 124.

⁴² Foss, “Message and Medium”, 52.

⁴³ Kenneth Clark, “The Artist in Wartime,” *Listener* 22, no. 563 (26 October 1939): 810.

⁴⁴ Foss, “Message and Medium”, 56.

⁴⁵ See E. Lutyens, J. Rothenstein et al. “Should There Be A Ministry of Fine Arts?” *Studio* 125 (February 1943): 51, 59; J. Hawkes to Mrs. Hamilton (Ministry of Reconstruction), 10 November 1941 (Cabinet Papers (in PRO) 124/425); H. Furst, “On Creative Patronage and Its Control,” *Apollo* 39 (1944): 147-8; K. Clark, *The Other Half, A Self-Portrait* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 136-7.

⁴⁶ Foss, “Message and Medium”, 56.

The WAAC emphasized the diversity of art included in its collections, featuring work by Surrealists, Royal Academicians, portraitists, mannerists and social portraitists, illustrators and neo-Romantics, such as Graham Sutherland, John Piper and Henry Moore, thus aiming for a 'cross-section of modern English painting'.⁴⁷ However, Clark excluded "those pure painters [e.g. Smith, Hodgkins, Walker, Hitchens, Nicholson, Pasmore] who are interested solely in putting down their feelings about shapes and colours and not in facts, drama, human emotions and life generally".⁴⁸ Foss noted that the excluded modernists, such as Nicholson, Hepworth or Gabo, far from being mere escapists as they had been accused, actually "viewed Modernist artists as central agents of social change leading towards total liberation."⁴⁹ In this sense, Nicholson was notably ironic towards British claims that war was fought for liberation and freedom when he maintained in 1941 that he had "not yet seen it pointed out that [...the] liberation of form and colour is closely linked with all other liberations one hears about."⁵⁰ In many ways, this stance could be compared with that adopted by the United States and also with the postwar debates about Art's role in reconstructing Europe.

In support of the so-called 'ultra-Modernists', the critics Herbert Read and Maurice Collis expressed their regret about the exclusion of said artists from Clark's collection of significant wartime art.⁵¹ On the other hand, critics such as Eric Newton justified the exclusion of the 'ultra-Modernists' by the WAAC on the grounds that they did not fulfil their criteria of what an art of national character should be. The latter claimed that British art was different from that of other European countries through its literary character⁵² and the art of the 'ultra-Modernists' could not be considered as such. In this sense, it seemed natural that contemporary writers such as the artist-journalist Graham Bell would attribute the rebirth of British art in the inter-war years to the fact that the country had become "an *island fortress* in which artists had perforce been thrown back upon British traditions."⁵³

⁴⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁸ Kenneth Clark, "War Artists at the National Gallery," *Studio* 123 (January 1942): 2-3.

⁴⁹ Foss, "Message and Medium", 58.

⁵⁰ Ben Nicholson, "Notes on Abstract Art," *Horizon* 4 (October 1941): 272.

⁵¹ See H. Read, "War and Art," *Spectator* (9 February 1940): 17 and M. Collis, "Art," *Observer* (21 October 1954): 2.

⁵² Eric Newton, "Paul Nash," *Weekend Review* (19 October, 1951): 138.

⁵³ G. Bell, "Art in the 'Island Fortress. A Review of Contemporary British Painting,'" *Studio* 120 (October 1941): 98-109.

The WAAC, “in so far as it was concerned with using art to build a myth of national identity, was thus able to ignore, with almost total impunity, the most avant-garde art being made in Britain.”⁵⁴ Charles Harrison confirmed that the reason for this was that during the 1930s, Clark and Newton’s ‘Centre Party’ of English art and criticism did not accept the art of the ‘ultra-Modernists’ as illustrative of British native values.⁵⁵ Another interest of patrons of British art was to promote its aesthetic quality, which would differentiate it from the art of Nazi Germany. In this sense, amongst the established artists whose work the WAAC purchased for considerable amounts was Paul Nash, Stanley Spencer, Wyndham Lewis and Laura Knight.⁵⁶ Although democratic and tolerant in its aspirations, the WAAC was often elitist and aimed at a small segment of the educated population receptive to its art during the war. Its approach was ‘pro-British’, as opposed to the British Council’s ‘anti-foreign’ cultural propaganda, Foss observed.

New developments in British society following the 1940 bombing cut short the WAAC’s attempts to institute a monopoly of taste on the masses. Far from causing “the expected results (the widespread collapse of morale and the onset of an epidemic of insanity)”, which could have been used to the WAAC’s benefit of aesthetic control, the bombing “actually fortified civilian resolve.”⁵⁷ The public, now including the middle classes as well, discovered a new interest in ‘high-brow culture’⁵⁸, and earlier leisure patterns of the 1930s when entertainment was more localised and class-based, were replaced by a booming of the range of leisure interests and the entertainment industry. As a result of the increasing demographic of the WAAC’s audience, after 1942, its literature and exhibitions were made more accessible to a wider public. Newspaper articles of the time commented on the fact that even during the Blitz, the National Gallery exhibition was ‘very successful’.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Foss, “Message and Medium”, 59.

⁵⁵ See Kenneth Clark’s preface in Roger Fry, *Last Lectures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), 6; Charles Harrison, “Critical Theories and the Practice of Art,” in *British Art in the 20th Century: The Modern Movement*, edited by Susan Compton (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1987).

⁵⁶ Foss, “Message and Medium”, 59.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ See John Rothenstein, *The Tate Gallery* (New York: Abrams, 1963), 42; Eric Newton, “Art for Everybody,” *Britain Advances* 7 (1943):12-13.

⁵⁹ See H. Swaffer, “War Through Frank Eyes,” *Daily Herald* (5 February 1942): 2.

The significant shift in perception in British cultural and artistic life in the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s was noted by John Piper who wrote that this change in England was precipitated by the war⁶⁰. With the advancement of neo-Romanticism and zealous evaluations of national identity by its exponents Michael Ayrton and John Piper⁶¹, there was a strong need in the British visual arts, seemingly de-politicised during the war, to elaborate effective formulas of national self. In a recent reappraisal of the concept of 'Englishness', William Vaughan wrote that,

The varied appeals to 'English Character' and 'Englishness' in different periods have of course their location in the specific circumstances of those times. Yet they do as well build upon previous definitions and seek to align themselves with their values. Recently, in the visual arts, there has been much talk of an 'English Romantic' tradition – particularly in the field of landscape painting. It has as a dual focus the 'Romantic' painting of the early nineteenth century and the Neo-Romantics of the 1930s and 1940s. Both of these periods are ones in which Englishness was being actively defined.⁶²

In wartime Britain, painting was the medium which could best fulfil national aspirations of this kind. Kenneth Clark, Eric Newton, Herbert Read and Jan Gordon all openly promoted painting against other practices such as photography, reserving "their most sustained praise for those WAAC works in which the artists' interpretative freedom and/or technical and pictorial expertise could be admired."⁶³ Great importance was given to the artist's personal reading of a subject, to creativity and originality, as opposed to the concern for a single narrative, as found in propagandistic art. In this sense, especially The Neo-Romantic artists were praised for their "allegedly traditional British emphasis upon the quality of visionary or poetic intensity - a quality that was attributed, by Clark and others, to a pantheon of luminaries including Shakespeare, Blake, Gilray and Cruickshank."⁶⁴

⁶⁰ *A Paradise Lost: the Neo-Romantic Imagination in Britain 1935-55*. Edited by John Piper. (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1987).

⁶¹ See Michael Ayrton's art criticism for *The Spectator* during 1946–1948 and John Piper, *British Romantic Artists* (London: W. Collins, 1942).

⁶² Vaughan, "Englishness of British Art", 11-23.

⁶³ Foss, "Message and Medium", 65. See also Read, "Art and War", 174-5, and Newton, "Art for Everybody", 15.

⁶⁴ Foss, "Message and Medium", 65; Kenneth Clark, "War Artists at the National Gallery," *Studio* 123 (January 1942): 2-9.



1. Paul Nash, *Battle of Germany*, 1944
2. Graham Sutherland, *Devastation, 1941: An East End Street*, 1941

Peter Fuller has written of the British artists' loss of contact with the international avant-garde during this time and a renewed focus on England's past. "Expressions of modernity now became filtered through and inflected by a deepening sense of a hidden continuity with the great British Romantic artists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century."⁶⁵ This view was introduced by Kenneth Clark's *Landscape into Art* published in 1949, based on a lecture series he had given as a Slade professor at Oxford between 1945-6. This first comprehensive modern review of European landscape painting written in the Ruskinian tradition, showed that in Europe, landscape painting was the "chief artistic creation of the nineteenth century."⁶⁶ Clark claimed that this glorious creative age generated the perception that "the appreciation of natural beauty and the painting of landscape is a normal and enduring part of our spiritual activity [...] It is the genius of Constable which first discovered and still justifies the art of unquestioning naturalism."⁶⁷ In European art, he argued, landscape was transformed into an idea through four fundamental approaches: the acceptance of descriptive symbols, the curiosity about the facts of nature, the creation of fantasy to alleviate primordial fears of nature and the belief in a Golden Age of harmony and order, which could be retrieved through painting the landscape.⁶⁸

In wartime painting the need for national reassurance was such that landscape was readopted as a favoured genre, assigned with the redemptive function of reclaiming the lost past. The land, a physical and universal expression of the national

⁶⁵ Peter Fuller, review of *The Neo-Romantics*. Barbican Art Gallery. *The Burlington Magazine* 129, no. 1012 (July 1987): 472.

⁶⁶ Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art* (London: John Murray, 1979).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

self, spoilt by the technologism of war, was seen as a metaphor for endurance, connecting the celebrated past of the nation with the present. In *A Paradise Lost: The Neo-Romantic Imagination in Britain, 1935-55*, David Mellor considered as a key concern of the movement the idea of the figure in the landscape - and, by extension, the spiritual relationship between man and the environment he inhabited.⁶⁹ "Nature was no longer a hortus conclusus, or a paradisaal garden made by God, for man; rather the Neo-Romantics perceived it as a giant memento mori. But most of the painters, at least, were interested in the pursuit of some kind of image of regeneration, or reintegration."⁷⁰ Central to the Neo-Romantic imagination was the desire to record the land itself, to excavate its history. Fuller wrote that, "Piper's ruins reminded the viewer us of Ruskin's observation, prompted by Turner, that the English tradition of landscape painting was nothing other than a healthy effort to fill the void which the destruction of gothic architecture had left."⁷¹

Fuller noted that the war emerged "not so much as a theatre of action, than as a metaphor, or symbol, of an injured landscape which has a significance that reaches beyond the simple chronicling of hostilities"⁷², thus re-claiming the neutrality of art and its allegorical function. He claimed that this period produced some of the best painting in the history of the country which belonged to "a long tradition of 'Higher Landscape', or landscape as means not just of depiction, but for conveying moral and spiritual truths"⁷³, thus transcending its descriptive role through the power of that prolific English artistic tool: imagination. This view had been supported by Read who in his writings had stressed the centrality of landscape in British 'high' art.⁷⁴ In this sense, Fuller wrote, that "War filled many artists and writers with a sense of longing for what might be lost; a fear of desolation was accompanied by a yearning for pastoral redemption."⁷⁵ Inevitably, war brought with it a resurgence of a feeling of

⁶⁹ David Mellor, *A Paradise Lost: The Neo-Romantic Imagination in Britain, 1935-55* (London: Lund Humphries, 1987).

⁷⁰ Fuller, review of *The Neo-Romantics*, 473.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Peter Fuller, "The Visual Arts," in Boris Ford (ed.): *The Cambridge Cultural History of Britain* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1992), 100-101.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Garlake, "Between Paris and New York", 186.

⁷⁵ In *Modern Painters*, Fuller wrote, "In great art, wherever there is depredation or despair, there is also bound to be redemption: 'Lowry found in the imagery of industrial decline, a secular equivalent for the religious idea of the Fall, and, through his painting techniques, reinstated hints of paradise into this dismal reality. (99)

national identity, and of a national heritage - at once topographical and cultural, physical and spiritual. With the onset of hostilities, many of the leading lights of the international avant-garde departed from this country; ironically, war played its part in re-uniting artists with the sentiments of a wider public.”⁷⁶ ‘Neo-Romanticism’⁷⁷ became the voice of these ‘re-united artists’ that Fuller spoke of, it gave expression to a multitude of ideas: on the one hand, it was a continuation of the Romantic tradition, on the other it could express noble patriotic sentiments.

At the level of national culture, preserving a sense of unity was essential during this period and the forging of strong bonds between London and the provinces was a major concern. The proliferation of touring exhibitions of war art had an essential role to play in the development of these ties.⁷⁸ Therefore in addition to its activities in London, the WAAC started organising nationally travelling exhibitions aimed at its ever-expanding audience. Largely neglected during the 1930s, the provinces welcomed these new endeavours, regarding them as a proof that the Government was taking interest in promoting equality of opportunity throughout the country. Government interest shown in the promotion of culture in the provinces was instrumental in strengthening the connections between isolated local communities and the capital, a reflection of the much thought-after nationally unified identity. The activities of the WAAC also extended internationally. In the catalogue essay to the 1941 exhibition *Britain at War*, the first collection of WAAC war art to travel abroad and to be shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Herbert Read provided an explanation for the lack of battle pictures in the collection and, implicitly, a definition of what he saw as typical characteristics of ‘English art’:

It must [. . .] be remembered though the English are energetic in action, they are restrained in expression. Our typical poetry is lyrical, not epical or even tragic. Our typical music is the madrigal and the song, not the opera and the symphony. Our typical painting is the landscape. In all these respects war cannot change us, and we are fighting this war precisely because in these respects we refuse to be changed.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Fuller, review of *The Neo-Romantics*, 472.

⁷⁷ The term ‘Neo-Romanticism’ was coined by Raymond Mortimer in the *New Statesman and Nation* in March 1942.

⁷⁸ Foss, “Message and Medium”, 65.

⁷⁹ Herbert Read, “The War as Seen by British Artists,” in *Britain at War*, edited by Monroe Wheeler (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1941), 12.

Read's intention was to remind the Americans "that even in a barbarous conflict the British remained high-minded."⁸⁰ It was important to show the world that British national culture was an indestructible autonomous force fuelled by traditional values and forms of expression, which, although seemingly unheroic and understated, were nevertheless deeply ingrained and unmovable even at times of crisis.

Building on the Ruskinian belief that 'war is the foundation of all the arts', Read and later Fuller considered the war years amongst the most productive periods in British art. Later Fuller reacted against the criticism of the 1980s which disregarded the importance of the 1940s and the 1950s⁸¹ in favour of an increased interest in the 1960s characterised by a booming of American-influenced art. In support of wartime art, he wrote that:

As the clouds of war gathered, 'progressive' artists increasingly found themselves severed from any public, and ranged in narrow, entrenched and tendentious positions. Paradoxically, the war had an invigorating, and restorative, effect on artistic activity. The late 1940s were a period of exceptional cultural optimism.⁸²

Similarly positive was the *Spectator's* critic M. H. Middleton who wrote in a review of the postwar exhibition *Art in 1946 and After*, that although Britain might be free of "the political commitments of a great world power", she had earned herself "a position of leadership we have never previously known as the artistic centre of the world".⁸³ Once the war had ended, however, the traditionalists could not maintain this tone of confidence for much longer. Now that the threat of Fascism no longer unsettled British culture, the newly-found independence allowed for the opening of unwanted channels of communication with the continent.

Fuller had to acknowledge that "the importance of the anti-vanguardist opposition to the emerging new consensus in the art institutions is highlighted by the

⁸⁰ Foss, "Message and Medium", 67.

⁸¹ Julian Spalding entitled an exhibition of the Kitchen Sink painters, *The Forgotten Fifties* (touring from Sheffield, to Norwich, Coventry, and Camden, Spring 1984).

⁸² Fuller, "The Visual Arts", 99.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

fact that, by 1948, the fires of neo-romanticism were largely extinguished. The leading protagonists - Moore, Piper, and Sutherland - could no longer, even loosely, be considered a group; each was now a major individual talent," and the critic dramatically declared that, "British art was to become progressively prised apart from its roots in natural form and common tradition; indeed it began to slip and slide into a period of decadence."⁸⁴ The distancing of art from a set traditional form mainly through the adoption of alien forms of expression was seen by Fuller as the beginning of its decline in quality. For example, he spoke of the 'conversion' of 'progressive' artists such as Victor Pasmore from realism to abstraction in the late 1940s, and deplored the gradual loss of interest the visual and literary quality of neo-Romanticism and its interest for organic form, perhaps with the only exception of the early work of some St Ives artists such as Bryan Wynter, whose imagery still bore visible traces of the influence of Colquhoun, MacBryde and Minton. Although after the war had ended, the Arts Council of Great Britain and the British Council promoted neo-romantic artists at home and abroad, hopes of leading the European avant-garde were gradually eroded by international influences.

Julian Stallabrass pointed out that Fuller had to answer the problematic question of why, in spite of natural predilections and strong traditions, the nation "gullibly let an authentic culture slip away in favour of aesthetic nullity."⁸⁵ Most plausible of all reasons was the overwhelming effect of the European avant-garde on British art after the war before the appearance of American art in the mid-1950s. In the immediate postwar period the modernism instituted by the *École de Paris* was seen as the main threat to an original national art and until the early 1950s most British schools taught their students according to French models.

In 1947 the art historian Reginald Brill recognized the lack of a solid modern movement in Britain since Constable and Turner, quoting a contemporary commentator who claimed that "modern British painting found a discreet middle course between the extreme application of the science of the French art schools and

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁸⁵ See Julian Stallabrass, "Success and Failure of Peter Fuller," *New Left Review* 207 (September-October 1994): 92; Peter Fuller, *Modern Painters. Reflections on British Art*, edited by John McDonald (London: Methuen, 1993), 59; Peter Fuller, *Images of God: the Consolations of Lost Illusion* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985), 59.

the comparative incapability in technical matters which had so long existed in the British Isles.”⁸⁶ Fearing the loss of the advantages its isolationist status brought to British art during the war, supporters of the Neo-Romantics such as Michael Ayrton, John Piper and Robin Ironside tried to prevent French modernism, which they had gladly seen segregated from national art during the war years, from permeating it in the postwar period. In his essay ‘Painting Since 1939’, (1945), Ironside believed this could be achieved by promoting the tendency of ‘lyricism’ in British art to counter “the formal disciplines of Parisian influence” claiming that “there is no likelihood of a reaction towards abstraction”⁸⁷ in British postwar painting. He claimed that the wartime work of even ‘purist’ abstractionists, like Ben Nicholson, and Barbara Hepworth, was deeply affected by the revival of romantic sensibilities. This forced obliviousness to foreign influences and the need to read qualities specific of a national traditional form of expression even into the work of radical British avant-garde artists was a last worried attempt to salvage an increasingly outdated view of what ‘British art’ should be.

The London exhibitions of the great French modernists of which the most important was that of Picasso and Matisse – organised by the British Council in 1945 at the Victoria and Albert Museum – were vehemently criticised⁸⁸ by traditionalists like Ayrton. The latter believed that during the war British artists had finally become “conscious of their own native tradition and had been brought far more directly into contact with the hills, rivers, rocks and trees of England because they have not been able to trot off to the south of France.”⁸⁹ On a political level, the right also saw the re-introduction of continental models like Picasso into the national culture as ‘retrograde’, and ‘disastrous’, going as far as comparing it with Hitler’s view of ‘degenerate art’.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Reginald Brill, *Modern Painting and Its Roots in European Tradition* (London: Avalon, 1947), 23, in Garlake, “Between Paris and New York”, 182.

⁸⁷ *Painting Since 1939*, edited by Robin Ironside (London: British Council, 1947), 21, in Garlake, “Between Paris and New York”, 186.

⁸⁸ See Chapter Four.

⁸⁹ Michael Ayrton, “Young Painters of Today,” *The Listener*, 12 July 1945, in Garlake, “Between Paris and New York”, 187.

⁹⁰ “Art,” *The Spectator*, 14 December 1946, in Garlake, “Between Paris and New York”, 187.

In a series of articles entitled 'The Heritage of British Painting' (1946)⁹¹, Ayrton deplored the inability of British artists to affirm themselves, hence their lack of visibility on the international scene; he was cautiously tentative as far as international exchanges were concerned, but not willing to sacrifice what he considered as a newly cemented national character. Moreover, Ayrton claimed that the uncertain contemporary status of British culture was due to its having adopted French models in the past. The critic was nevertheless mostly alone in his idealist quest, as his colleagues "fled to the four corners of Europe as soon as it became possible to do so".⁹² Paradoxically, Ayrton himself shared a studio in Paris between 1938-39 with John Minton, but travelled less abroad after the war, with the exception of Greece, where he was drawn due to his fascination with mythology. His other colleagues, on the other hand travelled extensively after 1945. Examples are Minton, as well as Sutherland who visited the South of France, where he met Picasso and Matisse, and Keith Vaughan who frequently visited the Mediterranean. Garlake claimed that Ayrton's reluctant position in relation to the French artworld was mirrored on a much larger political scale in the relations of Britain and the United States, through a similar feeling of resented dependency.⁹³ Just as it was impossible for the British to deny the need for transatlantic support in the postwar period, artists found that it was difficult, if not impossible to reject the continuous contribution of the French modernism to contemporary British art.

Institutional Support of Postwar Art

In the postwar period, government interest in the promotion of culture increased. All across the country, several welcome events contributed to the resurrection of British art. In 1951, the Festival of Britain brought artistic patronage to a huge and receptive audience and provided the means for artists to work on a scale not hitherto possible. This was one of the most spectacular ways to redress the image of British culture and refocus on the idea of an independent, powerful national art.⁹⁴ Garlake noted that, as historically, English painting and sculpture did not display any

⁹¹ Michael Ayrton, "The Heritage of British Painting, 11. Inferiority complex," *The Studio* (September 1946): 642.

⁹² Garlake, "Between Paris and New York", 187.

⁹³ *Ibid.* See also Chapter Five.

⁹⁴ See Joseph Monteyne, "Which Way Is Up? Autumn Landscape and the Crisis over Abstraction in Postwar Britain," *Collapse 1 Vancouver* (October 1995): 65.

monumentalist tendencies, the issue of national identity had been to this point solely a textual debate, mainly the object of writers.⁹⁵ The Festival of Britain and the South Bank exhibition of 1951 were the first of such endeavours which would literally elevate national art to a monumental level, their organisers striving to re-define the new art of the nation emerging victorious from the major historical and cultural crisis of the war.⁹⁶ Planned in 1947, during the austerity years of the Atlee Labour government, the Festival promised to provide a cultural event based on the same egalitarian principles as Labour's extensive programme of social and economic reform.⁹⁷

The organisers intended the Festival as a nationwide celebration of Britain's history, achievements and culture, an event for everyone which would help alleviate the trauma of war and boost postwar confidence⁹⁸ - Gerald Barry, the Festival Director, claimed that the organisers wanted it to be a 'tonic to the nation'. Lord Ismay, on the other hand, maintained in *The Daily Mail Festival Guide* that, "the Exhibitions, the Arts Festivals, and all the other activities of the Festival are designed and organised to show the achievements in all fields of activity of the United Kingdom solely. We are not holding an international festival - or even a Commonwealth festival. The Festival of Britain is British in the purest sense of the word."⁹⁹ The latter thus reiterated the postwar need to find a visual, material manifestation for national identity and unity by the proud display of home-grown achievements.

The *Festival of Britain* highlighted the importance of the newly formed national bodies of the Arts Council and the Council for Industrial Design. The Arts Council, set up in June 1945, marked a substantial increase in activity in all areas of the arts, from national opera and ballet companies to orchestras, theatre festivals, arts societies and art centres greatly neglected during the war. With the Arts Council, the

⁹⁵ Garlake, "Between Paris and New York", 181.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ *Symbols for '51, the Royal Festival Hall, Skylon and Sculptures for the Festival of Britain*, edited by Robert Burstow (London: Royal Festival Hall, 2 March - 21 April 1996), 5.

⁹⁸ Gillian Whiteley, "Art for Social Spaces : Public Sculpture and Urban Regeneration in Postwar Britain," AHDS Visual Arts Learning and Teaching Projects (Epsom: The Surrey Institute of Art & Design) <http://www.vads.ahds.ac.uk/learning/designingbritain/html/ass.html>.

⁹⁹ See also Baron Hastings Lionel Ismay, *The Memoirs of General Lord Ismay* (London: Heinemann, 1960).

principle of public subsidy for the arts developed for the first time, its first chairman, the economist John Maynard Keynes, announcing his aim of making high culture “a living element in everyone’s upbringing.”¹⁰⁰ One of its initiatives directed by W. E. Williams sought to establish local arts centres throughout the nation, not simply to host visiting productions but also to house local arts and leisure activities.¹⁰¹ The visual arts were now provided with greater expertise than previously and exhibitions of high standard were toured from London to the provinces. Both the British Council and the Arts Council were backed up by committees of independent and well informed individuals who collectively shaped policy. A number of those who had supported the exhibiting groups of the 1930s played a prominent part in this new patronage, such as Herbert Read, Roland Penrose, William Coldstream and Adrian Stokes.¹⁰²

For the Festival, the Arts Council contributed with the exhibition *60 Paintings for '51* with commissioned work by 60 artists, who were given large (at least 60 x 45in) canvases. Several artists associated with St Ives, amongst whom Heron, Nicholson, Lanyon and Wynter, excelled within this select group. Lanyon’s contribution, the vertical construction *Porthleven*, showed a greatly stylised vision of the fishing port viewed from multiple perspectives. The artist interpreted the image as alluding to an archetypal local couple, a fisherman and his wife, their figures melting into the elements of the ancient landscape. The choice of such work appropriately marked the union of modernist innovation in British art with long-standing regional cultural values. Having taken up painting more seriously upon his return to Britain after fighting with the RAF in the war, Lanyon’s perspective was especially relevant for the postwar climate. Andrew Causey wrote that, “coming home was a return from a kind of exile, and there was a sense that the England being fought for was specifically the English countryside. The Festival of Britain in 1951 reflected a neat balance between the modernity of the Skylon and Dome of Discovery and the ‘land’ theme, with stress laid on the historical growth of the country and its archaeology.”¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain: 1945-51* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 176.

¹⁰¹ Richard Weight, Abigail Beach, *The Right to Belong: Citizenship and National Identity in Britain, 1930-1960* (London: I B Tauris & Co., 1983).

¹⁰² Tom Cross, *Painting the Warmth of the Sun. St Ives Artists 1939-1975* (Penzance: Alison Hodge, 1984), 90.

¹⁰³ Andrew Causey, *Peter Lanyon: Modernism and the Land* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 38.

The British Council had an equally increasing role in influencing and disseminating national art. While the Arts Council promoted the formation of local art communities, the British Council began to organise important exhibitions of Matisse, Picasso, Braque and Rouault in London and took British art abroad. It was especially successful in spreading knowledge of the St Ives artists by encouraging critics and foreign dealers, notably from the United States, to visit the region.¹⁰⁴ It almost exclusively helped disseminate the art of Nicholson and later of Frost, Heron, Hilton and Lanyon abroad, with the exception of exhibitions organised by a few American commercial galleries with which these artists became affiliated with.

Although distant from the capital, at this time of expansion, St Ives became a model for cultural development and a model of participation between artists. The Penwith Society was singled out as a group making a notable contribution not only to the town, but to the neighbourhood and the Arts Council hoped “that what St Ives has achieved, largely through the drive and personality of a few dynamic members may be repeated elsewhere.”¹⁰⁵ The enterprise of the Penwith was unrivalled for such a small and remote community and was consequently rewarded with a grant by the Arts Council. This was largely prompted by a desire to encourage a regional initiative by professional artists, being aware of their predominant support of London art. Its ‘few dynamic members’ were mainly artists engaged with developing forms of landscape painting which fused the modernist vocabulary with the local ‘dialect’ unique to West Penwith. While inadvertently fitting into the Arts Council’s plan of encouraging and preserving regional cultural values, their art became especially instrumental in finding British art an esteemed position within international modernism.

¹⁰⁴ Margaret Garlake, reviews of *St Ives 1939-64. Twenty-Five Years of Painting Sculpture and Pottery* by David Lewis and David Brown; *Painting the Warmth of the Sun. St Ives Artists 1939-75* by Tom Cross, *Oxford Art Journal* 9, no. 1. (1986): 81.

¹⁰⁵ Annual report of the Arts Council of Britain, 1954-5, in Cross, *St Ives Artists*, 100.

Chapter Two

International Modernism and Regional Culture. St Ives

This chapter links the nationalist debate with further aspects of regionalism in postwar landscape painting, as well as the process by which international modernism was assimilated by a regional avant-garde community of artists such as the St Ives Group. Its first section provides a theoretical conclusion to the previous chapter: it records the position of some important critics of the postwar period on issues of nationalism and internationalism in the art of the time. It looks at ways in which, on the one hand, traditionalist critics such as Ayrton and Fuller constantly re-evaluated the artists' work in the frame of a (re)invented national tradition. On the other, progressive critical voices such as Heron and Alloway were eager to see British art as belonging both to a European modernist lineage and to a contemporary international avant-garde. Meanwhile, others such as Read and Berger promoted individualism and social responsibility in art. Their views helped rationalise the relevance of national tradition against new international influences, as well as redefine established notions of originality following the proliferation of unprecedented forms of artistic expression.

Critical Perspectives

Against ideas of nationalism, a great deal of critical writing on a global scale in the late 1930s and 1940s promoted international modernism. The early writing of Karl Mannheim (i.e. *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction*, 1935), Clement Greenberg (i.e. 'Avant-garde and Kitsch', 1939) and T. S. Eliot all essentially agreed on the idea that only an international type of modernism could be seen as progressive. In *Towards a Definition of Culture* (1948), Eliot claimed that a healthy organic national culture would have to develop in a close relationship with the land and whilst broken down into local cultures, within the latter there should be a clear expression of a universal, international culture. If the English were simply to try to impose Britishness on the Welsh, the Scots and the Irish it would result in a nation of 'featureless Britons'.¹ He believed that the notions of Englishness and Britishness

¹ See Richard Weight, " 'Featureless Britons': Regionalism and Englishness during and since the Second World War," paper presented at the conference *Looking into England*, organised by the British

were tightly linked, and Britishness was merely a concept upheld by Britain's institutions of power. Also, in order to develop a stronger, more cohesive culture, English culture had to incorporate those of other countries. Basic to both Mannheim and Greenberg was the belief that an international standard of high art, as represented by modernism, guarded against regression because, although originating in France, it was not nationalistic but the possession of any country that would adopt it – as Britain had done when modernism was banned in Germany.²

By 1947, there was a great rift between the artists who were keen to join the ranks of international modernism, and those of whom very few actually supported or explained this kind of art to their audiences.³ Postwar writers seemed compelled to assess the art of their contemporaries against these two inevitable parameters: on the one hand, conservative critics such as Michael Ayrton constantly re-evaluated the artists' work in the frame of a re-invented national tradition. National identity became a vital tool in defining language and imagery as these were seen as original and unique to English art and the new direction it was taking. On the other hand, new critical voices were eager to see British art integrated into an international contemporary avant-garde. Meanwhile, the criticism of the socialist critic John Berger did not show much interest in ideas of a corporate national identity, instead favouring individualism in art, relying less on theory and generally being non-prescriptive. Consequently, when the views of Patrick Heron and Lawrence Alloway were aired, they became decisive in the future shaping of art practice.

Although generally faithful to their core beliefs throughout their career, many British critics admittedly switched allegiances in supporting new and foreign influences. In this sense, it is useful to contextualise the research of the following chapters by exploring some of their positions.

Herbert Read was in many ways an example of a critic who was known for his split interests, on the one hand, in the romantic native tradition, on the other, in the

Council and the Centre for British and Comparative Cultural Studies (Coventry: University of Warwick, 12-18 December, 1999).

² See Andrew Causey, *Peter Lanyon: Modernism and the Land* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 39.

³ Margaret Garlake, *New Art, New World: British Art in Postwar Society* (London: Yale University Press, 1998), 76.

latter's integration into international modernism. He had been initially the archetypal supporter of modernism and a promoter of the new. A co-founder of the Institute of Contemporary Art, and a prospective director of the planned Museum Of Modern Art, Read "fulfilled the role of an art functionary on a global scale, active in the running of UNESCO and biennale committees; his books translated into many languages and he was a key player in the internationalization of modern art, the effects of which were one of Fuller's bêtes noires".⁴ His writing reflected this duality in critical loyalty which focused equally on promoting nationalism and internationalism. Whilst he could produce an article entitled 'Why the English have no taste' (1935) for a French audience⁵, he could also admit in a piece such as 'The Grass Roots of Art' (1946) that he was "afraid of the internationalizing tendencies of our age" and their effect on English creativity. He encouraged "all that makes for diversity, variety, the reciprocity of individual units", a sign that he was fearful of the kind of standardization British art could be subjected to by being incorporated into a universal, international form of art.⁶

Michael Ayrton's loyalties were more clearly defined. Although he considered as valid models the pre-Cubist work of Picasso and that of the French neo-Romantics, he remained throughout a defender of a nostalgic form of national art. He was the self-proclaimed spokesman for an insecure generation of artists, with no real formative background and fearful of cultural deprivation and devaluation of their art through an imminent integration into international culture.⁷ Julian Stallabrass has argued that nature, the means by which Ayrton, and later Fuller attempted to give a physical embodiment to British tradition, was in fact an insufficient basis for an oppositional aesthetic to foreign influences, partly because modernism had its own well-developed claims to it, and partly because it could not be used to differentiate between nations. National tradition, on the other hand, could be used to defend British art against internationalising modernism, "especially in England where a case could

⁴ David Cohen, "Seeing Moore: The Case of Two Critics, Herbert Read and Peter Fuller," essay in *AICARC*, the former annual publication of the International Association of Art Critics, London, 1991.

See also David Cohen, "Herbert Read and Psychoanalysis," in Malcolm Gee (ed.) *Art Criticism Since 1890: Authors, Texts, Contexts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

⁵ Herbert Read, "Why the English Have No Taste," *Minotaure* 7 (1935).

⁶ Cohen, "Seeing Moore".

⁷ Peter Fuller, article in *The Burlington Magazine* 128, no. 1003, Special Issue Devoted to British Art from 1500 to the Present Day (October 1986): 756.

reasonably be made that it was part of the English character to resist modernism in favour of a Romantic engagement with nature.”⁸ In this sense, the work of particular neo-Romantics were cited as examples: Douglas Cooper for instance found a definition of Englishness in the modernity and international stature of Graham Sutherland, and claimed that he was seen in Europe as ‘the only significant English painter since Constable and Turner’. The work of Sutherland was for Cooper one of the few last examples of authentic yet innovative national art. Peter Fuller later drew from such ideas in his criticism of postwar art, which, in his view, had regrettably distanced itself from a valuable national artistic heritage.⁹

A less one-sided, but in many ways similar position was adopted by two further critics, generally seen as supporters of realist art, *The Listener*’s David Sylvester and *The New Statesman*’s John Berger. Although each had a very personally nuanced outlook on contemporary British art, both made an important contribution to the way Britain was viewed abroad. On the one hand, Sylvester advocated a liberal form of realism, which he referred to as ‘Modernist realism’, championing the belief of Western liberalism in the freedom of the individual and the artist as an outlet of deeply-rooted existential issues. Berger, on the other hand, espoused ‘social realism’; he articulated a radical Marxist view of culture, “which recognised its utility as a weapon in the Cold War and sought an accessible, popular art form that would transform society.”¹⁰ Britain was a very divided country with a strong socialist political tendency up until the 1980s. Although the art establishment often remained impervious to this, many artists felt strongly inclined toward the notion of a utopian modernism, based on democratic principles and internationalist in its orientation, or a socialist realism that led art back to accessible content and some engagement with the social and political realities of the age.

⁸ Julian Stallabrass, “Success and Failure of Peter Fuller,” *New Left Review* 207 (September-October 1994): 90-91.

⁹ Peter Fuller dramatically declared that “the tradition which such artists stood for was increasingly betrayed from the late 1950s onwards. Capitulation to overseas influences began to take the place of intelligent assimilation.” (*The Burlington Magazine* 128, no. 1003 (October 1986): 756). By ‘intelligent assimilation’ he possibly meant that an artist like Sutherland allowed himself to borrow formal devices from French modernism, without however jeopardising the underlying romantic quality of his art. In *The Burlington Magazine* 128, no. 1003 (October 1986): 756.

¹⁰ James Hyman, *Figurative Art in Britain during the Cold War 1945-60* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 8.

Overall, both Berger and Sylvester took a stand against cultural hegemony and propaganda coming from the two main fronts of the Cold War, America and Russia. Hyman wrote that, “Underscoring each was a dialectical relationship between nationalism and pan-Europeanism, which oscillated between a desire to present British culture as hegemonic and attempts to forge a decentralised, European culture freed from the dominance of a single nation or superpower.”¹¹ Sylvester attempted to bring the two parts together by promoting an international form of modernism, indifferent to geographical limitations, which represented a denial of the importance of nationally determined discourse. He emphasised individualism in art and identified a decentralised West European culture with the values of liberal democracy. Meanwhile, Berger’s “promotion of social realism married a stress on indigenous British production to celebrations of complementary nationally determined projects across Europe,”¹² therefore encouraging the reliance on national potential in British art, but also arguing the need for freedom of each individual nation, thereby distancing himself from Stalinism and the general political position of the British Communist Party. “The threat to freedom by the Cold War made the social and political responsibilities of the postwar artist more onerous than they had ever been before”¹³ and Berger, who used phrases such as ‘cultural disintegration’, or ‘the decadence of the cultural situation’ felt that the British postwar artists, more than their European and American counterparts, realised that they had to face up to this responsibility in their art.

The positions of two further British critics, Patrick Heron and Lawrence Alloway reflected their acknowledgement and acceptance of outside influences. They had an alternative, welcoming attitude towards contemporary trends and influences coming from abroad. Their writing helped British art transcend its imposed self-reflexivity and integrate into international forms of modernism. Patrick Heron’s was an individual critical voice supporting, albeit selectively, the trends coming from the continent. Writing for the *New English Weekly* (1945-7), then *The New Statesman and Nation* (1947-51), he saw as essential models the French ‘premodern masters’ of the *École de Paris*. Having adopted, as early as 1947 a critical stance opposing Ayrton’s

¹¹ Ibid., 9.

¹² Ibid., 207-8.

¹³ Robin Spencer, “Brit Art from the Fifties: the Reality Versus the Myth,” *Studio International* (10 May 2002).

idealism, personism and preference for an individualist rational art, Heron saw English art as the natural result of a long tradition of following modernist models. Although he was deeply opposed to Ayrton's isolationism, he still believed that British art should maintain its originality and distance from a mediocre form of internationalism. In 1950 Heron expressed his lack of confidence in the innovative potential of a national art and the ability of British artists to rise to an international standard: "There is still little more than a handful of British painters whose work we could confidently exhibit abroad,"¹⁴ he wrote. This was mainly the result of the fact that Heron was evaluating the art of his contemporaries against the achievements of the *École de Paris*, which were difficult to exceed. Throughout his career he was an ardent promoter of the technical innovations initiated by Matisse, Bonnard, Picasso, Braque, Rouault, maintaining also a great respect for one particular young French semi-abstract painter from the new *École de Paris*, Nicolas de Staël.

Heron doubted the potential of most of the contemporary generation of younger French artists, dismissing what he regarded as their empty abstraction. He believed that whilst contemporary French art achieved international success by the end of the 1940s, the propagation of its specific style of painting had become a "sterilising process"¹⁵. In his opinion, 'art autre' and Informel were too much concerned with surface for the sake of it, too monotonous as visual manifestation and not much interested in achieving the underlying structural balance and compositional coherence that he wanted from art.

In response to French art, Heron promoted 'St Ives art'¹⁶ as a counter weapon to a predominantly bland and unoriginal universal internationalism. He was able to assert some critical control over the way French art was assimilated into British art, claiming that, although "the values informing the new movement derive from France [...] there are four or five British artists who did the work of importing and adapting"

¹⁴ Patrick Heron, "English and French in 1950," *New Statesman and Nation* 39, no. 983 (7 January 1950): 9.

¹⁵ Patrick Heron, "Paris: Summer 1949," *New Statesman and Nation* (6 July 1949); Garlake, "Between Paris and New York", 188.

¹⁶ He promoted the so-called 'middle generation' of artists, most of which were associated with St Ives i.e. Frost, Hilton, Wynter. See Patrick Heron, "Artists in Cornwall," *The New Statesman and Nation* (17 January 1948).

¹⁷, such as Moore, Smith, Hitchens, Sutherland, Nicholson and Wyndham Lewis – all of whom, especially Hitchens, combined an interest in classical modernist values of colour and form (Fauvism and Cubism) with an interest in a “native setting as principal, natural source of inspiration”¹⁸ which would distance the British painters from the abstract empty imagery of international tendencies. In 1949, Heron tried to materialise his vision of a valid and valuable British counterpart to the *École de Paris* by a precise definition of a vague concept: the ‘School of London’¹⁹. Garlake has referred to the philosopher and social anthropologist Ernest Gellner’s analysis of nationalism²⁰ to point out that Heron’s strategy could be seen as an example of “the process of unification into a single ‘high’ culture as standing in a metaphoric relationship with the dynamic of modernism.”²¹ In this sense, Heron seemed to be working on the idea that the national identity of British art could be saved by the definition of a unified, strong ‘high’ culture.

Finally, Lawrence Alloway was to become the most ardent British critical supporter of the New York School. The critic wrote for *Art News* from 1952, then joined the ICA in 1953 to organise and curate exhibitions and started contributing to the American *Art News*. In 1954-5 together with John Mc Hale he started co-convening the Independent Group, which situated him at the forefront as promoter of a British avant-garde.²² A predominantly urban cosmopolitan thinker and undocinaire as far as national or regional schools or movements were concerned, Alloway, later an ardent supporter of Pop Art, was understandably interested in the assimilation of British culture into an international modernism at large.

Dismissing the ‘British tradition’ and St Ives, where “landscape is so nice nobody can bring themselves to leave it out of their art”²³, Alloway supported the recent writings of Rosenberg in America and Tapie in France. His view towards

¹⁷ Patrick Heron, “The School of London,” *The New Statesman and Nation* (9 April 1949).

¹⁸ Patrick Heron, “Ivon Hitchens,” *The New Statesman and Nation* (14 June 1952).

¹⁹ Heron, “School of London”. For a more detailed discussion on the concept of ‘School of London’ see Chapter Three.

²⁰ See Ernest Gellner, *Culture, Identity, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

²¹ Garlake, “Between Paris and New York”, 189.

²² *Ibid.*, 190.

²³ Lawrence Alloway (ed.) *Nine Abstract Artists: their Work and Theory* (London: Tiranti, 1954), 12.

French art differed greatly from that of Heron, as he took a stand against a limiting national tradition, and chose to promote French contemporary gesturalism and the idea of Action Painting developing in the United States. Whilst Heron valued the classical modernist models, Alloway wanted to break with tradition in favour of an act of expression and instinct, originating from European Surrealism, but with a great contemporary emphasis on individuality. He proclaimed the new supremacy of the New York School over the *École de Paris*, whilst maintaining parallels between postwar Parisian abstraction [and] American Abstract Impressionism.²⁴ Alloway avoided the doctrinaire label of ‘Abstract Expressionism’, trying to find alternative, less conformist definitions of the new painting such as ‘abstract impressionism’, ‘action painting’, ‘Other Art’, generally favouring individuality over a normative trend.²⁵

Alloway’s exhibition *Place* (1959) showing the work of artists such as Denny, Smith and Rumney was introduced as an alternative to the traditional British approach to location. It was influenced by American painting and displayed large environmental works ordered in an intricate arrangement which the spectators were invited to interact with and explore. *Place* meant to show that it was possible to produce art “in ways that are British, or better European and not just a retreat to the usual long definitions of our national capacity (the Picturesque, linearism, love of country, the light of St Ives.)”²⁶ This exhibition in many ways annulled the traditional notion of *genius loci* in British painting, offering new ways of perceiving the environment, comparable to the subjective outlook and spatial abstraction of New York School painters such as Newman and Rothko.

The views of these critics helped introduce and shape the new face of postwar British art. As the neo-Romantic rhetoric of Englishness was obliterated by the fast progress of inter-European art movements, they helped rationalise past and present developments and intuit future ones. By 1955, the influences from Paris and New York urged artists to swap their romantic originality for a more internationally valid style and individual approach, following the models of successful contemporaries like

²⁴ For a full analysis of this trend, see Chapter Six.

²⁵ See Garlake, “Between Paris and New York”, 192.

²⁶ Lawrence Alloway, “Making a Scene,” *Art News and Review* (26 September 1959).

de Willem de Kooning or Jean Dubuffet, and it was often through the work of such unique artists that the new modernism was assimilated in Britain rather than through the impact of the trends were associated with.²⁷ Once the wartime cultural threat had diminished, the need to define national identity and reaffirm tradition in art became less of a priority. Integration into an international modernism took precedence, this often meaning a stress on individual creativity and the adoption of unprecedented forms of expression. The criticism of the time, even when in disagreement with the new developments, reflected these changes and helped comprehend their implications.

The Regional Significance of St Ives as Place and Artistic Community

This second section introduces some ideas about the notion of regionalism as opposed to internationalism in postwar culture and applies them to the art which was produced in St Ives in this period. It registers the multiple roles the town of St Ives played in the postwar years i.e. that of a prominent cultural regional model in Britain; a scenic inspirational setting for art production (an often reductive view); a marker of a period of exceptional achievement in British modernist art; an actual refuge for artists during the war; a corner of Britain unspoilt by industrialisation as well as a symbol for the unexplored unconscious and creativity.

After the war had ended, a renewed emphasis on the individual artist merged with a need to encourage the diversity of regional culture in order to avoid home-grown bureaucracy and international blandness in art. One of the main supporters of the idea of regional independent units was Herbert Read who believed that a great art could only be attained under maximum conditions of freedom, a freedom which was difficult to achieve in a world where educational, economic and social forces were united in their intention to produce conformity.²⁸ In 1943, Read proposed that ideal societies of creative intellectuals could develop within small independent communities.²⁹ He believed in a constant 'regional norm' and worked towards preserving the 'Englishness' of a postwar nation ethnically isolated during the war and intermittently subjected to fluctuating foreign cultural influences. In the

²⁷ See Garlake, "Between Paris and New York", 186.

²⁸ See Herbert Read, *The Grassroots of Art* (London: Lindsay Drummond, 1947).

²⁹ Herbert Read, "The Cult of Leadership," in *The Politics of the Unpolitical* (London: Routledge, 1943), 30-31.

catalogue introduction to *Forty Years of Modern Art* (1948), the ICA's first exhibition, he suggested that,

Every town of any size should have its art centre not merely receiving art but also creating and exchanging it in friendly rivalry with other centres and in London there should be a national centre, the nucleus for all the local centres [...] Each local art centre was to be a foyer, a hearth round which the artist and his audience can gather in unanimity, in fellowship, in mutual understanding and aspiration [...] an adult play-centre, a workshop where work is joy, a source of vitality and daring experiment.³⁰

Read believed that the Penwith Society in St Ives, to which he became president in 1949, was a practical example of such a local centre, "developing a regionalism in art which is [...] the only art politics that matter in the long run"³¹. His promotion of the Penwith as well as the reputation of its internationally emerging British artists Nicholson and Hepworth helped introduce St Ives to the international art scene.

The contribution of Denys Val Baker was also particularly relevant in defining a regional culture centred around the area of Cornwall.³² In *Voices*, a journal he had edited from 1946, he warned against 'cultural uniformity' stressing the importance of individual creativity. In this journal, an article was published by E. W. Martin in the same year entitled 'The Necessity of Regionalism', in which the writer showed his allegiance to Mannheim's theories, claiming that, "Our national culture will take its colour and variety, its very character and force, from the differing emphases which come from the artists separately observing different types of life in different parts of the country."³³ Baker was also a great admirer of the German psychologist and political thinker Erich Fromm and especially the latter's *The Fear of Freedom* (1942), in which he pointed out the threat of conformity to a universal norm. Fromm's writing was contemporary to Herbert Read's *The Politics of the Unpolitical* (1943) and D. S.

³⁰ Herbert Read, introduction to exh. cat. *Forty Years of Modern Art* (London: Academy Hall, 10 February – 6 March 1948).

³¹ Letter in *St Ives Times* (21 Aug 1953).

³² Later, Baker settled in St Ives and founded an important regional publication, *The Cornish Review* in 1949. He also published two books on St Ives, one of which was entitled *Britain's Art Colony by the Sea* (London: George Ronald, 1959).

³³ E. W. Martin, "The Necessity of Regionalism," in Denys Val Baker (ed.) *Voices* 2 (Winter 1946): 14.

Savage's *The Personal Principle* (1944), both of which discussed the idea of 'personalism'³⁴.

For many British artists of the 1940s there was no exclusive alternative to international modernism and the only option was to remain regionalists as well. In the work of the Cornish artist Peter Lanyon for example the two apparent opposites merged. His art adhered to the political explanations provided by Eliot, Mannheim³⁵ and Greenberg's criticism: "the equation each understood was between a country enclosing itself with a regressive, localized academic culture and loss of freedom on a wider scale."³⁶ For Lanyon, St Ives's home-grown culture would only be validated by its quality to reflect that of the wider world. Lanyon expressed his view against cultural segregation of British art, when he wrote that "the form that any art takes... does not exist outside a tradition built by other artists... To deny the tradition of this century as much as that of others is to become parochial, which is very different from being local or rooted."³⁷ For him, the regional background to art was just as important as its affiliation with international modernism; he insisted that, "art is modern or it is nothing: there is no specific English variant of modernism."³⁸ "For Lanyon there had never been such a thing as a St Ives School, only 'as many kinds of art as there are

³⁴ Inspired by Emmanuel Mounier's *A Personalist Manifesto* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1938). The philosophy of personalism proposed a radical reconstruction of society. Mounier's personalism rejected philosophical idealism - the person is "the one reality that we know, and that we are at the same time fashioning, from within" (p. ix); It is not a substance, nor an abstract principle, but a "living activity of self-creation" (p. x). The human person is not anything that can be calculated, analyzed, or reduced to a quantum in any way. Ontologically, the person is "immersed in nature", yet somehow "transcends nature". The wartime French Non-Conformists of the 1930s, groups and individuals looking for new solutions to face the political, economical and social crisis, revolved around Mounier's personalism. Locating themselves rather on the right-wing of the political spectrum, they attempted to find a "Third Way" between Socialism and Capitalism, and opposed both liberalism, parliamentarism, democracy and Fascism. Herbert Read called personalism "a positive philosophy - an alternative to the prevailing mood of pessimism and nihilism". (See George L. Kline, "Le Personnalisme by Emmanuel Mounier," *Ethics* 63, no. 3 (April 1953): 223.

³⁵ Andrew Causey noted that Lanyon was helped in this sense by his friend Patrick Heron, whose family were friends with the Eliots and together with Mannheim had participated at the Archbishop Temple's Malvern Conference in 1941, where Christian activists promoted a revival of rural communities and regional economies. Also, through Gabo, Lanyon was introduced to the American historian Lewis Mumford's *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1938). Mumford was a representative of an increasing American (and European) voice which intended to moderate the extremes of capitalism, mass production and the uncontrolled growth of cities, reviving respect for the pre-industrial virtues in a country with power dispersed in its regions.

³⁶ Causey, *Modernism and the Land*, 39.

³⁷ Peter Lanyon, "A Sense of Place," *Painter and Sculptor V* (Autumn 1962): 4.

³⁸ Peter Lanyon in Causey, *Modernism and the Land*, 38.

artists’.”³⁹ St Ives was a place where such considerations about regional values, individualism in art and the idea of an all-inclusive international modernism became particularly pertinent in the postwar period.

One of the problems in defining St Ives art in written accounts has often been the tendency to present an idealised view⁴⁰, over-estimating the potential of locality as the sole determinant of art production. Charles Harrison argued that, the fact that “a particular painting depicts features of St Ives is no proof that the Cornish village is or was a necessary condition of its quality or was even a very significant feature of its production”.⁴¹ Margaret Garlake noted that in some texts, place was seen simply as the cause of the art produced, which was not considered much in terms of “a bearer of ideas” - the art itself was not regarded as the motor which brought about change and innovation.⁴² Also, biographical and chronological data about St Ives and its artists was merely presented to the reader with no ideological contextualisation. For some writers, memory, a subjective and often unreliable tool, was the main starting point and conclusive research in their investigations of St Ives art.⁴³

St Ives, as a place, was much more than a picturesque setting which inspired the artists working here. It equally served as a safe-haven in the uncertain climate of the urban environment during the war, and was therefore not merely a formal influence, but a retreat for British artists from the dramatic wartime developments. One well-known example is that of Nicholson and Hepworth’s escape to Cornwall in

³⁹ Michael Bird, *The St Ives Artists. A Biography of Place and Time* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2008), 157.

⁴⁰ There has been insufficient research about the conceptual importance of landscape in postwar art. Most texts on the art of St Ives tended to be either descriptive, biographical or anecdotal (Denys V. Baker, Tom Cross, Peter Davies), absorbed in formal investigations of a modernist lineage (Patrick Heron, Hilton Kramer), poetic, romanticised and highly personal (David Lewis’s memoir) or rigorous compilations of chronological data (David Brown in Tate’s 1985 catalogue) – and all generally focused on St Ives art as end product, rather than examine the ideology behind the art, resulting in an overall simplification of a complex area of study. Bird’s *The St Ives Artists* (2008) is a welcome addition to the existing literature, integrating St Ives art into the wider cultural narrative of twentieth-century, by dealing with the context of contemporary developments in history, society and literature.

⁴¹ Harrison argued that this was “a caution underlined by Nicholson’s tendency in the late forties to refer to his more charming still-life-and-landscape confections, perhaps hopefully, as ‘potboilers’.” Equally, he claimed that we cannot “assume that the most significant determining referents of, say, Lanyon’s paintings of the fifties were those atmospheric qualities of sea, sky and landscape to which they seem so tellingly to allude.” (Charles Harrison, “The Place of St Ives,” *Art Monthly* 84 (March 1985): 9.

⁴² Margaret Garlake, reviews in *Oxford Art Journal* 9, no. 1 (1986): 82-85.

⁴³ Margaret Garlake wrote that, “While much energy has been devoted to recording artists’ reminiscences, a number of important private archives remain unworked.” *Ibid.* 82.

1939 from the expected London bombings. Equally important are the social considerations on the dichotomy between the hostile, busy industrial environment of the city and the peaceful, innocent, simple way of life in the country, as well as the idea of a self-sufficient regional community, striving on the motivating interaction between its intellectuals.⁴⁴ The accounts of the artist Bryan Wynter's on first coming to Cornwall highlight the conception of this region as a refuge from industrial modernity, where what normally would be "‘amenities’ are just a nuisance"; he wrote how the [Zennor] Carn provided him with his "own particular brand of amenities, an enormous access to and experience of this wild corner of England which still holds out against the slow insidious invasion of garden suburbs and slums."⁴⁵

Another interesting view is that of Cornwall as a retreat which allowed for individual reflection, introspection. When anthropologist Tom Harrison addressed a wartime meeting at the Housing Centre in London in 1942, he observed "a strong feeling ... that people should have less planned and ordered lives" and that, as a nation, the British were looking forward to the chance to "be themselves more".⁴⁶ Cornwall offered such respite from the disconcerting crisis of war. Michael Bird wrote that,

Cornwall, which almost entirely escaped the bombing that had transformed every major city, and where the promise (or threat) of a planned future seemed therefore more distant, was a place where independent minded men, sick of being ordered about, might hope to 'be themselves' or at least, by living outside conventional middle-class society and reading up on psychoanalysis, make contact with the selves they wished to be. [...] Penwith's ancient megaliths and field walls lent the landscape an archetypal Jungian quality, while its exposure to the elements and distance from city life seemed to connote the Freudian Id, source of the primal desires that modern Western civilisation sought to suppress.⁴⁷

The unspoilt, predominantly rural setting of Cornwall thus also stood for the unexplored unconscious. The wild, untamed landscape itself seemed to symbolise for

⁴⁴ Fuller, for instance, wrote that, "Economic stagnation, and geographical isolation, preserved St Ives [...] 'unspoiled': in other words, St Ives escaped some of the most destructive and intrusive aspects of modern industrial, commercial, and architectural 'progress'. Achievement in art almost always involves an element of refusal of modernity." (Peter Fuller, "St Ives," *Artscribe* 53 (May/June 1985): 48.

⁴⁵ Letter from Bryan Wynter to his mother (6 October 1945), in Bird, 73.

⁴⁶ David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain: 1945-51* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 42.

⁴⁷ Bird, *The St Ives Artists*, 72-74.

artists both a virgin territory, untouched by the ravages of war in the neo-Romantic, redemptive sense, as well as a psychological well, still untapped, still full of promise. Consequently, traditional cultural narratives wrongly proposed that artworks are mainly determined by locale.⁴⁸ Beyond the idealised view of idyllic nature as a source of inspiration, there are a multitude of reasons why Cornwall and specifically St Ives proved to be such a prolific source of creativity.

Garlake argued that, in addition to being a place, St Ives could also be regarded as a type of *practice*; in this sense its artists were mainly linked with the media of painting and sculpture, often working with organic form and investigating colour and atmospheric effects. More importantly, St Ives became related to the *myth* of ‘genius loci’, the spirit of place. This revival of regionalism happened at a time when the importance of landscape painting became closely linked with this notion. It has to be said though, that it is difficult to focus on an issue such as the sense of place, which implies a strong sense of being rooted in the area, as consideration of works by non-native artists settled here, also often came to be included in evaluations of St Ives art. Finally, St Ives was associated with the specific *period* between 1939-60, when its artists produced a typically exotic form of modernism, significantly influenced by a raw, ‘primitivising’ form of art which they had come upon in this region.

Modernism and Postwar Landscape Painting in St Ives

This final part looks at the landscape painting produced in the region in the postwar period and its significance for British modernism at large, as well as specifically for the artists working within this idiom. The subject of Constructivist experimentation before and after the war, landscape enabled the discovery of innovative ways in which to perceive space in art. Further roles of landscape painting included that of a psychological outlet, a means of phenomenological identification with the environment, as well as a pretext for formal aesthetic exercise. Ultimately, the landscape painting produced in postwar St Ives provided a means of

⁴⁸ Garlake wrote that, “place is a contingent circumstance which has been accorded the status of causality. The failure to analyse the conceptual significance of landscape art reduces a complex subject to Lewis’s perception of ‘a common earthiness shared by us all’ ” Garlake, reviews in *Oxford Art Journal* 9, no. 1. (1986): 82, citing David Lewis in his memoir of St Ives published as an introduction to the Tate catalogue *St Ives 1939-64. Twenty Five Years of Painting, Sculpture and Pottery* London: Tate Gallery Publications for the exhibition of 13 February – 14 April 1985.

internationalising British art; it came to represent the modernism of a home-grown avant-garde which would rival international developments.

In postwar Britain, together with the advancement of the idea of personalism in art and that of the creative individual as part of a small, autonomous (regional) community promoted by Read, Savage, Baker and Eliot, special importance was given to aspects of the unformed, naïve or primitive as in the untrained art of artists such as Alfred Wallis and Mary Jewels.⁴⁹ The foundations of the St Ives artistic community are thought to have been laid in 1928, when Ben Nicholson and Christopher Wood discovered the work of Wallis, the retired, half-illiterate ex-mariner who took up painting “for company” after the death of his wife.

There was a natural freshness about Wallis’s depictions that appealed to the modernist artists visiting the area between the two world wars. Painted on rough improvised surfaces, often cardboard packaging, his work managed to capture a specific experience without loading the picture with superfluous details, as was common practice in traditional landscapes. The fisherman had developed his own unique method of abstracting reality and though his style appeared child-like, his subjects offered a serious, unmediated interpretation of life. Charles Harrison believed that Wallis’s work greatly contributed to avant-garde theories which advocated “that real creativity was somehow direct and innate, that the imagination was fettered by training, that a painting was more importantly a thing in itself than a representation of something else, that strength of expression and vitality of working were more important than accuracy of description and technical skill, that the child, the primitive and the modern artist were somehow joined.”⁵⁰

Wallis’ ‘honest vision’ was inspirational for the modernists who were dealing predominantly with spiritual tendencies in their art. William Vaughan argued that British landscape in the twentieth century could be characterised by its “sense of privacy, even secrecy. Spurred on by the assertions of psychology – that modern substitute for the spiritual – the countryside became internalised, mysterious and

⁴⁹ Garlake, “Between Paris and New York”, 185.

⁵⁰ Charles Harrison, *The Modern, The Primitive and The Picturesque*, Scottish Arts Council (1987), 10.

symbolic” and “the psychological landscape also affected the valuation of the primitive.”⁵¹ The work of painters such as Wallis, Jewels and the potter Leach local to West Penwith was re-evaluated in the view of contemporary cultural conditions which developed in Britain and Europe⁵² after the war, a time “characterised by themes of patriotism, nationalism, xenophobia, insularity”, as well as “by that peculiar fascinated angst”⁵³ present in the existential expressionism of Sutherland and Bacon. Charles Harrison wrote that, in these circumstances,

an unadulterated Modernist culture could only continue in rustication. As the site of an exiled (or holidaying) community St Ives was perhaps specially qualified, at least in terms of the themes of Modernist culture itself. Valuation of ‘simplicity’ of life as a critique of over-sophistication, and of ‘innocence’ in representation as a counter to meretriciousness, celebration of the ‘authenticity’ of the ‘primitive’ or the ‘naïve’, and of the ‘integrity’ of the handcrafted and the factitious; these and other features of the refined ideology of the modern movement could plausibly be developed in West Penwith.⁵⁴



3. Alfred Wallis, *The Hold House Port Mear Square Island*, c.1932

4. Ben Nicholson, *Cornwall*, 1928

In his work, Wallis remained utterly unambitious about stylistic developments or psychological substance yet his painting influenced a formed modernist such as Nicholson for both its compositional freshness and simplicity and its expressive depth. Moreover, through Wallis, Nicholson discovered a new interest in the theme of ‘man in nature’. In his memoir of St Ives, David Lewis recounted visiting Hepworth,

⁵¹ William Vaughan, “The British Landscape Tradition,” in *Towards a New Landscape* (London: Bernard Jacobson Gallery, 1993), 97.

⁵² Twentieth-century art shunned imitation and promulgated individual expression. The avant-garde started seeking inspiration in the work of ‘primitive’, amateur or untrained artists. Their work was seen as pure, uninfluenced by traditional canons and free of decision-making or analysis. In France, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque looked at the work of Henri Rousseau ‘le Douanier’ (former toll collector), and later Dubuffet actively collected ‘Art Brut’ or ‘Outsider’ art.

⁵³ Harrison, “The Place of St Ives”, 10.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Nicholson's partner, with Lanyon and their ensuing discussion on "how in non-figurative painting and carving the artist is no longer in a subject-object relationship with nature but can *be* the object, and assume *directly* the natural agencies of wind and surface."⁵⁵ There was a crucial difference between the way Lanyon and Nicholson related to Wallis' work. Whereas Lanyon saw Wallis as a fellow Cornishman and his painting as an act of emotional communion with the nature of his homeland⁵⁶, Nicholson saw him as an avant-garde painter - "he spoke of him with the same reverence that he reserved for Mondrian and Miró"⁵⁷. Lanyon was fiercely protective towards Wallis and what his art meant to him as a native of St Ives - during the Penwith Society debates, Lanyon openly protested against the idea of Sven Berlin writing a book about Wallis, when Berlin was an outsider to the region, and therefore could never associate with the land the way the local artist could.

Lanyon's instinctive adoption of this theme of 'man in nature' from Wallis, or landscape painting as a direct reflection of life, prefigured his distancing from the programmatic constructivism of Nicholson. While the formal concerns of the initial avant-garde of the 1930s (Gabo, Hepworth, Nicholson) had played an important part in perfecting Lanyon's spatial and technical abilities, the perceptual concerns and the phenomenological angle which Wallis unconsciously adopted, gave Lanyon's painting its true meaning. They both related to the local landscape on an entirely different level, they were capable of intimately identifying with the land. Lanyon stated in April 1952, "I find the sky on my back as I climb the hills and the sea behind me, then at my side and it becomes the same thing in my painting. I have it up my side and in my belly and I carry a load of miners in my own workings."⁵⁸ The landscape was thus particularly significant for Lanyon for its social and historical connotations. Wallis naïve paintings were equally informed by his essential perception of what a place meant to him; he respected no rules of perspective and the

⁵⁵ *St Ives 1939-64. Twenty Five Years of Painting*, 18.

⁵⁶ Andrew Lanyon claimed that as a native Cornishman, the approach of his father Peter to the landscape was very similar to that of Wallis: "It was the same as Alfred Wallis seeing other people painting boats - they didn't know what it felt like to be in a boat, they were just portraying what they saw. My dad saw them looking at the landscape and painting what was before their eyes. And he said: 'No, there are men under there mining. I want to show what I know and what I feel, not just what I see'." From "The Real St Ives Story," Rose Hilton, Anthony Frost and Andrew Lanyon in conversation with Michael Bird, *Tate Etc., Visiting and Revisiting Art Etcetera* 8 (Autumn 2006).

⁵⁷ Peter Davies, *St Ives Revisited - Innovators and Followers* (Gwent: Old Bakehouse Publications, 1994), 77.

⁵⁸ Letter to Roland Bowden, 20 April 1952, IGA 942.1 in Bird, *St Ives Artists*, 70.

scale of objects within a scene was determined by their literal importance. Many of Wallis' paintings had consequently a map-like quality, which can be equally said of Lanyon's painting as well. Neither artist painted directly from the scene which explained the unique quality of their vision.

In spite of this underlying connection, Lanyon was an innovator and the constructivist phase in his career is perhaps a good postwar illustration of the fusion between regionalist affiliations and the interest in cosmopolitan modernism. Michael Bird discussed the apparent incongruity of Lanyon adopting the internationalist space-constructions of Gabo during the late 1940s while staying true to the special significance his birthplace had for him. It seemed that the two unlikely allegiances were reunited in his interest in the landscape. While the artist's feelings about the land were deeply rooted and unchangeable, he was constantly seeking new experimental forms of expression to capture his awareness of place and space. Bird wrote that,

Whereas Constructivist rhetoric made frequent references to Nature - the common locus of both art and science - landscape art was another matter. Its irresistible, perennial attraction for British artists and audiences appeared by the mid-twentieth century (whatever had been the case in Turner and Constable's day) to offer conclusive proof that British art could never be wholeheartedly avant-garde. Lanyon did not see why 'landscape' and 'modern art' should be mutually exclusive terms. His respect for his first teacher, Borlase Smart, and his pride in his place of birth were obvious, but he didn't enthuse over Cornwall's scenic qualities in the way a traditional painter might. Instead he blowtorched his stories about climbing cliffs and rambling over the moors with Constructivism's theoretical flame.⁵⁹

Lanyon needed Constructivist innovation to help counteract the traditional naturalist and idealist approach of his predecessors towards the Cornish landscape. A radical distancing from the latter view was necessary in order to blast preconceptions about the role of landscape in art and form his own personal approach.

The 1950s in St Ives marked the transition from the pure geometry of Neo-Plasticism and Constructivism to more expressive, gestural and allusive forms of abstraction. This was visible in the emancipation of Lanyon, Hilton and Frost, from Neo-Plasticism and geometric pure abstraction, as well as their distancing from the

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

formalism of some of their fellows Heron, Scott, Heath and Pasmore. Harrison believed that Hepworth and Nicholson had “reached the insurmountable limits of abstraction where technical innovation became stagnant and in danger of turning into repetition” and an artist such as Pasmore, as opposed to Hilton and Lanyon, re-adopted a constructivist vocabulary, this reliance on the dubious notion of ‘fundamental principles’ or ‘essences’ in autonomous abstraction, even as its original creators had reached the limits of their exploration of this idiom. Artists such as Lanyon, Hilton and Frost on the other hand had assimilated this knowledge and surpassed it by turning towards their awareness of the outside world.

The Penwith Society Debate

The issue of the relevance of abstraction became a sensitive subject for artists of differing views in postwar St Ives. In February 1949 at the Castle Inn, the modernists within the old St Ives Society of Artists (Hepworth, Nicholson, Gabo) proposed the establishment of a new group, the Penwith Society of Arts. This followed a previous separation of the younger more experimental artists (Barns-Graham, Lanyon, Wells, Heron, Wynter) from the traditionalists (Birch, Forbes, Bradshaw, Olsson, Knight) and their first reinvention as the Crypt Group (1943-48). It was unanimously agreed that the eminent critic and activist of modern art, Herbert Read, was to be the new president of the Penwith.

Although the society was founded on the principle of the abstractionists breaking away from their more conservative elders, there were considerable divergences within its own members. The new society was headed by the original ‘advanced’ artists Nicholson and Hepworth, but included the younger Crypt Group contingent, as well as some of the more open-minded of the traditionalists such as Smart and a number of artist-craftspeople, such as Bernard Leach. It seemed though that within this large and diverse group, Hepworth and Nicholson tried to impose their leadership and direct the focus towards an internationalist form of abstraction which they had championed in the 1930s.

The importance of the Penwith both within the local community and as a link to the metropolitan art world was crucial, yet equally the dissonances within the group prevented it from developing in the long run as a united modernist front including all

of its original members. “Intended both as a ‘shopwindow’ for the art world beyond Cornwall and as a discriminatory exhibiting society, this was from its foundation in 1949 the site of an often embittered debate on a dichotomy between abstraction and realism, a discourse with ideological implications extending beyond the limits of art practice.”⁶⁰ The individual relationships of its members and issues of internal ‘politics’ greatly influenced this debate. As chronicled by Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, it was an issue for artists in St Ives long before they became a matter of public interest in London.

After its committee put forward the idea that the Penwith membership could be generally divided into abstract and representational artists, “Hepworth and Nicholson further restricted this system of professional segregation proposing three mutually exclusive categories: representational (A), abstract (B) and crafts (C)”.⁶¹ Nicholson later claimed that this intention was merely that of stimulating artists of all three orientations to be creative and competitive within their distinctive fields.

Lanyon, one of the Penwith’s most articulate members, always believed that abstraction and figuration were inseparable in art. When Nicholson suggested this division, he openly protested⁶², as he realised that this was a means for Nicholson and Hepworth to establish themselves as the leaders of the B group. He compared the dictatorship of Nicholson and Hepworth to that of Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia. Alongside Bryan Wynter and Sven Berlin, he resigned from the Penwith and joined the Newly Art Society, generally becoming more independent of the artistic community of St Ives. Michael Bird wrote that, “Lanyon’s more formal objection to the ‘A, B, C’ rule, as he expressed it in a steady cannonade of letters to the *St Ives Times*, was that any type of segregation, and especially the implicit superiority of the

⁶⁰ Margaret Garlake, reviews in *Oxford Art Journal* 9, no. 1 (1986): 82.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

⁶² Andrew Lanyon said about his father that, “he got involved a lot in what went on in the Penwith Society [where Nicholson and Hepworth had supported the formal categorisation of members as either abstract or representational artists]. He was very cross, because he said he had been fighting in the war against Fascism, then he came back here and it was on his doorstep. While he was away, his position in St Ives had been usurped by the ‘king and queen’ - Ben and Barbara - and he was relegated to the status of ‘prince’. In fact, I discovered that he played the role of Goldilocks to the three bears - the three Bs, Ben, Barbara and Bernard [Leach]. When Bernard was away, he used to go into the pottery, roll out the clay with a rolling pin and make slab pots and decorate them rudely. So he was, in a sense, desecrating these sacred cows. And he did the same with Barbara and Ben. [...] If my dad hadn’t had these sacred cows, he wouldn’t have been able to use humour in his art as he did. It very much shaped him. And the Cornish like to attack everything that is slightly precious.” (From “The Real St Ives Story”).

'B' faction, violated St Ives's time-honoured laws of hospitality, according to which all forms of art were to be accepted on equal terms."⁶³ This clearly implied that he was still considering Nicholson and Hepworth as visitors to the area, even though they had been living and working here for a decade. Besides, Lanyon was increasingly dissociating himself from the restrictive idiom which still characterised their work. In some ways, it almost seemed as if he related his feelings of rejection towards the doctrine of Constructivism to his feelings towards Nicholson's self-imposed leadership within the Penwith. Bird recorded that,

Lanyon didn't want to be associated with Nicholson, who, he said, 'avoided the essential problem of living', being content instead 'to play games on his own pitch'. And he rejected what he called 'the social outcome' of Nicholson and Hepworth's work - probably meaning its loyalty to old-style avant-garde elitism - which, 'after 6 years of service life', he found 'cruel in the widest human sense'. His own latest project was, he explained, something completely un-Nicholsonian, a 'pilgrimage from inside the ground.'⁶⁴



5. Ben Nicholson, *Feb 28-53 (vertical seconds)*, 1953

6. Peter Lanyon, *Green Mile*, 1952

By this, Lanyon may have suggested that his art had a certain depth to it that Nicholson's work did not. Or, that it was literally grounded in the land, through the experiences of his ancestors, as opposed to Nicholson's which was generally a more

⁶³ Bird, *St Ives Artists*, 86.

⁶⁴ Letter from Peter Lanyon to Roland Bowden (16 Aug 1952) Iare Archive IGA 942.15.

detached spatial investigation. He expressed these feelings in a series of works produced in 1952 (e.g. *St Just, Harvest Festival, Corsham Summer, Bojewyan Farms, Green Mile*) which followed his literal pilgrimage “along the ‘tinnerns coast’ west of St Ives and Zennor, towards St Just.” Bird argued that, “Its ‘inside’ element was perhaps a matter of personal atonement, since Lanyon’s family had been involved in mine management and finance, rather than toiling at the rock face underground.”⁶⁵ This may also explain the passionate efforts in Lanyon’s art in trying to (re)connect with the land.

Lanyon’s work was firmly anchored in local and personal history and experience. In a clear protest against Nicholson, he stated that, “My concern is not to produce pure shape or colour on a surface, but to inform and fill up every mark I make with information which comes directly from the world in which I live”.⁶⁶ By contrast, a work such as Nicholson’s *February 28-53* (1953), starting from its impersonal title, seemed to record a moment in a series of formal exercises, his admiration for Mondrian’s grid-like abstracts being still predominant. Lanyon’s *Green Mile* (1952), on the other hand, very much like *St Just*, the work he prepared for the Festival of Britain in 1951, starting from their allusive title and vertically elongated format, recorded a journey, both literal and metaphorical. *St Just*, on the one hand, followed the actual trajectory of movement within the space of the landscape, on the other, the narrative trail of a profound and disturbing event in local history: the martyrdom of the local miners.

Abstractions such as those of Lanyon, Hilton and Frost relied on the visible world and seemed easier to digest than the technically rigorous abstractions of the Constructivists. ‘Humanist’ forms of abstraction were being developed all across Europe in the aftermath of the war. Harrison believed that St Ives art should be placed in the much wider context of modernism when he wrote that in accordance with contemporary European painting in the later 1940s and ‘50s, “the appearance of semi-abstract art was everywhere highly over-determined [...] The formal pictorial potential of Frost’s boats, of William Scott’s saucepans, of Constant’s broken wheels, of Appel’s façades of faces, of Bissiere’s informal lattices or of Lanyon’s tilting

⁶⁵ Bird, *St Ives Artists*, 77.

⁶⁶ Peter Lanyon, in an article by The Otter Gallery, University of Chichester, West Sussex

planes of sea, land and cloud, might have signalled “the gravity of irrevocable technical change” and “the emancipation of the St Ives middle generation from their respect for the ‘senior’ artists – Lanyon’s from Nicholson, for instance”.⁶⁷ Thus, their work signalled a change from the internationalist abstract movement of the 1930s to more personalised, individual forms of abstraction.

Artists such as Frost, Hilton and Lanyon argued that contemporary art and the lived-in environment were inseparable: Lanyon “mixed landscape themes with coded references to home, fertility and family; Frost’s *Walk along the Quay* story was a more everyday take on the same phenomenon,”⁶⁸ while Hilton’s was an anthropomorphic interpretation of the landscape. There was a certain humanism, an empathy, an almost phenomenological identification with the environment in the work of such artists. By contrast, the incoming American Abstract Expressionism, seemed to be of a more technically monotonous and militant, masculine⁶⁹ nature. The relationship between St Ives and New York will be examined in more detail in Chapter Five.

In the postwar period, the local creative community of St Ives acted as a magnet which attracted those especially receptive to innovation in art. The St Ives School rose to avant-garde status, partly through Alan Bowness’s advocacy at a time when abstraction was still widely seen as threatening the validity of art. National and international exhibitions, as well as important critical interest turned it into the focal point of modernist innovation. In this sense, it could be seen as representing an ‘un-official’ avant-garde, its notional leaders having been the subversives of the 1930s. As such, by the late 1950s it received considerable institutional recognition while London-based groups practising process-dominant art and a radical form of abstraction occupied a more authentically avant-garde position.

Most often it is claimed that Londoners influenced St Ives art as they moved into the community. The opposite process is also true. A brief encounter of the former Vorticist David Bomberg with the dramatic landscape of Cornwall in 1947 resulted in

⁶⁷ Harrison, “The Place of St Ives”, 10.

⁶⁸ Bird, *St Ives Artists*, 131-132.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

works which fused a sense of physical embodiment in nature with the constructivist investigation of space. On returning to his students at the Borough Polytechnic in London, Bomberg passed on this new thick, earthy gesturalism in recording the environment to Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff, the future founders of the School of London. The latter applied this style to their vision of urban progress, ending up standardising a manner of painting which had initially served to capture the precise opposite – the wild setting of West Penwith.

Chapter Three

Landscape and Modernist Abstraction: Critical Readings

This chapter extends the debate on modernist abstraction by examining in detail the theoretical position of two prominent British postwar critics, analysing the significance of their views for the understanding of the core issue of landscape painting. Patrick Heron's criticism, based on the art of the French pre-war avant-garde, noted the distancing of postwar painting from 1930's 'pure' abstraction through a need to fuse perceptual interests with formal concerns of space, colour, composition. Throughout his career, Heron insisted on the need to avoid self-reflexive, 'mechanical' abstraction through an individual, original response to reality. Heron identified the postwar switch in the definition of 'abstraction', from the sense of 'abstracting from' or 'distorting' a subject from the visual world in the Cézannesque, pan-European tradition, to a new 'non-figuration', marked by the total loss of connection with the visible world. Herein lies in fact one of the main arguments of this chapter: the shift in the perception of the significance of abstraction in the postwar period. Heron stayed true to the first definition which implied an unbreakable link with nature.

A second perspective came from the critic Lawrence Alloway, who broke with Heron's reading of abstraction by supporting radical innovative forms of expression which sought to transcend the visual re-interpretation of the outside world and focus on the inherent workings of art and the life of paint itself. Alloway's theorisation started from the premise that 'abstraction' – which in Heron's view stood for 'distortion' of reality and used nature as a starting point – differed from 'non-figuration' which stood for self-reflexive abstraction, painting involved in its own process. He identified two forms of abstraction: a rational, purely geometric abstraction of Constructivist lineage, and an irrational, painterly abstraction associated with Tachisme. Alloway found that the latter had come to dominate contemporary art, influenced by Michel Tapié's theory of 'art autre' which dealt with a predominantly process-oriented, gestural, anti-compositional form of abstraction. In this sense, two major modernist concerns converge in the painting of the mid-1950s: the exploration of space within the picture and the exploration of paint at the surface of the picture. According to Alloway, in the postwar period the second concern acquired priority.

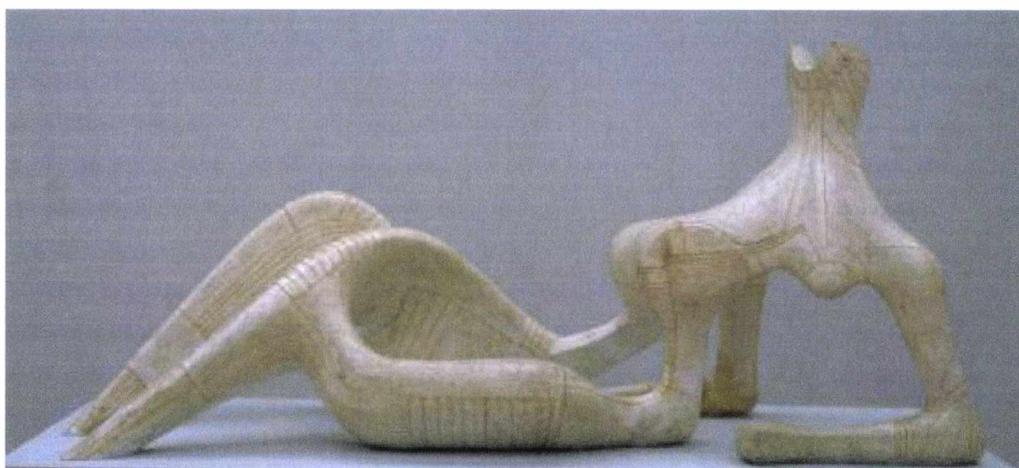
Although Art Informel presented itself as anti-modernist and anti-formal, the inherent human quality of the mark as well as ulterior allusive interpretations of its imagery clearly indicated humanist implications and reinforced the dual focus on what the painting was made of and what it could mean. In Britain, this duality was of particular interest, and the very fact that critics as diverse as Heron, Berger, Alloway, Sylvester, Robertson agreed on the superiority of the work of an artist such as Nicolas de Staël, was proof of the increasing need to merge these disparate aspects. A number of British artists (i.e. Bomberg, Frost, Feiler, Auerbach, Bacon, Lanyon) have sought precisely this reconciliation in their work. The chapter thus concludes with a brief reflection on humanist implications in postwar abstraction, reclaiming this notion originally associated with realism. In British and European painting, humanism provided the means by which to supersede the limitations of modernist formalism and forge typical individual ways of painting in non-figurative modes. Forms of gestural abstraction with allusions to the human body (i.e. 'Abstract Humanism') or, alternatively, to nature (i.e. 'Abstract Impressionism') constituted a manifestation of the postwar liberation from formal and aesthetic restrictions and a re-iteration of humanist principles.

The acknowledgment and assimilation of modernist abstraction in postwar Britain was a complex and challenging process. In 1951, a young Arts Council awarded the £500 Festival of Britain Purchase Prize to an abstract painting, William Gear's *Autumn Landscape* (1950). Singled out from amongst other winning works by Lucian Freud, Ivon Hitchens, Claude Rogers and Robert Medley, Gear's painting attracted the most public and political attention. This clearly reflected the extent to which abstraction was seen as a contentious subject in this period. The painting was accused by the press of being left-wing and international. This greatly contrasts with the view introduced with the promotion of American Abstract Expressionism in the mid-1950s, of abstraction as an expression of the freedom of the individual.¹ However, this association between the liberal nature of abstraction and democratic values was already anticipated in Atlee's defence of modern art in response to its

¹ The association between abstraction and Cold War politics will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

accusations by the conservative right and Lord Samuel of being anti-social, anarchic and unreasonable.² “Lord Viscount Samuel launched a scathing attack on modernist culture in Great Britain, characterising it by what he called ‘deformity sculpture’ and a form of painting that was ‘deliberately irrational and anarchic’. Attlee, in response, felt compelled to defend modern art by stating that for “art to be healthy [it] must be free.”³

Above all, the public and the press complained to the Arts Council for wasting public funds on abstract art, which was perceived as being valueless. By its patronage, the Attlee government was defending the cultural institutions of the welfare state established by the Labour Party, such as the Arts Council, in addition to the government’s gift to the British people after six years of postwar austerity measures—the Festival of Britain.⁴ The impressive (semi-) abstract works exhibited at the Festival gave visual form to a sentiment of postwar liberation; in many ways, they were the evidence of national achievement, originality and innovation. Very much like the theme of the international competition *Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner* initiated by the ICA in the same year, the focus, albeit indirectly, seemed to be on abstraction, seen as symbol of freedom, individuality and inventiveness in the visual arts, and therefore a sign of progress in British culture and society at large.



7. Henry Moore: *Reclining Figure*, 1951

² Lord Viscount Samuel, “The Artist and Society,” *Apollo* 53, no. 316 (June 1951): 150.

³ Joseph Monteyne, “Which Way Is Up? Autumn Landscape and the Crisis over Abstraction in Postwar Britain,” *Collapse* 1 (October 1995): 64.

⁴ Joseph Monteyne, “Which Way Is Up? Autumn Landscape and the Crisis over Abstraction in Postwar Britain,” *Collapse* 1 (October 1995): 64.

Henry Moore's organic *Festival Figure* (and related watercolour entitled *Sculpture in Landscape* (1951) produced for the Festival, alluded to the form of a reclining female figure which merged with the soft curves of the English countryside. James Hyman claimed that Moore's work was typical of British art in the early 1950s in which abstraction and figuration came together as the artists explored the possibilities of an alternative form of expression that was "neither 'pure abstraction', nor 'neo-realism'... far from representing a 'middle ground' compromise between the creation of Modernist idioms and the restraining forces of conservative taste, from which soil grew much of the most innovative art of postwar Britain."⁵ In this sense, the critical writing and curating of Patrick Heron and Lawrence Alloway of the early and mid-1950s, often adopted a central position between the two merging tendencies: figuration and abstraction.

The realist critic David Sylvester came from a different critical background; he was not convinced for example by a stylised work such as Moore's *Festival Figure* – he and other contemporary commentators remarked that the British public was bemused by the modernity of many of the large sculptures on show. In a *Studio* review, Sylvester expressed his scepticism about the success of Moore's figure, arguing that it had no meaningful relationship with its surroundings:

One suspects that Moore has conceived this work purely as a sculptural object, not as an image, because the forms, considered as signs, are either conventional or arbitrary. The head is just as much a cliché as are the heads in official portraits by Royal Academicians. The legs have no connexion with the structure... This latest addition, then, to Moore's long series of 'opened-out' reclining figures has too little contact with life to carry the imaginative conviction and dramatic power of its predecessors.⁶

Sylvester thought Moore's *Reclining Figure* was impressive, yet empty of significance, thus useless for having lost its connection with the real world. Equally, a

⁵ *The Middle Ground, Different Ways of Seeing: Towards a Reassessment of Postwar British Art*, edited by James Hyman (London: James Hyman Gallery, 2004). Published in conjunction with the exhibition "The Challenge of Postwar Painting. New Paths for Modernist Art in Britain (1950-65): Important works by Frank Auerbach, Alan Davie, Terry Frost, Patrick Heron, Ivon Hitchens, Peter Lanyon, Henry Moore, William Scott and William Turnbull" shown at the James Hyman Gallery, London.

⁶ David Sylvester, "Festival Sculpture," *Studio* 142, no. 702 (September 1951): 75.

Studio article of August 1951⁷ condemned the abstractions exhibited in *60 paintings for '51* as inhumane and devoid of spiritually elevating substance. The leftist socialist realist John Berger also criticised the abstract works displayed at the preliminary Festival exhibition at Gimpel Fils finding them boring, with interchangeable titles, ornamental, repetitive imagery⁸ and overall unable to connect effectively with reality.⁹ For Berger, abstract art was largely restrictive, with the artists having no 'ulterior motive'¹⁰; he believed their art had no social involvement, but was merely a 'bourgeois' source of aesthetic pleasure.¹¹

Meanwhile, newspapers such as *The Times* and its critic Alan Clutton-Brock (who had participated in the jury of the Festival) praised the daring venture of the newly-formed Arts Council and saw the exhibited art as having a socially positive purpose and a symbol of progress within the Atlee's Labour government's welfare state.¹² Nevertheless, public reaction was generally critical towards the large, more abstract paintings as well and Ben Nicholson felt compelled to address the reluctant viewer, in the defence of abstraction: "People to whom this freedom in painting and sculpture is new ask, 'But what is it supposed to represent?' The answer to that is very much the same one might give if asked what a flower is supposed to represent. Each flower exists *in its own right* – it does not represent anything but itself."¹³ Nicholson suggested that the public should trust the organisers and art intelligentsia to form their ignorance with respect to welcoming the new forms of art.¹⁴ In many ways, then, the *Festival of Britain* represented a means to educate the public about the fact that national achievement did not have to be exclusively linked with long-standing traditions, but could be seen in conjunction with innovative new developments in the arts.

⁷ "Art Without Faith," *The Studio* 142, no. 201 (August 1951): 33.

⁸ For more, see Monteyne, "Which Way Is Up?", 84.

⁹ John Berger, "William Gear at Gimpel Fils," *New Statesman and Nation* 41, no. 1049 (14 April 1951): 422.

¹⁰ John Berger, "Abstract Paintings, Sculptures, Mobiles at the AIA Gallery," *New Statesman and Nation* 41, no. 1056 (2 June 1951): 620.

¹¹ See Monteyne, "Which Way Is Up?", 84.

¹² "Festival Paintings: Large Canvases on View," and "Large Pictures," *The Times* (22 June 1951): 3, 7.

¹³ Ben Nicholson, "Letter to the Editor," *Daily Mail* (7 August 1951).

¹⁴ See Ben Nicholson, "Defending Modern Artists," *Daily Mail* (7 August 1951).

In this decade of transition, a dominant critical mode, especially true in relation to landscape – welcomed abstract painting that permitted figurative interpretation without enforcing a single reading.¹⁵ Notably, the painters associated with St Ives i.e. Patrick Heron, Peter Lanyon, Roger Hilton and Terry Frost were forging their own, unique language which would transcend constructionist limitations. They achieved this by experimenting with non-figurative imagery, often used as an expression of their response to the natural environment. In their painting there was a close connection between a concern for compositional structure, the act of mark-making and actual physical sensations (“caressing skin, grasping a body, climbing a hill, swimming in the sea, gliding in the sky”¹⁶), one might say, a dual focus on the formal and experiential aspects of art. The antecedents of this view were set by the artist-critic Adrian Stokes, associated with this group from the 1940s, and an ardent theorist of perceptual art, who wrote extensively about the necessity of the relationship between the artist and the outside world. He claimed that the true artist “claims that he cannot work without the conviction that his painting will be the equivalent, [...] though in no sense the mere representation, of an outer experience.”¹⁷ He pointed out that, although the works of some of his most admired contemporaries seemed to be total abstractions, the artists themselves rejected this claim. One painter strongly influenced by Stokes’ theories was Peter Lanyon, who maintained in 1957:

I’m not advocating subject in the old sense but I think that an image which is, as it were, a part of the paint and the painting itself – something which is coming through which may not be precise or consciously experienced so much, but can be familiar almost subjectively, subconsciously by whoever’s looking at it – that’s very important and I think that’s partly to do with the involvement. I think it is absolutely necessary to have this power of image behind the form. Very often you get abstract painting which is without image, which is concerned only with the organisation of paint, colour and form on the surface, and because it is without image it’s limited in depth, in history, in pressure, in upthrust, in knowledge which is our own racial background.¹⁸

¹⁵ See Andrew Causey, *Peter Lanyon. Modernism and the Land* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 192.

¹⁶ Hyman, *The Middle Ground*.

¹⁷ Adrian Stokes in *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes*, edited by Lawrence Gowing, vol. III, *Three Essays on the Painting of Our Time. Part III. Is-ness and the Avant-garde* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 182-183.

¹⁸ “Derbyshire 1957,” transcript from telephone recording of Andrew Forge interviewing Peter Lanyon and Anthony Fry. Recorded: Thursday, 25th July, 1957. Transmitted: Sunday, 28th July, 1957. (London: BBC Third Programms), TLO 34911/TAV 297B.

Lanyon stressed the importance of the mutual correspondence between painting and the viewer, and the latter's ability to relate to the art, which was only achievable by retaining the connection with the real world through the visual image. Although Lanyon and his contemporaries were to be technically influenced by the American avant-garde, in many ways, his view expressed the British artists' initial reaction to the formal abstraction of the New York School, whose influence had recently affected the London art world. Lanyon's interview was taken in 1957, only a year after the Tate showed the Abstract Expressionists in the exhibition *Modern Art in the United States*; two years later, in 1959, it showed the even more influential *New American Painting*.

The latter coincided with an exhibition of British paintings entitled *Four English Middle Generation¹⁹ Painters* organised by Patrick Heron for the Waddington Galleries in 1959. This was seen as reminding the public of a "native tradition of painting evolving independently of the *École de Paris*"²⁰, and contemporary commentators Dennis Farr and Alan Bowness proposed it as a valid British alternative to American art. It featured work by Heron, Wynter, Frost and Hilton, whom Farr claimed were "not provincial, in the European sense, and indeed their work can stand comparison with that of their European contemporaries. There is a strong American influence, certainly, but that is to be welcomed as symbolic of a necessary breakaway

¹⁹ The art dealer Leslie Waddington and the critic Alan Bowness invented the term in 1959. It was initially used to refer to the painters Roger Hilton, Patrick Heron, Terry Frost and Bryan Wynter. Later, Heron extended the term to include Peter Lanyon, Alan Davie, William Scott and Keith Vaughan. Most of this group were at some point associated with St Ives, which became in many ways the British counterpart of American art, and was strongly supported by the British Council and shown regularly in New York's commercial galleries. Heron wrote that the acceptance and admiration by his 'middle generation' towards the first showings of American art in London was crucial for the further development and meteoric international success of the latter. He remembered that, "it was our tiny group of 'middle generation' painters in Britain who gave them their *first foreign approval* [...] not only were we in varying degrees influenced by them at the time (the supreme compliment as between painters), but we openly proclaimed that this was what was happening." From "The Ascendancy of London in the Sixties," *Studio International* (December 1966) in *Painter as Critic*, edited by Mel Gooding (London: Tate Publishing, 1998), 156.

At the ICA in 1970, Patrick Heron delivered a lecture entitled "Symmetry in Painting: an Academic Formula". For three hours Heron spoke of the international promotion of American painting and criticised mechanical painting. He also criticised British critics for ignoring the middle-generation of artists. Heron emphasised the necessity for the "hand-stroked, hand-scribbled, hand-scrubbed application of paint". (in Gooding, (ed.), *Painter as Critic*, 22).

²⁰ Dennis Farr, "London," *The Burlington Magazine* 101, no. 675 (June 1959): 249.

from the tutelage of Paris, the vitality of whose tradition, after a glorious revolutionary era, is now almost spent.”²¹

The work of the ‘generation’ artists needed to be seen as free of the influence of Paris, developing parallel with the art of the New York School, yet maintaining its independence from it through its typically British fusion of figurative and non-figurative modes. Bowness suggested that a show of British painting comparable to the *New American Painting* exhibition should be held at the Tate, “which would throw into sharp contrast the hardening of the barriers between the ‘realist’ school and the abstractionists – using this term rather loosely to include all who are not exclusively figurative artists”²².

In many ways then, the critics could identify a clear movement towards abstraction in British painting, which they regarded as an indication of the innovative potential of national art and which, as a result, they wished to promote as a legitimate equivalent of American painting. Meanwhile, there was also a strong sense in which, the painting of the ‘middle generation’, was seen as superior through its quintessential loyalty to visual world and the image. A traditionalist such as Peter Fuller criticised the new American artists, claiming that they “attempted to express emotions through paintings from which almost all illusionistic imagery had been removed”.²³ He saw this as a Cold War means by which American cultural agencies promoted abstraction as a symbol of the existential ‘freedom’ of artists in the West. There have been extensive theories on the ideologically contextualisation of formal American abstraction and recent criticism has seldom considered this form of art only for its aesthetic attributes, while realism, on the other hand, has been seen as much more than merely an outlet of social or political messages.²⁴

In Cold War pronouncements on Abstract Expressionism, abstraction came to be associated with the freedom of the individual (read both anti-Fascist and

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Peter Fuller, “The Visual Arts,” in *The Cambridge Cultural History of Britain*, edited by Boris Ford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 109.

²⁴ Mona Hadler, “Sculpture in Postwar Europe and America, 1945-59,” *Art Journal* 53, no. 4, *Sculpture in Postwar Europe and America, 1945-59* (Winter 1994): 17. See also Robin Spencer, “Brit Art from the Fifties: the Reality versus the Myth,” *Studio International* (10 May 2002).

anticommunist) while figuration provoked associations with the Socialist Realism of the Communists and the Third Reich. It was often alleged that postwar American abstract art was funded by the CIA as a means to promote and export an avant-garde art to Europe, that was formally radical but politically immune to the associations with Communism that the European avant-garde had garnered. This aspect was visible in the interest and support given to the Institute of Contemporary Arts' international sculpture competition *The Unknown Political Prisoner* in 1951.²⁵

Fuller believed that, initially, British supporters of the new American art, such as Patrick Heron, did not realise the extent to which the transatlantic influence would undermine original national developments. Fuller claimed Heron had underestimated its negative impact on the shaping of British contemporary art, a result of which was that towards the late 1950s a considerable number of artists (e.g. Hoyland, Ayres, Denny, Cohen, Smith, Turnbull, Riley) started working in exclusively non-figurative modes. Illustrative of this was the exhibition *Situation* (Royal Society of British Artists, 1960) which used two main criteria for the work exhibited: total lack of reference and huge scale. Intense, saturated colour, the sole reliance on gestural mark-making and simple geometric elements were used to create a sense of expanding space. Any suggestion to the outside world, including abstraction from nature, was to be eliminated – this was a stipulation by the exhibition organisers that pointedly excluded the earlier generation of St Ives painters whose work was rooted in observation (e.g. Heron's 'middle generation').

Patrick Heron and the Pan-European Modernist Reading of Postwar Abstraction

In the decade prior to these developments, Heron had written extensively about the distinction between two approaches to abstraction, which, even though stylistically similar, diverged from the point of view of the subject. As early as 1949,

²⁵ See Danny Birchall, "Historic Monuments," blog article for the Institute of Contemporary Arts, [://www.ica.org.uk/Historic20Monuments+13784.twl](http://www.ica.org.uk/Historic20Monuments+13784.twl), 20 May 2007.

See also Joan Marter, "The Ascendancy of Abstraction for Public Art: The Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner Competition," *Art Journal* 53, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 28; and Robert Burstow, "The Limits of Modernist Art as a 'Weapon of the Cold War': Reassessing the Unknown Patron of the Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner," *Oxford Art Journal* 20, no. 1 (1997): 80.

the critic had made a distinction between the 'pure' Mondrianesque abstraction of the 1930s and a highly individual abstract-figurative vision, which, nevertheless, relied on the perception of the outside world:

Most purely abstract artists believe that the plastic work of art should be entirely self-contained, that it should have no direct reference to any known object outside itself. To my mind this is a pictorial heresy. I do not believe that, in order to give full play to the purely abstract features of form, colour and design, it is necessary to discard all evocation of external reality and to eschew all poetic comment upon a world of perfectly recognizable everyday objects and people. On the contrary, I believe the function of painting at its highest level is the perpetual creation of a new fusion, a new marriage between the purely abstract entities on one side and the everyday world of commonplace, but nevertheless magical realities, on the other. A purely abstract shape is easy to invent. What is difficult, so difficult that only genius can fully accomplish it, is the forging of a new formal image out of familiar, well-known forms.²⁶

Heron supported a type of abstraction which was greatly involved with perfecting the formal capacities of colour and spatial composition, yet he always insisted on the necessity of art to stay true to the subject. By promoting the great French avant-gardists Braque, Bonnard, Matisse, Picasso and attempting to understand the creative process of British artists such as Ivon Hitchens, Roger Hilton or Peter Lanyon, Heron sought to reconcile the extremes of, what he referred to as, 'pure abstraction' and the 'fallacy of realism'. In 1950 he wrote that "if the middle way between pure abstraction and object representation can once more be strengthened in both England and France, there is hope for modern painting; we should then escape the new academicism, now threatening, the academicism of mechanical abstraction."²⁷ Heron clearly expressed his resistance to the self-reflexivity of pure abstract art, but also the mimicry of pure realism; in fact he saw a parallel between the two in the sense that both could potentially become academic and doctrinaire.

²⁶ Patrick Heron, "The Necessity of Distortion in Painting," from a lecture delivered at Leeds University (October 1949) in *Painter as Critic*, 42..

²⁷ Patrick Heron, "English and French," *New Statesman* 39, no. 983 (7 January 1950): 9-10. See also Heron, "Bonnard and Visual Reality," *New Statesman* (24 November 1951): 588-9, as well as Heron's introduction to *The Changing Forms of Art* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955).

In his essay 'Bonnard and Visual Reality' (1951), Heron stressed the importance of the visual attitude in painting and the "complex texture of visual reality, the reality of the eye." He noted the loss of the mimetic function of painting and the important role played by interpretation or "translation" of reality through "distortion" on canvas, instead of literal reproduction of a contemplated subject. This early essay was still very much relying on the idea of Cézannesque synthesis and 'abstracting from' nature, which the critic referred to as 'distortion' of the subject.

A few years later though, in 1953, reflecting upon the contemporary significance of the word 'abstract', Heron claimed that "the battle for this word's true meaning has been lost: it is no longer considered a verb, and one applicable to Cézanne's processes, but as an adjective meaning 'non-figurative' ". This shift in the word's significance was to prefigure future debates about the delicate boundaries between figuration and abstraction in postwar art. Heron wrote that the word 'abstract' came to describe painting which the viewer was only "on the verge of understanding more fully", whilst images which had become accessible or familiar were generally labelled with an alternative to 'abstract'. He pointed to the restrictive nature of the word's new significance when he wrote that, "Being aware of the true content and feeling of a work – even a patently non-figurative one – makes one reluctant to label it with a word which implies, although it ought not to, a certain barren emptiness."²⁸ By this, the critic implied the inadequacy of the word 'abstract' in the contemporary context, when applied to the non-figurative painting of his fellow artists and voiced the difficulties in labelling this form of art.

Although Heron's initial critical studies were steeped in the synthesis of nature by the pioneers of the European avant-garde, through his own work and writing he realised the increasingly dual function of contemporary French and British art to stay true both to material and subject. Of the avant-garde movements, Heron initially preferred Cubism for preserving the ties with the outside world, allowing artists to order their vision of reality into a coherent formal structure on canvas whilst exploring the materiality of the medium itself. In this, Cubism provided a bridge between the old and new Écoles de Paris and a way to create a natural relationship

²⁸ Patrick Heron, in exh. cat. *Space in Colour*, an exhibition selected by Heron at the Hanover Gallery, London, July-August 1953, in *Painter as Critic*, 88.

between contemporary British painting and Paris. In 1955 he wrote that, “Cubism, in its love of the concrete, extols paint, canvas, paper, chalk as well as wine-glasses, tables and guitars. This sensuous love of the material is of paramount importance to Soulages, de Staël and – over in England – to William Scott, Alan Davie, Roger Hilton, Peter Lanyon, Victor Pasmore and Terry Frost.”²⁹ In an article of the same year, Heron used the term ‘*abstract-figuration*’³⁰ in an attempt to define this type of abstraction which would still be indispensably relying on the outside world. In this, he attempted to re-claim the tie with reality which was lost in Abstract Expressionism, an interest shared by many of his compatriots, mainly those painters belonging to the St Ives group, as well as an alternative younger generation of American artists working in the 1950s³¹. Heron’s interest in the subject drawn from the visual world, captured in pictorial form through spatial arrangement and composition thus merged with his fascination with “the sensuous love of material” - the plastic potential of the medium.

Lawrence Alloway and the Internationalist Reading of Postwar Abstraction

Lawrence Alloway’s writing and curating was highly instrumental in defining and classifying trends within postwar art and ultimately made a break with Heron’s pan-European reading of postwar abstraction. Throughout his career, Alloway supported radical innovative forms of expression which sought to break away from the visual re-interpretation of the outside world and get involved in the inherent workings of art and the life of paint itself. In an article of 1953 Alloway claimed that, “The difference between the process of *abstraction* and *non-figuration* is that the former takes nature as its starting point and reduces or distorts it to pictorial form whereas the latter is not seeking to make the paint stand for abstracted natural forms but merely for itself.”³² Whereas the latter aspect was seen by Heron as a deficiency of postwar art, Alloway embraced it and dedicated most of his career to promoting it. By the late 1950s, this interest urged the critic to find ways in which to present a global image of painterly, processual abstract art in which contemporary British

²⁹ Patrick Heron, “Space in Contemporary Painting and Architecture,” in *Changing Forms of Art*.

³⁰ Patrick Heron, “Art is Autonomous,” *The Twentieth Century* (1955) in *Painter as Critic*, 99.

³¹ See Chapter Six.

³² Lawrence Alloway, “The Limits of Abstract Painting,” *Art News and Review* 5, no. 16 (5 September 1953): 5. See also Kenneth Martin, “Abstract Art,” *Broadsheet* No. 1: Devoted to Abstract Art (1951).

painting would have to match up to trends coming from the postwar *École de Paris* and the New York School.

Throughout the decade, Alloway's criticism had consistently followed the diverse developments in abstract art and attempted to rationalise them and often categorise and label them. In the early 1950s, Alloway had supported the pure constructivist, 'classicising' abstraction of those St Ives artists [e.g. Nicholson, Hepworth, Gabo] who carried a lucid outlook on abstraction over from the thirties to the fifties in "an attempt to restore the continuity of European concrete art interrupted by the war."³³ This preference for the legacy of the 1930s was replaced in 1954 in *Nine Abstract Artists*, with an interest in the contrast between "a new-wave constructivist group whose affinities were with Max Bill and Richard Lohse"³⁴ and a group of "irrational" painters running a "stylistic gamut from expressionist action painters to a kind of sensual impressionism without things."³⁵ In this sense, he remarked that there were two distinctive trends in British abstraction: the *rational* and purely *geometric* art of a number of artists such as Mary Martin, Victor Pasmore³⁶, Kenneth Martin, whom he was at that point particularly interested in, and the "*irrational expressionism by malerisch [painterly] means*" of other abstract artists such as William Scott, Terry Frost, Roger Hilton and Alan Davie who "melt, bury or fracture platonic geometry".³⁷ While he admitted, (for example, in relation to Peter Lanyon's work³⁸), that pure Mondrianesque abstraction was a utopian stance which postwar art could no longer accept as valid, he elaborated alternative theories in support of non-figurative art.

An example of these two approaches to abstraction can be seen in two works by Victor Pasmore and, Terry Frost respectively, dating from the same year. In

³³ Lawrence Alloway, "Abstract Art, 22 Fitzroy Street," *Art News and Review* (26 July 1952), from Margaret Garlake, "Between Paris and New York: Critical Constructions of 'Englishness' c. 1945-60" in *Art Criticism Since 1900*, edited by Malcolm Gee (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 190.

³⁴ Garlake, "Between Paris and New York", 190.

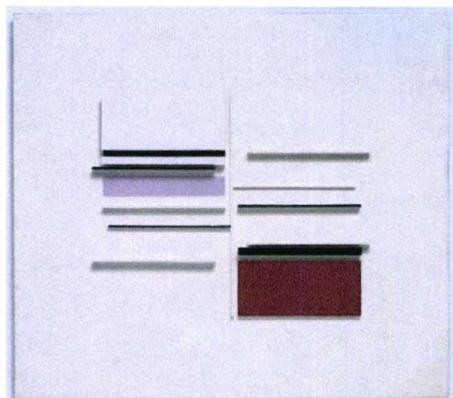
³⁵ Lawrence Alloway (ed.), *Nine Abstract Artists* (London: Tiranti, 1954), 9.

³⁶ Alloway defined Pasmore's abstract reliefs not, as one might expect, in terms of machine production, but as late manifestations of the Arts and Crafts on account of their hand-made character.

³⁷ Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists*, 3-4.

³⁸ Alloway always included Lanyon in his exhibitions (e.g. *Abstract Impressionism*, 1958 and *Dimensions*, 1957) For the first he described his work in his book *Nine Abstract Artists* as "a kind of impressionism without things", whereas in the exhibition catalogue for *Dimensions: British Abstract Art 1948-1957*, he referred to his work as 'allusive abstraction'.

Mondrian's tradition, and in line with Nicholson's constructivist abstraction, Pasmore's *Abstract in White, Black, Indian and Lilac* (1957) is an expression of his belief that art derived from nature, and specifically from its underlying processes and structures rather than its surface appearance. In his reliefs, Pasmore gave three-dimensional form to the concepts of growth and abstract harmony. He refused to use diagonal elements as he did not consider these as organic developments when compared to horizontals and verticals, maintaining that, "Geometry, though subject to the quoi of personal judgment, is a guide to the organic process." Frost's *Yellow Triptych*, on the other hand, was produced in response to Frost's direct experience of the dramatic Yorkshire Dales which the artist visited after taking up a fellowship in Leeds. The spectacular scale of the vista is echoed in this painting which creates the sensation of a huge space in which arching lines, pulsating colour and painterly forms float freely before the viewer. Like many British artists of the time, Frost was aware of American abstract painting and in this work there are areas reminiscent of Rothko's blurred colour edges, as well as perhaps Jasper Johns's repertoire of strong recurring images and signs. In many ways, these two works also reflect Alloways early considerations about the distinction between non-figuration and abstraction, Frost seemingly subscribing to the first approach and Pasmore, to the second.



8. Victor Pasmore: *Abstract White, Black, Indian and Lilac*, 1957

9. Terry Frost: *Yellow Triptych*, 1957-9

The two forms of abstract painting Alloway discussed, on the one hand, *geometric abstraction* "promoted as being objective, conceptual and rational"³⁹, on the other, *painterly abstraction* which he "implicitly dismissed for its allusive,

³⁹ Fiona Gaskin, "British Tachisme in the Postwar Period 1946-1957," in *Artists and Patrons in Postwar Britain*, Essays by postgraduate students at the Courtauld Institute of Art, edited by Margaret Garlake, Courtauld Research Papers No.2 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 29.

subjective, perceptual and irrational qualities”⁴⁰ have more recently been taken up by Margaret Garlake and Elena Lledó, who distinguished between ‘cold’ geometric abstraction and ‘warm’⁴¹ painterly, tachiste-type abstraction. Alloway’s categorisation did not endure, however, for very long in postwar criticism. Already with the occasion of the Arts Council exhibition *New Trends in Painting* (1956)⁴², the critic declared that the painterly tendency in abstraction had come to predominate on the contemporary artistic scene having taken precedence over construction: “This unusual stress on the action of the artist, splashing his canvas, building up the paint, and so on, dispenses with most of the conventions of traditional modern art. The rejected rhetoric includes geometry, formal composition, and the purification of art by the exclusion of objects.”⁴³

By the time of the touring exhibition *Dimensions: British abstract art 1948-1957*, held at the O’Hana Gallery in 1957, Alloway’s viewpoint had visibly shifted and he could no longer see a distinctive difference between geometric and painterly abstraction. *Dimensions* showed artists of mixed nationalities such as Ernst, Dubuffet, de Staël, Francis, Appel, the main characteristic to their work being painterliness, and intuitive gesture inspired by European surrealism and reworked by the new American abstract painting. Alloway elaborated on the painterly aspect of contemporary abstraction in the catalogue introduction to *Dimensions*⁴⁴, using the terms ‘allusive abstraction’ (work containing reference to landscape, still life or figure, e.g. Terry Frost) and ‘painterly non-figuration’ (containing no real allusions to the outside world, but remarkable for the plastic and lyrical qualities achieved through the handling of paint e.g. Denis Bowen). This was an attempt to prove that painterliness was characteristic of both and it was on this aspect of plasticity that the viewer should concentrate, rather than on identifying reference or lack of it within specific works.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ See Margaret Garlake, “Between Paris and New York,” and Elena Lledó, “Postwar Abstractions: the Paradox of Nicolas de Staël,” PhD thesis (Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 1995).

⁴² Lawrence Alloway, exh. cat. *The Challenge of Postwar Painting* to “New Trends in Painting: Some Pictures from a Private Collection” (London: Arts Council, 1956) showing Karen Appel, Bram Bogart, Nicolas de Staël, Jean Dubuffet, Max Ernst, Sam Francis, Paul Jenkins, Jean-Paul Riopelle and Pierre Soulages.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Lawrence Alloway and Toni del Renzio in exh. cat. *Dimensions: British Abstract Art 1948-1957*, (London: O’Hana Gallery, 1957).

In addition to Alloway's two categories, Fiona Gaskin also considered a third which she referred to as 'allusive non-figuration', in which the external world was no starting point and the language was predominantly abstract, yet traces of figurative imagery could be implied as an end-result and could be exploited by the artist. She argued that the paintings belonging to this category allowed for imagery to develop, even though the work had never been originally intended to be figurative - "the artist had not started out with an object (whether before his eyes or in the mind's eye) from which to abstract an image, but because of the inherent power of paint and colour to imply imagery, allusions could be found in the dabs or strokes of paint. Such allusions were allowed to remain, or might even be elaborated by the artist."⁴⁵ An example could be perhaps found in the work of an artist such as Paul Feiler, which often seemed to start off with the involvement in the marks and resulted in some suggestion of a familiar visual image, such as in *Landscape, Red & Black* (1958), where the placement of the horizontal band narrowing towards the top of the picture could infer the horizon, as the vertical brushstrokes in the centre could suggest trees or vegetation - hence the connotations in the title.



10. Paul Feiler: *Landscape, Red & Black*, 1958

The 1956 exhibition *New Trends in Painting* (showing artists such as Karen Appel, Bram Bogart, Nicolas de Staël, Jean Dubuffet, Max Ernst, Sam Francis, Paul Jenkins, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Pierre Soulages) as well as *Dimensions* were displays of diverse international languages of painting, promoting "a new attitude to finish that

⁴⁵ Fiona Gaskin, "British Tachisme" in *Artists and Patrons in Postwar Britain*, 22.

disregarded notions of *belle peinture* in favour of an *art brut*.⁴⁶ It focused on an art of raw gesturalism and painterliness. Alloway stressed that, far from representing a compromise between realist and abstract tendencies and styles, *New Trends in Painting* was presenting a new catalogue of aims and values. He referred to “the now academic quarrel between realism and non-figurative art” and pointed out that the selected artists were not part of either category, as they were seeking, in line with Tapié’s ideas, “something that is real as a painting, in which the physical qualities of paint have not been suppressed by a fixed idea or finish or elaborated to a point of excessive refinement.”⁴⁷ Hyman showed that although these artists had rather different manners of painting, their work was presented so as to show a “global shift in priorities”⁴⁸ in the sense that Alloway’s concept challenged Sylvester’s established notion of European modernist realism, and ultimately, the relationship between realism and Modernism per se.

The ideas Alloway introduced through *New Trends in Painting* were elaborated on a year later in a series of six essays entitled ‘Background to Action’ (1957) published in *Art News*, influenced by Harold Rosenberg’s article ‘The American Action Painters’ (*Art News*, 1952). The main object of these articles was to design an international stage where European and American Tachistes, Abstract Expressionists and Cobra artists would be scrutinised according to one single dominant criterion – that of ‘action’ and physicality of paint, as well as, following Rosenberg’s line of enquiry, “an existential definition of the artist”.⁴⁹ Alloway’s overview largely ignored the art of Paris and the School of London, and attempted to install New York at the forefront of the international avant-garde. He wrote that, “New York is to mid-century what Paris was to the early twentieth century: it is the centre of Western art.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Hyman, *Middle Ground, Different Ways of Seeing*, 11.

⁴⁷ Alloway, *Challenge of Postwar Painting*, 3.

⁴⁸ James Hyman, *Figurative Art in Britain during the Cold War 1945-60* (London: Yale University Press, 2001), 192.

⁴⁹ Lawrence Alloway “Background to Action,” *Art News and Review* 9, no. 19, cover feature (12 October 1957): 1-2.

⁵⁰ Lawrence Alloway, “Background to Action 4. The Shifted Centre,” *Art News and Review* 9, no. 23 (7 December 1957), 2 from Hyman, Note 20, 248.

Alloway's purposefully internationalist criticism helped promote British art abroad in a moment of flux between the two Arts Council exhibitions organised by the MoMA, *Modern Art in the United States* (1956) and *The New American Painting* (1959) held at the Tate. This was a strong new approach in British criticism which so far had been limited to national and European allegiances. Whilst many contemporary British critics at the time were dismissive of America, Alloway's exhibitions and writing went beyond the rivalry between Western Europe and American culture, allowing them to coexist.⁵¹ In 1958, another exhibition organised by Alloway under the name *Abstract Impressionism*⁵² further illustrated the idea of a new painting born out of a multitude of international influences. It showed Europeans like de Staël and Masson, alongside Americans such as Francis, Guston and Mitchell and British artists such as Moynihan, Hitchens, Heron and Lanyon. The same year, Andrew Forge declared that "the barriers between abstract and realist tendencies are not as hard as they used to be; artists feel free to cross them either way. They are united in a new interest in the painterly, paint itself and its manipulation. (This is perhaps the most important characteristic of the time.)"⁵³ Modernist formalism of European allegiance was thus overturned for an anti-formal gesturalism which seemed to develop internationally both in the postwar *École de Paris* and the New York School and Alloway wished to integrate contemporary British art into this context.

Pictorial Matter, Space and Form

Overall, two major concerns of modernist painting were visible in the mid-1950s: on the one hand, the exploration of space within the picture and on the other, the exploration of paint on the surface of the picture. In the late 1940s writers such as the French theorist Michel Leiris⁵⁴ and the British critic David Sylvester⁵⁵ had showed a great interest in the movement of form in pictorial space in the work of artists such as Paul Klee, Joan Miró, André Masson, Alberto Giacometti and Francis

⁵¹ Hyman, *Figurative Art in Britain*, 193.

⁵² See detailed analysis of this exhibition and term in Chapter Six.

⁵³ Andrew Forge in exh. cat. *Since the War* (London: Arts Council, 1958), 8.

⁵⁴ Michel Leiris and Georges Limbour, *André Masson et Son Univers* (Genève: Éditions des Trois Collines, 1947); Michel Leiris, "Around Joan Miró," in *The Prints of Joan Miró* (New York: Curt Valentin, 1947).

⁵⁵ See David Sylvester, "Curriculum Vitae," in *About Modern Art: Critical Essays, 1948-1997* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1997).

Bacon. Here, movement, actual or implied, was seen as translating psychological torment through implications about the vulnerability of the human body. However, in the mid-1950s there was a visible switch in art from the preoccupation with the psychological experience of the body in space to a preoccupation with the life of paint on the canvas. The treatment of paint at the surface of the picture, the process of making a painting (i.e. *facture*, or the execution of a work of art) and texture became important. This replaced the artist's interest in the illusion of depth and movement between certain points within the pictorial space.

This outlook was introduced into British art by Michel Tapié's definition of 'art autre'⁵⁶ (most commonly rendered in English as 'art of another kind') through the exhibition *Opposing Forces* held at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1953. His definition of 'Art Informel' (from the French 'informel', meaning unformed or formless) rejected tradition and undermined a separation between abstraction and figuration; it was promoted as a radical break with all conventional notions of order and composition, in many ways denying the core principles of Modernism itself. This notion referred to the anti-geometric, anti-naturalistic, and non-figurative formal preoccupations of the artists producing such work (e.g. Karel Appel, Camille Bryen, Alberto Burri, Jean Dubuffet, Jean Fautrier, Ruth Francken, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Wols), stressing their pursuit of spontaneity, looseness of form, and a penchant for the irrational.

Their work was characterised as predominantly gestural and expressive, featuring repetitive calligraphic marks and anti-compositional and promoted as an equivalent to American gestural abstraction (e.g. Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, Tobey). In the catalogue introduction to the exhibition, Tapié wrote that "The Informel is not opposed to Form... but to a sterilised and sterilising formalism" and spoke of the search of the artist for "the Real in depth, the Real appropriate for today"⁵⁷. Any formal constrictions were denied, and Tapié offered as an alternative, the raw vision of the artist's innermost feelings, expressed in the most honest, spontaneous fashion, which is what he meant by the pursuit of 'the Real'.

⁵⁶ Michel Tapié, *Un art autre* (Paris: Gabriel-Giraud, 1952), unpaginated. See Chapter Four.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

The pictorial means by which this expressive process would manifest itself were consequently often experimental and involved in the sheer process of working the medium. This concern with material was visible for example in French artist Jean Dubuffet's protruding layers of paint and Nicolas de Staël's use of the palette knife to sculpt impasto into tactile masses. De Staël (exhibited in 1952 at Matthiesen and in 1956 at the Whitechapel) and Dubuffet (shown in 1955 at the ICA), were extremely influential on British figurative and non-figurative artists alike. For Dubuffet's ICA exhibition catalogue, the French critic Georges Limbour wrote that, "painting is *matter* rather than *form*. It is matter in the same way as the world is matter"⁵⁸.

In many ways, this art aspired to be a re-creation of reality by means of the artist's personal, intuitive intervention. Heron offered his own reading, but he chose an artist such as Nicolas de Staël, whose work still had strong ties with modernism in the conventional sense. The critic remarked that "in de Staël the double function of fine painting is always apparent: each form, each area of paint is both itself (an area of paint) and, at the same instant, the communication of illusion – the almost tangible illusion of forms in space – out there! Before your very eyes!"⁵⁹; in an *Arts* (N.Y.) article of the same year he stated enthusiastically that "since 1945 no foreign painter has had such an influence on the English avant-garde"⁶⁰. Due to the fact that de Staël's work was accessible to both parts of the abstract-realist debate through its dual function, the realist critic John Berger was equally fascinated by it, pronouncing him in 1956 "the new hero of the art world"⁶¹ for his ability to stay true to both the reality of paint as matter and the reality of the known image.

The development of Nicolas de Staël's painting was reflected in the work of British artists of the time. In the catalogue of his 1956 memorial exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, Denys Sutton wrote that during 1951-2 the Parisian artist had come to a moment of crisis in his career, where the process of synthesising from nature had reached a dead end, where he realised he could not push the simplification of the image derived from nature any further, and had to find his way back to

⁵⁸ Georges Limbour, "Let the Material Speak for Itself," translated by Peter Watson, in exh. cat. *Dubuffet* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1955).

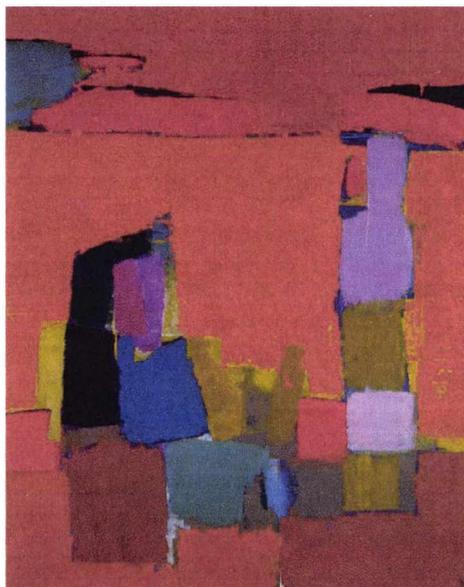
⁵⁹ Patrick Heron, "Nicholas de Staël," *The Listener* (3 May 1956) in *Painter as Critic*, 109.

⁶⁰ Patrick Heron, article in *Arts Magazine* 30 (May 1956): 12.

⁶¹ John Berger, "De Staël is the New Hero of the Art World," *Evening Standard* (16 May 1956): 560.

figuration: “The effort of facing up to the problems of figurative painting was immense, and he felt the strain [...]. What he had to do was nothing less than bridge the gulf from abstract to figurative painting, or, in other words, to reverse the course of his development.”⁶²

An example of this was the work *The Football Players* (1952) in which the intensity of the contact between the players, the ‘jeu’, as he expressed it, of the ‘rouge et bleu’, compelled him to actually represent the figures, as can be seen in a series of relevant preliminary sketches.⁶³ The switch visible in de Staël’s approach from then on came through in his landscapes of the time, which were believed his most accomplished oeuvre and which Heron referred to as “those paintings in which the abstract components add up to an oblique statement of landscape or still life, without the reference being overt.”⁶⁴ Having abandoned the paint brush along with the figure, de Staël’s favourite technique of thickly laid on paint produced a semblance of depth and perspective, competing with and, at the same time, emphasizing the brilliance of the pictorial surface. An example of this is *Figure by the Sea* (1952), in which there is an equal concern for the tactility of paint as well as the arrangement of the colour shapes in such a manner that the result is the translation of pictorial space into suggestive space.



11. Nicolas de Staël: *Figure by the Sea*, 1952

⁶² Denys Sutton in exh. cat. *Nicolas de Staël*, memorial exhibition (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, May-June 1956), 16.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Heron, “Nicolas de Staël,” in *Painter as Critic*, 109.

The director and curator of the Whitechapel, Bryan Robertson started his preface to de Staël's exhibition catalogue in 1956 offering his work as a perfect example of 'intellectual manipulation' in painting. The curator believed that the most valuable work of gestural artists such as Pollock, Mathieu and Riopelle was in fact "most carefully contrived, as self-conscious as any other kind of painting and as objective. The tyranny of reason is not easily discarded."⁶⁵ By implying that the mark-making process of these artists was still controlled on some mental level, Robertson distanced himself from the critical views of Americans like Harold Rosenberg and William Seitz who advocated action painting as strictly an instinctual act and believed that reason did not come into play in the creative act. Robertson claimed de Staël was neither a pure realist nor a purely abstract artist. He believed art was an act of revelation and de Staël was superior to either category by being able to relate to the spirit of his time through his work. He stayed away from both these "over-simplified categories and in some ways he tried to synthesize them"⁶⁶. His success lay in his unbreakable ties with nature which would facilitate both a means of emotional expression and a means to exert some control and structure in his compositions.⁶⁷ De Staël managed to maintain a perfect balance between thought and action, always true to the consciousness of the picturesque of traditional easel painting, but meanwhile experimenting with conventional scale, paint and figuration. Robertson wrote that one constant in his art was his wish to produce work "in terms which everyone can recognize."⁶⁸ David Sylvester and Lawrence Alloway expressed similar admiration for de Staël's innovative vision with the occasion of the same Whitechapel exhibition.⁶⁹ De Staël's work thus emerged as the perfect model for the abstract-figurative idiom in the painting of the 1950s, and both, otherwise conflicting, camps of the realists and abstractionists learned from him how to maintain a balanced emphasis between what the painting was of and what it was made of.

⁶⁵ Bryan Robertson in the preface to exh. cat. *Nicolas de Staël*, 1956.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ See Bryan Robertson in the *Preface to Nicolas de Staël*, exh. cat., memorial exhibition held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, May-June 1956 (Tate Archive)

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁹ Alloway wrote that the artist was "trying to reconcile the specific properties of paint with the creation of images. All his images are simplified so that this medium can contain its sensuous freedom: he aims at a balance of sign and matter." Alloway, "Challenge of Postwar Painting", 3.

This merging of the two modernist interests – on the one hand, a concern for space within the picture, and on the other hand, a concern for paint as matter was also visible in the work of the English artist David Bomberg (sometimes compared to early Staël⁷⁰) at his Arts Council retrospective⁷¹ in 1958, whose work Sylvester noted for its painterliness and brushwork⁷². (Sadly, this artist's work was otherwise largely neglected during his lifetime by the London arts establishment.) Throughout the 1930s Bomberg's art had become greatly involved with conveying the essence of his response to landscapes in Scotland and Spain. At Cuenca and Ronda and in the Asturian mountains he painted works such as *Valley of la Hermida: Picos de Europa, Asturias* (1935), in which he allowed his vigorously handled paint to live a life of its own - even as he continued to depict the natural world around him. In this sense, his late Spanish landscapes of the mid 1950s (e.g. *Tajo and the Rocks, Ronda*, 1956) were even more notable. In these works, Bomberg managed to combine psychological enquiry with the phenomenological stress on inhabiting the space depicted, as he strived for a close unity with nature.

Whilst Bomberg was visibly gestural in technique, he never dissolved form altogether. In his work, a highly personalised method of mark-making served as a means of 'self-inscription'⁷³ but Bomberg also stressed that "there is no painting without form. Form is the language."⁷⁴ Peter Fuller claimed that his concern with structure rather than surface, led him to plastic and formal solutions which transcended the illustrative superficiality which was considered the weak point of English neo-romanticism.⁷⁵ At the same time, Bomberg insisted that the crucial aim of his art was to seek the ambiguous 'spirit in the mass', a theory according to which the movement of gravitational forces in the universe proved the existence of a spiritual presence of a higher order.⁷⁶ Fuller showed that by reiterating this duality between, on the one hand, empiricism and the power of the eye and on the other,

⁷⁰ Richard Elovich, "London. Nicolas de Staël at the Tate," *The Burlington Magazine* 123, no. 944, Special Issue Devoted to Twentieth Century Art (November 1981): 692.

⁷¹ *David Bomberg: An Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings* (London: Arts Council, 1958).

⁷² See David Sylvester, "Round the London Galleries," *The Listener* 60, no. 1538 (1959): 428

⁷³ Hyman, *Figurative Art in Britain*, 196.

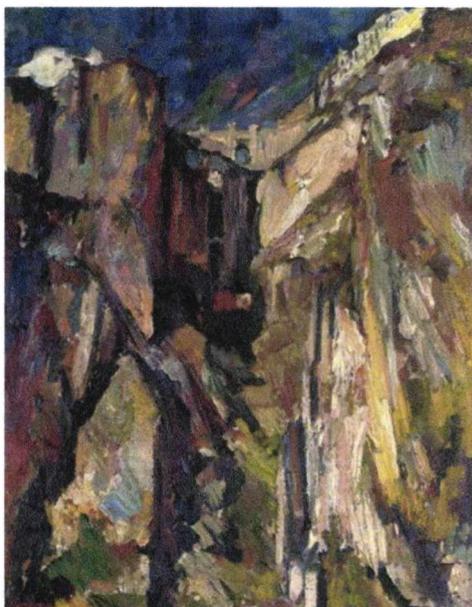
⁷⁴ Bomberg made this assertion in the foreword to the catalogue of his first one-man show, held in July 1914 at the Chenil Gallery, London.

⁷⁵ Peter Fuller, review "David Bomberg. London, Tate Gallery," *The Burlington Magazine* 130, no. 1021, Special issue on Twentieth-Century Art. (April 1988): 305.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 306-7.

abstraction as a means of transcending the visual world and discovering the essence of nature, Bomberg gave expression to the main concerns of 1950s painting:

Bomberg and his most talented followers were able to develop an aesthetic stance which evaded the limitations of *abstraction* (with which Bomberg had experimented in his youth), or *empiricism* (in which he had come close to being trapped in his middle years). But his unremitting emphasis on the necessity, but insufficiency, of the eye - he was a seer in every sense of the term - ensured that he escaped from the solipsism of an expressionism rooted solely in the angst of the individual psyche, or the gestures of an individual soma.⁷⁷



12. David Bomberg: *Ronda: In the Gorge of the Tajo*, c. 1956

With this statement, Fuller stressed the inescapability from reference to the outside world in British painting, which stopped short at using gesture for the sake of gesture alone or gesture solely as a manifestation of subconscious trauma, as advanced in American action painting. The latter's European counterpart, specifically a French form of gestural abstraction (shown in the important exhibitions of Mathieu in 1956, Wols in 1957, Michaux and Fautrier in 1958 at the ICA) also described as 'Tachisme'⁷⁸, a sub-category of Art Informel, was concerned specifically with the plastic and processual qualities of paint as medium and material.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 305-7.

⁷⁸ Tapie used the term objectively in *Un art autre* (1952), to describe the work of several contemporary non-geometric abstract painters associated with the École de Paris, who produced work characterised by apparently spontaneous dabs, blotches, and dribbles of paint, similar to American Action Painting but less overtly vigorous. Fiona Gaskin noted that the term was often mistaken for similar techniques such as dripping, *tubisme*, *matière painting*, all regarded later under the more general heading of *art informel* and *art autre*.

In its avoidance of both figuration and empty geometric abstraction and its reliance on process and execution in painting, Tachisme was a form of art which interestingly, may have provided a further example of the way in which this 'middle way' could manifest itself in British postwar art. Although a non-figurative art form which avoided precise significance of its imagery, the 'tache' was ultimately suggestive both due to the fact that it was the result of human, private intervention, and through its often accidental ulterior visual associations. Patrick Heron, for example, in his short tachiste phase, admitted to have found suggestion to nature: 'I referred to the series as garden paintings, since they certainly related in my mind to the extraordinary effervescence of flowering azaleas and camellias which was erupting all over the garden.'⁷⁹ Some critics, Herbert Read for example would see tachiste imagery as expressionistic through the visual associations between the tache and nuclear imagery (e.g. in the work of Denis Bowen or Ralph Rumney)⁸⁰, although the artists themselves never consciously intended them and many did not acknowledge them ulteriorly either.



13. Patrick Heron: *Azalea Garden: May 1956, 1956*

Throughout their tachiste period artists like Gear, Hilton, Heron, Rumney, Bowen and others would in fact use some form of spatial organisation in their

⁷⁹ From the painting's display caption of May 2007 at the Tate Gallery, London.

⁸⁰ Herbert Read, "A Blotch on the Scutcheon," *Encounter* 6 (1 July 1955): 54; See also Denys Sutton in exh. cat. *Denis Bowen 1961 Paintings* (London: Drian Gallery, 1961).

paintings (e.g. grids, verticals, horizontals, sharp edges, etc.), yet their interest was more in the surface of the picture plane, not any forms of perspective. In tachiste works there was no special area of interest or focal point, neither were the elements of the picture placed in any sequential order which would lead the eye in the depth of the pictorial space. Gaskin remarked that, despite some reliance on geometry, Tachisme was not a rational form of art, like Constructionism, which used mathematical canons such as the Golden Section. Nor was it an exclusively perceptual form of art, seeing as it only used nature indirectly. Neither of these aspects strictly applied to tachiste painting and, in this respect, it did not conform to Heron's concept of 'good painting'. In the catalogue for his *Space in Colour* exhibition (1953) held at the Hanover Gallery, Heron had defined 'good painting' as the perfect balance between the picture's potential to create illusion or pictorial depth and the materiality of paint at the surface of the picture plane, a balance he thought, was best achieved in the work of his much admired French masters Braque, Picasso and Cézanne.⁸¹

Aside these considerations intended to clarify and define the trends in postwar abstraction, many contemporary critics believed that establishing a clear-cut dichotomy between figurative and non-figurative modes of expression was not a productive endeavour. David Sylvester observed that, as in the 1950s, the division between what had been defined as 'Euclidian' and 'biomorphic' during the 1930s, was not valid any longer and it was impossible to label paintings as figurative or non-figurative anymore. In *Nine Abstract Artists* (1954) Alloway quoted Nicholson with high irony for the latter's insistence on the abstract-figurative divide that had split the Penwith Society – saying that "slightly more or less abstract for me is beside the point"⁸², while Heron wrote in *The Changing Forms of Art* (1955) that, "It is as though non-figuration were an ideal impossible of achievement: it is as though all forms become willy-nilly, invested by the spectator with the property of symbols or signs, or images which overlap with those of reality."⁸³ Essentially, all these writers meant that it was impossible to establish a definite demarcation between abstract and figurative attributes in art. In 1956, Alloway stated that this debate over figurative and

⁸¹ See Se Gaskin, "British Tachisme" in *Artists and Patrons in Postwar Britain*, 34.

⁸² *Nine Abstract Artists*, 5.

⁸³ Heron, *Changing Forms of Art*, xi.

non-figurative art had become academic⁸⁴, possibly meaning that the debate itself had come to be regarded as removed from the actual art which was being produced at the time.

Humanism and Abstraction

It is essential to point out the humanist nature of much British and European postwar abstraction, which was in many respects the quality which differentiated it from the internationalist prewar formalism as well as American postwar formalism. The ideological complexities of the war greatly contributed to this reorientation⁸⁵ and the main purpose of the chapter was to show that humanist attributes were by no means strictly applicable to figurative painting. The continual interest in the human body, as well as the individual response to nature proved to be equally prolific foci in non-figurative forms of painting.

In the 1950s the notion of 'humanism' often came up in debates about the limits of realism and abstraction. In an early article of 1952, John Berger attempted to define the abstract-realist dichotomy by writing that "People tend to call any artist who distorts and uses geometric shapes 'abstract'; or ... any painting which is representational, 'realist'." ⁸⁶ It seems that in most readings of the two concepts, anthropocentric humanism was intuitively linked with realism⁸⁷. However, there was also an increased tendency to relate the idea of humanism with abstraction. The writings of postwar critics such as Patrick Heron, Bryan Robertson and Michel Tapié's prefigured a theory later developed by the *Art News and Review* critic Pierre Rouve (and his colleague Lawrence Alloway) about 'Abstract Humanism', a type of art in which an irrational form of painting would combine with personalised, realistic imagery, and which was offered as a European alternative to American Abstract Expressionism.

⁸⁴ Alloway, *New Trends in Painting*, 2.

⁸⁵ See Boris Lurie, article in *Leonardo* 9, no. 4 (Autumn 1976): 338.

⁸⁶ John Berger, "Definitions," *New Statesman and Nation* 44, no. 1137 (20 December 1952): 752.

⁸⁷ Berger's was a form of Marxist humanism which had as its foundation the concept of alienation of the working individual and the loss of his freedom in a capitalist system, where disadvantaged and rendered voiceless by his own labour, he becomes less human and becomes objectified.

Traditionally associated with realism, Humanism had been a constant in British art, so there was a strong need to preserve it in some contemporary form. Abstraction and formalism were seen as alien and foreign to British art, as they were first introduced through the French avant-garde, and later through the much more extreme formalism of American painting. Constant efforts had to be made in order to assimilate this tendency into British art; this could not be done in its rawest state - formalism had to be domesticated to suit British tastes and 'infused' with human qualities.

Humanist concerns involved an individual response to social issues to advance society through one's own art and life. Formalism, on the other hand, was responsible for producing various trends and movements based on the sole principle of style and aesthetic judgement and was therefore never deeply involved with social issues. Postwar humanism provided a reaction to formalist art, which, based on technological thinking, often lead to classifying characteristics in art which were limiting. Alloway and Rouse were involved in the dissipation of the boundaries between the figurative and abstract categories, by promoting the primacy of paint as matter. Essentially, the acknowledgement that painterly gesturalism was predominant in contemporary art was instrumental in establishing the existence of humanism in abstraction: in this sense, the liberation from formal and aesthetic restrictions could be considered as a manifestation of humanist principles.

Attempts to theorise humanism within postwar art had already been made by Heron in a *New Statesman* article of 1950⁸⁸ and two years later in 1952, by Robertson in *The Listener*. The latter proposed that a most successful form of art could be produced by the merging of humanist principles with formal rigour, as he wrote that, "we should all like to see a great humanist painter emerge soon, and if his humanist preoccupations were strengthened by a formal sense equivalent to Brâncusi, Moore or Nicholson, so much the better. Nobody seems to be able to unite the two aesthetics. But someone will, eventually."⁸⁹ It has been shown that most of the British artists of

⁸⁸ Heron, "English and French", 9-10. See also "Bonnard and Visual Reality", 588-9, as well as Heron's introduction to *Changing Forms of Art*.

⁸⁹ Bryan Robertson, "Letters to the Editor. The Plight of Paris," *The Listener* 48, no. 1218 (3 July 1952): 25.

the decade were on some level involved with the merging of the two aspects in their art.

The need for defining this humanist trend in contemporary art was such that, with the occasion of Leon Kossoff's 1957 Beaux Arts Gallery exhibition, Rouve proposed the term 'Abstract Humanism', suggesting that Kossoff's dark drawing and thick paintings of portraits and cityscapes were reuniting intellectual aspects of 'traditional aesthetics with irrational, instinctual incentives of brutism'. At the time, *Art News and Review* heavily promoted this view and in spring 1957 it dedicated special space for Rouve's concept. Incidentally, Rouve and Alloway's views on the matter differed slightly, as for Rouve his view was still predicated on the high culture of Europe; whereas for Alloway, the "new permissiveness about references in abstract pictures to figures and landscapes" was "related to the general preoccupation with signs that criss-cross the whole field of visual communication, from Capogrossi to road signs, from UN arm badges to Klee's Pedagogical Sketchbook, from advertising to Michel Tapié."⁹⁰ Alloway's later support of Pop art was evident here.

Alloway and Rouve's writing, as well as that of Heron, Sylvester and Robertson were increasingly concerned with defining an ideal form of expression in the 1950s and on some level all saw this as one in which basic humanist principles converged with an interest for formal vigour. The concept of 'Abstract Humanism', as well as notions such as 'Abstract Impressionism' developed from this need to reconcile what was believed best from the two camps of the debate. In addition to the focus on the human body, landscape provided a perfect medium which could join such trends. Even a pro-American critic like Alloway did in fact believe up to 1960 that "landscape taken to the verge of abstraction was appropriate to the moment" in British art of that period.⁹¹ Alloway's 1958 labelling of an international form of gestural abstraction which contained allusions to nature as 'Abstract Impressionism' was thus yet another attempt to define humanist preoccupations within postwar art. From the beginning, this chapter has dealt with various theories and methods through which the two tendencies, realist humanism and modernist abstraction, could merge in postwar painting and produce a new, innovative vision which would distinguish

⁹⁰ Lawrence Alloway, "Art News from London," *Art News* (February 1957): 62. Also see Hyman, *Figurative Art in Britain*, 194.

⁹¹ Andrew Causey, *Peter Lanyon: Modernism and the Land* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 176.

British abstract art from the rest, while at the same time fully integrate it into an internationally acknowledged avant-garde.⁹²

⁹² See Lawrence Alloway, "Making a Scene," *Art News and Review* (26 September 1959).

Chapter Four

Postwar British Painting and the *École de Paris*, Old and New

This chapter explains the differing theoretical stances on modernism of Heron and Alloway introduced in the previous chapter, by conducting an in-depth assessment of the teachings of the old and new *Écoles de Paris*. It focuses on the assimilation of French art in British art as well as its relevance to the shaping of postwar landscape painting. The first part deals with actual impact of Parisian art in London shortly after the Second World War. Despite the high reputation of French art in postwar Britain, its reception reveals an ambivalent attitude about its influence on British art. On the one hand, the great exhibitions of French masters such as Picasso, Matisse, Braque and Rouault held between 1945-1946 were seen as a long-awaited reconnection with Paris, still regarded at that point as the centre of the international art world. On the other hand, the creative wartime British art, produced in isolation from any European mainstream was feared to be threatened by the French avant-garde masters. The part highlights the neo-Romantic, traditionalist opposition to French art as well as the efforts of Sylvester to establish a School of London which would rival the French epicentre of the art world. It records the adverse reaction to Picasso's 1945 exhibition which is shown to have been caused by opposition to radical (foreign) modernism, as well as by the frustration that the art of the French avant-garde was difficult to exceed. Some postwar British criticism was discriminating against the new *École de Paris*, yet faithful to the old *École*. In this sense, a critic like Heron opposed the former, as a means to institute young British contemporaries as the genuine followers of the masters, henceforth elevating the London art world to the status that Paris once had.

The second part of this chapter deals with the influence of the old *École de Paris* on British postwar landscape painting. Drawing from new research on the criticism of the time, it offers a brief overview of postwar interpretations of late Impressionism and some of the motives and aims behind these views. A change is noted from pre-war to postwar readings of Cézanne and Monet: from an interest in the synthetic aspect of abstracting from nature in Cézanne's case and the rendering of fleeting visual motifs in the case of Monet, to the dissolution of form and the sheer involvement in the mark-making process in their late work. In this sense, a shift can

be noted from the concern with pictorial structure and form to an interest in the loss of order and in paint as matter, as well as a re-definition of pictorial space, from its illusionary function, to space seen as paint substance. The re-invention of Impressionism to suit contemporary needs, gave birth to the initially American trend and term 'Abstract Impressionism', yet the French critic Marcel Brion claimed that 'impressionist abstraction' had been a constant in French art, bridging Dutch geometric abstraction and Germanic romantic abstraction. The British critic Lawrence Alloway on the other hand, used this association with Monet to internationalise a form of gestural abstraction. The lack of finish in the late works of Monet and Cézanne has often been seen as enabling its associations with abstraction in the postwar period, as well as the fact that these two artists were viewed as pioneers and innovators on the limit between figuration and abstraction. Overall, this section discusses the critical reception of some postwar exhibitions of these two artists, presenting the often conflicting views between traditionalist critics such as Douglas Cooper, and the pioneering views of Heron and Alloway.

The third part of the chapter examines the effect of the art of the postwar *École de Paris* on British painting before the impact of American Abstract Expressionism. It mainly focuses on the formal, technical transformation of British painting as a result of its exposure to French Tachisme. Two painting approaches are examined here: on the one hand, a style initiated by Nicolas de Staël's semi-abstract painting which dealt with a synthesis of the visual world in blocks of vibrant colour and an increased concern with the surface of the painting. De Staël is shown to have bridged the gap between the discoveries of the old European avant-garde - particularly the legacy of Cubism and Cézanne - and the new French painting. On the other hand, the effect of gestural Tachisme, typical of a French abstract artists such as Georges Mathieu is seen as an early manifestation of a European equivalent to American action painting, which was to prepare the British artists for the overpowering influence of American gesturalism such as that of Jackson Pollock.

Inevitably, during the war years, few European exhibitions¹ were held in England. Several shows of the modern masters Matisse, Picasso, Cézanne, Gauguin, Braque and Derain were organised in London before the beginning of the second world war, mainly by private galleries (i.e. Leicester Galleries, Alex. Reid & Lefèvre, Zwemmer, Arthur Tooth & Sons, Rosenberg & Helft, Agnew & Sons)² but there was no institutional acknowledgment of the European avant-garde until the end of the war in 1945 when an exhibition of paintings by Picasso³ and Matisse was organised by the British Council at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London⁴. “Francophilia had been a key note of pre-war British art, so it is no surprise that the aftermath of the Second World brought not only renewed contact with the continent but also a wave of exhibitions in London.”⁵ Great postwar shows such as *Braque and Rouault at the Tate Gallery* in 1946⁶, as well as an exhibition of Cézanne’s water-colours in April - May 1946 and the Arts Council’s *Picasso: 55 lithographs 1945 – 7* in January 1947 were seen, on the one hand, as an eagerly-awaited re-engagement with Paris, still regarded as the centre of the art world, but on the other hand there was a strong opposition against French modernism by traditionalist critics mainly, though not exclusively⁷, associated with the war-time neo-Romantics.

In 1945, Michael Ayrton praised the loss of connection with Paris which the war years had forced upon English painting⁸, for during this period artists were able to refocus on landscape painting which, he believed, had acted as a preserver of national identity. Ayrton despised Picasso’s modernism for its rejection of tradition and

¹ Exceptions were less significant exhibitions such as *Picasso and his Contemporaries: also Gouaches by Frances Hodgkins* (London: Lefevre Gallery, March - April 1943).

² At Leicester Galleries, London: Matisse in 1919, Picasso in 1921, Cézanne in 1925 and Gauguin in 1924 and 1932; *Thirty Years of Pablo Picasso*, Alex. Reid & Lefevre Limited, London, June 1931; *Exhibition of works of Matisse and Picasso* Zwemmer Gallery, London, Oct. - Nov. 1933; Renoir, Cézanne, Braque in 1934; Cézanne in 1935 and 1937; Matisse in 1933; *6 maîtres modernes : Cézanne, Derain, Matisse, Picasso, Renoir, Rousseau*, Arthur Tooth & Sons, London 15 Mar. - 7 April 1934; Monet in 1939; Rosenberg & Helft: *Masterpieces by Braque, Matisse, Picasso*, Rosenberg and Helft, London, 5 - 31 Oct. 1936; Matisse in 1937, Braque and Picasso in 1939; *Centenary Exhibition Cézanne*, Paul Rosenberg & Helft, London, 1939; Agnew & Sons: *Water-colour and Pencil Drawings by Cézanne*, Thomas Agnew & Sons, London, 1936.

³ The same year the exhibition *School of Paris: (Picasso and his Contemporaries)* was held at the Lefevre Gallery, London in May - June 1945.

⁴ *Exhibition of paintings by Picasso and Matisse*, organised by L’Association Française d’Action Artistique & The British Council, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, December 1945.

⁵ James Hyman, “The Plight of Paris,” *Royal Academy Magazine* (London 2001).

⁶ *Braque, Rouault : Exhibition of Paintings*, Tate Gallery, London, 1946, 11 April - 22 May 1946.

⁷ A note should be made here that some artists associated with Neo-Romanticism in Britain saw French art as their artistic focus i.e. Colquhoun, MacBride saw Picasso and Gauguin as chief reference points.

⁸ Michael Ayrton, “Young Painters of Today,” *The Listener* (12 July 1945): 46.

condemned its great impact on European visual culture, insisting that the École de Paris was foreign and therefore useless to British art. He claimed that the latter's greatest merit was its "genetic national inheritance that enabled it to disregard foreign models".⁹ In his *Studio* articles of 1946, Ayrton maintained a shift of influence and power had taken place during the war years, from the Parisian School, whose hegemony was over, to contemporary British painting, whose main qualities were "linear, poetic, vital, rhythmic in design and shrewd in perception of individual character".¹⁰ He saw the superiority of British art as the result of its having escaped cultural domination during the second world war.

However, Ayrton's protests against Paris at the end of the war were preceded by a period a few years earlier when new forms of expressionist or surrealist French art inspired that of his generation. In 1935, James Thrall Soby's book *After Picasso*, the first book on Surrealism by an American critic, was published. It is believed that in the late 1930s John Minton, Michael Middleton and Ayrton¹¹ himself were influenced by the work of the Parisian neo-romantic generation of 1926 (Bérard, Tchelitchev, Berman and Léonid) introduced in this book. Soby presented the French Neo-Romantics as an alternative to their contemporary Picasso.¹² These artists, alongside the Surrealists, and inspired by Picasso's Rose and Blue periods went "behind all conspicuously modern art and to rediscover romantic sources of inspiration as well as of technique"¹³. The French Neo-Romantics influenced their style, which featured a predilection for both naturalism and allegory, theatrical settings, perspectival and object distortions. They started focusing "on subjectivity and poetic intensity, and developed in their works a sense of transience of existence and a melancholic mood conveyed through 'Picassoid' blue."¹⁴ A certain lyricism, a nostalgic outlook on the past as well as strong formal stylisation was decidedly notable in the work of both French and English Neo-Romantics.

⁹ See Margaret Garlake, *New Art, New World : British Art in Postwar Society* (London: Yale University Press, 1998), 70.

¹⁰ Michael Ayrton, "The Heritage of British Painting, I. Continuity," *The Studio* (August 1946): 33-41.

¹¹ Ayrton shared a studio in Paris between 1938-39 with John Minton.

¹² Virginia Button, "The Aesthetic of Decline: English Neo-Romanticism c. 1935- 1956," PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 1992.

¹³ James T. Soby, *After Picasso* (Hartford: E.V. Mitchell, 1935), 5.

¹⁴ Hetty Einzig, "John Minton: 1917-57", MA thesis, London University, 1979, 12-13.

Ayrton's insecure attempts at praising a national British art had not stopped the great number of his fellow artists who travelled to Europe¹⁵ after the war to revisit the institutions they had studied at in the 1930s and get in touch with the new French modernists, such as the British artist Eduardo Paolozzi had done before establishing the Independent Group in London.¹⁶ "Certainly Paris was the Mecca for young British artists and critics, who journeyed there in numbers as soon as contact could be re-established after the isolation of the war years. Lucian Freud, Eduardo Paolozzi, William Turnbull, Alan Davie, Stephen Gilbert, Stanley William Hayter, William Gear and Raymond Mason, all spent various lengths of time in Paris in the years after the Second World War, formative moments which did much to internationalise British art and stimulate a dynamic postwar culture."¹⁷

A more forceful claim for the supremacy of British art than that of Ayrton was made by a young David Sylvester in a long later essay of 1948 in which he, for the first time, tried to lay the critical foundations to the existence of a 'School of London'¹⁸. Written for a French journal, the article demanded that an 'École de Londres' deserved to be considered on the same par as the École de Paris. Although Sylvester was making claims for a greater international awareness of British art, it is clear that for the critic, and for his compatriots, Paris was still the main reference point and standard to which artistic achievement was measured. Sylvester's francophile affections were evident as he signed his early reviews with the French sounding name of 'Sylvestre'¹⁹

In the immediate postwar years, the adverse British critical and public reaction to the work of the French masters was widely recorded in the press of the time. With the occasion of the Picasso and Matisse exhibition which opened at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1945, several commentators were shocked into hysterical reactions which questioned not the artistic but also the moral credibility of Picasso and his

¹⁵ See Button, "Aesthetic of Decline"; See also Hyman, "Plight of Paris".

¹⁶ See Garlake, *New Art, New World*, 70.

¹⁷ Hyman, "Plight of Paris".

¹⁸ David Sylvester, "Les Problèmes," *L'Age Nouveau* 30, 31, 32 in James Hyman, *The Battle for Realism: Figurative Art in Britain during the Cold War 1945-1960* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001) 24 and note 76.

¹⁹ See Hyman, "Plight of Paris".



supporters.²⁰ A *Burlington Magazine* editor wrote that Picasso's exhibition was spoilt by outbursts of typical English Philistinism: "Guerrilla warfare, decades after the battle for modern art was supposed to have been won, broke out in the exhibition premises."²¹ On the other hand, there was a predominant feeling that the innovation in art achieved by the Parisian avant-garde was difficult, if not impossible, to rival for contemporary British artists. This realisation could have been one of the reasons why the reaction to their work was so polemical²². Hence the editorial went on to state:

There is a tendency nowadays to speak of the much desired and long-awaited 'new realism' as though it were actually upon us; we make efforts, in order to persuade ourselves that art is still flourishing, to set up rival gods: Giacometti is a promising candidate. But it is difficult to resist the conclusion that the general level has sunk. Picasso and other artists slightly older or of the same age - Bonnard, Matisse, Klee, Braque - were borne forward to fresh insight on a great tide that had been gathering momentum during the course of the nineteenth century, and it was this shove from behind that gave them their greatness. The tide began to slacken around 1914 and has now almost spent its force. Picasso's successors have no alternative but to play around with his various inventions, or to try their hand feverishly, but impotently, at experiments which he might have, but never in fact, made - until the tide finally turns, until new strength can be generated, sufficient to stir up a new art of a different order.²³

This article hinted at the lack of innovation and of creative complexity of the new *École de Paris* and for that matter, European contemporary art in general. James Hyman wrote that, "as early as the Festival of Britain of 1951 disillusionment at postwar French art had begun to set in. It became commonplace to regard Paris as a city of two generations: an older generation of unsurpassed quality and a younger generation who had failed to live up to this"²⁴; this view, was supported by critics such as Sylvester in "Plight of Paris" (1952) and Berger in "Judgement on Paris" (1953). Another critic questioning the level of innovation achieved by the contemporary *École de Paris* was Patrick Heron, who supported the trends coming from the continent rather selectively. In his *New English Weekly* and *New Statesman*

²⁰ See Jeffrey Jones, "In Search of the Picassoes," *Interpreting Ceramics* 1 (2000); For the full text of Munnings's speech see *Munnings v. the Moderns* (Manchester: Manchester City Art Galleries, 1986).

²¹ "Homage to Picasso," editorial in *The Burlington Magazine* 93, no. 585 (December 1951): 369.

²² An interesting issue arising from these considerations is to what extent the polemic against French modernism is continuous with the pre-war period or to what extent it is part of a reaction against modernism that is specifically part of the feeling that modernism had failed to provide a culture that could respond to the postwar situation. John Berger's writing elaborates on this aspect.

²³ "Homage to Picasso".

²⁴ Hyman, "The Plight of Paris".

and Nation articles of the late 1940s and early 1950s, he often dismissed what he saw as the 'empty' abstractions of the younger French generation of artists and was instead an ardent promoter of the technical innovations initiated by Matisse, Bonnard, Picasso, Braque and Rouault. Such criticism of post war French art however had an underlying objective, that of promoting the art of young British artists as the direct successors of the French pre-war masters and establish London as the new art centre of the world, following the decline of postwar art in Paris.

Postwar Re-Interpretations of Late Impressionism

In the postwar period, the late work of French masters such as Cézanne and Monet came to be viewed from a different light than in the pre-war period, when abstracting from nature and the synthetic aspect of post-Impressionist painting were the focus of interpretation of their art. In this sense, Patrick Heron's writing from the 1940s had comprehensively dealt with the studies of form and compositional structure in the work of old *École de Paris* masters such as Cézanne, Braque and Matisse. The postwar perspective, on the other hand, focused on the deconstruction of form and image in the late work of the Impressionists and took an interest in the mark-making process and the concern for the materiality of paint in the finished pictorial product. Typical of this view was the writing of Lawrence Alloway who saw Monet's late style as a foundation for a painterly form of contemporary abstraction. The critic attempted to differentiate between pre- and postwar art by pointing to the switch from the concern with pictorial structure and form, to the loss of order and an overwhelming interest in paint as matter and self-ruling spatial determinant within the picture. He claimed that space was "the key word in postwar art, as form was a key word of early 20th-century aesthetics", though specifying that "it is no longer a space dependent on 'the meaning of a terrain or a floor'²⁵ but space as substance,"²⁶ therefore it the opposite of space as illusion of three-dimensionality.

²⁵ James J. Gibson, *The Perception of Visual World* (London: Greenwood Press, 1950) in Alloway's exhibition catalogue introduction *Abstract Impressionism* (1958).

²⁶ Alloway in exh. cat. *Abstract Impressionism An Exhibition of Recent Paintings*, edited by Lawrence Alloway and Harold Cohen (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1958). Touring to Nottingham University; Arts Council Gallery, Cambridge; Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle; Arts Council Gallery, London, 1958. The writer illustrated this by reference to some of the work of French artists Masson and Dubuffet, Americans such as Francis and Bluhm and British artists such as Moynihan and Smith.

The formalist interpretations of Monet by American critics such as Barr and Greenberg following the MoMA's acquisition of a late Waterlily panel in 1955, on the one hand, and the increasing presence of an informal, lyrical and suggestive form of abstraction in America, continental Europe and Britain, on the other, prompted Alloway to attempt to internationalise this trend under the label (invented by Elaine de Kooning earlier in the decade) of 'Abstract Impressionism' in 1958. He argued that the informal abstraction of the new impressionists was considerably more painterly than the work produced by mainstream Abstract Expressionists. The influences he cited were Monet, Bonnard (who inspired artists as different as Sam Francis and Harold Cohen), as well as Cézanne's late works, especially his watercolours, with their "elliptical treatment of weightless forms, which influenced Tal Coat and Masson."²⁷ The French critic Marcel Brion had already introduced the connection between late Impressionism and abstraction in *Art Abstrait* (1956), presumably as a pre-emptive measure to the Americans' adoption of late Monet as a formalist model. Brion insisted that 'impressionist abstraction' had always been "an extremely significant constant in French art"²⁸, mediating between extremes such as the Dutch geometric abstraction (e.g. Mondrian and de Stijl) and Germanic romantic abstraction (e.g. Kandinsky and Der Blaue Reiter).

Much of the 'abstraction' of late Impressionist works could be attributed to a certain 'lack of finish' in the work of Monet (and Cézanne too), in the same way as Turner's unfinished canvases had been considered as glimpses onto a new, innovative form of art. Katharine Lochnan explained that the "So-called Impressionist 'lack of finish' resulted in part from the breaking down of the traditional hierarchy between works on paper and canvas. The preliminary sketch all but disappeared, and painting assumed the role formerly played by preparatory drawing and oil sketches. The desire to capture transient effects quickly, or to give painting the appearance of spontaneity, led to the hybridisation of drawing and painting techniques."²⁹ In many ways, this technical aspect of late impressionist painting was exploited by postwar critics whose readings sought to establish a connection between Monet's open-ended gesturalism in

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Marcel Brion, *Art Abstrait* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1956), 253 in exh. cat. *Claude Monet: An Exhibition of Paintings* edited by Douglas Cooper. (London and Edinburgh: Arts Council, Edinburgh Festival Society and Tate Gallery, 1957).

²⁹ Lochnan in preface to *Turner Whistler Monet* (London: Tate Gallery, 2004), 12-13.

the *Water lilies* and Cézanne's deconstruction of the image in late canvases such as those of the *Montagne Saint Victoire* series³⁰. Although the motives and aims of these two artists greatly differed, the very aspect that their late work touched on some unprecedented limit in art, brought them renewed interest by British postwar artists, many of whom were very actively involved in re-inventing new, original forms of art in a true contemporary spirit.

Two important Cézanne exhibitions were held in Europe in the summer of 1954. One in Paris, *Hommage à Cézanne*, at the Orangerie, the other in Edinburgh and London, at the Tate Gallery. The London show, consisting of over 60 works selected by Lawrence Gowing, was intended as a general overview of the artist's career. In a double review of the exhibitions of 1954, Douglas Cooper maintained that, although Cézanne was, with Degas, "one of the two supreme artists of the late nineteenth century" and "universally accepted among the great masters of all time"³¹, he was little understood in the British art circles of the mid 1950s. Cooper explained this through the deficiencies and inconsistencies in Cézanne literature and the difficulty in organising an extensive collection of his work in order to be able to evaluate the relevance of his entire output.

Whilst Cooper's review was more of a technical debate often addressed at Gowing, over the accuracy of chronology in dating Cézanne's exhibits, he did pass on some critical judgement about their aesthetic value. He claimed, it was easy to name a greater painter than Cézanne (e.g. Giotto, Bellini, Titian, Rubens, Poussin) for the achievements of the latter were "more consummate because they were fully able to achieve their aims. Cézanne was not, and he knew it. [...] Cézanne's work is marred by an element of unfulfilment: one need only consider the enormous number of pictures which went wrong or which he abandoned half-finished."³² It is important to note here that Cooper expressed a similar view when writing about Monet's late unfinished *Waterlilies*, which he would later refer to in the catalogue to the Tate exhibition of Monet in 1957. Cooper's traditionalist approach would not allow him to

³⁰ In the postwar period, there was an increasing awareness of Cézanne's late watercolours which are very economic, synthetic and sometimes full of voids. Although these were generally preparatory sketches, they became better known and of particular interest after the war.

³¹ Douglas Cooper, "Two Cézanne Exhibitions," *The Burlington Magazine* 96, no. 620 (November 1954): 344.

³² *Ibid.*, 345.

see the innovative potential in the final experiments of the two great French masters, nor the fact that his contemporaries were justified in finding the beginnings of a new way of looking in Cézanne and Monet's late work.

The self-reflexive nature of the two artists' final studies, was the result of the incessant scrutiny of the same subject which would ultimately bring them on the brink of new discoveries through the dissolution of form and image and a new preoccupation with the nature of paint. Cooper saw this as a shortcoming claiming that, "Neither painting nor drawing came to him [Cézanne] easily and so often he was not able to translate his vision in terms of paint with the exactness which he demanded of himself. This no doubt accounts in part for the restricted nature of his vision, for his concentration on a very few subjects to which he continually returned to at all periods of his life. Cézanne does not open up new worlds for the spectator as do, say, Titian, Rubens or Rembrandt. He opens our eyes to the inspiring possibility of seeing familiar objects in a new way."³³ Hence distortion and deconstruction of the subject of the visible world was for Cooper no great quality to admire.

Lawrence Gowing had a much more enthusiastic response to Cézanne's Tate exhibition of autumn 1954. In the catalogue introduction, he expressed profound admiration for the work of the master and the general aim of his text was to focus on the emotional aspect of Cézanne's work in addition to the acknowledgement of his technical contribution to modernist abstraction. He wrote:

We are accustomed to recognize that form was purer in his painting and pictorial architecture barer than they had ever been before. Yet there are other elements which touch us as closely: not only is visual sensation presented as purely, but the associations, the human meaning of the subject, are equally tenacious. Cézanne's successors have forced us, against our will, to accept with purity a progressive impoverishment: his own solution was precisely the opposite. A critic of twenty years ago found the essence of his landscapes to be their lack of *Stimmung*, of mood or sentiment: for us, the remark of a recent English writer about the *Château Noir* is more to the point: 'we may feel there are present the potent domes and deep-set grottoes of an ageless romance.'³⁴

³³ *Ibid.*, 347.

³⁴ Gowing in introduction "The Great Transformation" to exh. cat. *Painting by Paul Cézanne* (London: Tate Gallery, 29 September – 27 October 1954), 5.

In a romanticised view of Cézanne, Gowing insisted on the perfect duality of sense and sensibility, as he pointed out that Cézanne's intellectual side was just as potent as his instinct. "For him the function of the painter's craft was 'to obey, to translate consciously... the two parallel texts, live nature felt – that which is there' (he indicated the green and blue plain) – 'and that which is there' (he struck his forehead), 'so that the two may fuse, in order to endure! [...] the process, the final fusion was taking place before our eyes. Perception and design become one."³⁵ This reading of Cézanne was much closer to the contemporary spirit, possibly helped by the fact that Gowing, an artist himself, was able to relate to Cézanne on a personal level.

Patrick Heron, on the other hand, was more interested in the formal discoveries of Cézanne. In 1956, he wrote an article entitled 'Is Cézanne Still Alive?' in which he intended to link the pictorial experiments of the French master with contemporary abstraction and establish a continuity between Paris and British postwar art.³⁶ He commented on Cézanne's synthetic vision of nature in planes that were parallel to the picture surface, arguing that he was the first modern artist who insisted "on upending *all* planes, whether or not they defined a receding or diminishing surface in the subject, and making them hover just behind the picture surface, and more or less parallel with it," employing form "as floating independent facets".³⁷ A visible result of this was the constant dialogue between the artist's marks and the surface of the picture in contemporary abstract painting. His "fragmentation of continuous surfaces, and the tying together of the resultant flat fragments into harmonious configurations"³⁸, was seen by the critic as an effective approach of rendering pictorial structure in contemporary painting.

Heron observed that Cézanne also devised the uniform treatment of the picture surface from one side to the other, its 'all-overness' and rhythm, in the critic's words, "an insistent regular pulse from edge to edge". This approach implied the fact that

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

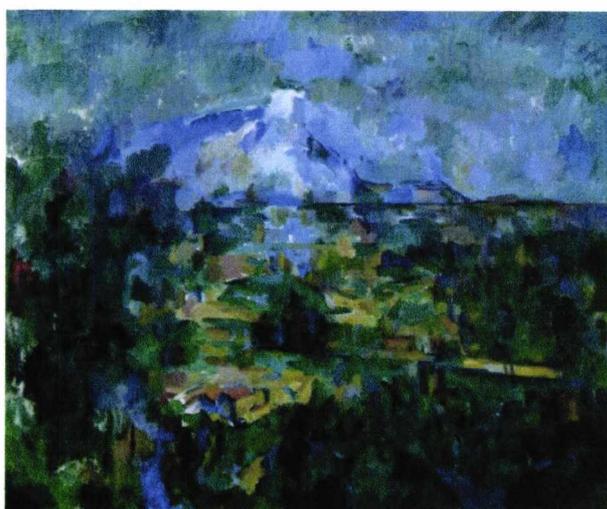
³⁶ It must be pointed out though that Cézanne was conscious that his art was searching for a new way of painting but he was set against the arbitrary abstraction of Bernard, whose work he felt suffered from the influence of Van Gogh and Gauguin. Cézanne's explanation of his abstractions points to the fact that they are not sought, but something that results from his attempt to convey light effects. (From a consultation with Cézanne scholar Jonathan Kear, 12 September 2007)

³⁷ Patrick Heron, "Is Cézanne Still Alive?" *Arts Magazine* (October 1956) in *Painter as Critic*, edited by Mel Gooding (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1998), 117.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

both colour and form (which have overlapping functions in Heron's writing) could now have a life of their own. Each band of pigment could breathe freely and have, in effect an equally important intensity as the picture seen as a whole. Each form would now make up independent volumes in the space of the picture, creating a sensation of recession. These ground rules set out by Cézanne in his late work provided the basis of formalist abstraction in the 1950s; eloquent examples of this were Heron's own work in Britain and that of an early abstract expressionist artist of European descent such as Hans Hofmann in America.

From 1900 onwards, Cézanne painted a series of studies of Montagne Sainte-Victoire. Composed of discrete patches of colour, the image almost dissolved beneath the surface pattern of brushstrokes. Of these very last landscapes, Heron wrote that "the loose planes of turpsy paint, floating as it were *in front* of the evoked image of Montagne Sainte-Victoire or the pine branches in the garden of Le Château Noir [...]. They are abstract registrations of depth - each one bringing the eyebeam to a halt at a different point in depth from the next. The harmony involved in the experience of looking at a late Cézanne is literally the experience of a physiological rhythm; it is a rhythmic muscular experience."³⁹ This observation strengthened the general perception of contemporary British art, especially that of the 'middle generation' and St Ives modernism, in which the identification with place fused with formal, pictorial interests.



14. Paul Cézanne: *Montagne Sainte-Victoire Seen from Les Lauves*, 1904-06

³⁹ Ibid.

Heron observed how Cézanne was the first painter since the Italian Renaissance to dissolve traditional perspective, its “single, fixed and static *focus*.” The static viewpoint was replaced by multiple, dynamic focal points. In a painting by Cézanne “there seem to be innumerable points of focus, in the sense that while you are looking at them the surrounding forms seem to converge on them in much the same way that those radical lines in diagrams demonstrating ‘perspective’ converge on the ‘vanishing point.’”⁴⁰ This was an important discovery of Cézanne and the interest for the decentralised focal point was thoroughly investigated by a British artist, such as Peter Lanyon, for example.

The late *Montagne Saint Victoire* paintings were done in diluted oil and the canvas was often left bare in places. It seemed that his studies in watercolour influenced this oil painting technique, as Fry (1927) and then Venturi (1943) had noticed, leading to the explosive liberation in the last works: greater rapidity of execution, lightness and fluidity. Transforming colour into light meant that these patches were sometimes dissipating as if by their own will, leaving empty spaces within the picture. Cézanne himself called these incidents ‘abstractions’⁴¹ and the artist felt that he was heading for a new territory, unexplored before in art. The dissolution of form in late Cézanne was by no means a sign of deficiency, as Cooper had claimed, but on the contrary, it represented the extreme to which the artist had arrived in his synthesis of the visual world through pictorial means. In Heron’s view, this was the ultimate achievement of the *École de Paris*: abstracting from reality, formally analysing the visual world to the point where the image was pulverized. The truth of this incisive vision was transported onto the canvas in a valid, harmonized pictorial composition which contained the essence of the subject, reduced to its bare essentials. Most of Heron’s writing was based on his belief in the absolute validity of Cézanne’s pioneering vision; this was the type of formalism by which he theorized the abstraction of the generation of artists (i.e. Frost, Wynter, Hilton, Lanyon, Hitchens) which he himself was part of and whose art he actively promoted.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴¹ Cézanne wrote of the unfinished aspect of the *Montagne Saint Victoire* series in a letter to Emile Bernard of 23 October 1905: “The sensations of colour that light gives create abstractions that don’t let me cover my canvas or follow the outlines of objects when the points of contact are tenuous, delicate; thus my image or picture is incomplete.” In “Correspondence to Emile Bernard” in *Cézanne’s Letters*, 4th edition, edited by John Rewald, translated by Marguerite Kay (Oxford: Bruno Cassier, 1976), 313.

In the case of Monet, his late work was even more successfully assimilated in postwar abstract trends. Shown at the 1957 Edinburgh Festival, the attention was directed now particularly towards some less known works of Monet, where it was believed that the master had achieved a final breakthrough and the mediation between figuration and abstraction, as he transformed elements of abstract imagery into form and pattern. In theory and practice, Heron never separated perceptual reality (nature) from pictorial reality (abstraction), going as far as to say that even the realist or naturalist artist produced a type of abstraction, considering the individual and subjective frame through which he/she contemplated the subject. In an early 1947 lecture entitled "The Necessity of Distortion in Painting", Heron wrote that *any* representation of a three-dimensional subject upon the two-dimensional plane of a flat canvas involves distortion of some kind.⁴² Heron believed that it was the Impressionists's mastery of nature's appearances which ultimately led to a subjective interpretation of the landscape; he noted that they had "arrived at the summit of the naturalistic conquest of appearances and [...] were, therefore, at the great turning-point from an objective to a subjective basis for art."⁴³ The writer observed the paradoxical situation in which the careful and detailed impressionistic study of the way things 'looked', eventually generated a subjective, lyrical -, instead of an exclusively pragmatic approach to painting. The artists became aware of actual visual patterns in nature, which they then actively sought out and transformed into personal visual sensations and rhythms on their canvases, thus linking their visual experience to some phenomenological experience of the motif seen. This was the very aspect which Heron thought was best visible in Claude Monet's late *Water Lilies*⁴⁴:

It was the Impressionists who finally extended our awareness to the optical sensation itself; they were aware of the actual look of things for the first time. And we must not forget that 'the look' of a nude or a tree is itself elusive and illusory. The pink lump, the greenish mass - in these may reside the true appearance of these things to our eyes. But the *appearance* of any object may conceal more than it reveals of that object's true nature, of its structural reality. Of all the schools of European painting it is French Impressionism that is most nearly paralleled by the only completely objective recording of appearance that we have - namely, photography. Yet even the Impressionists

⁴² Patrick Heron, "The Necessity of Distortion in Painting," from a lecture delivered at Leeds University, October 1949, published in *Painter as Critic. Patrick Heron: Selected Writings*, edited by Mel Gooding (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1998), 40-41.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

⁴⁴ See Chapter Six for an elaborate discussion about Monet's influence on modern abstract painting.

had their purely lyrical, purely poetic aspect: even they, that is to say, to some extent were *imposing* a subjective version of exterior reality upon their subjects.⁴⁵

By studying fleeting optical effects from nature, Monet arrived at a lyrical expression of his subjective response to the scene. Meanwhile, by relentlessly studying nature, he developed a formal language from an imperative need to capture the underlying structure of what was there, in front of his eyes. In both late Monet and Cézanne, one process led to the discovery of another: possibly for the first time in the history of art, the objective contemplation of reality generated a subjective expression, formally verging on abstraction, reminiscent of the ‘objectification of the subjective’, as symbolist critics used to say.



15. Claude Monet: *Nymphéas*, c.1914-17

Monet's 1957 Arts Council exhibition was organised by Douglas Cooper and John Richardson who had gathered an extensive collection of 113 paintings to cover all phases of Monet's "stylistic development".⁴⁶ Cooper claimed, the late *Nymphéas* were no basis for his contemporaries' justification of abstraction in Monet, as their lack of finish could in fact be mainly attributed to the master's fading eye-sight and many of the works seen as abstract had in fact been abandoned by the painter himself as failures. The reviewer Ralph Coe, on the other hand, claimed that three large

⁴⁵ Heron, "Necessity of Distortion in Painting", 39-40.

⁴⁶ Douglas Cooper in *Claude Monet: An Exhibition of Paintings*, organised by the Arts Council in association with the Edinburgh Festival Society (London: Tate Gallery, 1957). Work was jointly selected by Cooper and John Richardson and contained very few paintings after 1900.

Orangerie *Nymphéas* (1916-23) proved that Monet never stopped painting until the point when his eyesight would not allow him to continue anymore and this was “evidence that he experienced repeatedly the torment of an almost abnormally refined visual sensibility.”⁴⁷ Cooper could have been closer to the truth though as it has been believed. Ophthalmology scientists of Stanford university have recently claimed to have proved what many in the art world have long suspected - that Claude Monet painted in his distinctive style because cataracts blurred his vision.⁴⁸

In the 1950s however Monet’s late style was successfully re-interpreted by contemporary abstract painters. Douglas Cooper admitted that “ ‘tachiste’ and ‘abstract expressionist’ painters on both sides of the Atlantic – Bazaine, Manessier, Singier, Riopelle, Sam Francis, Jackson Pollock and Mark Tobey for example – had consciously derived inspiration for their own work through studying paintings by Monet. While he accepted that no one would deny their right both to do so and to formulate whatever theories they will to justify their activities”, he argued that “we are not obliged to see Monet through their eyes, nor to take so narrow a view of the pictorial significance of his canvases.”⁴⁹ Cooper’s limitations of accepting late Monet as a model for formalist abstraction were evident here.

A real break with this conservative British critical stance was provided by Lawrence Alloway who first truly introduced the connection which some American abstract painters (following the writings of Greenberg, Barr and Seitz) had discovered between Monet’s late *Nymphéas* and New York school abstraction. He first attempted this in the catalogue introduction to the exhibition *Exploration of Paint* held at Arthur Tooth and Sons gallery, London in January 1957, where work by international artists Jean Dubuffet, Sam Francis, Paul Jenkins, Jean Paul Riopelle was shown. As a result of his enthusiasm and receptivity to the contemporary implications of Monet’s work, Alloway organised in early 1958, together with the painter Harold Cohen, the touring exhibition he entitled *Abstract Impressionism*, in which he showed European and American artists alongside British artists, such as Bernard Cohen, Harold Cohen,

⁴⁷ Ralph Coe, review of *Claude Monet: An Exhibition of Paintings*, *Burlington Magazine* 99, no. 656 (November 1957): 385.

⁴⁸ MF Marmor, “Ophthalmology and Art: Simulation of Monet’s Cataracts and Degas’ Retinal Disease,” *Arch Ophthalmol* 124 (2006): 12; Stewart Payne, “Cataracts the Key to Monet’s Blurry Style” *The Telegraph* (17 May 2007).

⁴⁹ Cooper in *Claude Monet: An Exhibition of Paintings*.

Patrick Heron, Ivon Hitchens, Peter Kinley, Peter Lanyon, Rodrigo Moynihan and Richard Smith.

Alloway was predominantly interested in process, execution and painterliness in the work of the Abstract Impressionists. He pointed out the influence of Claude Monet's late style on a relatively wide range of British and American artists; he observed that "The late impressionism of Monet became more 'abstract'; nature continued to be the subject, of course, but the marks and the pigment took on an increasing importance. [...] The connection between impressionism and the new painting lies not only in the painting of light but also in the use of conspicuous paint to refer to nature."⁵⁰ This is where Alloway's interpretation of abstraction differed from Heron's view: while the former would focus on the exploitation of medium, the dynamic of marks and painterliness as a self-reflexive form of abstraction, Heron was still very much loyal to a kind of formalist re-interpretation of visual reality in paint. For Alloway, late Monet was the basis through which he could explain the overlapping of contemporary tendencies coming from French Tachisme and American action painting, and an international re-orientation towards process painting.

Although less interested in Abstract Impressionism as a new form of action painting, Patrick Heron was fascinated by the formal aesthetic of such gestural painting, the 'all-overness' of his technique at the surface of the picture or his 'calligraphy' as he called it. However, what the critic thought differentiated Monet's art from gestural non-figurative painting of the Tachistes and 'action painters', was that Monet's colour was still essentially naturalistic, whereas that of the contemporary artists was not.

Critics such as Douglas Cooper and his apprentice John Richardson, as well as several conventional writers for publications such as *The Burlington Magazine* provided a rather limited outlook and were largely dismissive of the late impressionist works which they regarded as simply unfinished and considered them as deficiencies of the artists' output. A writer like Lawrence Gowing, on the other hand, would translate for instance Cézanne's late work into the British romantic sensibility, which

⁵⁰ Ibid.

seemed a rather far-fetched interpretation. However, critics such as Ralph Coe, Patrick Heron, Lawrence Alloway who appreciated the innovative potential of the late impressionist works and saw them as windows opening onto a new way of looking at the world and of making art. They saw Cézanne and Monet's late work as a promise to the future of modern art, but their angle differed slightly. While Heron was interested in formal aspects of space, form, colour and surface pattern, Alloway appreciated the sheer painting process, the act of mark-making and its painterly effect. The latter actively sought to establish a connection with an old-school great like Monet and the young *École de Paris* Tachistes, as well as American action painting.

The Postwar *École de Paris*: Tachisme and British Painting

In the immediate postwar years there was a stringent need for British artists to absorb and supersede the avant-garde canons of the French modernist pioneers and start fresh, in a new individual style. In this sense, the wave of influence coming from a young *École de Paris* and Michel Tapié's notion of 'art autre'⁵¹ helped distance the artists from the old avant-garde and gave them a sense of being involved in an artistic revolution. Tachisme, the most important form of expression derived from postwar Paris, gave British artists the opportunity to express themselves in an entirely new, original and unprecedented language.

Although it presented as a radical departure from past styles, "the tache had its roots in both the constructive brushstrokes of Cézanne and the more numinous dabs of Impressionism and Pointillisme."⁵² This is supported by the fact that in 1889 the critic Félix Fénéon had used the term 'tachisme' when he referred to the Impressionist technique, while in 1909 Maurice Denis had described the work of the Fauves with the same term. Consequently, this term acquired multiple connotations as early as the turn of the century. Continuity in this sense was visible in the great variety of art considered under the label of 'Tachisme' in the postwar period, as it referred equally to the directional brushstrokes in the calligraphic work of Mathieu, Michaux, Riopelle, and the soft-edged blocks of vibrant colour of Nicolas de Staël. Although striving for originality, paradoxically, this was considered to be an impersonal style in

⁵¹ Michel Tapié, *Un Art Autre* (Paris: Gabriel-Giraud, 1952).

⁵² See Fiona Gaskin, "British Tachisme in the Postwar Period 1946-1957," in *Artists and Patrons in Postwar Britain*, Essays by postgraduate students at the Courtauld Institute of Art, edited by Margaret Garlake, Courtauld Research Papers No.2 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 20.

the sense that it gave the artists the chance to express themselves in an anonymous voice, which would not imitate that of already well-established avant-garde styles.⁵³ Nevertheless, often its ties with early modernism were undeniable, especially in the work of an artist such as Nicolas de Staël.

Three important early exhibitions had introduced the new trends emerging from the École de Paris to the British public: *London, Paris: New Trends in Painting and Sculpture* (Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1950), *L'École de Paris 1900-1950* (Royal Academy of Arts, 1951) and *Young Painters of the École de Paris* (Arts Council touring exhibition, 1952), for which the term 'École de Paris' was generously attributed to all artists, even those remotely affiliated with the French capital, Fiona Gaskin notes in a thorough assessment of Tachisme in British art.⁵⁴ These exhibitions marked those six years before American art had established itself in Britain in 1956 with the occasion of the Tate exhibition *Modern Art in the United States*, period in which Paris was still regarded as the epicentre of the art world.

In Tapié's *Un art autre: ou il s'agit de nouveaux devidages du reel* (1952), a book and exhibition held at Studio Facchetti, Paris, offered an analysis of a contemporary radical form of abstract painting. It meant to establish Art Informel – considered the French counterpart of American Abstract Expressionism – as a form of art which was conceived and executed outside the conventional, bourgeois tradition of 'belle peinture'. The main, underlying theme was existentialist – the artist was on his own, committed entirely to his practice – and *art autre* rejected all traditions (affirming only Dada from the past).⁵⁵ Tapié's text presented the densely painted work, extreme in its depiction of violence and rejection of bourgeois values, of the artists gathered in the Galerie Drouin circle since 1945: Dubuffet, Fautrier and Wols. Except Tapié's writing, there was no founding theory or manifesto which would announce Tachisme as a coherent, purposeful artistic movement like it had been the case with other avant-garde 'isms', including geometric Constructionism in Britain, for example.

⁵³ See Ralph Rumney in an exh. cat. (London: New Vision Centre Gallery, 1956) in Fiona Gaskin, "British Tachisme", 30.

⁵⁴ See Gaskin, "British Tachisme", Notes, 47. The same was applicable to the term 'New York School', which was linked to various artists who had little or no connection with the metropolis.

⁵⁵ Andrew Causey, *Peter Lanyon. Modernism and the Land* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 137.

In 1953, the concept of 'art autre' became first accessible to the British audience through Tapié's ICA exhibition *Opposing Forces* (1953), which presented Tachisme as an international phenomenon, introducing the Americans Jackson Pollock (and one of his enormous 1950s works first shown to a British audience) as well as Sam Francis, alongside artists of European affiliation such as Georges Mathieu, Henri Michaux, Jaroslav Serpan the Filipino Alfonso Ossorio and the Canadian Jean-Paul Riopelle. Alloway, the British curator of the show, also made a connection between Tapié's ideas and the American Harold Rosenberg's 1952 *Art News* article 'American Action Painters'. In many ways, this liberal style gave the artists the freedom to reject the historical past but also the academic and formalist traditions of European art.⁵⁶ At the time, mutual interests in shaping a new modernist vocabulary were typical for both French and American art and British artists were inspired by both, yet it seemed that British artists were initially exposed to the French influence, which they had come into contact with before the Tate exhibition *Modern Art in the United States* (1956).

In the article 'Mathieu Paints a Picture'⁵⁷ written two years later in 1955, discussing Georges Mathieu's 1950s mural-size paintings, Tapié re-inforced this idea of rejection of the past and conventional forms of 'belle peinture'. The article belonged to a series of four photographic essays launched by *Art News* in 1951 showing American and European painters (i.e. Jackson Pollock, Jean Fautrier and Alberto Burri) working in a variety of unorthodox manners. The article on Mathieu was by far the most provocative and intended to achieve the most powerful impact and a strong counter-reaction to two previous *Art News* articles of the same year about American artists, i.e. Robert Goodnough's 'Pollock Paints a Picture' and Harold Rosenberg's seminal 'The American Action Paintings'.⁵⁸ The clear intention here

⁵⁶ However, it is important to point out that there were some British artists such as Peter Lanyon who did not subscribe to Tapié's characterisation of an 'anti-cultural' art-autre "in the sense that this phrase has of turning away from the past and was resistant to bourgeois art and values. Lanyon's position in this respect was the modernist one of concern for tradition while maintaining a critical standpoint towards it". (See Causey, *Peter Lanyon. Modernism and the Land*, 139). Although his earlier work could sometimes be likened to that of Dubuffet or Fautrier, Lanyon was never directly influenced by their art or radical belief system.

⁵⁷ Michel Tapié de Ceyleran in "Mathieu Paints a Picture," with photographs by Robert Descharnes *Art News* 53, no. 10 (February 1955): 50-53.

⁵⁸ See Romy Golan, "L'Éternel Décoratif: French Art in the 1950s," *Yale French Studies* 98, *The French Fifties* (2000): 109.

was to establish French gestural abstraction as a valid and valuable counterpart to the much publicized American painting.

Further important exhibitions helped contemporary French tendencies permeate British art: one of them was precisely Georges Mathieu's ICA exhibition in July-August 1956, for which the artist had produced all works during the two days preceding the exhibition at the gallery itself. In the exhibition catalogue, Tony del Renzio described this performance as "convulsive lyricism", thus stressing the idea of painting as an instinctual act of poetic revelation. A year later, the exhibition *Metavisual, Tachiste, Abstract* (April-May 1957) held at the Redfern Gallery in London, well and truly established Tachisme as the dominant form of abstraction (even if there was no so-called 'tachiste' movement' per se in British art at the time), superseding "Constructionism as the *enfant terrible* of British abstract art."⁵⁹ By the time of the exhibition, it was obvious that Tachisme could not hold on any longer to its strictly French or British beginnings as critics like Alloway saw it as a global manifestation of a predominantly processual abstract trend in international art, just as American action painting and Abstract Expressionism became more and more popular. The participating artists felt they were at the forefront of the international avant-garde by using a completely new approach to painting.

Humanism and Non-Geometric Abstraction

Tachisme became popular in Britain in the aftermath of the Second World War due to the fact that it offered a valid alternative to, on the one hand, geometric abstraction, on the other, to academic art, both manifestations of rational systems of thought. "Into the vacuum left by the war were mobilized new ideas from the realms of philosophy, psychology and anthropology to make sense of the human condition."⁶⁰ Three such theoretical influences were particularly relevant – French Existentialism, Zen Buddhism and Jungian psychoanalysis, but also "other reasons, socially determined and aesthetic, for the appeal of Tachisme" in Britain.⁶¹ Mainly because this art form was subjective and instinctive, such underlying theories were called upon in support of its validity.

⁵⁹ See Gaskin, "British Tachisme", 17.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

There was a strong sense in which Tachisme, through its instinctive gesture and the stress on plasticity of the media used, was associated with humanist values. In Britain, this aspect translated in the technical differences between the new painterly abstraction and Constructionism, as well as the art of groups such as Unit One and Circle, which aimed for the more sterile, manufactured quality of the painted mark. Tachisme, through its spontaneity and lack of finish, had a predominantly human quality about it. This approach of painting was largely instinctual, the 'tache' carried connotations of the emotive and expressive. These lyrical qualities had first been identified in France by Mathieu and Jean José in 1947 through the term 'lyrical abstraction'⁶², which was used to describe the tendency before the term Tachisme was first used. Alloway referred to a similar aspect when he noted the existence of this non-informal abstraction in British art in *Nine Abstract Artists* (1954) as a 'sensuous impressionism without things'.

The 'tache' was an organic, irregular mark which in itself provided an humanised alternative to the pristine hard-edged forms of geometric abstraction. In *New Trends in Painting* (1956), Alloway claimed that the painterliness sought after by tachiste artists was a way to stay true to human values, he explained that they sought "something that is real as a painting, in which the physical qualities of paint have not been suppressed by a fixed idea or finish, or elaborated to the point of excessive refinement."⁶³ In this sense, an effective means of staying connected with reality, was the coarse and protruding texture of tachiste paint.⁶⁴ As opposed to geometric abstraction, painterly abstraction was concerned with the sheer plastic quality of the material and the process of working with it; there were no remote idealisms that the tachiste artists aspired to reach through their art. Fuelled by theories of French Existentialism, Tachisme was welcomed by British artists as it provided a way to see

⁶² Georges Mathieu, *De la Révolte à la Renaissance: au-dela du Tachisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 88. Mathieu claimed that he invented the phrase 'lyrical abstraction', to describe the works he selected for *L'Imaginaire* (Galerie du Luxembourg, 1947) although the first recorded instance of its use was in Jean José Marchand's essay accompanying that exhibition. "Too much importance may be attached to putative distinctions between Tachisme, lyrical abstraction and Tapié's art autre: the terms must be understood in the context of their creators' bids for supremacy as leading art critic of the day." (Gaskin, "British Tachisme", 46-47).

⁶³ *New Trends in Painting: Some Pictures from a Private Collection [E.J. Power's Collection]*, edited by Lawrence Alloway (London: Arts Council, 1956), 2.

⁶⁴ Gaskin, "British Tachisme", 31.

the artist's mark as an expression of his identity and quintessential being⁶⁵, which was in actual fact the way through which 'the real' was pursued in this type of painting.

Tachisme was openly negating the historical and artistic past and all traditional forms of expression. This would often manifest itself in the employment of unconventional materials, in the work of British artists such as Denis Bowen, Sandra Blow, Ralph Rumney, applied with atypical working techniques such as rubbing, splashing, scraping the canvas. Sandra Blow's work, also strongly influenced by the Italian trend *Arte Povera*, was illustrative of the way in which these new influences permeated British art. Blow had committed her entire career to a what the critic Mel Gooding referred to as 'intuitive abstraction', which he contrasted with 'geometric abstraction', (mainly relying on regular, universal forms in two or three dimensions).⁶⁶ The critic insisted that Blow's work was mainly concentrating on its function as visible object, and did not rely on suggestion or repetition of motifs; it could mostly be associated with an expressionist kind of abstraction, which was gestural or painterly.



16. Sandra Blow: *Space and Matter*, 1959

Even as it worked as a self-regulating mechanism, Blow's language recreated elements from nature through the earthy colours, undulant lines, graphic rhythms, quiet, neutral areas and tactile surface. Throughout the years, Blow added to and substituted paint for coarse, raw materials. In her famous painting *Space and Matter*

⁶⁵ See exh. cat. *Paris Post War: Art and Existentialism (1945-55)*, edited by Frances Morris (London: Tate Gallery, 1993), 15-23.

⁶⁶ Mel Gooding in exh. cat. *An Artist of Nature* (Truro: Lemon Street Gallery, 2003).

(1959), chaff and charcoal were mixed into liquid cement and smeared across the surface, alongside oil paint. Blow's priority was for her arrangements to come together as autonomous units, always showing the freshness of her touch, her unmistakable signature. The artist maintained that, "As well as wanting a balance in the composition, there should be what I call a 'startling rightness'. This can be any shape or colour: the crucial thing is that although perfect in its place, there is an unexpected quality about it, an element of surprise."⁶⁷ This idea of the 'startling rightness' was very much in line with the conceptions of Art Informel⁶⁸: art should not be about anything concrete, except the materials themselves; intuition alone was allowed to govern the creative process.

On an ideological level, strictly geometric pre-war abstraction had uncomfortable political connotations, hence the need for the Tachistes to dissociate themselves from it:

The geometric abstraction of the pre-war years was tainted with the cultural values of the epoch that had given rise to Fascism, war, the Holocaust and nuclear destruction. It is not hard to see why artists (many of whom, furthermore, had seen active service)⁶⁹ would have felt that an art form associated with those values had been discredited and that a new language of feeling had to be found with which to grasp the essence of their age.⁷⁰

Illustrative of this aspect was Jean Fautrier's *Hostage* series started in 1944 inspired by the artist's personal experience of Nazi executions of French prisoners, shown in 1945 at Galerie Drouin in Paris, which prompted French critics like André Malraux to refer to his work as "the first attempt to dissect contemporary pain, down

⁶⁷ From a studio discussion between Sandra Blow and Sarah O'Brien Twohig in an exh. cat (Truro: Lemon Street Gallery, 2006), courtesy of Caroline Wiseman Modern Art gallery website: <http://www.artgal.co.uk/caroline-wiseman/sandra-blow-dealer.php>.

⁶⁸ In the late 1940s, Blow's work was very strongly influenced by the hands-on approach of Alberto Burri, a painter associated with Art Informel and precursor of Arte Povera. From Burri, Blow learned that an object literally made is as basic as a primitive artefact and can much more directly translate the artist's perception of the surrounding world, than a traditional painting or any work of art in the conventional sense. Blow stated that she could "remember an extraordinary sense of shedding everything, of leaving all known tracks. And then just looking for something that could be my own, of interpreting the actual structure of painting which seemed to connect with abstract art-structure and space and finding my own language in it." Statement by Sandra Blow (Swanage: Bourn Art Gallery, May 1995).

⁶⁹ Examples are the Scottish artists Scott, Gear, Davie, who never used geometric hard-edge abstraction.

⁷⁰ Gaskin, "British Tachisme", 30.

to its contemporary ideograms”⁷¹. In the last years of the war, Fautrier spent most of his time in a sanatorium on the outskirts of Paris, where at night, he could hear the Gestapo torture and execute prisoners in the nearby woods. British artists could have never been directly affected by the atrocities of war to this extent, therefore the philosophical and psychological undertones of Tachisme did not apply equally to its British equivalent.

The art of the postwar *École de Paris* was mainly a strong influence on the formal and stylistic aspects in British painting, as the socio-political context which generated French postwar art was significantly different from that experienced by British artists. Causey wrote in this sense that, “the condition of France in 1945 was particular and not easy to share from a distance. Though France was an ally, it had also been a defeated and occupied country, and was undergoing the process of *épuration* – the effort, often violently carried out, to punish collaboration and expiate collective guilt.”⁷² This was very different from the experience of an artist such as Peter Lanyon, for example, who, as a British serviceman returned home after long war service abroad to a triumphant and free country, which could now move on and start building a future. Causey went as far as to maintain that Tapié’s notion of ‘art autre’ had no exact correspondent in British art, and the only few artists who did get some attention in Tapié’s seminal book included Paolozzi, Sutherland and Bacon. There was, however, a prevalent sense of unfulfilment amongst some British artists, as a direct result of political uncertainties, following WWII and on the brink of a Cold War, as well as the more removed context of the Korean war. The writer claimed that this was in fact the context of Lanyon’s despair reflected in the reference to ‘napalm’ in a painting such as *St Just*.⁷³

Formal Equivalents of Tachisme in British Postwar Painting

It has already been shown that Tachisme started off as an anti-style and emphasised the process of making art. This aspect was generally seen as the main criterion for defining works as ‘tachiste’. Within this idiom there were two distinctive approaches in British Tachisme, which derived from the postwar *École de Paris*: on

⁷¹ André Malraux in exh. cat. *Les Otages, Peintures et Sculptures de Jean Fautrier* (Paris: Galerie René Drouin, 1945) in Morris (ed.), *Paris Post War*, 90.

⁷² See Causey, *Modernism and the Land*, 140-141.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 141.

the one hand, a manner of painting inspired by the loosely geometric colour patches of Nicolas de Staël, and on the other, from the more energetic calligraphic marks of Mathieu, Michaux, Riopelle, Hartung, Bazaine. As opposed to de Staël's blocky style of Tachisme, Alloway had in fact avoided to refer to Mathieu's work as 'tachiste', preferring the term 'linearist'⁷⁴ due to his calligraphic style. However, such differentiations were less important as 'tachisme' represented a way of thinking and a special interest in process or the making of a work of art, rather than a formal endeavour in Britain. So, this allowed for both styles of painting to be collectively referred to as 'tachiste'. Hence the categorisation into 'blocky' and 'gestural' should be less about pursuing a specific formal aesthetic outcome, and more about presenting two different processes of painting.

A third manner of painting could be added to the previous two categories, namely a gestural expressionism using a figurative idiom; in this latter category one would find the 'brute art' of Dubuffet, as well as that of Fautrier, Wols and Tapié. The following analysis will deal with the effect of the first two on British postwar abstraction, purely for the reason that this is an evaluation of non-figurative modes of painting from the postwar period. However, it is important to point out that all three categories were at some point considered under the umbrella of Tachisme, and the even wider one of Art Informel.



17. Nicolas De Staël: *Nice*, 1954

18. Hans Hartung: *T-1954-20*, 1954

19. Wols: *Blue Ghost*, 1951

⁷⁴ Lawrence Alloway in *Art News and Review* 9, no. 26 (8 January 1958).

Within these three categories, the work of Nicolas de Staël was unique and stood out for its obvious links with the modernism of Cézanne and Matisse, while linking their discoveries with the process-oriented trends of the new *École de Paris*. In Britain, de Staël's art rose to great prominence amongst European artists by 1952, and Alan Bowness noted that "His thick impasto and sensuous handling of paint was imitated, and ... [he] was particularly relevant to those younger British artists then on the verge of abstraction, but also reluctant to lose all contact with nature and the figure."⁷⁵ In many ways, de Staël's art provided a convenient transition between tradition and innovation, in a form which was easily assimilated.

Alloway wrote that, "De Staël [...] had a sharp eye for places but he abstracted from them only those aspects which he could use as paint shapes. Paint determines the appearance of the world in the painting: signs of nature are modifications of the paint."⁷⁶ This was an important observation which explained why De Staël was situated within the circle of Tachistes: by the sheer involvement in the handling of paint and the orchestration of the pictorial composition, the artist managed to re-create reality in a unique way, to a great extent guided by the plastic qualities of his materials.

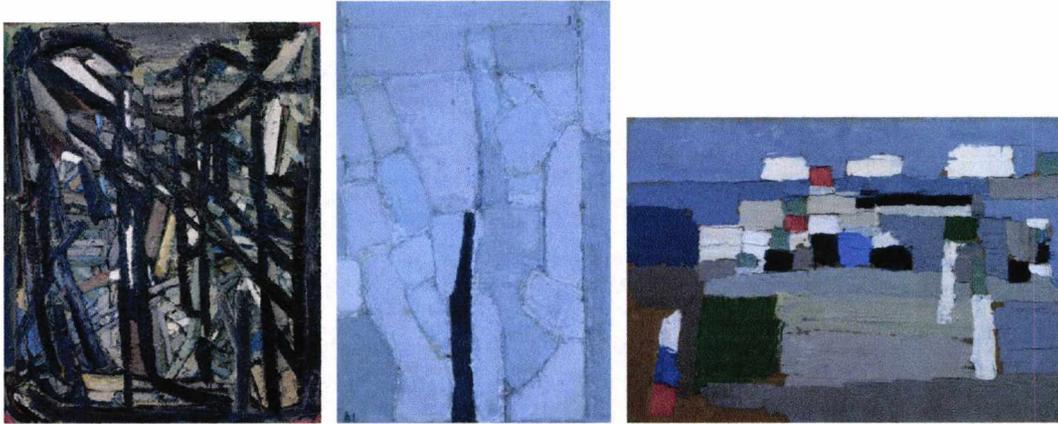
Although already exhibited in London as early as 1950 in the exhibition *In Paris Now* at the Leicester Galleries, Nicolas de Staël's work emerged as an important example for British artists, following his famous one-man exhibition at the Matthiesen Gallery in 1952. The work shown in the latter exhibition covered the years between 1946 and 1952, period in which the artist had experimented with three different styles of Tachisme:

His early abstract work, dating from the period 1946-1948, consisted of loose grids, interpenetrated by clashing diagonals and planes. By 1949 de Staël was producing mosaic-like works of vertical and horizontal impasted slabs and patches. These were also internally logical images (that is, without external referents) although their starting point was in nature. [...] In 1952 de Staël started to paint semi-figurative works in which external referents were included and reduced and simplified to their barest essentials.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Alan Bowness in exh. cat. *Nicolas de Staël* (London: Tate Gallery, 1981), 5.

⁷⁶ Alloway in *Abstract Impressionism: An Exhibition of Recent Paintings*, 1958.

⁷⁷ Gaskin, "British Tachisme", 23.



20. Nicolas de Staël: *Ressentiment*, 1947
 21. Nicolas de Staël: *Composition 1950*
 22. Nicolas de Staël: *Landscape Study*, 1952

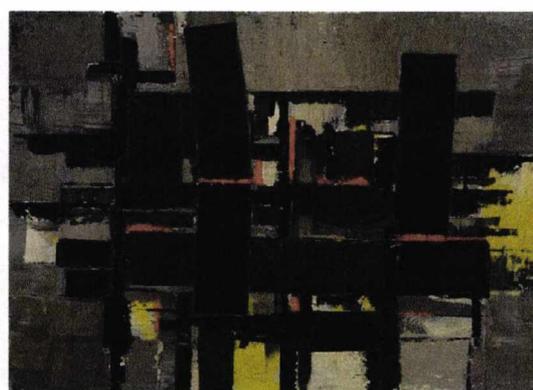
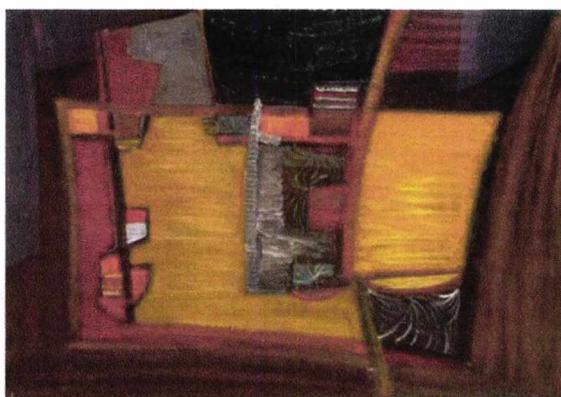
The following works are illustrative of these consecutive stages in de Staël's career and all three modes could be found in British postwar painting. In *Ressentiment* (1947), the dark, vertical and oblique lines, dominate the picture and form a dense network perhaps reminiscent of the monochrome grids of Soulages. Pastel bars set in a conflicting dynamic with the foreground grid emerge from the thickness of the paste, creating the illusion of depth by interacting with the clearly delineated dark framework, almost producing a stained glass effect. A similar approach could be noted in the work of British artists Denis Bowen, William Gear and Frank Avray Wilson, who used this type of reinforced grid structure in their abstract paintings.

The second work, *Composition* (1950), has a title de Staël frequently used during this period as a reiteration of the fact that these works were rationally put together by means of carefully modulated blocks of colour. As in the first work, there are no obvious allusions to known forms, although the artist believed that his choice of colours and the shapes were based on his perceptual experience of reality. Due to the economy of chromatic and compositional means, this is more easily readable as a suggestive image. British equivalents of this manner of painting could be seen a few years later in the minimal abstracts of Roger Hilton and William Scott, also striving to render a pure, essential expression of their perception of the outside world.

The turning-point of de Staël's development took place in 1951-2 when he started to change from a non-figurative to a figurative approach. The artist spoke of his need "to feel life before me, and to take it all in so that it penetrates through the

eyes and the skin”⁷⁸. He first began to paint directly from nature in the spring of 1952 when he embarked on a series of still lifes of flowers, then made several small landscapes out of doors on the motif in Normandy and in the Seine Valley. The third work, *Landscape Study* (1952), dating from this period, appears to be a coastal scene⁷⁹ in which bands, slabs and patches of thick colour reconstruct the shapes and colours of the visible world in a harmoniously balanced and self-sufficient pictorial unit. As de Staël’s last works became more and more figurative, ground-breaking exhibitions such as his Matthiesen show in 1952 had a strong impact on several British semi-abstract artists including William Gear, Roger Hilton, William Scott, Patrick Heron and Terry Frost.

Terry Frost, one of the most perceptual St Ives artists, learnt a lot from de Staël. This was especially visible in his 1954-55 works in which thick impasto was used in compositions abstracted from nature, studied visually and experienced outdoors, such as in *Brown and Yellow Harbour*, 1954-55. Andrew Causey showed that, from 1953, Peter Lanyon as well, found an important modernist grounding for his art in the painting of the de Staël, which replaced the late, decorative form of Cubism and the colour of Matisse and Bonnard advocated by Heron in the immediate postwar years. Alloway showed that, having been born out of Cubism, de Staël’s painting still contained obvious figurative imagery, although this was not the main concern of his art anymore.⁸⁰



23. Terry Frost: *Brown and Yellow (Harbour)*, c.1955

24. William Gear: *Landscape Structure*, 1955

⁷⁸ See Anne de Staël, Françoise de Staël, Germain Viatte, André Chastel, *Nicolas de Staël : Catalogue Raisonné de l'Oeuvre Peint – Lettres* (Neuchâtel: Ides et calendes, 2000), 88.

⁷⁹ See Ronald Alley, *Catalogue of the Tate Gallery's Collection of Modern Art other than Works by British Artists* (London: Tate Gallery and Sotheby Parke-Bernet, 1981), 703.

⁸⁰ Alloway in *New Trends in Painting*.

De Staël also influenced William Gear's style for a few years, as the artist started using thick impasto with the palette knife and modelling it into geometric formal units of a less vibrant colour (e.g. *Landscape Structure*, 1955). As early as 1948, David Sylvester had quoted Gear who said that, "I don't want to draw nature, I want to draw in nature"⁸¹ and in 1950 he described his painting as "abstraction within landscape"⁸². In this sense then, De Staël's art provided an example of the way in which the artist's personal responses to the outside world could be condensed in a pictorial form which would still essentially contain these responses, without literally reproducing the subject that triggered them. The reason why, possibly, de Staël was so attractive to British artists was that he possessed an emotional and aesthetic intelligence which would enable him to discipline instinctual impulses with formal rigour.

Roger Hilton is considered another artist who, inspired by De Staël, started being interested in employing paint shapes organised spatially within the picture, a process which he called the "activization of space".⁸³ In his work, Hilton was also believed to be referring to the argument of the Dutch painter Constant van Nieuwenhuys, whom he met in 1953 through the Cobra group and who was therefore a promoter of intuition in the creative process, whom Hilton described him as 'a humanised Mondrian'. Constant believed that modern architecture needed to be humanized by the positive introduction of plastic colour and art was not confined to easel painting, but liberated to expand into real space.⁸⁴ An example of this is Hilton's *February* (1954), in which the strict geometry of the neo-plasticism is moulded into irregular, expressive abstract shapes, which have organic or anthropomorphic implications. In this sense, the influence of De Staël, but also Tal Coat, came at around the same time and visibly affected the change from Hilton's more graphic style to the large compact areas of pure colour that seemed to extend beyond the frames of the painting, hence the "activization of space" he spoke of. Another reason for this term could have been that these abstract shapes seemed to establish a dynamic

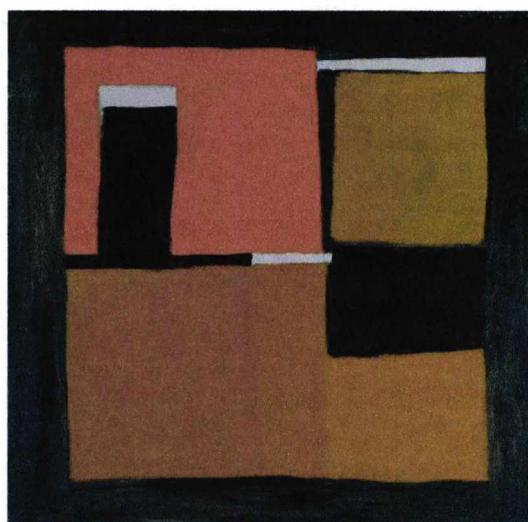
⁸¹ Gear in exh. cat. *William Gear*, edited by David Sylvester (London: Gimpel Fils, 1948).

⁸² From a conversation between William Gear and Malcolm Davies in exh. cat. *William Gear Paintings 1948-68*, Arts Council of Northern Ireland and Scottish Arts Council, 1969), 10.

⁸³ Roger Hilton in *Nine Abstract Artists: their Work and Theory*, edited by Lawrence Alloway, (London: Tiranti, 1954), 30.

⁸⁴ Constant van Nieuwenhuys, "For a Spatial Colourism" (1953) in Gaskin, "British Tachisme", Note 33, 48.

arrangement within the picture, hence also the feeling that these were not simply non-figurative works. Their movement and placement would often allude to anthropomorphic imagery. In *Nine Abstract Artists* (1954), Alloway confirmed this idea when he quoted Hilton saying that he felt the need for there to be a kind of anonymous presence in his work.⁸⁵



25. Roger Hilton: *February 1954*

26. William Scott: *Orange, Black and White Composition*, 1953

Similar transformations were in place with the abstract forms of William Scott. The latter seemed more influenced by de Staël's Matthiesen Gallery exhibition than his first visit to America in 1953⁸⁶ when he met Pollock, Kline, Rothko and de Kooning. In Scott's interiors and still lifes of 1952-6 lessons had been learnt about the ways in which the handling of matter could suggest the presence of a body or landscape, "without recourse to description, illustration or narrative"⁸⁷. Alloway believed that both Hilton and Scott were working with ambiguous imagery and Heron confirmed the comparison when he wrote in *The Changing Forms of Art* (1955), that Scott's work of the late 1940s and early 1950s looked like a "Mondrian that is melting"⁸⁸. While Mondrian had sought form and proportion, Scott's work, on the other hand, was a "living entity, utterly organic, a concrete sensuous fact involving

⁸⁵ *Nine Abstract Artists*, 10.

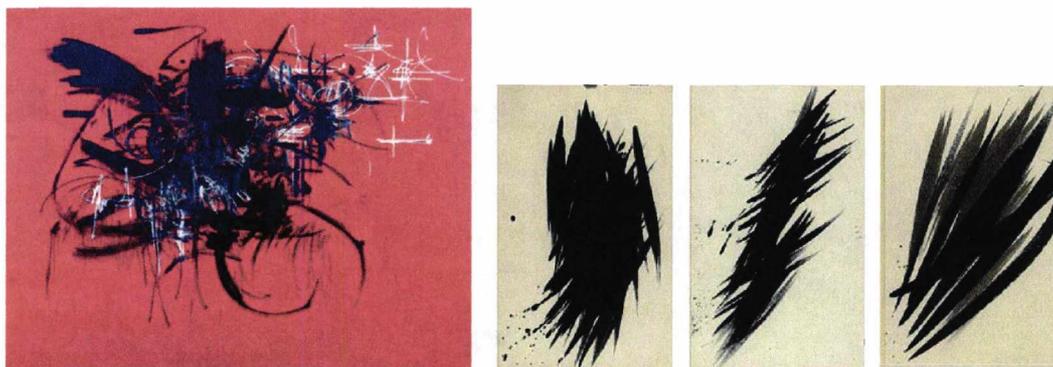
⁸⁶ James Hyman, *The Middle Ground, Different Ways of Seeing: Towards a Reassessment of Postwar British Art* in exh. cat. *The Challenge of Postwar Painting New Paths for Modernist Art in Britain* (London: James Hyman Fine Art, 2004), 10.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Patrick Heron, *The Changing Forms of Art* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), 199.

paint,”⁸⁹ Heron noted. Following De Staël’s show in 1952, Scott experimented for a short time till 1953 with a mosaic of taches painted in gouache (e.g. *Interior*, 1953), however without turning decorative or flat, but on the contrary, achieving spatial depth.

Arguably, a second significant influence on the development of British Tachisme came from the French gestural exponents of the new *École de Paris*, such as Georges Mathieu, Pierre Soulages, Henri Michaux, Hans Hartung, Who-Ki Zao and Camile Bryen. Before British artists were significantly exposed to American action painting, the work of these European artists had already had a great impact on their work. Within this idiom, Mathieu’s paintings from the late 1940s and early 1950s were characterised by spontaneity of gesture as he filled wide canvases with long, dark marks and vivid colour (e.g. *Flamence rouge*, 1950; *Hommage à la Mort*, 1952). He referred to this manner of painting as “l’esthétique de la vitesse”, which was an instinctual and unpremeditated approach, and an art which was formless and produced in a state of creative ecstasy.⁹⁰



27. Georges Mathieu: *Flamence rouge*, 1950

28. Hans Hartung: *Untitled*, 1955-1956

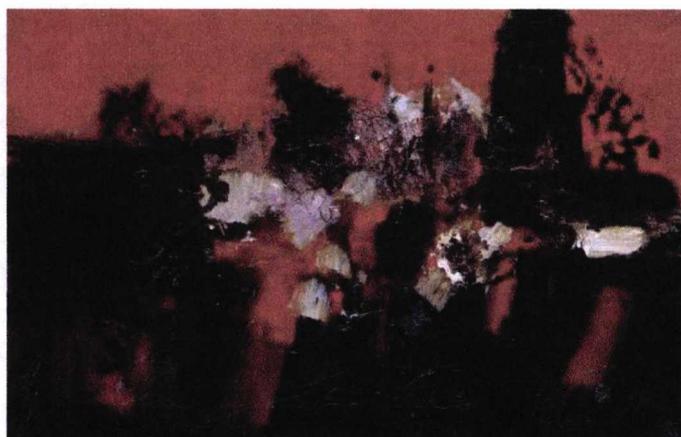
It is likely that the Scottish artist William Gear and through him, Alan Davie in his early work, were aware of this type of gestural abstraction⁹¹ and painting as a

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁹⁰ Mathieu, *De la Révolte à la Renaissance*, 107.

⁹¹ This type of abstraction was visible in Hans Hartung’s one-man exhibition at the Hanover Gallery in 1949, as well as in the work of Hartung, Mathieu, Soulages and Who-Ki Zao in *Young Painters of the École de Paris*, 1951; Mathieu and Michaux in *Opposing Forces*, 1953; Soulages in a one-man show at Gimpel Fils, 1955. See Gaskin, “British Tachisme”, 49 and Alex Seago, *Burning the Box of Beautiful Things: The Development of a Postmodern Sensibility* (London: Oxford University Press, 1995), 125 about Mathieu’s live and televised demonstration of painting at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1956.

process of projecting the movement of the artist's body onto the canvas, even before coming into contact with Pollock's work. This gestural form of Tachisme also strongly inspired a group of artists associated with the New Vision Centre Gallery in London (i.e. Ralph Rumney, Denis Bowen, Halima Nalecz, Frank Avray Wilson) which was showing regularly and exclusively minor British and foreign tachistes in one-man exhibitions.⁹² Although their role has often been overlooked, Denis and his colleagues at the New Vision Gallery Group made essential contributions to the shaping of postwar modern British art and enabled the emergence of significant new trends. Yet, in spite of all these developments, Tachisme was not critically recognized in Britain per se until the global significance of gestural abstraction was established following the Tate exhibition *Modern Art in the United States* of 1956.



29. William Gear: *Trunks, Nocturne*, 1953
30. Denis Bowen: *Crystallised Landscape*, 1958

Bowen, a leading advocate of informal abstract painting in Britain and a pioneer of Tachisme, used vigorous blocks of paint and free-form brush strokes from the early 1950s to the mid-60s, influenced by Europeans such as Michaux, Fautrier, Fontana and Burri. Bowen consulted French periodicals such as *Art d'Aujourd'hui* and *Cimaise* to keep updated on contemporary French painting, and in the London galleries he informally met continental artists he greatly admired, such as Giacometti, Soulages and Mathieu, whose interest in 'pure', process-oriented painting

⁹² See exh. cat. *New Vision 56-66*, edited by Margaret Garlake (Jarrow: Bede Gallery, 1984); and Marlowe Russell, "Obituary of Denis Bowen," *The Guardian* (31 March 2006).

consolidated his own.⁹³ Despite having been influenced by figurative painters such as Carel Weight, Robert Buhler and John Minton, Bowen was more interested in experimenting with the processual aspect of painting. Davies wrote that, "His awareness of paint as a deliciously tactile, fluid substance capable of a range of expressions beyond the merely descriptive ensured his involvement with the burgeoning avant-garde of the early 1950s. However, Bowen's awareness of nature - particularly the spectacular light effects of skies at dusk - also brought a romanticism to his work, also inspired by his experience of the wartime landscape."⁹⁴ An illustration of this could be found in a work such as *Crystallised Landscape* (1958) in which the energetic brushwork is complemented by dramatic chromatic juxtapositions, causing a simple gestural exercise to be endowed with atmospheric qualities - this is perhaps where the effect of his formative period with an artist such as Minton was visible, with Bowen's materials and gestural marks often acquiring symbolic and emotional values.

Most British experimental artists of the time were at some point influenced by the various aesthetic orientations within the current of Tachisme. The stages through which this trend permeated British art could be followed in the work of an artist such as Patrick Heron. The latter's outlook too had been visibly changed by de Staël's 1952 exhibition, which actually pushed him towards producing his first entirely abstract work, with strongly contrasting slabs of colour placed in dynamic relationships. An example of this is the work *Figure in Harbour Room, Orange & Grey* begun in the same year, in which, although holding on to some figurative and perspectival devices, Heron clearly showed more interest in the interplay of the coloured areas with the linear structure. Unlike de Staël's, Heron's taches covered the entire canvas to all its margins, whereas the former would group his patches of colour in the centre of his works.⁹⁵ De Staël's influence on Heron was short-lived and the artist admitted re-adopting figuration⁹⁶ as his chosen manner of painting until 1956, however a strong interest for experimentation with non-figurative units remained. In 1955 Heron went through a stage when he was inspired by another French artist,

⁹³ See Peter Davies, "Denis Bowen: 'Space Age Abstract Painter,'" *The Independent* (28 March 2006).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ See Gaskin, "British Tachisme", 26.

⁹⁶ Patrick Heron in exh. cat. *Statements: A Review of British Abstract Art in 1956* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1957).

Pierre Soulages and his monochromatic gestural abstracts, such as in works like *Winter Harbour* (1955) where Heron predominantly used black and white vertical forms.⁹⁷



31. Patrick Heron: *Figure in Harbour Room*, oil canvas 1952
32. Patrick Heron: *Azalea Garden: May 1956*, 1956

From 1956, Heron started painting a series of ‘garden pictures’ such as *Azalea Garden: May 1956*⁹⁸ in which the brushwork was much more fragmented, the colour more diluted and the palette much lighter, suggesting natural space. This series was inspired by his garden at Eagles Nest, Zennor, but also by the artist’s own admission in *Statements* (1957), by the work of American Sam Francis⁹⁹ which he had seen in the Arts Council exhibition *New Trends in Painting* (1956). Fuelled by the experimentation of the previous period, Heron embarked on these abstract works in which “a figurative treatment of the subject had been virtually obliterated by a curtain-like succession of laterally-brushed rough verticals”.¹⁰⁰ Discarding figurative

⁹⁷ Gaskin, “British Tachisme”, 26.

⁹⁸ See Ronald Alley, “Patrick Heron: the Development of a Painter,” *Studio International* 174, no. 891 (July/August 1967): 20.

⁹⁹ The critic Lawrence Alloway, more interested in paint as process and matter, accused Heron of taking Francis’s influence and turning it in his works into “weather reports”. (Paradoxically though, Alloway himself organized the joint British-American exhibition *Abstract Impressionism* a year later in 1958.) Neither Heron nor Francis were consciously using nature as a starting point, however they alluded to weather conditions, times of the day or seasonal changes. While Heron described them as “mysterious, but nonetheless real” (*Statements*, 1957), in the exhibition catalogue to *Abstract Impressionism*, Alloway acknowledged that there was a predominant trend at the time which produced abstract paintings containing reference to natural phenomena, but he believed that these were “often seen through a screen of sentiment”. See Lawrence Alloway, “English and International Art,” *European Art This Month* (1957): 25.

¹⁰⁰ Mel Gooding, *Patrick Heron* (London: Phaidon Press, 1994), 94.

imagery was a liberating experience, which permitted him to strictly focus on the pictorial aspects 'i.e. the architecture of the canvas, the spatial interrelation of each and every touch (and stroke, or bar) of colour'; the artist continued his exploration of paint moving on from taches to stripes, mostly spurred by his contact with the art of the Americans Sam Francis and Morris Louis. However, Heron's works produced in this style still showed a great interest in the hand-made effect of the painted mark and continued the spatial investigation of the picture, whereas the work of the Americans seemed much more focused on the sheer automatic production of pictures which in their use of commercial paint and enormous scale differed through their manufactured appearance. On many levels, then, Heron's 'tache' and 'stripe' paintings could be more affiliated with European and specifically French informal abstraction.

Some of Heron's first stripe paintings were included in the seminal exhibition *Metavisual, Tachiste, Abstract Painting in England Today* held in 1957 at the Redfern Gallery, London. Alongside Heron, the show featured work by Blow, Frost, Gear, Heath, Hilton, Lanyon, Nicholson, Pasmore, Ayres and Bowen and was generally intended as a display of indigenous innovation, of a British art which was aware of, and had successfully assimilate various international trends, and in the process had discovered and developed its own unique voice. The latter contradicted some contemporary criticisms of British abstraction, such as that of Sylvester of the same year: he claimed that most such works "do not hold the wall, they float, they melt away as we look at them. For British painters, improvisation has meant playing about with paint on the assumption that if they go on long enough something is bound to turn up. He maintained that the tragic flaw of English art was compromise, unwillingness to commit to a point of view."¹⁰¹ Sylvester's ongoing belief that British abstract art was inferior, isolated and insecure was challenged by an exhibition such as that held at the Redfern in 1957, which was a confident display of individual experimental talent.

British art seemed to have turned a new page in the late 1950s. The experience of the war had liberated minds, experimentation was in the air, there was a fresh concern with unconscious structures and contents, an interest in the workings of

¹⁰¹ See Jackie Wullschlager, "Abstraction Tamed," *Financial Times*, Arts & Design, New York and London (6 July 2007).

chance and an unusually strong revolt against tradition. Many of these characteristics were introduced through the influence of the postwar *École de Paris*. Recently, in July 2007, an exhibition held at the Redfern Gallery in London, meant to re-enact the 1957 show with the same name which had been “suggested by Patrick Heron’s wife Delia as a daring statement of cosmopolitan integration”¹⁰². *Metavisual Tachist Abstract 1957 - a Fiftieth Anniversary* intended to celebrate this international moment in postwar British painting giving a palpable sense of the historical moment which produced some of the most inventive art of the postwar period.

¹⁰² Ibid.

Chapter Five

British Postwar Painting and the New York School

This chapter moves away from the influence of Paris to examine the relationship between American Abstract Expressionism and British painting in the 1950s. It provides a brief analysis of the political context British culture found itself in during the Cold War, introducing the idea of art, specifically abstract painting, used as a political tool of propaganda and the comparable role of realism in the period following the war. Contemporary critical opinions from both sides of the Atlantic (i.e. Heron, Robertson, Alloway, Sylvester, Berger, Fuller in England and Greenberg, Rosenberg, Fried in the United States) are being investigated in an attempt to set the scene for the impact of the important American exhibitions held in London in 1956 and 1959. In this sense, the main focus of this chapter is the reception of New York School painting by an insecure British art world, whose initial reluctance to adopt a new and foreign model of expression turned into overt enthusiasm as Abstract Expressionism came to be seen the main valid and innovative art from the late 1950s onwards. The reception of American art had a similar resonance to the exhibitions of Matisse and Picasso shown in London in 1945, although the state British culture found itself in greatly differed through its having benefited from a decade of exposure to the influence of the old and new Écoles de Paris. The fact that British artists had come into contact with French Tachisme prior to the American influence had already greatly motivated them in seeking new, liberal and individual forms of expression.

A further interest of this chapter surfaces in a comparative analysis of developments in the active, yet regional St Ives group and the globally publicized movements of the New York School. Significant links between the two art centres are shown to have existed from the early and mid-1950s onwards, through mutual visits by critics and artists, as well as in their writing and art. Amongst multiple parallels in their painting were a concern for myth and psychological enquiry, creation seen as a private act of the individual artist and abstraction on an expanded scale. The aspect which set them apart though was the predominantly empirical nature of St Ives art, as opposed to exclusively formal interests, on the one hand, or symbolic/existential interests, on the other hand, present in American abstract art. Critics such as Patrick Heron and Peter Fuller encouraged the experiential quality of British art, its strong

sense of place and preference for organic form and claimed that American art was mainly a stylistic influence. Heron believed that style in itself should not be an essential determining factor in abstract painting and championed the necessity of a reliance on subject, warning against the dangers of a stylistic doctrine. Conversely, by the late 1950s, the pro-American Lawrence Alloway altogether dismissed the interest in landscape as a setback to innovation in British art.

Overall, the chapter discusses the ways in which St Ives abstraction (and, in great lines, European abstraction) differed from American abstraction through its humanism and reliance on perception, rather than systematic quality and strict formal allegiances. Although it offered a new impetus to British postwar art, it represented by no means the sole influence on national forms of non-figurative painting. Furthermore, isolated links between British and American critics and artists prove that the influence may have been mutual on some level, and the vagueness of international interest in St Ives was mainly due to its persistent ties with an external subject, what is more, one which was considered outmoded: the landscape.

The postwar years were closely associated with the Cold War, which caused the entire European political landscape to change and Britain's position following the dissolution of the empire and WWII started being more reliant on its relationship with America. Apart from its deeply-rooted ties with Europe, the second powerful source of influence on British national culture came from the United States, whose relations with Britain had come to be of a one-sided dependency, especially through the need of the British to accept political and economic support from America particularly through the Marshall Aid loan agreed in 1945 and implemented in 1947. The latter was "seen by the Right as an attack on imperial authority and by the Left as a possible means to weakened socialism"¹ or altogether, a threat to the progress of the nationalisation process. Considering the power of America in the postwar period, its imminent cultural influence was far more feared in Britain than that of continental culture; US culture was mainly associated with popular mass-culture and the cinema and in 1957 the *Daily Mirror* warned of "a systematic, well-organised and financed

¹ Margaret Garlake, "Between Paris and New York: Critical Constructions of 'Englishness', c. 1945-60," in *Art Criticism Since 1900*, edited by Malcolm Gee (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 182.

attempt to impose coca-colonization on the British people.”² While Hollywood films were selling the American dream to the British audiences, British critics attributed negative connotations to this influence:

The fear that underlay the enquiry was of assimilation to a culture familiar in outline but utterly foreign in its nuances. If French culture had the authority of the matriarch, for whom rejection is implicit, America possessed the allure of the black sheep.³

The first and most potent contact of British culture was with American mass culture. US high culture, on the other hand, did not have any relevant impact in Britain until the later 1950s possibly when the first important exhibition, MoMA’s *Modern Art in the United States*, was shown at the Tate Gallery in London in 1956. The lack of a well-defined American high culture was noted by Clement Greenberg in an article published in *Horizon* in 1947, in which he could not find many worthy exponents of American high culture, except perhaps Pollock and Smith, whereas James Thrall Soby appreciated the work of the Americans Morris Graves and Ben Shahn for raising provincial values of art to the level of quality of international modernism. Meanwhile, in England the reverse process was in place as critics promoted a home-grown culture which would deny its affiliations with the continent, this tendency being prevalent in the work of the neo-Romantics.

For Britain, on a political and economic level, the United States, as the emerging new superpower played an important role, of a superior power sustaining Britain, which had yet to go through a complex process of development in order to measure up as an equal partner. The British-American relationship was thus required and strengthened by Cold War tactics. Political interests started infiltrating British culture, in which a significant reorientation was taking place, from the existing predominant influence of French modernism towards the assimilation of new developments coming from American art, particularly Abstract Expressionism, following the exhibition *Modern Art in the United States* shown at the Tate Gallery in 1956. By the late 1950s, British had acquired a respected position within the international mainstream. The nostalgia and utopic vision of wartime neo-Romanticism was replaced by the artists’ interest in the fast-paced present world and

² From *Arena* 2, Special issue (June/July 1957) in Garlake, “Between Paris and New York”, 183.

³ *Ibid.*

the threat of total cultural annihilation feared during the second world war was not actual anymore.

Political Ties: the Cultural Cold War in Britain

Some perceived the reordering of the global political situation in postwar Britain as a new threat posed to its national culture, as the country became a battleground for Cold War cultural and political supremacy. The helping hand lent by the United States through the Marshall Aid, although seen as humiliating, could not be declined considering the country's economical crisis. Meanwhile, it constituted a very powerful political tool by which the Americans sought to avert Soviet Communist totalitarianism from western Europe. During this time, U.S. popular culture invaded Britain through various channels: the Hollywood films promoting the utopia of the American dream, the prevailing presence of American troops in Europe, the proliferation of consumer goods, magazines and advertising. The historian Tony Shaw indicated how this influx of U.S. culture would soon become a tool of political propaganda:

All wars, especially cold wars, are fought in part through words and images. Propaganda--the design, production, and dissemination of these words and images--was central to the forty-year battle fought between East and West after the Second World War. As the U.S. and Soviet nuclear arsenals increased in the 1950s and 1960s, a direct military clash between the superpowers was generally considered to be suicidal. The resulting psychological and cultural conflict--an alternative to "real" war--was unparalleled in scale, ingenuity, and power. In a period of information and entertainment overload stretching from the golden age of radio to the birth of satellite television, it seemed almost impossible not to be touched in some way by the barrage of official and unofficial Cold War publicity. Virtually everything, from sport to ballet to comic books and space travel, assumed political significance and hence potentially could be deployed as a weapon both to shape opinion at home and to subvert societies abroad.⁴

Complex political interests were at play in this process of cultural dissemination. The CIA's plans were to attract European intellectuals out of the radius of the Soviet influence, by conducting a covert promotion of a "non-Communist left

⁴ Tony Shaw, "The Politics of Cold War Culture," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 59-76.

of democratic socialists disillusioned with Moscow.”⁵ Frances Stonor Saunders wrote that although many of the intellectuals who benefited from this funding denied it, several others, such as the British poet and critic Stephen Spender, the co-editor of *Encounter* magazine, for instance, knew in fact that the real sponsor of their cultural activities was the C.I.A. Hugh Wilford expanded on this idea that the intelligence organization’s most successful venture in Britain was undoubtedly its magazine *Encounter*. He showed how, launched in London in 1953 under the joint editorship of Stephen Spender and the young New York intellectual, Irving Kristol, *Encounter* rapidly established itself as the most important and most dedicated journal of political opinion and cultural expression in England, attracting contributions from a wide range of the British intellectuals. The magazine had difficulty in dissociating itself from its political implications:

Whether this means, though, that the CIA had succeeded in colonizing the consciousness of Britain’s left-wing intellectuals, as some commentators have concluded, is very much open to question. For one thing, such a verdict overlooks evidence of British intellectuals attempting to use the US cultural apparatus for their own domestic selfish purposes. Sometimes such acts of appropriation were literal and crude, as when officers of the British Society for Cultural Freedom⁶ took their friends out to lunch joking that ‘American taxpayers are paying!’ At other times they were more subtle: witness Stephen Spender’s constant campaigning to reduce the American political side of *Encounter*’s coverage, and transform the publication into a latter-day version of the British ‘little magazine’ he had helped edit during the 1940s, *Horizon*.⁷ In both cases the basic impulse was the same: the British were exploiting the covert patronage of the CIA for their own ends.⁷

Recently the subject of increased scholarly and public interest, official US government involvement in the cultural shaping of the West, has been seen as a direct consequence of American Senator Joseph McCarthy’s absolutist approach to culture

⁵ Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 1999), 254.

⁶ A British affiliate of the American CCF, the British Society for Cultural Freedom, was established in January 1951 under the leadership of such prominent literary intellectuals as Stephen Spender, Malcolm Muggeridge and Fredric Warburg. Young political thinkers on the right wing of the Labour Party, including Anthony Crosland, Roy Jenkins and Hugh Gaitskell were drawn into the organisation’s sphere of influence through their involvement in such events as the *Future of Freedom* conference held in Milan in 1955. The CCF even established a presence in British universities in the shape of the Committee on Science and Freedom at Manchester.

⁷ Hugh Wilford, “Calling the Tune? the CIA, the British Left and the Cold War, 1945-1960,” *Intelligence and National Security* 18, no. 2 (June 2003): 45.

and politics. In the past decade, new information came to light which changed the traditional outlook on the course of cultural history. For example, an astonished British press discovered in 1996 when the Foreign Office files were disclosed, that the writer George Orwell had secretly introduced a list of “crypto-Communists” in the arts and media to the British government shortly before his death in 1950. This posed questions not only about Orwell’s presumed strong left-wing conviction, but also about that of a series of other intellectuals. Writers, historians and knowledgeable public felt betrayed. Amongst the many books published as a reaction to these revelations were Christopher Mayhew’s *A War of Words: A Cold War Witness* (1998) and Paul Lashmar and James Oliver’s *Britain’s Secret Propaganda War 1948-1977* (1998) which look at Britain and take us forward into the post-1945 Cold War.⁸

Focusing mainly on the way U.S. low culture was propagated in Britain, Garlake wrote that, in the beginning of the 1950s, fears of Americanisation were increasingly voiced by the political Left (represented by magazines such as *Our Times* and *Arena*), who were proposing social realism as a means to preserve British cultural heritage and safeguard it against its exposure of U.S. low-culture. Marxist critics and historians, like the young John Berger declared in the *New Statesman* in 1953 that, “All works of art, within their own immediate context, are bound directly or indirectly to weapons”.⁹ He argued that the essence of the realist debate consisted in the fact that an artist “either blows his own trumpet or is the herald of his time,”¹⁰ he either “serves or searches arrogantly alone”.¹¹ This polarisation was the result of a national and international socio-political world-struggle.¹² He recognized the opposition “between our extending communal way of life (factories, overgrown cities, flats, mass entertainment and so on) and an obsessively individualistic ideology”¹³, which “led him to equate individualism with decadence, placing his views in direct and deliberate

⁸ Lashmar and Oliver have made the first attempt to outline the Inland Revenue Department’s (IRD) multifarious propaganda activities in Britain and overseas throughout the organization’s existence. These writings offer keen insights into the perceived “menace” of Communism in Britain and the Empire during the “first” Cold War and the measures taken by the information and intelligence bodies to combat that threat.

⁹ John Berger, “The Unknown Political Prisoner,” *New Statesman* 45, no. 1150 (21 March 1953): 337-8.

¹⁰ John Berger in exh. cat. *Realist Painters of ‘La Colonna’* (London: Leicester Galleries, 9-31 May 1956).

¹¹ John Berger, *A Painter of Our Time* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1958), 88-9.

¹² John Berger, *Permanent Red: Some Essays in Seeing* (London: Methuen, 1960).

¹³ John Berger, “Art in Ceylon,” *New Statesman* 47, no. 1194 (23 January 1954): 98.

confrontation with the West's rhetoric of personal freedom.”¹⁴ Meanwhile, the illustrator Paul Hogarth wrote that “it should be known how rearmament and Cold War thinking affected the nature of art itself.”¹⁵ The Communist activist Patrick Carpenter condemned advocates of Modernism such as Herbert Read and Patrick Heron for equating realism with Communism, without considering the ideological implications and commitments of other kinds of art: “All art is propaganda. The fundamental problem is whether it should be propaganda for man or against him.”¹⁶

Hyman placed the battle for realism at the centre of Cold War culture in Britain, not only as a reactionary force as seen widely by theorists of the era from the ending of the Second World War until the late 1950s, between the fall of neo-Romanticism and the rise of Abstract Expressionism. He saw as characteristics of this battle its predominantly European roots, its association with the idea of high culture and with the conventional medium of domestic-scale easel painting.¹⁷ Although American cultural historians and art critics such as Eva Cockcroft, Serge Guilbaut and Michael Leja concentrated on the propagandistic promotion of American abstract art in Europe during the Cold war, they omitted the role of realism in postwar Europe. That these “revisionist studies have themselves become an orthodoxy, as the tendency to characterise Europe as a dying culture in resuscitation from America.” In fact, ‘the battle for realism’ was a way by which European culture could regain its lost vitality “in an art world decentralising from Paris to cities such as London and Milan at a time when American art was, in Europe, virtually ignored, dismissed or irrelevant, or categorized as inferior, derivative and naïve.”¹⁸

The exhibitions of abstract expressionist painting in Europe followed a series of American folk art exhibitions during the 1940s and first half of the 1950s.¹⁹ Tradition and realism therefore came to be used before innovation and abstraction as

¹⁴ James Hyman, *Figurative Art in Britain during the Cold War 1945-60* (London: Yale University Press, 2001), 3.

¹⁵ Paul Hogarth, “Humanism versus Despair in British Art Today,” *Marxist Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (January 1955): 37-47.

¹⁶ Patrick Carpenter, “Correspondence. Art and Critics,” *New Statesman* 45, no. 1152, (4 April 1953): 400.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹ Michael Leja, *Slow Learners: Art and Cultural Diplomacy in the US*, unpublished lecture for *Cold War Culture, An International Conference* (London: University College, 22-30 October 1994) in Hyman, *Figurative Art in Britain*, Note 16, p. 209.

tools of affirming and promoting national identity overseas. A contributing factor for this one-sided view of cultural dissemination was that no alternative comprehensive study of the Soviet cultural propaganda in Europe has been carried out yet. Turning the table on the American revisionist debates about the exclusive employment of abstract art as a political tool, Hyman maintained that "In visual culture during the early Cold War period the battle between the United States and the Soviet Union found its fullest expression not, as has been assumed, in a conflict between abstraction and realism but rather in a battle for realism. Both sides were initially drawn to realism rather than abstraction, encouraged by the relative ease with which a broad public could read such art."²⁰ The Cold War rhetoric of individual freedom and aesthetic autonomy though did not apply to figurative art as it was used in relation to abstract art. However, realism did in fact adhere to Greenberg's definition of modernist art and was therefore a powerful force which was difficult to ignore:

Contrary to the assumptions in so much literature on Abstract Expressionism, figurative art in Europe was not seen as passé but could be championed in the very terms elaborated by Clement Greenberg as non-narrative, non-literary and non-illustrational. As such figuration was all the more dangerous. It could not merely be dismissed. [...] this danger led Greenberg, the leading American champion of Abstract Expressionism to confront directly the claims of David Sylvester.²¹

In an article entitled 'The European View of American Art' published in 1950, Clement Greenberg criticised the unenthusiastic reception of American art at the 1950 Venice Biennale.²² Greenberg was offended by the views of English critics Douglas Cooper²³ and David Sylvester, surprised not by their prejudice, but by their "lack of critical competence".²⁴ He dismissed Sylvester's criticism of Albert Pinkham Ryder, Max Weber and Arshile Gorky as negligence and superficial knowledge of the

²⁰ Ibid., 4.

²¹ Ibid., 5.

²² He cited from reports of the event by Aline B. Louchheim in *The New York Times* in which she wrote that the lack of consideration given to the American exhibits had "little to do with the show itself, but that its explanation lies in two factors. The first is the habit of Europeans to think of Americans as cultural barbarians, the second, their resentment of their present military and economic dependence upon us." From reports on the Venice Biennale, *The New York Times* (10 September 1950) in *Clement Greenberg: Affirmations and Refusals 1950-1956*, edited by John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 60.

²³ Douglas Cooper had referred to the work of American John Marin as "convulsive and somewhat inept" and Jackson Pollock as "merely silly", as cited by Greenberg reproduced in a column by Alfred Frankfurter in *Art News* (September 1950).

²⁴ Clement Greenberg, "The European View of American Art," *The Nation*, 25 November 1950, in *Clement Greenberg: Affirmations and Refusals 1950-1956*, 60.

American artists's work and attributed Sylvester's admiration of Alexander Calder's and Rufino Tamayo's work as a sign of the English critic hanging on to old-fashioned views of modernism in its incipient phase, with a pronounced ignorance of the real innovation brought about in the work of the American abstract artists such as Pollock, de Kooning and Gorky. Greenberg wrote,

[In Calder and Tamayo's work] the drawing is too Picassoid [...] it is modern painting the way they have got used to it in Europe these past thirty years, and with a certain twist, a new *mise en scène* that protects it at first glance from the reproach of lacking originality. It is exactly what the enlightened critic [i.e. Sylvester] has been ready to welcome ever since 1940. [On the other hand] The kind of art that Pollock, de Kooning, and Gorky present does not so much break with the Cubist and post-Cubist past as extend it in an unforeseen way, as does all art that embodies a new "vision". Theirs represents, in my opinion, the first genuine and compelled effort to impose Cubist order – the only order possible to ambitious painting in our time – on the experience of the post-Cubist, post-1930 world.²⁵

Greenberg claimed that the post-Cubist formalism of the new American art was "new beyond freshness and therefore violent", shocking for conservative European critics like Sylvester and the unknowing public of the Venice Biennale. He implied that New York School painting did not in fact have any valid counterpart in European painting. He set the French tachiste Jean Dubuffet as a singular example of this type of art in Europe, against the less important work of Graham Sutherland, who "gets away with it in England, [where] they are still looking forward to the Picasso of 1928, even if it is an academicized pastiche of him."²⁶ To this, Sylvester retorted in the same issue of *The Nation* that, "Mr. Greenberg's great error is his notion that Pollock, Gorky, and de Kooning represent an exclusively American conception and that this conception is what is most contemporary in art today. I believe that something akin to what they are doing is being done very much better by Hartung and Kermadec."²⁷ However, Sylvester himself was soon to learn that the impact of American Abstract Expressionism was in fact inescapable.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Editor's note, *ibid.*, 60.

In the beginning, American high-culture was not perceived as much of a threat and “remained an object of benign curiosity until 1956”²⁸ (when *Modern Art in the United States* was shown), writers such as Anthony Hartley believed. The British Left press adopted a neutral position towards American social realism, seen as the only relevant U.S. painting at the time. Greenberg did not believe though that provincial realism was the future, but predicted that the modernist abstraction of Hans Hofmann’s students²⁹ would put American painting on the international cultural map. (However, a note should be made here of the fact that in a 1947 article Greenberg himself still claimed that the emerging new art of his co-nationals had international roots, mainly European and more specifically Parisian.³⁰) Although of European origins, American high culture and its influence could not be overstated. “Just as American intellectuals had willingly exiled themselves in France in the 1920s and 1930s, in the 1950s European artists turned to the United States for stimulus.”³¹

Before 1956, the Institute of Contemporary Art in London and the Independent Group were the main investigators of the influences coming from American art and culture, but the Tate Gallery soon took over this role. In 1956, the Tate showed work of American painters produced in the late 1940s, in the first significant exhibition entitled *Modern Art in the United States*, part of the Museum of Modern Art’s tour of eight European capitals. In the introduction to the catalogue, Holger Cahill heralded the idea of a new, autonomous American art, free from outside influences, particularly European.³² The cultural context in which American art was received in Britain was decidedly different from the way in which French had been hailed a decade earlier:

In contrast to 1945, when Picasso’s wartime paintings penetrated the closed circle of British art with the ‘shock of the new’, artists active in 1956 converged on contemporary American work informed by a decade of

²⁸ Garlake, *New Art, New World*, 72.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁰ Greenberg wrote, “America, in two or three big cities, is being rapidly divested of its provincialism, but the cosmopolitanism replacing it is the product of a levelling out and rationalization of culture, which we now import or imitate the way we do French wines and British cloth.” Clement Greenberg, “The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture,” (1947) in John O’Brian (ed.) *Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism; Vol. 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1959* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 168.

³¹ Garlake, *New Art, New World*, 4.

³² Holger Cahill, “American Painting and Sculpture in the Twentieth Century,” in exh. cat. *Modern Art in the United States* (London: Tate Gallery, 1956), 11-28.

experience of French innovation. They were familiar with Matisse, Jean Dubuffet, Nicolas de Staël, the lyrical abstraction of the new École de Paris, the Tachisme of Sam Francis and Mathieu and the sculpture of Alberto Giacometti and Germaine Richter. In this context, Abstract Expressionism, with its deep European roots, was as much a catalyst to further development, a confirmation of the validity of experiments already under way, as a revolutionary innovation.³³

British writers about the exhibition such as N. Wallis in *The Observer* and B. Taylor in *The Spectator*³⁴ acknowledged the new American art, half-heartedly, mainly because they had not encountered an equivalent in any of the art they had written about and this posed critical problems they had not had to deal with before. On the one hand, the reaction of critics like Lawrence Alloway was rather ambivalent, as he described the new work as “a new aesthetic which, though it is the product of a different culture than ours, is no more alien to us than any other art.”³⁵ On the other hand, Alloway took a stand against his colleague’s reticence to give the new American art the attention he thought it deserved. He pointed out that these works transcended a merely decorative function and were an expression of the “humanity of the man who makes them”.³⁶ The socialist art historian Meyer Schapiro, writing for *The Listener* likewise encouraged a positive critical outlook on the art of the Americans who in his view were autonomous creators of an art centred on the self and “opposed to the set, impersonal order of the external world.”³⁷

These were powerful paintings, rooted in international Surrealism but entirely American. The personal responsibility of each artist to create only in relation to his own inner needs had been recognized, and individually the artists had begun to gain a large measure of financial independence.³⁸ Amongst the work of more established American artists like Hopper and Tobey, a smaller number of Abstract Expressionists, including Pollock, de Kooning, Still, Rothko, Motherwell, Tomlin, Guston and Gorky were given some space in the exhibition.

³³ Garlake, *New Art, New World*, 77-78.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Note 70, 252 .

³⁵ Lawrence Alloway, article in *Art News and Review* (21 January 1956).

³⁶ Lawrence Alloway, “US modern: painting,” *Art News and Review* (21 January 1956)

³⁷ Meyer Schapiro, “The Younger American Painters of Today,” *The Listener* (26 February 1956): 146-147.

³⁸ Tom Cross, *Painting the Warmth of the Sun. St Ives Artists 1939-1975* (Penzance: Alison Hodge, 1984), 146.

The more knowledgeable British avant-garde had already made contact with these paintings and welcomed their revolution. As early as 1948 work by Jackson Pollock had been seen by Peter Lanyon and Alan Davie. Willem de Kooning was one of the United States' representatives at the Venice Biennale in 1948, as were Arshile Gorky and Pollock in 1950. Some American painters had also shown in the São Paulo Biennale exhibitions from 1951. William Scott, who brought wind of developments across the Atlantic to his friends at Corsham had been shown in São Paulo in 1953 (with Patrick Heron) and had made his first visit to New York in that year. In London, the Institute of Contemporary Arts had included paintings by Pollock in a mixed show in 1953 and had arranged an exhibition of Mark Tobey's calligraphic paintings in 1955.³⁹

Patrick Heron, writing for the American *Arts* magazine praised the new abstract language of the Americans shown in London and he compared the importance of their work to that of Picasso and Matisse a decade earlier:

I was instantly elated by the size, energy, originality, economy, and inventive daring of many of the paintings. Their creative emptiness represented a radical discovery, I felt, as did their flatness, or rather their spatial shallowness. I was fascinated by their constant denial of illusionistic depth which goes against all my own instincts as a painter . . . to me and to those English painters with whom I associate this new school came as the most vigorous movement seen since the war, we shall now watch New York as eagerly as Paris for new developments (not forgetting our own, let me add) — and may it come as a consolidation rather than a further exploration.⁴⁰

Heron's intuition was strengthened later by the most ardent supporter of American art, Lawrence Alloway, who, in the introduction to *Modern American Painting* (1961) looked back on the shift that had occurred in the 1950s, claiming that "New York is now as firmly established as, at least, the rival of Paris and, for some people, as the successor of Paris. English dealers visit New York and the West Coast of America, as once they only visited Paris."

New York and St Ives

At this time, an equally important, yet far less acknowledged avant-garde was active in Britain. Thanks to Heron's critical writings addressing American audiences,

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴⁰ Patrick Heron, "Americans at the Tate," *Arts Magazine* (March 1956).

transatlantic relationships flourished between New York and St Ives in the 1950s. In 1974 Heron published an article in three instalments in *The Guardian* arguing that American post painterly abstraction was greatly indebted to St Ives art, referring to the period of late 50s and 60s as the 'St Ives-New York axis'.

While in the late 1940s, the occasional visits of Arts Council civil servants to some St Ives studios were the only significant acknowledgment of the art working in this area, ten years later, Nicholson, Lanyon and Frost started exhibiting in New York and their studios were visited by gallery owners, as well as important personages of the New York art world such as Marc Rothko in 1958 and Clement Greenberg in 1959. Their visit to Cornwall "reflected a dialogue between British and American artists that was part of the increasingly international nature of art production . . . serving to validate the town's importance as an artistic centre and to assuage any anxieties of parochialism."⁴¹ Peter Fuller believed that "they looked, but they tended to keep very quiet about what they had seen going onto English canvases, when they got back home."⁴² Nevertheless, their visits, together with Heron's articles, brought St Ives considerable international recognition as an artistic centre and the painting produced here came to stand for abstraction born out of the artists's special relationship with nature. At the same time, many younger British painters and critics adopted a type of American-influenced approach to abstraction, which was largely formal (geometrical) or produced works by appropriating images and qualities from contemporary mass culture.

A number of British artists, mainly of the St Ives group had different interests in the new art coming from America. Peter Lanyon, for example, although to some extent affiliated with the *Circle* group, sympathised with the New York School artists's rejection of the type of abstraction promoted by the AAA (American Abstract Artists)⁴³ group, which was one-sided and idealising. Not unlike Barnett Newman who considered a non-geometrical form of abstraction as the future of art, believing that "It is precisely this death image, the grip of geometry, that has to be

⁴¹ Chris Stevens, *Mark Rothko in Cornwall* (St Ives: Tate Gallery, 1996), 5.

⁴² Peter Fuller, *Modern Painters. Reflections on British Art*, edited by John McDonald (London: Methuen, 1993), 3.

⁴³ See G. McNeil, "American Abstractionists Venerable at Twenty," *Art News* 4, no. 3 (1956): 34–5, 64–6.

confronted”⁴⁴, Lanyon was drawn towards a new form of expression which, without being representational, would avoid the stark geometry of pure abstraction.

A natural progression in this direction was achieved through a middle stage which most Abstract Expressionists had been through and which was “a period of concern with myth as metaphor for the condition of inner self in the modern world”⁴⁵, which pushed artists beyond figuration by the late 1940s. Artists such as Rothko, Gottlieb, Pollock and Lanyon were fascinated at this stage with a type of metamorphic vision that dealt with animal symbolism, antique myths recycled in their work, which in Rothko’s opinion were “eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas.”⁴⁶



33. Mark Rothko, Untitled (# 17), 1947

34. Peter Lanyon, Prelude, 1947

By the end of the decade alienation from contemporary life was so strong that nothing but complete non-figuration could represent Rothko’s position. His claim of the need to ‘pulverise’⁴⁷ the image introduced a force to language used in the drive to non-figuration that had no parallel in England. In some ways, Lanyon’s own art (already in 1953, received in America as ‘abstract

⁴⁴ Barnett Newman in exh. cat. *The New American Painting* (New York: MoMA, 1959) in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* edited by John O’Neill (Berkeley: University of California, 1990), 179.

⁴⁵ Andrew Causey, *Peter Lanyon. Modernism and the Land* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 183.

⁴⁶ Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, “The Portrait of the Modern Artist,” WNYC broadcast, 13 October 1943, in Anna C. Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 92.

⁴⁷ Mark Rothko, “The Romantics were Prompted,” *Possibilities*, 1 (Winter 1947-8): 84, in Ellen G. Landau, *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 141.

expressionist'), shared the energy and vividness sought by New York school painters, which they did not find in traditional European ideals.⁴⁸

Peter Lanyon subscribed to the American notion of denying the European traditional concern with beauty in art, as pointed out by Newman in 'The Sublime is Now' (1948). Newman went back to primordial mythical symbols (e.g. seeds, germination etc) which Lanyon did as well through images of the womb, horse/stockade and below-ground fertility.⁴⁹ A negative attitude towards the modern world in the wake of the atrocities and violence of the war and the ensuing lack of spirituality in a predominantly commercialised world caused artists to revert to ideas of primitivism, suggesting "a return to origins, or by contrast it could allude to a dark world of destructive urges lying below the level of rationality in the collective unconscious, erupting with alarming frequency and force."⁵⁰ Artists retired into their own private worlds in an attempt to escape feelings of guilt and social responsibility.⁵¹ The art they started producing was a reflection of this need to create a parallel, spiritual universe.

The Monet revival of the 1950s offered a technical way of dealing with this problem as Monet's enormous late murals of the *Water lilies* series inspired New York School painters to create pictorial spaces expanded onto enormous scales which would envelop the viewers and make them part of this world.⁵² In England, Peter Lanyon came to this approach independently; as early as his Derbyshire broadcast of 1957, he claimed that "we want to make this painting come all the way round and enclose us".⁵³ In 1958, Alloway presented this aspect of New York School painting to the British public in his article 'Art in New York Today' in *The Listener*.⁵⁴ He showed that the most private expression of the artist's intimate world would be projected onto

⁴⁸ Causey, *Modernism and the Land*, 183-184.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ See Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (London: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁵² See Chapter Six.

⁵³ "Derbyshire 1957." Transcript from telephone recording of Andrew Forge interviewing Peter Lanyon and Anthony Fry. Recorded: Thursday, 25th July, 1957. Transmitted: Sunday, 28th July, 1957. London: BBC Third Programms, TLO 34911/TAV 297B.

⁵⁴ Lawrence Alloway, "Art in New York Today," *The Listener* 150 (23 October 1958): 647-8.

these vast painted surfaces, an aspect Caroline Jones referred to as “the public statement of the quintessentially private act.”⁵⁵

There were more parallels between the two transatlantic art centres than one would think. Andrew Causey showed that, although a world apart, the New York School artist faced, in many respects, the same problems as the St Ives artist, torn between the need of belonging to a community and that of retiring into their own world.

The New York school in the 1940s had ‘The Club’ and the school called ‘Subjects of the Artist’; on a modest scale St Ives had similar combinations of exhibition, teaching and social facilities. In both there was a sense that all the time the ‘real’ artist was elsewhere in the privacy of the studio. Certainly in both countries the communal aspect disappeared in the 1950s and commitment was to an unfettered act of painting.⁵⁶

Robert Motherwell, for instance, just like Lanyon, believed that true art could be born only out of total abandonment to the act of painting.⁵⁷ In Caroline Jones’s view, the canvas would become a state of which one’s conscious individuality and past would be wiped clean and “the painting then becomes the only presence in the empty studio”.⁵⁸ Although Lanyon had no knowledge of surrealist automatism and never claimed to paint directly from the unconscious, he did start focusing very much on individual experience from the mid-1950s onwards.

A note should be made here of the much debated aspect of the extraction of politics from the art of the time in American abstract painting, commended by critics like Harold Rosenberg as a trait of the new autonomous painting⁵⁹. Ultimately, the very implication of politics in Abstract Expressionist painting turned it into an important tool of propaganda in the climate of the cultural Cold War, as has been shown by a score of historians, critics and more recently the journalist Frances Stonor Saunders. Causey claims that a similar tendency was at work in postwar Britain,

⁵⁵ Caroline Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Post-war American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 20.

⁵⁶ Causey, *Modernism and the Land*, 185.

⁵⁷ See Robert Motherwell in Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 20.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁹ “The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation from Value – political, esthetic, moral ... The lone artist did not want the world to be different, he wanted his canvas to be a world”. Harold Rosenberg, in *Art News* 51 (December 1952) in Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (London: Da Capo Press, 1959), 23-9.

where “institutions like the British Council and the Arts Council were working vigorously on behalf of artists at home and abroad, promoting quality in technical innovation and nurturing critical positions while paying less attention to art that directed censure externally onto the world.”⁶⁰

Between 1958 and 1969 a whole series of contemporary American one-artist exhibitions were shown at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, starting with Pollock and ending with Frankenthaler, while the Institute of Contemporary Art exhibited Gottlieb in 1959 and Californian ‘West Coast Hard-Edge’ painting in 1960. The International Council of MoMA also showed some exhibitions of abstract American art in the early 1960s in the USIS Gallery at the American Embassy in London, organised by the Cultural Affairs Officer Stefan Munsing, a knowledgeable catalyst between British artists like William Green and Americans such as Sam Francis, Gottlieb and Kline.⁶¹

In 1959, a second exhibition of the New York school entitled *The New American Painting* was held at the Tate gallery, selected by MoMA curators and Stefan Munsing from MoMA’s collection and private collections, as well as commercial New York galleries. This show mainly focused on new work by Rothko, Newman, Still, de Kooning and Pollock, in which reference to the outside world had been now entirely replaced by formal interests. Their work caused critics like Lawrence Alloway to adopt an aggressive attitude towards national art, against what he saw as retrogressive and old-fashioned in English art. He characterised the English “contently fogbound”, writing of “the usual lousy definitions of our national capacity”, which he defined as “the picturesque, linearism, love of country, the light of St Ives”.⁶² Alloway’s openly contentious attitude resulted in distancing himself from some of his British contemporaries and ultimately moving to America in 1961. Nevertheless, he was a prolific critic with broad loyalties that included the emerging Pop Art and the overlapping of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art in what he called “the long front of culture”.⁶³ By 1959, Alloway had shifted his interest exclusively to non-figurative

⁶⁰ Causey, *Modernism and the Land*, 185-186.

⁶¹ See Garlake, *New Art, New World*, 81.

⁶² Lawrence Alloway in Cross, *Painting the Warmth of the Sun*, 154.

⁶³ Lawrence Alloway in exh. cat. *European Artists Today: Thirty Five Painters and Sculptors*, edited by Sam Hunter (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1959), 46; See also “The Long

abstraction organising the exhibitions *Place* (ICA, 1959) and *Situation* (RBA, 1960), dismissing the validity of landscape painting with the sole exception of Lanyon's work. He saw Lanyon as the last successful advocate of a dying genre:

British art looks disorganised from a distance because Britain's strongest national convention – landscape painting – seemed no longer usable, except, in the hands of one artist, Lanyon. For him, but not for other St Ives artists, landscape was still a valid and successful starting point. However, as nature gets demoted from the centre of British aesthetics, which is now happening, Lanyon may turn out to be our last landscape painter.⁶⁴

His *Situation* exhibition, having as influences transatlantic urban art, was meant to establish a break from perceptual St Ives abstraction, the paysagiste or pastoral tradition. Alloway supported an entirely self-sufficient form of abstraction and believed that progress could be made only by annihilating the essentially British retrograde tradition of landscape painting. It is unfortunate that Alloway largely ignored the development of the Heron's 'middle generation' of artists centred around St Ives, which became meanwhile an official British avant-garde and in many ways the counterpart of American art, and was strongly supported by the British Council and shown regularly in New York's commercial galleries.

Overall, the second exhibition of American art of 1959 was far more resonant than the first. British critical voices sounded far more welcoming than at the time of *Modern Art in the United States* (1956). *The Guardian* described the exhibition as "enormous, stunning and shocking"⁶⁵ and many critics like John Russell, for instance, perhaps more out of a need to conform to contemporary critical standards, admitted having misjudged American art at the time of *Modern Art in the United States*, considering the new art "according to the canons of traditional aesthetics"⁶⁶, when in fact it was situated outside the Western tradition.⁶⁷

The Tate's *The New American Painting* of 1958-9 established American abstraction as a universal language, "a single brand label"⁶⁸, easier thus to promote in

Front of Culture," *Cambridge Opinion* 17 (1959) in *Modern Dreams: the Rise and Fall and Rise of Pop*, edited by Brian Wallis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988).

⁶⁴ Alloway in Hunter (ed.), *European Artists Today*, 46.

⁶⁵ "New American Painting," *The Guardian* (27 February 1959).

⁶⁶ John Russell, article in *The Sunday Times* (8 March 1959).

⁶⁷ See Garlake, *New Art, New World*, 81.

⁶⁸ Hyman, *Figurative Art in Britain*, 202.

Europe and much more potent as an influence. It was engineered to rival contemporary European expressionist trends. Whereas in Europe, Expressionism blurred the boundaries between figuration and abstraction, symbolically embodying split allegiances, the arrival of Abstract Expressionism introduced a form of Expressionism that by the end of the 1950s could be read for the first time as the signifier of a single country, America and Clement Greenberg as the principal promoter of a one-sided formalist line of critical enquiry.⁶⁹

This shift in perception was evident in the reception Abstract Expressionism was given in the British press. While up to the early 1950s *Horizon* had been presenting Ben Shan, a figurative painter, alongside essays by Greenberg⁷⁰ and up to 1958 *Art News and Review* had published reviews of European expressionists alongside Americans, from 1959, mainly through the impact of pro-American British critics like Alloway and Robertson, the new American art would take centre-stage.⁷¹

John Berger, supporting socialist realism and David Sylvester, supporting Modernist realism originating in the high art of the European avant-garde, were united in their determination to promote European realism as an alternative to American abstract art, whilst staying independent of the socialist art of Soviet Russia. Hyman observed that “both sides were forceful in their condemnation of American art. Sylvester, for its sensationalism and romanticism, Berger for its decadence, self-indulgence and obscurity.”⁷² For a long time, Berger and Sylvester held their ground and defended British art against the American cultural invasion. Sylvester saw American art as a natural development of European modernism while Berger criticised the works of Pollock in a Venice Biennale review as “the equivalent of the literary productions of the monkey on the typewriter.”⁷³ In 1958 he wrote a sharp critical piece directed against abstract expressionism, which ideologically he believed was a telling sign of the cultural and moral self-destruction of American society:

The painter has become his own hero [...] the emphasis on gesture is typical of all desperate nihilist manifestations. [...] What the bomb destroys is unimportant. The only thing that matters is to “declare oneself” by throwing it

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ “Art on the American Horizon,” *Horizon* 93-4 (October 1947).

⁷¹ Hyman, *Figurative Art in Britain*, 202.

⁷² Ibid., 207.

⁷³ John Berger, “The Biennale,” *New Statesman* 52, no. 1325 (4 August 1956): 132.

[...] The inarticulate is admired in the same way as the dumb discontent of James Dean. [...] Culture, Science, Reason [...] are assassinated because they appear treacherous and hypocritical; in their place are put the superstitious and idols of the Commercial Dream Factory.⁷⁴

Sylvester's view, on the other hand, seemed to have changed after *Modern Art in the United States* (1956). Having criticised American painting at the Venice Biennale in 1950, in 1956 he accepted the work of the New York artists as "sensitive without being aesthetic" and "curiously neutral and matter-of-fact".⁷⁵ In 1959 Greenberg recorded in a letter to Heron his meeting with Sylvester at the American Embassy in London, writing that he had "found himself not disliking him but disapproving of him: his real intimate relations are certainly not with art (not for that matter, are Alloway's, whom I got to like more and more nevertheless). Like Sam Hunter and Tom Hess at home, Sylvester functions to confirm situations which, simply because they are contemporary, are confused anyhow." To this Heron concurred that Sylvester was standing in the way of progressive art when Heron tried to promote it.⁷⁶

In a New York Times article of 1959, Sylvester advised that British artists should avoid copying American models for their own good, because "when English painting tries to emulate American action painting, it loses or weakens what it has without making a corresponding gain."⁷⁷ Sylvester's concept of European Modernist realism and the deserved place of British art in the European high cultural vanguard as supported by *Horizon*, the Hanover Gallery and the ICA slowly dissolved in the late 1950s, due to the great diversity of work⁷⁸ shown in exhibitions such as *Recent Trends in Realist Painting* (1952), as well as the lack of a single geographical focus.

Even realist artists such as William Coldstream and Euan Uglow, although at first reluctant to accept American painting, received the action painting of Pollock

⁷⁴ John Berger, "Art of Assassination," *New Statesman* 55, no. 1401 (18 January 1958): 69-70.

⁷⁵ David Sylvester, "Expressionism, German and American," *Arts Magazine* (1956).

⁷⁶ Greenberg – Heron correspondence (September 1959) in A. Wilson, "Between Tradition and Modernity: Patrick Heron and British Abstract Painting 1945-1960," PhD thesis (Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 1999), 390-394.

⁷⁷ David Sylvester, "Americans Abroad," *New York Times* (12 April 1959) in Stacy Tenenbaum. "A Dialectical Pretzel": *The New American Painting, the Museum of Modern Art and American Diplomacy 1952-1959: Revisionism Revisited*, MA Report (Courtauld Institute, University of London, 1992), 53.

⁷⁸ The ICA's exhibition *Recent Trends in Realist Painting*, organized by Robert Melville and David Sylvester in July-August 1952 showed artists as various as Francis Bacon, Frank Auerbach and Peter Rose Pulham.

enthusiastically at Robertson's Whitechapel exhibition in 1958.⁷⁹ Victor Willing wrote a tribute to Pollock in *Encounter*, following the artist's death in 1956 in which he attempted to integrate his work into a European framework, relating it to the expressionist work of postwar Parisian artists such as Giacometti, Masson and Leiris, claiming that "extreme instability ... gave strength to his work"; he stressed the ideological content of Pollock's work, the artist-genius misunderstood and forever tormented, who tried to break free and unleash his innermost feelings through the liberating space of the canvas. Thus the expressionistic attributes of European Modernist realism as presented by Sylvester had been reframed in an American context. Realism, as Sylvester had seen it, was no longer allowed to be expressive by means of unorthodox non-figurative imagery. This became the exclusive tool of abstract painting. Hyman wrote of the inability of Sylvester to maintain the validity of European Expressionism on a par with American Abstract Expressionism:

Despite attempts by Sylvester and those in his circle to extend readings of space derived from Klee to Pollock and to present American abstraction as a phenomenon which could be integrated into a European Expressionism, by 1956 it was becoming difficult for European commentators to regard American culture as simply a variant of European art. By 1959 their Eurocentric approach to avant-garde had collapsed. No longer was it possible to dismiss American art or present it as a variant of European models. Whereas in 1950 Sylvester had been able to create a Modernist teleology for realism – a meandering path that traversed Europe – by the late 1950s through the efforts of Alloway, in particular, a new super highway had been built that joined Western Europe to America.⁸⁰

By the late 1950s, it became obvious in Britain that American Abstract Expressionism had triumphed, when even the most conventional and prominent realist critics like Sylvester jumped ship. During his first State Department funded visit to New York, Sylvester was welcomed as a distinguished critic (just as he had been in Paris in the mid 1940s) and met Rosenberg, de Kooning, Guston, Kline, Smith, Rothko, Motherwell, Frankenthaler and Stamos, which resulted in a radical shift in his critical approach. In his 1996 book *Curriculum Vitae*, Sylvester acknowledged Alloway's perceptiveness in being the earliest British supporter of American art, admitting that:

⁷⁹ Recorded in the minutes of the exhibition subcommittee meeting of 11 December 1957, Whitechapel archive, in Hyman, *Figurative Art in Britain*, 250.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 203-4.

I had suddenly realised that I had been backing the wrong stable in believing that salvation was going to come primarily through the hard-won achievement of a particular sort of ambition – had failed to see, what Lawrence Alloway had seen, that it was going to issue from the natural fertility of a culture which in the domain of art had hitherto not produced a really significant crop but was now ready to yield one great vintage after another.⁸¹

As for Heron, he also agreed with the supremacy of the new painting in which the subject in itself would replace the ‘image’ and anything remotely figurative within it. However, he made it clear that the self-contained gestural dynamic of some of the new works, particularly in ‘action painting’, was not sufficient and he missed the “sensuous subtlety of tone colour, a subtle asymmetry of shape, a varied tempo of working”⁸². Heron stood by his guns giving as an example the work of fellow artists such as Roger Hilton, praising the latter’s work for the all-important formal harmony, which was at the centre of most of his critical writing. Reviewing an ICA exhibition of tachiste painting and action painting, showing Pollock, Kline, Rothko, Still, De Kooning, Dubuffet and Tapies in 1958, Heron set the qualities he found in the work of his colleague Roger Hilton against the processual work of the American and European artists:

this time I do not react with enthusiasm to the shallow space; nor to the overt speed of the muscular brushwork; nor to the harshly brittle paint: nor to the lack of subtle resonance in color. [...] it is a terribly cramping thing to be bound by a rigid concept of what *freedom* should look like in a painting. As I’ve said before in ARTS, it seems to me that mere quickness in actual execution, involving an evenly loose and a vigorously rhythmic movement of the arm, is a false criterion of excellence. [...] now what we desperately need are examples of a new and fine *deliberateness*; a more fully conscious and considered mode of action, which will embrace the static and fundamentally architectural elements in painting at the same time that it displays the fluent and spontaneous. [...]

Hilton’s starkness has just that sensuous richness, that subtle science of painting, which I find missing in the American painters I have been discussing. Hilton’s violence is in the mind, not on the canvas. The explosive expressionism of his ragged and sometimes brutal symbols is utterly tamed by the purely pictorial realities of his extremely varied colour and his sense of

⁸¹ David Sylvester, ‘Curriculum Vitae’. *About Modern Art: Critical Essays 1948-1996* (London: Chato and Windus, 1996), 20.

⁸² Patrick Heron, “American Artists from the E. J. Power Collection/Roger Hilton,” *Arts Magazine* (May 1958) in *Painter as Critic. Patrick Heron: Selected Writings*, edited by Mel Gooding (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1998), 150-153.

formal balance – in a word, by his knowledge and reverence for, the art of painting.⁸³

Writing a parallel review of the gestural patterns of Mark Tobey and the art of Bryan Wynter, Heron made a very important observation about what differentiated and united the work of the American and St Ives painters. He thought that the transatlantic influence affected British painting from a mere stylistic point of view, and mainly as a result which transpired in the finished work; Heron believed that the work of Wynter was the product of an organic development, very much related to a sense of the place which inspired it; therefore his gestural pattern was just a natural progression, which manifested itself in a ‘universal’ form of expression. Although reminiscent of Tobey’s, the style of the American artist was not a single influence or a starting point. Heron wrote about the difference between the work of the two artists:

A case could be made out claiming that Tobey is one of the most influential painters now living: he is the forerunner of Pollock, for instance, in his ‘shallow depth’ as in the extreme evenness of emphasis in his over-all composition - two features of non-figurative pictorial expression which have spread first from Seattle to New York and thence all over the world. It is a case of genetic rather than direct influence. If, as I’ve just suggested, figurative painting is not susceptible of translation, from country to country, still less from continent to continent, the opposite seems demonstrably to be the case with non-figurative painting. Although I firmly believe that the best non-figurative painting is an organic development, a growth which feeds on the particular (a certain place, unique objects, a special light, etc.), it nevertheless turns this material into forms which are universal in their application. The microscopic - still more the molecular - structure of the rocks and bushes outside my Cornish window here would flow imperceptibly into the similarly minute structure of rocks and trees in East Anglia, no doubt. Yet Cornwall’s aspect is utterly dissimilar from that of Suffolk. Thus the Cornish painter Wynter, influenced latterly by Tobey, has transplanted a pictorial ‘molecular structure’ which Tobey developed on the Pacific Coast, and used it to precipitate configurations of his own which transcribe and (condense his experience, not *of*, but *at* the Atlantic coastline of Cornwall. [...] Wynter - who is one of the most significant English painters of the present time - has taken, as it were, single typical brush strokes out of the context of his earlier figurative paintings and built them into these new images of space which, once arrived at, instantly connect with Tobey’s.⁸⁴

By this, Heron stressed the necessity of subject in abstract painting yet again, considering style as of secondary importance. He was eager to point out the danger of

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Patrick Heron, “Influences and Affinities: Americans at the ICA / Tobey, Wynter, César,” *Arts Magazine* (January 1953) in *Painter as Critic*, 128.

a new doctrinaire art theory in New York, when he wrote “if there is an obvious danger confronting much American criticism, it is that the formal approach itself is showing signs of sprouting a new academicism all its own. It is not enough merely to list the dominant colours in a painting, vaguely enumerate instances of diagonal stresses, vertical rhythms or planar counterpoint: these phrases are mere jargon unless they are seen to be emerging out of an attempt to describe an actual passage in a particular picture.”⁸⁵ For Heron, there was a great difference between the Americans’ self-reflexive jargon used for the stylistic analysis of art and a clear and explicit critical vision concerned with essential formal discoveries in the painting of his contemporaries.

Peter Fuller always supported the idea that some British innovations in modernist abstraction preceded those of New York and that Heron’s writings, as well as his painting, were, in his view, the most poignant example of this. As far as St Ives’s precedence over the art of New York was concerned, Heron himself wrote that “Lanyon was painting ‘like an American Abstract Expressionist’⁸⁶ from 1950 onwards – that is to say, for some years before he himself or any of the rest of us had any acquaintance whatsoever with the work of the New York painters.”⁸⁷ Fuller went as far as to maintain that, “The crux of Heron’s position was that, instead of having always been at the receiving end of ideas emanating from New York, several painters of his generation, himself included, had exerted ‘crucial influence’ upon New York painting from the late fifties onward. Heron established this case beyond reasonable doubt – and it has never been answered. There have been those who have said that it just does not matter who did what first [Greenberg], but the truth always matters, in art, no less in life.”⁸⁸

Heron himself claimed to have argued during a private discussion with Greenberg that the future of modernist abstraction could lie in an exploration of the edges of the painting, and whilst Greenberg contradicted him, he soon adopted this

⁸⁵ Patrick Heron, “Introducing Roger Hilton,” *Arts Magazine* (May 1957) in *Painter as Critic*, 128.

⁸⁶ Lanyon’s first exhibition in America was held at the Passadoit Gallery in New York in January 1953 and at the time, American critics saw his work as abstract expressionist, “even though the paintings in question were more tightly constructed and less impulsive than what we now expect from the term.” (Causey, *Modernism and the Land*, 137).

⁸⁷ Patrick Heron, “The Ascendancy of London in the Sixties,” *Studio International* (December 1966) in *Painter as Critic*, 160.

⁸⁸ *Peter Fuller’s Modern Painters*, 217.

view publicly himself. Another similar anecdote that Heron circulated revolved around a set of Ektachromes of his vertical stripe paintings of 1957, which got lost in the editorial offices of Arts Magazine, yet their influence could clearly be distinguished in Morris Louis' subsequent stripe paintings. Such views caused Heron to be considered on either side of the Atlantic as a "disgruntled maverick as he aggressively argued the idea that English advanced art has been the victim of American cultural imperialism. These ideas culminated in 1974 in a 14,000-word essay passionately detailing numerous instances of perceived American chauvinism, printed over three days as double-page spreads in the Guardian newspaper during general election week."⁸⁹

Heron also claimed that the acceptance and admiration of his 'middle generation' for the first showings of American art in London were crucial for its further development and meteoric international success. He remembered that, "it was our tiny group of 'middle generation' painters in Britain who gave them their *first foreign approval* [...] not only were we in varying degrees influenced by them at the time [early 1950s] (the supreme compliment as between painters), but we openly proclaimed that this was what was happening."⁹⁰ In spite of this, British art and artists were not always looked upon favourably by the American critics, especially in the 1960's. Heron was forced to compose a furious retort at the attitude of New York critics towards British art in a *Studio International* article of 1966. He was dismayed by Michael Fried's smugness when writing in 1965 (*Three American Painters*, Harvard University) that "for twenty years or more almost all the best new painting and sculpture has been done in America" as well as Max Kozloff's article 'British Painting Today' (*Encounter*, January 1964) in which the critic pointed to a "general deficiency in British art" in which "sacrifices are made for the sake of imaginary virtues".

Heron was disappointed about the fact that Clement Greenberg's writing in the early 1950s exclusively emphasised American achievement, choosing to overlook the special relation which existed between nature and abstraction in British painting. He considered that Greenberg's formalist criticism addressed British abstraction from a

⁸⁹ David Cohen, "A Premium on Pleasure - Paintings, Patrick Heron, Tate Gallery, London, England," *Art in America* (June 1999).

⁹⁰ Heron, "Ascendancy of London" in *Painter as Critic*, 156.

one-sided, patronising standpoint and that some of the art that he, on the other hand, was promoting, was overestimated in value. He also maintained that another crass generalization had been made by Gene Baro who stated that “ ‘a good deal’ of British abstraction is only landscape imagery in disguise.”⁹¹ Heron believed that this was a hangover from the days of Alloway’s anti-St Ives campaign. The American’s reluctance to recognize the value of British art could be explained by the fundamental differences that developed between the two approaches to abstraction. Mel Gooding attempts to explain this:

[In St Yves] the intuitive discovery of the image in the act of painting itself, that poetic empiricism that was typical of much of the best abstract painting of the postwar period, gave it an expressive variety and range of pictorial invention. This was quite the opposite to the centred symmetrical format, and the serial and systematic repetition of motif and device, that were typical of those American painters of the 1960s so admired by Greenberg for their renunciation of virtuosity.⁹²

In this sense, it is important to note that an artist like Lanyon preferred the work of de Kooning or Rothko over that of the majority of the abstract expressionists, precisely for the humanity which came through in their abstractions. At one stage, Lanyon came possibly closest to de Kooning whose gestural work of the late 1950s, which had initially started from the study of the female form, became similarly personal and spontaneous, but equally concerned with the substance of paint and its visual manifestation, as evidence of “the artist’s active presence”.⁹³ Causey remarks that what truly was similar in the art of the two artists was their deep appreciation of art as one of the last testaments of humanity, as he quotes Schapiro who said that “Paintings and sculptures (...) are the last hand-made, personal objects within our culture. Almost everything else is produced industrially, in mass, and through a high division of labour.”⁹⁴ Rothko was another American artist whose work Lanyon greatly appreciated for its “humanity” and “incredible facing quality.”⁹⁵ “He recognized that Rothko saw painting in moral rather than simply formal terms: the

⁹¹ Gene Baro, “British Painting: the Post-war Generation,” *Studio International* (October 1967).

⁹² *Painter as Critic*, 22.

⁹³ Meyer Schapiro, “Recent Abstract Painting,” (1957) in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries: Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), 218.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Peter Lanyon, in a letter to Paul Feiler, 18 October 1961.

moral commitment of the tragic condition of man behind Rothko's formal abstraction was what impressed him."⁹⁶

Peter Fuller maintained that Greenberg had come to support the 'pure aesthetic of visual sensation' that manifested itself formally in British abstract art before he had read any of Heron's writings on the subject. Meanwhile, in America though certain artists started adopting a kind of abstraction which was charged with symbolic undertones. So Greenberg was forced to accept that some of the Abstract Expressionists he had supported now started deviating from his strict formalist aesthetic. Fuller too pointed out this new orientation in the work of Rothko and Newman, and in parallel in Britain, that of Lanyon. Some of these American artists' transgression of exclusive formalism explained Greenberg's later indifference towards the work of Pollock or Rothko.⁹⁷ More interestingly, Fuller pointed out that it was Heron who actually influenced Greenberg's further theories:

Heron once described to me his first meeting with the ambitious and immature Clement Greenberg. He was struck by just how thoroughly Greenberg seemed to know even the exact phrasing of Heron's articles. I am convinced that the essays Heron eventually collected in *The Changing Forms of Art*, of 1955, were a significant influence on Greenberg's development. They showed the American the extreme to which an aesthetic of 'pure' aesthesis could be pushed. Greenberg successfully transported these ideas back to America. There the superficiality of the new aesthetic, its reliance on visual sensation divorced from natural form, spiritual values or, come to that, any deeply rooted sense of cultural tradition, was a positive advantage. In the thin and ugly climate of modern American 'cultural' life, this art of mere sensation flourished as it could never hope to do in the English countryside.⁹⁸

As opposed to the American abstract expressionist however, "the motivation [for abstraction] for Heron was not spiritual, transcendental or existential, [...], but remained perceptual, prosaic and external."⁹⁹ The English countryside offered hidden

⁹⁶ Causey, *Modernism and the Land*, 186.

⁹⁷ "Greenberg criticised Pollock himself for his Gothicness, and aspiration to symbolism. He largely ignored the achievement of Rothko, who denied he had any interest in abstract forms or colour harmonies, except as vehicles for the expression of deep emotion." (*Peter Fuller's Modern Painters*, 111).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Hyman in *The Middle Ground, Different Ways of Seeing: Towards a Reassessment of Postwar British Art*, edited by James Hyman (London: James Hyman Gallery, 2004). Published in conjunction with the exhibition "The Challenge of Postwar Painting. New Paths for Modernist Art in Britain (1950-65): Important works by Frank Auerbach, Alan Davie, Terry Frost, Patrick Heron, Ivon Hitchens, Peter Lanyon, Henry Moore, William Scott and William Turnbull" shown at the James Hyman Gallery, London, 2004.

strength to the art of its painters, which the New Yorkers could not relate to, but the scenery was merely a stimulus, not an exclusive and singular influence, like some of the latter would wrongly believe. Nevertheless, the next decade in Britain would be dominated by New York's influence. In the 1960s, the strong impact left by London's recent discovery of American Abstract Expressionism and the emergence of Pop Art resulted in the landscape abstraction produced in St Ives being eclipsed by the large-scale autonomous abstractions of the more conceptual American colourists. Following their example, a new British generation was emerging (Denny, Smith, Cohen, Hoyland), which would embrace total non-figuration.¹⁰⁰

The importance of 1950's St Ives art for the development of British painting, however, is indisputable. The type of painting this group produced was an 'organic' and 'emotional' type of abstraction, which clearly differentiated it from the predominantly formal geometry of New York School painting. Cross wrote that "St Ives gained its reputation for its 'otherness'. It also became a central part of the postwar art revival in England, for who could deny this great contribution to landscape painting that was continually seen in the London galleries — essentially English, yet fully informed to the level of the best continental examples. The art of St Ives replaced that of France in offering new forms of linking man with natural landscape — so long a theme of the painters of provincial France, yet strangely absent in much postwar French art. Furthermore, the paintings of Wynter, Wells, Barns-Graham, Lanyon and others were clear and legible, despite their structured complexity. [...] there was a feeling for the unexpected, not descriptive but emotional abstraction"¹⁰¹, an allusive kind of non-figuration, organic rather than geometric, informal rather than constructivist, lyrical rather than rational.

¹⁰⁰ "The formal, large-scale work of non-figurative painters such as Newman, Reinhardt, Rothko and Still, rather than the earthy atmospheric painting of de Kooning, Pollock and Kline, interested the young British painters, many of whom had recently been students at the Royal College of Art. When in 1960 a group of these, including Robin Denny, Richard Smith, Harold Cohen and John Hoyland, arranged the London exhibition "Situation", it was to demonstrate their adherence to this totally abstract and large-scale format for painting. It was significant that the work of the St Ives artists, which in so many ways answered this description, was omitted. In his introduction to the catalogue, Roger Colman referred to the 'landscape, boats-figures' of the St Ives painters as evidence of their avoidance of the real problems of abstraction. [...] They could not be passed over for their contribution was significant, but they were not accepted because they did not conform." (Cross, *Painting the Warmth of the Sun*, 194-198).

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 198-200.

Chapter Six

Abstract Impressionism in Britain and America

This chapter continues exploring the idea of the existence of an alternative postwar understanding of modernism to autonomous formalism, and the role of the landscape subject in developing such readings. It introduces a trend developed from Abstract Expressionism, yet often neglected in histories of mid-twentieth century painting, in which artists sought to re-claim the rapport with the outside world which had been lost in abstract painting. They went beyond the postwar existential dilemma, as well as the self-reflexivity and introspective character of expressionism, through a rediscovered empathy for nature, complementing the predominant concern with conceptually formal issues in mainstream Abstract Expressionism with perceptual interests. This was instrumental both in the devising of formal analyses and modernist genealogies for Abstract Expressionism and in the development of new departures from this increasingly academic mode. The theorization of the trend by important contemporary writers (i.e. Elaine de Kooning in America and Lawrence Alloway in Britain) constituted the proof that such a reaction was happening.

The chapter traces the origins of the term 'Abstract Impressionism' back to a re-evaluation of Monet's late panels in the New York's Museum of Modern Art, presenting the formalist readings of Alfred H. Barr and Clement Greenberg, as well as existentialist interpretations of Monet's work by William Seitz. Alternative views are provided by Louis Finkelstein and Thomas B. Hess in America, the early writing of Rodrigo Moynihan in Britain, and later that of Douglas Cooper, Ralph Coe, Patrick Heron and Lawrence Gowing. The trend influenced by late Monet was characterised by gesture painting taken in new directions marked by the evocation of natural forms, allusive colour and light, patterned brushwork, and contemplative mood, with a predominant lyricism and a visual attitude to painting and its plasticity.

In Britain, a similar tendency had developed as early as 1933 when the term 'Objective Abstraction' was coined by Moynihan in reference to the work of a group of painters who, rejecting geometric abstraction, believed in an initially nature-inspired art which would develop according to an unpredictable internal logic of its

own through the plastic qualities of paint. The trend was short-lived but returned two decades later in a new form, parallel to the American trend, through the fresh excitement for the work of Monet, shown at the Edinburgh Festival and the Tate in 1957. One year later, the ICA's Lawrence Alloway introduced to the British public Greenberg's connection between the late *Nymphéas* and New York School abstraction and organised the exhibition *Abstract Impressionism*. Heron also showed how Monet generated great interest, especially among non-figurative painters associated with the reassessment of French Tachisme and American Action Painting.

Origins and Terminology

The focal point of American artist-critic Elaine de Kooning's *Art News* article 'Subject: What, How or Who? Discussing Today's Controversies over the Place of Nature on Canvas' of 1956 was an argument that style per se should not be a starting point, an aim. Artists should not endeavour to produce work in a certain mode in order to conform to a dominant trend. She stated that, "A style in art, when it is vital, is a mode of thinking. When the style becomes the conclusion of its own thinking, as in decoration, it is dead. Its corpse becomes the property of commercial artists. [...] But a dead style can be brought to life – sometimes a larger life than it had originally – by a living subject."¹ This is what happened to Impressionism in the 1950s. Often considered as a less relevant part in the history of modernism during the 1930s and 1940s, Impressionism suddenly began to be re-introduced into the modernist canon. What was the reason behind this reconsideration by artists and critics of the understanding of Impressionism and its significance in the 1950s?

This period saw a renewed wave of interest in Claude Monet's late *Water Lilies* (1914-26) in the United States. This revival was important for three reasons.² Firstly, Monet's re-evaluation in the contemporary context spurred further critical and public exposure to his painting, which was a welcome development after over thirty years of neglect. Secondly, it showed how the reputation of an artist can be brought

¹ Elaine de Kooning, "Subject: What, How or Who? Discussing Today's Controversies over the Place of Nature on Canvas," *Art News* 54, no. 2 (1956): 62.

² See Michael Leja, "The Monet Revival and New York School Abstraction," in exh. cat. *Monet in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 98. Published in conjunction with the exhibition shown at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, January 23 – April 18, 1999 and the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, September 20 – December 27, 1998.

back to life by the collaboration of agents and institutions, and the power of the latter to shape artistic taste. Thirdly, “the Monet revival was enmeshed in both the making and the critical assessment of contemporary American painting. It participated both in the devising of formal analyses and modernist genealogies for Abstract Expressionism and in the development of new departures from this increasingly academic mode.”³ Its reconsideration by abstract artists gave birth to a new tendency, which deviated from mainstream Abstract Expressionism by dealing with a more emotional, organic and lyrical form of abstraction.

Up to the 1950s, critics referred to Monet by means of clichés, such as “a vaporizer of form, a doctrinaire whose contribution Cézanne had to make ‘solid’ and Van Gogh, passionate.”⁴ Consequently, this shift in critical opinion was surprising. The avant-garde’s revised stance towards Monet’s work was very closely linked with the revaluation of the artist’s early and late styles. Prior to this revival in the mid 1950s, the canvases from his earlier period in which subject, illusion and structure were still clearly distinguishable, were more highly regarded. His later work, on the other hand, was considered unfinished and shapeless. However, the new perspective on Monet’s work focused specifically on the large mural works of his last years of life.

Michael Leja has traced how these paintings finally reached private and public attention again. Initially considered as mere remnants of his large Orangerie project, they were left abandoned in Monet’s Giverny studio for nearly thirty years by his son Michel until collectors and dealers showed some interest in them and they were included in a 1949 Impressionist exhibition at the Basel Kunsthalle. In 1950, the American collector Walter Chrysler Jr. was thought to have bought one the most significant pieces of the *Water Lilies* series directly from Monet’s son in Giverny. In the commencing years, further European exhibitions showed more of the murals. The most significant of all purchases was that of an important such panel in spring 1955, when the Museum of Modern Art in New York, under the directorship of Alfred Barr, bought one directly from Michel Monet.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Thomas Hess, “Monet: Tithonus at Giverny,” *Art News* 55 (October 1956): 42.

However, it is believed that a far more important contribution to the Monet revival than that of the buyers, came from the artists of the time. “*Time* magazine named French Surrealist André Masson as the one responsible for ‘starting the bandwagon’ rolling by writing in the French journal *Verve* in 1952 that the Orangerie was the ‘Sistine Chapel of Impressionism.’”⁵ In his article, Masson proclaimed Monet’s *Grandes Décorations* as his most valued works, and was hopeful that young French artists would discover Monet and the beginnings his work offered.⁶ His was the first serious evaluation of Monet’s *Nymphéas* since their installation in the Orangerie almost twenty years earlier, in the late 1920s. “Masson had spent the war years in the United States in close contact with the future Abstract Expressionists. He knew exactly what it took to bring Monet’s late work, which had just been rediscovered by the younger generation of American painters, back under the French mantle.”⁷ Monet’s *Grandes Décorations* were reinterpreted by Masson as large easel paintings:

One could dream of a Monet turning toward the use of large canvases, clear and iridescent, the preserve of Veronese and Tiepolo. Do not dream any more; consider his supreme work, the *Nymphéas*. Despite their monumental dimensions, they do not have the characteristics of grand Venetian or Flemish decoration. His disposition of spirit appears to me to be that of the great easel painter who decides to yield to his vision a field vast enough - imposing enough - so that it embraces the world. . . . One of the peaks of French genius.⁸

So, Masson looked at Monet in the contemporary context for the first time, reclaiming the master’s innovative vision as the property of French culture.⁹ In spite of this, the work of the Abstract Expressionists such as Pollock, Still, de Kooning, Newman, Rothko benefited more visibly from the visual impact of Monet’s murals and thus brought the significance of his late oeuvre to the American public. This, in

⁵ André Masson, “Monet le Fondateur,” *Verve* 7, no. 27-8 (1952): 68.

⁶ Leja, “The Monet Revival” in *Monet in the Twentieth Century*, 100.

⁷ Romy Golan, “L’Éternel Décoratif: French Art in the 1950s,” *Yale French Studies* 98, *The French Fifties* (2000): 104.

⁸ Masson, “Monet le Fondateur”. See also Romy Golan, “Oceanic Sensations: Monet’s ‘Grandes Décorations’ and Mural Painting in France from 1927 to 1952,” in *Monet in the 20th Century*, 86-97.

⁹ The French school of Art Informel had nineteen canvases of Monet’s *Nymphéas* before, during and after the war whereas Americanised postwar historiography insists on the acquisition and exhibition of much smaller versions of the *Nymphéas* in the Museum of Modern Art in New York only in 1956. Incidentally, London did not acquire one of the series till 1963. See Douglas Hall, review of *Monet* by John House, *The Burlington Magazine* 120, no. 907 (October 1978): 684.

spite of the fact that Monet himself would have, most likely, not seen any parallels between his landscapes and the new American abstractions, as pointed out in 1956 by Clement Greenberg, who wrote that, “Monet’s own taste had not caught up with his art... He himself could not consciously recognize or accept ‘abstractness’ – the qualities of the medium alone – as a principle of consistency makes no difference: it is there, plain to see in the paintings of his old age.”¹⁰

It is now generally believed that Barr and his MoMA colleagues had acquired the 1955 *Water Lily* (W. 1983, now in the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh) with the specific intent to make a connection between Monet’s late art with the new painting of the Abstract Expressionists and find him a new place in the history of modern art. For this purpose, one of the most spontaneous pieces was selected, by comparison to the more visibly over-worked ones. In the publications accompanying the panel’s first exhibition, Barr remarked it’s relevance to Kandinsky, whom he regarded as the founder of Abstract Expressionism, and “the young abstract painters of our mid-century”. It is very likely that he was referring to a group of younger New York School artists frequently reviewed in the press of the time, and coined as “abstract impressionists”. This is even more likely as MoMA’s press release and the painting’s wall label named Monet’s style “abstract impressionism”.¹¹

The painting was immensely successful as it fascinated both public and press with Monet’s late fraught years and the legacy he left to his modernist followers. However, the leading Abstract Expressionists (eg. Rothko, Newman, Pollock) never admitted being influenced by Monet. In their statements they mostly mentioned being descendants of the Cubists, Surrealists and abstractionists. Barnett Newman mentioned Monet’s work, but mainly to criticise the Impressionists for their “monist aesthetic” and “for their inability to see that drawing and subject matter, not just color, were also problems facing modern painting”.¹²

The late Monet was seen as relevant to the development of abstract art by critics like Clement Greenberg especially for the parallels in the paintings’ form, scale

¹⁰ Clement Greenberg, “The Later Monet,” *Art News Annual 1957* (December 1956): 132, 148 and “American-Type Painting”, 190.

¹¹ Leja, “The Monet Revival” in *Monet in the Twentieth Century*, 101.

¹² *Ibid.*, 102.

and style. On visiting Europe and Paris particularly in 1954, he studied Monet's *Grandes Décorations*, which was subsequently responsible for a significant shift in his style of analytical writing, as seen in the essays " 'American-Type Painting'" (spring, 1955) and "The Late Monet" (Dec., 1956), presented by *Art News* as "the first extensive American study" of Monet's art.

Greenberg valued Monet's art because he believed that he had replaced nature with autonomous form, as the sole source of pictorial success. For him, Monet's work spoke of flatness and purity, of 'chromatic' and 'symphonic' pictorial structure, a valid alternative to 'architectonic' Cubism and early abstraction. With this new appreciation of Monet came a change in preference for Greenberg, as he replaced Pollock's gestural automatism with Still and Newman's interest in colour structures. Although often disputable and contradictory, Greenberg's new outlook was consciously or unconsciously serving a more complex purpose. One of the underlying reasons for this was to link the work of the New York School artists with the tradition of a the heroic, European avant-garde. Considering the influence of other great European modernists like Picasso, Matisse, Miró, this was yet another proof of the legitimacy of the succession of American art from French modernism.

Another American critic who promoted Monet was William Seitz, who differed from Greenberg by the fact that he emphasised the Symbolist elements he believed he had discovered in Monet's late work. He claimed Monet "was pushing naturalism to its bursting point" and had even influenced Kandinsky's "abstract musical art" as he "re-formed nature according to inner anguish and the distorted vision that he resented, to produce his only truly expressionistic works."¹³ Seitz thought Monet was an important mediator in the history of modern art, connecting Courbet and Kandinsky, materialism and spiritualism, naturalism and abstraction.

Not everybody agreed with Seitz's curatorial approach to Monet's exhibition, and the artist Larry Rivers criticised his controlled selection of Monet's work which he believed presented the Impressionist as "very modern and very weather-bent. A painter with no prior idea of the outcome, only sure he wants to paint something – all

¹³ William Seitz, "Monet and Abstract Painting" and "Claude Monet," *Art Journal* 16, no. 1 (1956): 46.

very “New York School”.¹⁴ It was not Seitz’s intention to present Monet as obsessed with meteorological phenomena, but to show how in his work nature becomes ‘transcendental abstraction’. Yet, Rivers had made a valid point about the critic’s attempt to affiliate this work with Abstract Expressionism, if one was to consider Seitz’s analysis, in which a close interrelationship existed between the artist’s soul and the outside world:

[some of his paintings] tremble on the razor edge where vision mediates between the world out there and the inner experience of the mind, sensibilities and emotions. As a nature poet, Monet’s psychic state was more determined by the weather than by any other influence.¹⁵

The criticism on the subject and, less evidently, the mediation of the interim work by a considerable number of younger, lesser known New York School artists, caused even the more established Abstract Expressionists to introduce elements adopted from Monet’s late work into their art. Between 1952-5, prior to the airing of any eminent critical opinions, a group of emerging young New York artists (e.g. Philip Guston, Joan Mitchell, Sam Francis, Nell Blaine, Miriam Schapiro, Wolf Kahn, Hyde Solomon etc) were using gesture painting to evoke natural forms, shimmering colour, patterned brushwork and a more serene overall mood. Contemporary views on this new approach to abstract painting associated the new trend with Impressionism in general, rather than Monet in particular:

Reviews of their work frequently noted that in their paintings lessons drawn from Monet, Renoir, Sisley, and Pissarro were being assimilated to abstraction and Expressionism. Impressionism in the broader sense was the point of reference in this art and in the criticism it elicited, not Monet’s late paintings *per se*, which drew no special attention. Introducing Impressionism into Abstract Expressionist modes helped to generate and focus debates about purity or allusion in abstraction, inner- or outer-directed art, public or private reference, and originality or “confiscation” of past styles. Impressionism offered these artists a way to revitalize Abstract Expressionist painting and to distinguish themselves within that movement’s ranks.¹⁶

The earliest recorded use of the term ‘Abstract Impressionism’, as defining the work of this group is attributed to Elaine de Kooning. In a letter from Thomas B.

¹⁴ Larry Rivers, “Monet: The Eye is Magic,” *Art News* 59 (April 1960): 27-8.

¹⁵ Seitz, “Monet and Abstract Painting” 46.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Hess, Lawrence Alloway learned that the term seemed to have been coined by De Kooning in 1951 at the Arts Club, 8th Street, New York.”¹⁷ In the aforementioned *Art News* article of 1956, De Kooning observed that “the Abstract Impressionists (who outnumber Abstract-Expressionists two to one, but, curiously, are seldom mentioned)”¹⁸ were readapting the impressionist practice to the ideology of its followers. Whereas stylistically, the approach had a lot in common with Impressionism in its latest phase, the focus was now more on emotion than on the representation of visual impressions. The critic explained:

Retaining the quiet, uniform pattern of strokes that spread over the canvas without climax or emphasis, these followers keep the Impressionist manner of looking at a scene, but leave out the scene. The scale of the structural unit may change (it is usually vastly blown-up in contemporary work), but the balance remains the same. As the Impressionists attempted to deal with the optical effects of nature, the followers are interested in the optical effects of spiritual states, thereby giving an old style a new subject.¹⁹

Joan Mitchell, Sam Francis, Rosemarie Beck, Giorgio Cavallon, Philip Guston worked in a considerably *different* manner from mainstream abstract expressionism, in the sense that, whilst their brushwork was more or less reminiscent of the Parisian ‘Lyrical Abstraction’ or Tachisme, their painting did not seem to focus exclusively on the dynamic of their marks. The critic Arthur C. Danto wrote about the early work of Guston, an already well-established figurative painter²⁰:

...his distinctive abstract style differed from that of any of his peers more widely than any of them differed from one another. His way of laying down paint was not fluid and urgent, like Pollock. It was not slashed and brushy, like de Kooning, or sweeping and calligraphic, like Kline. It did not float translucently, like Rothko. Guston's strokes fell like short, clustered dabs of pigment into nests and networks of closely harmonized hues, which resembled passages in Impressionist landscapes. The question was even raised whether it was expressionist at all--whether Guston had not originated instead a form of Abstract Impressionism. The distance between what Guston had been, and

¹⁷ Lawrence Alloway in exh. cat. *Abstract Impressionism: An Exhibition of Recent Paintings* arranged by Lawrence Alloway and Harold Cohen (London: Arts Council, 1958). Exhibition touring to Nottingham University; Arts Council Gallery, Cambridge; Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle; Arts Council Gallery, London, 1958.

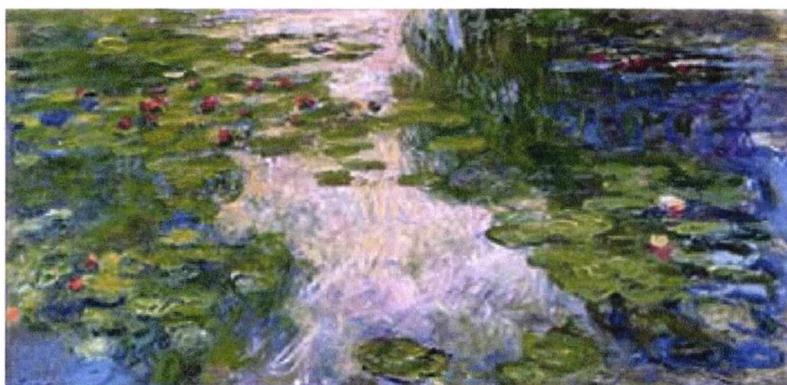
¹⁸ Elaine de Kooning, “Subject: What, How or Who?”, 62.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Guston had won the Prix de Rome in 1948 and four years earlier, the first prize in “Painting in the United States,” an exhibition sponsored by the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh.

what he became through Abstract Expressionism, was thus shorter than that traversed by any of the others.²¹

The mainstream Abstract Expressionists' preference for the structural, constructive, post-cubist approach seen as the principal route to abstraction was complicated by the Museum of Modern Art's said acquisition in 1955 of one of Monet's late *Water Lilies* (c. 1917 – 19, destroyed by fire in 1958), almost twenty feet in length. The sheer presence of this work was a reminder of an entirely different treatment of a vast painting surface, as this kind of scale had been up to that point exclusively the battleground of the formal, non-figurative artist. Monet's work, on the other hand, represented a "harmoniously nuanced and atmospherically charged activation of an enormous surface" which suggested an *alternative* to a "late Cubist" compositional order,"²² Mark Roskill remarked.



35. Claude Monet, *Water Lilies*, 1917-19

The figurative painter-critic Louis Finkelstein wrote: "It has been the role of modern painting since Monet *not* to flee from reality but from the theoretical straitjacket which is contradicted by sensitive visual experience. That this reality is difficult both to achieve and elucidate in the face of your previous habits of construction is witnessed by the many strategies which have since been brought to bear. Roughly these are divisible in three ways: *structural*, *symbolic* and *visual*."²³ In an attempt to follow the course of the return of modern art to "sensitive visual experience", Finkelstein devised this rather generalising categorisation.

²¹ Arthur C. Danto, "The Abstract Impressionist: Philip Guston," *The Nation* (29 December 2003).

²² Mark Roskill, *The Languages of Landscape* (Pennsylvania, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 272; Note 86.

²³ Louis Finkelstein, "New Look: Abstract Impressionism," *Art News* 55, no. 1 (March 1956): 36-37; 66.

First in Finkelstein's division came Cubism and its derivatives; in painting of this ancestry, there was a strong focus on objects from reality, deconstructed and reconstructed on the canvas, forming self-sufficient structures within the work of art; this kind of art was not concerned with the emotional perception of the larger natural universe outside the picture, but rather with the process of reordering the immediate environment into abstract configurations. Lawrence Alloway identified this period, by writing that, "In the earlier phases of modern art, when form (as something solid) and not space was the challenge, the influential artists of the past were architectural."²⁴ When referring to the 'structural' strategy, Finkelstein meant those art trends which were significantly influenced by Cubism, presumably such as Orphism, Futurism, Vorticism, Suprematism, De Stijl, Constructivism, etc. In such work, forms were typified and the result was rather impersonal.

Abstract Expressionism provided, in a way, a counter-example in its preference for the artist's individual, personal signature. This was the 'symbolic' strategy, in relation to which Finkelstein wrote: "In order to reach the reality which the formulation of Constructivism denied, the artist posited some interior means of recognition – an imagery relying neither upon construction nor observation but on passionate acts of will to break down the previous conventions of control and description."²⁵ This was a return to the personal and subjective, expressed through instinctive mark-making. However, Finkelstein felt that the self-reflexive nature of the movement was its deficiency and its art was driven by great inner forces, whilst the outside forces of the universe came to be neglected. He argued that the abstract expressionists considered creative zeal as the exclusive quality of art, just as the objectualists before them condemned everything that was not entirely relying on construction. He reiterated this by remarking that, "The passion itself which goes into the creation of a work is, of course, no guarantee of value."²⁶

Hence, he emphasized the emergence of the third approach, which he named the "visual" strategy. This proved to be the one most valued by the writer, as it greatly related to the manner in which his select set of artists, the Abstract Impressionists, were working. Finkelstein believed that this new lyrical movement attempted a return

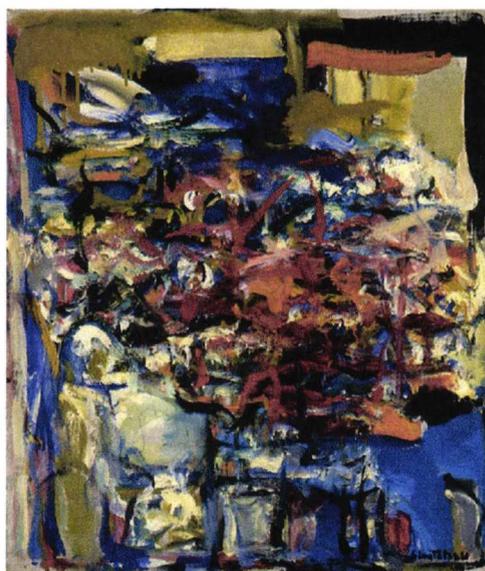
²⁴ Alloway in *Abstract Impressionism: An Exhibition of Recent Paintings*, 1958.

²⁵ Finkelstein, "New Look: Abstract Impressionism", 66.

²⁶ Ibid.

to natural, impersonal beauty, a wish to capture a part of something greater than the impermanence of human existence. According to the critic, the abstract impressionists managed to finally produce art of an essentially compact quality, as experience and vision converged in their abstractions. In an article in *Art News* in 1956 he wrote:

There is no clear grouping of these artists, but rather a tendency through varied personal developments to rely more on an optical unity as the dominant expression in their work. (...) Hyde Solomon, Nell Blaine, Robert Goodnough and Wallace Reiss have turned from the austerities of flat-pattern abstraction to the spatiality of landscape and the lushness of flowers and foliage. In the work of a good many others, such as Philip Guston, Stephen Pace, Rosemary Beck, Al Newbill, Joan Mitchell, John Grillo, Miriam Schapiro and Pat Adams, the tie to representation which Impressionism implies is equivocal or irrelevant, but the kind of vision in which they are involved is basically Impressionist, recasting abstraction into something much more concerned with the qualities of perception of light, space and air than the surface of the painting. (...) By and large these artists are more colourists than draftsmen and their works evidence more a sensuous response than conceptual control. Subject as such is not the issue; *seeing* is – a kind of seeing which I feel has grown out of the implications of Abstract-Expressionism.²⁷



36. Joan Mitchell, *Untitled*, circa 1956

37. Sam Francis, *Big Red*, 1953

Finkelstein believed that the most important development that the group brought about was “this recourse to visual sensibility as the basis of stylistic decision”. He insisted on the importance of ‘seeing’, but a kind of seeing which was

²⁷ Ibid.

filtered by the senses and did not need to materialize on canvas in a well-defined subject as such. The critic took a reactionary standpoint to abstract expressionism when he proposed the descriptive process of translating the 'seen' into marks and colour, as an alternative to impulse-driven acts of creation. Finkelstein maintained that the abstract impressionists were very much concerned with the effective rendering of light and space within the picture, by means of colour.

In Britain, Lawrence Alloway, continuing his idea of formal art being architectural, argued in 1958 that the informal abstraction of the new impressionists was, in fact considerably more painterly than the work produced by mainstream Abstract Expressionists. He quoted as influences the work of Monet, Bonnard (who inspired artists as different as Sam Francis and Harold Cohen) and Turner, whose "late works, in which he destroyed form by dramatic light influenced both Masson and de Staël. Also [...] Cézanne's late works, especially his watercolours, with their elliptical treatment of weightless forms, influenced Tal Coat and Masson."²⁸

Abstract Impressionism in Britain

A trend reminiscent of late Impressionist painterly abstraction had developed in Britain much earlier than the 1950s. In March-April 1934 the British painter Rodrigo Moynihan and his colleagues Geoffrey Tibble, Graham Bell, Victor Pasmore, Ceri Richards, Thomas Carr, Ivon Hitchens and William Coldstream held an exhibition at the Zwemmer Gallery in London entitled *Objective Abstractions*. The movement which was known under the same name developed as part of the general ferment of exploration of abstraction in Britain in the early 1930s and was short-lived. A few years later many of these artists would become members of the realist Euston Road School. At the time, however, David Gascoyne wrote a review²⁹ of the show in the *New English Weekly* in which he anticipated that the informal, painterly approach of these artists would have a considerable impact on British painting in the future.

In the catalogue to a retrospective of Moynihan's work held at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1978, Lawrence Gowing brought back into discussion the

²⁸ Alloway in *Abstract Impressionism: An Exhibition of Recent Paintings*, 1958.

²⁹ David Gascoyne, review of "Objective Abstractions. Zwemmer Gallery, London," *New English Weekly* (29 March, 1934).

paintings and theory introduced by the artist in 1934, as well as Gascoyne's review of the show:

The rationale of these paintings, or at least the frame of mind that inspired them, drew confidence, as Gascoyne perceived, from the paint generated informality of Monet's loosely figurative style in his last years. The curling handling of clotted oil-paint in the Objective Abstractions sometimes recalled him, with an occasional suggestion of Turner – perhaps the unfinished sketches of Venetian festivities – but there was nothing prismatic or festive in Moynihan's colour and any sign of impressionist illusion would of course have been barred from advanced painting in the thirties.³⁰

In a *Burlington Magazine* article of 1982, Gowing reproduced for the first time an early, unpublished³¹ essay entitled 'Impressionism and Abstract Painting' written by a young Moynihan around the time of the *Objective Abstractions* exhibition in 1934. Gowing himself admitted being puzzled by this essay which did not seem to have much to do with the actual theories supporting the Objective Abstractions as seen in the paintings themselves. Moynihan's piece had a lot more to do with the role of Cézanne than Monet and seemed to have been inspired by Roger Fry's *Cézanne. A Study of His Development* (1927). Gowing presumed that Moynihan's early essay preceded the developed ethos of Objective Abstractions.³²

In a questionnaire published in the catalogue, all the exhibited artists were united in their rejection of the geometric abstraction espoused by much of the European avant-garde in the 1930s and in their belief in an art, inspired initially by nature, that would develop according to an unpredictable internal logic of its own. Gowing believed Moynihan's essay presented the earliest recorded interest of a British artist in "the possibility of an abstract painting unconnected with the *renaissance du sentiment classique*, which was the progressive orthodoxy of the

³⁰ Lawrence Gowing, "Shorter Notices. Notes on Impressionism and Abstract Painting," *The Burlington Magazine* 124, no. 954, Special Issue devoted to Twentieth-Century Art (September 1982): 555.

³¹ The artist had submitted the essay to the *New Statesman and Nation* but it was returned to him unpublished by the literary editor of the time David Garnett, "naturally enough for nothing so seriously involved in so abstruse a question of the studios was publishable in England at that time." (Gowing, "Shorter Notices", 555).

³² Gowing wrote that, initially "Objective Abstraction proposed that the ultimate condition of painting would *objectively* be the amorphous brushing of paint in itself, dictated only by the 'questions which present themselves on the canvas.' These very questions and the intuition that the handling of paint on canvas, not any form or imaging or idea, would be its own sufficient theme, were at the heart of what Moynihan and his friends called Objective Abstraction. It was known that painting could and perhaps should be about painting; the proposal that paint should be about the immediately previous 'state' of the very same paint was another matter." ("Shorter Notices", 555).

early thirties. He [Moynihan] is found welcoming a flux in which ‘the object lost all its specifications, emotional or formal.’ ”³³

Moynihan’s 1934 essay concentrated on the potential of late Impressionist imagery, where form disintegrated and turned into an amorphous mass, as well as on late Cézanne. He was most interested in the abandonment of any explicit emotion or form, which had still been present in high Impressionism and classic Cézannism. Moynihan believed Cézanne appreciated Impressionism but also feared its implications that “the whole of the painter’s responsibility had so to speak been thrust upon nature.” So Cézanne imposed a structural framework upon his vision of nature in order to avoid the dissolution of the image through incessant study of nature’s effects as seen in Monet’s work: “towards the end of his life Cézanne was to abandon the stress on the geometric structure of the object, but the looseness which resulted was of a completely different kind to that of Monet.”³⁴

Roger Fry alluded to the importance Cézanne’s late works might have for future generations, and Moynihan agreed that in these “ ‘completest revelations of his spirit’ [Fry’s words] can be found, I think, the true meaning and importance of impressionism: he brought the mind of the painter, the object and the canvas into an intimate alliance.”³⁵ In doing so, the object was dissolved altogether and the painter lost his role of endowing the object with emotional or formal attributes. This is how Moynihan believed true abstract painting came about, an autonomous painting “necessitating not the spontaneous invention of non-representational symbols, but that scepticism of the true ‘eye’ painter whose creative spirit must proceed by assuming nothing in its search for a synthesis of vision.”³⁶

The artist seemed to wish to distance himself from current abstract trends in which classical canons and the pursuit of ideal form were the main concern. (An example of this was the Mondrian-inspired abstraction of Ben Nicholson and Naum Gabo in Britain and of Americans linked with the American Abstract Artists (AAA)

³³ Ibid.

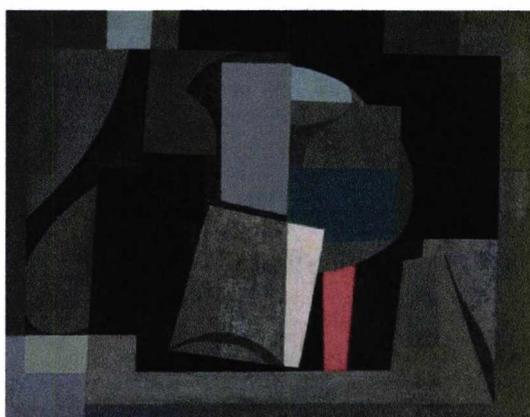
³⁴ Rodrigo Moynihan, “Notes on Impressionism and Abstract Painting,” (March or April 1934), first published in *The Burlington Magazine* 124, no. 954 (September 1982): 556.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

group.) Moynihan meant to show that “there is a kind of painting which *objectively* is more abstract, more modern, further from idea and the ‘preconceived form’ than the mere ‘invention’ of non-representational symbols’, which current opinion accounted abstract painting, and that kind is the autonomous paint-generated painting, which is detected, rightly or not, in late Impressionism, Monet and Cézanne alike.”³⁷

Moynihan believed that the truly ‘objective’³⁸ nature of abstraction lay in the inherent potential of paint - the “autonomy of amorphous pigment” was the real progressive element introduced by this group.



38. Ben Nicholson: *Painting - still life*, 1934-4

39. Rodrigo Moynihan: *Objective Abstraction*, circa 1935-6

However, Gowing claimed Moynihan must have misread the amorphous abstraction in late Cézanne, especially as the latter’s work of this period was not broadly exhibited in the early 1930s in Britain, therefore probably not properly understood by artists and critics. Neither is it likely that Moynihan had read Cézanne’s letter to Emile Bernard ³⁹ in which the master explained that the structure of his pictures was steeped in the study of nature, as his lines were perpendicular and parallel to the line of horizon. Nevertheless, Moynihan’s discovery of abstraction in late Cézanne is to be noted as an early and valuable insight into the master’s work, as reflected in contemporary writing. In fact, Gowing maintained that, “When Moynihan

³⁷ Gowing in *ibid.*, 555.

³⁸ Gowing maintained that, “The adjective did not simply mean object-like, but anticipated the jargon to come, with the meaning of ‘realistically and cynically regarded’, the usage, for example, which was to accuse ‘premature anti-fascists’ of ‘objective fascism’.” (*ibid.*)

³⁹ Paul Cézanne’s letter to Emile Bernard was printed in Pierre Bonnard’s *Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne* (1907).

painted the Objective Abstractions, the disintegration that Monet had brought about seems to have taken Cézanne's place as 'the true meaning and importance of impressionism'."⁴⁰

There were clear parallels between the work of the 1950s Abstract Impressionists and the 1930s Objective Abstractionists. In Moynihan's essay there was a predominant focus on 'the visual attitude in painting', which from determinant of figurative painting, would become the determinant of truly objective, autonomous, paint-generated abstract painting. Moynihan claimed there was more to Impressionism than a mere recording of transitory effects from nature performed by artists with experience limited to the Barbizon tradition. Through the advancement of science, an art based on symbolism was replaced by a new reliance on vision. The artist "no longer called upon to affirm directly the spiritual unity of the community, was left to choose where he would take his stand in his new role as 'interpreter'."⁴¹ This visual attitude in painting was set against the 'conceptual' or 'idealistic' approach: one which would not aim to endlessly reproduce form in an attempt to achieve perfection but one which "tries to produce conclusive answers to these questions which present themselves on the canvas." The visual attitude Moynihan described would be a 'critical, objective' approach.

In this, Moynihan was decidedly a precursor of what would become a dominant trend twenty years later in the 1950s in the United States, when he wrote of the objective, visual artist who "is directed not to the perfection of a pre-conceived form but by the appearance of his painting, which in his case becomes the object."⁴² As an alternative, Moynihan proposed painting which originated from the Cubist tradition of constructing the surface of the painting and building it up by means of objects: "The practice today of arranging certain hieroglyphics into satisfactory patterns, whether in a violent or tasteful manner, is accepted as abstract painting."⁴³ Moynihan claimed, this type of painting, just like pure impressionist painting solely reliant on the study of nature, was deficient because it relied on foreign influences like negro sculpture, the primitives and theoretical sources such as psychoanalysis.

⁴⁰ Gowing, "Shorter Notices", 555.

⁴¹ Moynihan, "Notes on Impressionism", in *ibid.*, 556.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

In this pioneering essay, Moynihan chose intuition over logic and the search of classical ideal form or the theorizing of art. "Logic cannot pretend to isolate a 'classical' art, make it possible under any conditions, give it canons and a determinate goal. The sterility of an art begins when it ceases to deny itself, when the artist acquires superstitions and no longer has the will to reject."⁴⁴

In Britain in the 1950s, very much like in America at the time, there was a newly-found excitement for the work of the French Impressionists and especially Claude Monet, whose work was shown at the 1957 Edinburgh Festival. The attention was directed now particularly towards some less known works of Monet, where it was believed that the master had achieved a final breakthrough and the mediation between figuration and abstraction, as he transformed elements of abstract imagery into form and pattern. This view irritated the exhibition organizer Douglas Cooper, who intended the show to promote the work of Monet, seen as belonging to the past century. Cooper and John Richardson had gathered an extensive collection of 113 paintings to cover all phases of Monet's "stylistic development".⁴⁵

However, in a review of the exhibition, Ralph Coe wrote that 18 works in the exhibition dating between 1895-1923 reflected "the current shift of critical opinion favourable to the late Monet which has taken place in the last five years."⁴⁶ He showed that Monet's late abstract colour patterns were regarded in a new light by his contemporaries, his "diaphanous textures, formerly thought to be evidence of artistic disintegration" were re-evaluated and regarded as Monet's truly innovative vision. He used a study of a 1907 panel from the *Water Lilies* series (borrowed from the Walker Collection) in order to illustrate what he believed was a shift in critical perception of Monet's work:

This painting belongs to a series which has been most severely criticised in the past as having neither substance nor meaning; yet it forms, perhaps, the most subtle index to his vision, at its least material, at its most radical moment of simplification, when the relationship between the eye and limpid subject have

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Douglas Cooper in exh. cat. *Claude Monet: An Exhibition of Paintings*, Arts Council in association with the Edinburgh Festival Society (London: Tate Gallery, 1957); Work for this exhibition was jointly selected by D. Cooper and John Richardson and contained very few paintings after 1900.

⁴⁶ Ralph Coe, review of *Claude Monet: An Exhibition of Paintings*, *Burlington Magazine* 99, no. 656 (November 1957): 382.

become so close as to be truly exquisite. In these flat depths Monet carried to a logical conclusion the subjectivity and negation of space in the 1890's. Retinal sensitivity could hardly go any further than to evolve the multitude of nuances and shades of feeling seen here; such a '*gestalt*' approach is nothing less than astonishing for an artist trained in the 1860's, and whose roots resided in the perspectival methods of Corot and Jongkind.⁴⁷

Coe claimed that three large Orangerie *Nymphéas* (1916-23) proved that Monet never stopped painting until the point when his eyesight would not allow him to continue anymore. Although some of the "generalities" of these late paintings could be attributed to his condition, the critic did not doubt that Monet had in fact a long-pursued aim. He claimed that the artist's discontent with his own work from 1894 onwards⁴⁸ should not be interpreted as a weakening of his will. On the contrary, it was "evidence that he experienced repeatedly the torment of an almost abnormally refined visual sensibility."⁴⁹

Douglas Cooper, the exhibition organiser, was of a different opinion. Mainly concerned with demonstrating the greatness of Monet as an 'eye-painter' through an extensive overview of his entire career, his critical approach was far more traditional. Yet, even he was forced to start his exhibition catalogue essay by briefly acknowledging the new response received by Monet in contemporary criticism:

They have looked at Monet with fresh eyes, and during the last five or six years have focused attention on him in such a way that he has begun to regain some of the artistic stature which he seemed to have lost. This time, however, Monet is presented to us as a begetter of the abstract movement in painting on the basis of the broad brushwork and poliphonic use of colour which occur in his late works, notably in his last (post- 1912) Water-Lilies series.⁵⁰

Cooper quoted Alfred H. Barr as the leading authority in his line of criticism who appreciated Monet for helping, if unintentionally, to "liberate form and colour from visual facts, [...] moving toward an art of semi-abstraction in which the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 385.

⁴⁸ Claude Monet was recorded to have said that, "To finish means absolute perfection, yet I work hard without advancing, searching, groping, without reaching much but tiring of the whole thing." Gustave Geffroy, *Claude Monet, Sa Vie – Son Oeuvre*, II (Paris: G., 1924), 63.

⁴⁹ Coe, review of *Claude Monet*, 385.

⁵⁰ Cooper in exh. cat. *Claude Monet: An Exhibition of Paintings*.

important reality would be his surface textures and shimmering colour.”⁵¹ Cooper seemed to be aware of the new trend in American contemporary painting known under the name of ‘abstract impressionism’, which had developed following the recent Monet revival. Furthermore, he cited the Italian Lionello Venturi, who as early as 1948 had maintained that, “Contrary to the present view, Impressionism was actually the first step on the road which led some forty years later to abstract art.”⁵² Cooper was though less convinced by the argument of the French critic Marcel Brion who attempted to appropriate the current fashionable ‘impressionist abstraction’ as a French invention, “an extremely significant constant in French art”, situating it in the position of mediator between pure geometric abstraction of Dutch provenance and romantic abstraction of Germanic descent.⁵³

Cooper could not ignore the new developments in the work of an increasing number of international abstract artists who claimed having been influenced by Monet’s late style, he rejected their motives. He admitted that “‘tachiste’ and ‘abstract expressionist’ painters on both sides of the Atlantic – Bazaine, Manessier, Singier, Riopelle, Sam Francis, Jackson Pollock and Mark Tobey for example – had consciously derived inspiration for their own work through studying paintings by Monet. No one would deny their right both to do so and to formulate whatever theories they will to justify their activities”, yet he argued that “we are not obliged to see Monet through their eyes, nor to take so narrow a view of the pictorial significance of his canvases.”⁵⁴ He claimed, the late *Nymphéas* were no basis for his contemporaries’ justification of abstraction in Monet, as their lack of finish could in fact be mainly attributed to the master’s fading eye-sight and many of the work seen as abstract had in fact been abandoned by the painter himself as failures. In Cooper’s view then, most of the contemporary theories were fortuitous conjectures.

A real break with this conservative British critical stance was provided by Lawrence Alloway who first truly introduced the connection which some American abstract painters (following the writings of Greenberg, Barr and Seitz) had discovered

⁵¹ Alfred H. Barr, *Masters of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1954), 19, in Douglas Cooper, exh. cat. *Claude Monet: An Exhibition of Paintings*.

⁵² Lionello Venturi, *Gli Impressionisti Alla XXIV Biennale De Venezia* (Venice: Edizioni Daria Guarnati, 1948), 5, in Cooper, exh. cat. *Claude Monet: An Exhibition of Paintings*.

⁵³ Marcel Brion, *Art Abstrait* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1956), 253.

⁵⁴ Cooper, exh. cat. *Claude Monet: An Exhibition of Paintings*.

between Monet's late *Nymphéas* and New York school abstraction. He first attempted this in the catalogue introduction to the exhibition *Exploration of Paint* held at Arthur Tooth and Sons gallery, London in January 1957, where work by international artists Jean Dubuffet, Sam Francis, Paul Jenkins, Jean Paul Riopelle was shown. As a result of his enthusiasm and receptivity to the contemporary implications of Monet's work, Alloway organised in early 1958, together with the painter Harold Cohen, - from an idea initiated by the Fine Arts department of the University of Nottingham - a touring exhibition entitled *Abstract Impressionism*⁵⁵, in which he showed European and American artists alongside British artists, such as Bernard Cohen, Harold Cohen, Patrick Heron, Ivon Hitchens, Peter Kinley, Peter Lanyon, Rodrigo Moynihan and Richard Smith.

David Sylvester was resentful towards Alloway's attempts to further internationalise British art. Sylvester directed an especially vehement offensive against his concept of 'Abstract Impressionism', which he claimed the critic had in fact adopted from the same need of reconciling disparate trends from the two sides of the Atlantic. Although Sylvester himself had welcomed the implications of ambiguity in the work of Monet (as well as the idea of "allusiveness" in Bacon's painterly works), he claimed Alloway was excessively vague when it came to the introduction of a term such as 'Abstract Impressionism'. Having admitted that such labelling was tempting for any critic, he dismissed Alloway's attempt because the art he was promoting did not "face up to appearance". He wrote that "ambiguity has to stop somewhere short of vagueness, somewhere short of [Alloway's] pronouncement that 'allusions to nature, though important are not allowed to disrupt the autonomy of paint'." ⁵⁶

An equal resistance to the vagueness of the concept of Abstract Impressionism was expressed in an *Observer* review by Alan Bowness, who particularly sceptical

⁵⁵ *Abstract Impressionism. An Exhibition of Recent Paintings Arranged by Lawrence Alloway and Harold Cohen*, organised by the Arts Council of Great Britain in collaboration with the United States Embassy, 1958-1961, showing British and American artists: Rosemarie Beck, Norman Bluhm, Lawrence Calcagno, Bernard Cohen, Harold Cohen, Barry Daniels, Vieira da Silva, Nicholas de Stael, Sam Francis, Patrick Heron, Ivon Hitchens, Angelo Ippolito, Peter Kinley, Peter Lanyon, Andre Masson, Rodrigo Moynihan, Joan Mitchell, Stephen Pace, Walter Plate, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Miriam Schapiro, Richard Smith, Pierre Tal Coat.

⁵⁶ David Sylvester, "Round the London Galleries," *The Listener* 59, no. 1526 (26 June 1958): 1060, citing Alloway from exh. cat. For *Abstract Impressionism: An Exhibition of Recent Paintings*.

about the existence of a European counterpart of the American movement.⁵⁷ He believed that Alloway's proposition was highly generalising with the only common nominator of the works being their landscape component, without the latter being "an essential characteristic of either impressionism or of abstract art"⁵⁸. Equally, he deplored the difference in style and quality of the mixed international show.

In the catalogue introduction to *Abstract Impressionism*, Alloway pointed out the influence of Claude Monet's late style on a relatively wide range of British and American artists; he observed that "The late impressionism of Monet became more 'abstract'; nature continued to be the subject, of course, but the marks and the pigment took on an increasing importance. [...] The connection between impressionism and the new painting lies not only in the painting of light but also in the use of conspicuous paint to refer to nature."⁵⁹ By "conspicuous paint", Alloway must have been referring to the allusive nature of the new impressionists' art: the viewer's gaze would simultaneously be involved in what was happening at the surface of the picture, whilst becoming aware of further depths of meaning transpiring from behind the marks, this being aided by suggestive colour. The critic noted evident similarities between this kind of art and Monet's lily ponds, remembering that, "Later impressionist landscapes are often on the edge of turning into paint; conversely in abstract impressionist pictures the free, sensual paint, liberated by action painting, turns into landscapes all the time."⁶⁰

Alloway, although attentive to the formal attributes of this type of painting, also left the reader with the impression that the work of the Abstract Impressionists did to some extent endow abstract art with naturalist connotations, even if the critic did not openly state this. This became evident however, when he found in his contemporaries' work typical traits of impressionist painting. For instance, he wrote, "Space is created by aerial- and texture-perspective, not by size- or linear-perspective. Aerial perspective, blueing, filmy hazy, is a cue for distance. Texture differences imply a change of direction in a modelled form. [...] The light, though free of objects,

⁵⁷ Bowness wrote that, "to assimilate the term to recent European painting that owes nothing to these American artists and is as unlike as that of Hitchens, Masson, de Staël, Moynihan and Harold Cohen is to reduce it to nonsense." In "Abstract Impressionism?" *The Observer* (15 June 1958): 15.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Alloway in exh. cat. For *Abstract Impressionism: An Exhibition of Recent Paintings*.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

often connotes natural effects, of noon, of dusk, effects of weather (Bernard Cohen) or the gradient of horizonless planes, such as the sea or a field viewed vertically (in Patrick Heron)”⁶¹. This shows that, even Alloway had to admit that there were perceptual implications to this type of art, although he was mainly interested in process, execution and painterliness in the work of the abstract impressionists.

A similar critical angle on the abstraction derived from Monet came from Patrick Heron. He was less interested in Abstract Impressionism as a new form of action painting, but was fascinated by the formal aesthetic of such gestural painting. In a review of the Monet exhibition held at the Tate in 1957, he commented that it was “a comparatively new thing, this interest of the avant-garde (to revert to an old-fashioned term for the opposite of ‘old-fashioned’) in Monet.”⁶² He remarked that “after forty years of neglect by the foremost painters of the time”, Monet was once again of great interest, especially to certain non-figurative painters belonging to Tachisme or Action Painting. He gave as examples the work of Philip Guston in the United States and, in France, from 1945 onwards, non-figurative painting, that was transcending the smooth, geometric ‘abstract’ art of the thirties, a kind of painting increasingly focused on pigment, textures and color values in Bonnard’s manner of painting, and that of the Impressionist group. In Heron’s view, Monet’s two greatest talents were: “first, a miraculously sensitive eye for harmony in the higher tones of atmospheric color and, second, an exceptionally vital and original wrist.” By the latter, Heron meant “the electrically nervous yet physically vital energy of all his brush writing. In this amazingly varied surface quality lies his main abstract vitality.”⁶³

Unlike the American Louis Finkelstein, Heron remarked that the renewed interest in Monet had not come about as a result of a preoccupation with the space of his pictures or his subject matter, but with the ‘all-overness’ of his technique at the surface of the picture. Heron observed how the Impressionists “backed out almost to the picture surface itself. [...] one can no longer swoop into the picture’s subject,

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Patrick Heron, “The Monet Revival,” *Arts Magazine* (November 1957) in *Painter as Critic. Patrick Heron: Selected Writings*, edited by Mel Gooding (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1998), 135.

⁶³ Ibid., 136-137.

unconscious of passing any barrier at the picture surface.”⁶⁴ So, in Heron’s view, Monet became important once again due to the artists’ special interest in his technique more than anything else. His approach was pioneering by the fact that it focused upon the texture and colour nuances of his weave of brushstrokes which *seemed* to prefigure the modern immersion in the physical process of making a painting, rather than that of producing a suggestive image:

we are now in love with his granular surfaces, with the brush marks which instantly convey the precise movement of wrist and arm through which they came about, with the ‘all-over’ dance of his nervously controlled brush, as it spreads its little explosive blobs and clouds of color across the picture with so even and consistent a tempo. Also, there is the opalescent depth and the misty radiance of his color, the fact that it does not define hard, resistant planes that are parallel to the picture surface - all this concerns us again, now, in our flight from the geometric definiteness of Cubism, and from the unmodulated flatness of large color areas.⁶⁵

Commenting on Monet’s last panels, Heron wrote that “here all was in the touch; ‘composition’, considered as an arrangement in space, was at a minimum. The plane of the pond’s surface filled out the entire canvas to its four corners; the miraculous life of paint, when applied by brushes, was made manifest in a new sense.”⁶⁶ However, what the critic thought categorically differentiated Monet’s art from gestural non-figurative painting was the fact that Monet’s colour was still essentially naturalistic, whereas that of the contemporary artists was not. This clashed on some level with Alloway and Finkelstein’s observations, according to which the work of the abstract impressionists actually did still contain suggestive accents of colour, reminiscent of those found in nature. Heron wrote about Monet:

For him, one touch of Naples yellow placed between two of cobalt violet is not *only* a statement of ‘violet-yellow-violet’ – as would be the case in a non-figurative colorist of today. It was also the conveyor of an optical sensation concerning the light of the setting sun as it was reflected between two small waves of the evening sea. The abstract *content* is missing from the lily ponds: they really represent a distended representational idea. In them Monet pointed to the future; but he did not enact it.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Patrick Heron, “The Necessity of Distortion in Painting,” from a lecture delivered at Leeds University (October 1949) in *Painter as Critic*, 46.

⁶⁵ Heron, “The Monet Revival” in *Painter as Critic*, 135-136.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Late Monet however was a versatile point of reference for both supporters of figurative and abstract art on both sides of the Atlantic and his work from this period became the touchstone of innovation and mediation between the old and new avant-garde. In 1960, at a time when Clement Greenberg was increasingly involved with the critical appraisal of 'Post-Painterly Abstraction', he continued to support Monet's import to abstract art. In a comparison with Mondrian's work, Greenberg wrote that, "Far from incurring the danger of arbitrariness in the absence of a model in nature, Mondrian's art proves, with the passing of time, almost too disciplined, too convention-bound in certain respects; once we have become used to its utter abstractness we realize that it is more traditional in its colour, as well as in its subservience to the frame, than the last paintings of Monet are."⁶⁸ Here, Greenberg reiterated the fact that Monet's work was innovative for the fact that its huge scale and seemingly instinctive gestural technique, turned his late canvases into impressive, abstract pieces, with a strong environmental effect. On a different occasion, writing about Clyfford Still's work, Greenberg once again brought Monet back into discussion, maintaining that his late canvases foreshadowed colour field painting:

Setting himself against the immemorial insistence on light and dark contrast, he [Clyfford Still] asserted instead colour's capacity to act through the contrast of pure hues in relative independence of light and dark design. Late Impressionism was the precedent here, and as in the late Monet, the suppression of value contrasts created a new kind of openness. The picture no longer divided itself into shapes or even patches, but into zones and areas and fields of colour. This became essential, but it was left to Newman and Rothko to show how completely so.⁶⁹

The Monet scholar John House argued against such interpretations when he stated that Monet's concern for formal pattern needs to be considered within a 19th-century context, of applying such decorative treatment to a subject studied visually from nature. He warned that one should not confuse this with Greenberg's modernist "flatness"⁷⁰. Yet, Richard Shiff noted the fact that modernist 'flatness' was ultimately the marker of pictorial autonomy⁷¹, which conceptually approaches what House

⁶⁸ Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," (1960) in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 777.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 785.

⁷⁰ John House, *Monet: Nature into Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 46, 133.

⁷¹ Richard Shiff, review in *The Art Bulletin* 73, no. 1 (March 1991): 149-156.

himself described as the ‘internal pictorial unity’ dominant in Monet’s work from the 1890s onwards.⁷²

Unlike Greenberg who concentrated strictly on the formal values of vast areas of colour, Finkelstein was more concerned with the impression of actual space that he thought Monet’s work conveyed. He wrote, that the new movement, inspired by the nineteenth-century style of Monet and Pissarro “stressed in a new way, light, space and air.”⁷³ There was an ongoing debate about the duality between the rendering of realistic space and that of pictorial space (in the modernist abstract sense) in late Monet. Heron did not consider that Monet’s painting had much to do with “composition as an arrangement in space”, in the vein of Cézanne, based on “hard, resistant planes parallel to the picture plane”, advancing and receding and thus creating pictorial space. Instead, he focused on the ‘all-overness’ in the treatment of a vast surface and the aesthetic of the marks.

Louis Finkelstein and Lawrence Alloway, although coming from very different critical backgrounds, both thought that an important preoccupation of the new painting inspired by late Monet, was the intimation of real space. Finkelstein remarked that, “Many of the most authoritative works of the past ten years seem to come across by their success in delivering a strong sense of space and spatial activity apart from the painting’s autonomous existence. (Hoffman, Tworckov, Motherwell) (...) The description, moreover, devolves in practically all cases on one main aspect of experience – the quality of space. It is the sense that space rather than objects constitutes the primary reality of our understanding which gives this movement its unity and conceptual basis.”⁷⁴

⁷² House, *Monet: Nature into Art*, 225.

⁷³ Finkelstein, “*New Look: Abstract Impressionism*”, 66.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*



40. Rodrigo Moynihan, *Yellow and Violet*, 1957

Meanwhile, as Heron focused on the influence of Monet's 'calligraphy' on the work of gestural abstract painters like the Tachists and Action painters, Elaine de Kooning stressed the emotional focus ("optical effects of visual states") of abstract impressionist painting, instead of the traditional Impressionist preoccupation with visual or "optical effects of nature". Meanwhile, Finkelstein believed that Monet's foremost contribution to the new painting was basically his ability to render natural space in a semi-abstract manner.

Both Alloway and Finkelstein insisted that the origins of this type of painting lay in sensory experience, which manifested itself in lyrical imagery. Finkelstein stated that, "For the artist perception always challenges concept. (...) I do not think that all abstract painting has gone as far from the world of the senses as might be assumed."⁷⁵ This was an important observation about postwar art which went unnoticed on an American art scene where an emphasis on form, on the one hand, and expression of zealous feelings, on the other hand took centre stage in abstract art. Meanwhile, Alloway recorded the predominant lyrical quality in many of the painters involved: "clouds, flowers, gardens, water, glaciers, rocks, derived partly from Klee, partly from the French tendency to think of artists as poets."⁷⁶ Alloway indicated that the risk of this kind of imagery was to become "too discreet, too meditative, too near

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Alloway in exh. cat. For *Abstract Impressionism: An Exhibition of Recent Paintings*.

Calvert's idyllic Greece"⁷⁷, but meanwhile emphasised the forceful presence of abstract impressionist colour relations which would prevent these works from surrendering to prettiness. He tried to make up for the sentimental lapses in his review by maintaining that, although these pictures did refer to nature and their obvious preoccupation with light was indeed the result of nature filtered by the artist's sentiments, light "does not act in one-to-one references. It is the product of the paint and not merely the 'time of the day' transfigured."⁷⁸

For a short period, this restricted group of American (Francis, Guston, Mitchell etc.), continental (De Staël, Masson, Tal Coat etc.) and British painters (Heron, Moynihan, Cohen etc.) shared their interest in what critics came to refer to as 'abstract impressionist' painting, rivalling the Expressionistic interests through their more subtle and delicate treatment of the work surface and their predilection for poetic lyricism. However, by the time of the 1958 exhibition *Nature in Abstraction* held at the Whitney Museum of American Art, there were attempts to thwart this development, as John I. H. Baur, its organiser, remarked. Alfred H. Barr Jr., the director of MoMA at the time, considered that claims for the occurrence of such a movement were ungrounded and decided to avoid discussing them. In his scheme of development, reference to the forms, textures, colours and spaces of the real world was hardly permitted to have an evocative value – except the occasional mystical implications. It was feared that if suggestion was given serious consideration in painting, it might compete with the primary reality of paint on canvas. Nevertheless, there already existed written proof of the incidence of the new movement, with American writers such as de Kooning, Hess and Finkelstein and British critics such as Alloway, Coe, Cooper, Gowing having given it considerable attention.

⁷⁷ Edward Calvert (1799-1883) was a wood-engraver and painter. Like Palmer, he was inspired by Blake's illustrations to Thornton's edition of Virgil. Unlike the other Shoreham artists, Calvert did not base his pastoral visions on religious poetry such as that of Milton or Bunyan, but found inspiration in Theocritus and other pagan idylls. After 1831 and Blake's death, Calvert's pastoral vision faded but his interest in ancient Greece developed into a more classical sentiment. For the rest of his life painted mainly for pleasure, working in oil, watercolour and gouache. He took his subjects chiefly from pagan mythology, aspiring to a 'beautiful ideal' drawn from ancient Greek art. (Tate Glossary, <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ArtistWorks?cgroupid=999999961&artistid=81&page=1&sole=y&collab=y&attr=y&sort=default&tabview=bio>).

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Chapter Seven

Converging Perceptions of Landscape and Place: Romanticism, Modernism, Phenomenology

This chapter provides a conclusive overview of various issues referring to postwar landscape painting discussed in the thesis. Its first part reconsiders a long-standing standard in British art, the Romantic tradition. It examines the idea of the invented landscape, the *landscape of the mind*. This study focuses mostly on the immediate influence of wartime neo-Romanticism on the landscape painting of the 1950s, but historical models are also reviewed. Neo-Romanticism was a reaction to naturalism, through the intuitive perception of the natural environment. It mainly focused on a reinvented outlook on idyllic, rural scenes, as a reaction against the conformity of contemporary urbanisation. A nostalgic neo-Picturesque outlook on landscape offered an idealised view of the country during the war, landscape being seen as a metaphor for national freedom and pride. The sources of this type of landscape painting are identified here in romantic imagery, historical reference and the idea of the neutral landscape, wild, untamed - one of the last mines of innocence and untarnished beauty. This explained the subsequent liberation of landscape from ideological constraints of any kind, as well as the ease with which it assimilated modernism. In the 1940s, the concept of 'place' was re-evaluated in modernist terms, mainly by Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland, who sought to 'extract' the intrinsic character of a specific place on a purely intuitive, individualist basis. In this they did not rely on any external reference. The great innovation brought to British painting by Nash was the shift from aesthetic to phenomenological considerations of place, as he endowed the elements of the landscape with personally charged metaphors.

The second part of the chapter considers the influence of modernist formalism on British landscape painting. The focus here is particularly on *eyesight as an aesthetic conduit*. In the 1950s, a reaction against mythical, historical and descriptive tendencies became evident in landscape painting. Young British artists influenced by European and American modernist models proposed a novel approach to landscape as opposed to its traditional 'invented' forms. Landscape was now reconsidered as a visual object, capable of yielding pictorial unity by its reduction to abstract pictorial

patterns. A lingering reliance on visual imagery coincided with the modernist concern for the formal autonomy of the picture, following the example of Matisse, late Cézanne and Monet, whose discoveries were redefined in a contemporary context by a European artist such as Nicolas de Staël. This formal, visual approach overlapped with the experiential, phenomenological approach to landscape in British painting. While the first mostly relied on the aesthetic aspect, the second focused on the perceptual aspect and the dynamic, all-inclusive perception of the landscape. The changing connotation of the notion of 'place' in these approaches is exemplified in a parallel evaluation of the work of two British artists working with landscape in the 1950s, Peter Lanyon and Anthony Fry.

The concluding part elaborates on the phenomenological approach to landscape painting. The focus here is on the dynamic, *embodied experience of the landscape*. This approach is subjective, the artist is an insider, exploring the view from within the view, that is, entirely identifying himself with it. Historical precedents to this approach of landscape painting are sought out in the work of Courbet and Cézanne, natives of the land they explored as subject. Landscape is perceived as a complex experience, subsuming historical, anthropological, social aspects and carrying multiple layers of personal meaning to the artist. The viewer becomes the main protagonist in the picture, his role overlapping with that of the figures within it. Instead of re-creating a view synthesised through personal perception on the canvas in the modernist formalist tradition, the artist attempts to create new experiences. Art becomes the proof of lived experience, as well as the means to relive this experience each time the picture is contemplated. As supported by the theories on phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, within this approach, landscape is no longer a vista, captured from a static viewpoint, but an all-encompassing experience, physically explored from all angles. In the work of Lanyon and Hitchens, the viewer becomes an active participant.

i. The Romantic Legacy. Landscape and Inner Vision

In a survey of English painting of 1882, the French critic Ernest Chesneau wrote that in his later work that "Turner did not look at nature enough and he did not

paint the sun that he had before his eyes, but the sun of which he dreamed.”¹ Essentially, this could be an abbreviated and very general definition of the *invented*, idealised landscape, typical of the romantic-visionary tradition in British painting. In the years following the second world war, there was an attempt to maintain the wartime orientation towards this approach and the Neo-Romantics were praised for their “allegedly traditional British emphasis upon the quality of visionary or poetic intensity.”² The qualifier ‘romantic’ was rather inappropriately but irreversibly attached to the concept of traditional English painting. Postwar artists and critics disregarded the classical³ and its manifestations in history painting and portraiture and especially during the war, one reason for this might have been political in the sense that foreign and southern European culture was associated with Fascism.⁴

Further reasons for which British art was defined as opposing classical and formal values were related to the need to establish a strong national identity. Following Ruskin’s legacy, Kenneth Clark’s *Landscape into Art* (1949) brought to view the idea that landscape painting was the ‘chief artistic creation of the nineteenth century’, claiming that “the appreciation of natural beauty and the painting of landscape is a normal and enduring part of our spiritual activity”.⁵ Postwar commentators found this line of thought useful in the shaping of a unified national voice for culture. In *Patterns of English Painting* (1954), Eric Newton regarded Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland as two of the nation’s greatest artist working in the Blakeian tradition, in a “strong vein of romantic symbolism”, which was seen as “a typically British gesture of revolt against puritanism of form”⁶ – in this case, again, English romantic art was offered as a superior alternative to the classicising tendencies of the European avant-garde. This approach had been promoted by the

¹ Ernest Chesneau, *La Peinture anglaise* (Paris: A. Quantin, 1882), 162.

² Brian Foss, “Message and Medium: Government Patronage, National Identity and National Culture in Britain, 1939-45,” *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 2 (1991): 65 and Kenneth Clark, “War Artists at the National Gallery,” *Studio* 123 (January 1942): 2-9.

³ This view had antecedents in Ruskin’s theories, according to which the Gothic style embodied the same moral truths that he sought in great art: strength, solidity and aspiration and expressed the full range of human emotion; Classical values, on the other hand, were connotative of the repressive standardisation of modern developments, and lack of moral strength.

⁴ Great importance was given to the artist’s personal reading of a subject, to creativity and originality, as opposed to the concern for a single narrative, as found in propagandistic art. (See Foss, “Message and Medium”)

⁵ Kenneth Clark, preface of *Landscape into Art* (London: John Murray, 1979) and “A Note on Ruskin’s Writings on Art and Architecture,” in *Ruskin Today* (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc, 1964).

⁶ Eric Newton: ‘Patterns of English Painting’, *Britain Today*, no. 222 (October 1954): 25.

writing of Herbert Read, for whom British art was romantic by nature, since it was northern and expressionistic - a characteristic of national art which worked as a counter weapon against the French cultural influence⁷ in the beginning of the twentieth century. Revisiting the universal northern European Gothic style produced in Britain in the Middle Ages, Read believed it left its imprint on the future of art in this country with its main characteristics being linearity, two-dimensionality and a geometric quality. He believed that this approach was undermined from the sixteenth century onwards by the influence of southern European styles stemming from the Renaissance which concentrated on space and perspective in art.⁸ Read argued that the 'aesthetic sensibility' and the 'instinct for plastic form' thus lost, were revived by nineteenth-century geniuses such as Constable and Turner, with whom,

a return to nature was accomplished, a return to the English landscape that entailed rendering the sensations experienced in the observation of natural phenomena. This pushed British painting away from holding onto an objective sense of reality, 'to make the work of art a symbol of the artist's inner or subjective feelings'. Under a large umbrella of expressionism, based on the transformation of form through natural observation and evidence in the finished work of a certain organicism, Read included such diverse artists as Graham Sutherland, Robert Colquhoun, and Henry Moore. In a contrasting branch, he grouped non-figurative or abstract artists such as Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, Victor Pasmore [...] With the work of such abstract artists, there was no longer any reference to the phenomenal world. They were constructing a new order of reality, and the art of abstraction pushed to its logical extreme becomes an art of pure and absolute form, similar to music.⁹

It seemed surprising then that Read supported the abstraction of the second group, whose art leaned clearly towards classical form and was, in line with previous theories, inspired by southern European formalism. In fact, Fry's early twentieth-century theories on Post-Impressionism, the work of the Vorticists¹⁰, as well as later Nicholson's 7 & 5 Society all tried to reinstate classical values through geometry, synthetic form and abstraction in British art and all were fuelled by continental modernism rather than northern expressionism. Read's position was a rather

⁷ Herbert Read, *Contemporary British Art* (London: Penguin Books, 1951), 30.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹ Joseph Monteyne, "Which Way Is Up? Autumn Landscape and the Crisis over Abstraction in Postwar Britain," *Collapse* 1(October 1995): 85-86; Monteyne cites Read, *Contemporary British Art* (London: Penguin Books, 1951), 23.

¹⁰ See Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art* (London: Cassell, 1934), 187.

temporary one, in line with the general resurgence in the idea of classicism immediately after the Second World War.

Wartime perceptions of national identity had set certain limitations on what was seen as the best of a quintessentially British art: there was a visible preference for painting above all other forms of expression, specifically landscape painting, and a strong view of the British visual tradition as lyrical, romantic and (paradoxically) naturalistic. Critics such as William Gaunt, Michael Ayrton and Eric Newton described the English painting tradition with adjectives such as ‘linear, romantic, poetic, visual, rhythmic, mystic’.¹¹

Seeking simple definitions, they settled on Gainsborough, Blake, Turner and Constable as evidence that ‘British art has always been predominantly romantic’¹², with individual informality and spontaneity as its distinguished characteristics.¹³

Gainsborough’s poetic sensibility, Blake’s avid interest in spirituality and the role of imagination, Turner’s infatuation with the natural Sublime and Constable’s subjective, highly personal view of nature, all became exemplary markers of a traditional home-grown culture.

In the 1950s, the national romantic legacy met with modernist innovative forms of expression. A perfect example of an artist whose work was a testament of this union was Peter Lanyon. Fuller’s bias was visible when he interpreted Lanyon’s art as having an idealising quality, claiming that he “was one of the last major British artists to produce ‘Higher Landscape’¹⁴ painting, a type of painting which was nearly

¹¹ Newton wrote that “it has been frequently demonstrated that both romanticism and mysticism are as congenial to the British temperament as they are uncongenial to the French.” From Newton, “Patterns of English Painting”, 25.

¹² See Anthony Bertam, *A Century of British Painting 1851-1951* (London: Studio Publications, 1951), 100; Read, *Contemporary British Art*, 39.

¹³ Garlake, *New Art, New World*, 64.

¹⁴ “That is, to engage the pathetic fallacy and produce pictures rooted in the imaginative transformation of the perception of nature; pictures which are capable of expressing deep human sentiments. [...] Lanyon depicts a nature which seems in danger of disappearing from him – and us – into a void of meaningless sensation, but it is still a nature out of which he can, if only just, extract a compelling sense of aesthetic order and consoling harmony. [...] Both [Rothko and Lanyon] were struggling for that ‘Higher Symbolism’ in painting, and both, in different ways, were aware of its virtual impossibility – of the risk of losing everything, including themselves, in the void of sensation and ‘pure’ abstraction.” From Peter Fuller, *Peter Fuller’s Modern Painters. Reflections on British Art* edited by John McDonald (London: Methuen, 1993), 110.

a symbolic expression of the artist's feelings, and through its own highly subjective nature, on the verge of dissolving into abstraction. The reliance of such art on sentiments differentiated it from what he considered an abject practice in painting, in which abstraction was used for its own sake, without any noble, spiritual motivation.

Fuller's ideas were strongly influenced by Ruskin's differentiation between *aesthesis* and *theoria*, the first term referring to painting solely concerned with formal visual attributes, emptied of any romantic or symbolic quality. *Theoria*, on the other hand, could be applied to 'Higher Landscape' painting, which would deeply affect the viewer emotionally, as well as visually. Fuller's view was that the rest of the St Ives generation tended to deprive their art of this quality by adhering to the more strict principles of geometric abstraction,¹⁵ to which Patrick Heron had provided the critical backing. With this, Fuller clearly subscribed to the cliché that a national high art would have to be lyrical, spiritual, romantic and symbolic, and far more valuable than foreign art, which was deficient by being precisely the opposite: pragmatic, rational and concerned with the geometry of form. (The example of Peter Lanyon however proved that things were far from being this simple and the 1950s knew a fascinating overlapping of national romantic tendencies in landscape painting and external trends indebted to modernist formalism.)

Fuller argued that this approach was so deeply engrained into the British mentality that any foreign influences not compatible with it would be rejected. For instance, at the beginning of the twentieth century when the European avant-garde trends flourished, a promoter of modernist formalism in Britain such as Roger Fry was shunned by the British audience who accepted nothing else than the Romantic tradition as part of the nation's cultural heritage. In this sense, the postwar critic Robin Ironside had written about "a reaction from the ideas of Roger Fry, a return to freedom of attitude more easily acceptable to the temper of our culture, a freedom of attitude that might acquiesce in the inconsistencies of Ruskin but could not flourish

¹⁵ "The generation that followed Lanyon in St Ives took the much easier route of accepting this 'impossibility'. Instead of the quest for a Higher Painting, they produced pictures which purported to rely on visual sensation alone. They set out in search of an art which, in Ruskin's terms, was one of pure *aesthesis* rather than *theoria*." (*Peter Fuller's Modern Painters*, 110-111).

under the system of Fry.”¹⁶ In this view, then, the wartime resurgence of nationalistic feelings could only find one form – that of Romanticism.

Ironside too considered Neo-Romanticism as a lyrical art which resisted Parisian formalism as well as the geometric abstraction of Nicholson’s 7 & 5 Society in London, whom he saw as following the teachings of Fry and Bell on the supremacy of form over sentiments and life.¹⁷ The critic protested against the latter’s focus on Cézanne to the detriment of more like-minded European painters to the English Neo-Romantics such as Rouault or Chagall and De Chirico.¹⁸ Later, Malcolm Yorke pointed out that although preserving national identity was an important Neo-Romantic endeavour against the supremacy of Paris, the influence of vital continental modernists such as Picasso was unavoidable even by this otherwise conservative group. During this time, ‘abstract’ often implied ‘modern’. Abstraction was seen as a threat to received values and it “replaced Surrealism as an object of scandal and, like Surrealism was treated as difficult, alien and slightly embarrassing”.¹⁹

The Ideological Roots of Neo-Romanticism

The neo-Romantic²⁰ painting produced between 1940-3 showed land and country in an ideal light during a time in which Britain was subject to imminent wartime peril. Associated with ideas of national freedom and pride, landscape had to be aesthetically pleasing and contain ideal imagery which meant to spur feelings of nostalgia for a nation’s lost freedom and an idyllic peace-time land, whilst also encouraging the population to find the strength to fight for it. Ruins evoked a sense of melancholic reverie, there was an overwhelming interest in the individual and

¹⁶ Robin Ironside in *Peter Fuller’s Modern Painters*, 70.

¹⁷ Arnold L. Haskall, Dilys Powell, Rollo Myers and Robin Ironside, *Since 1939: Ballet, Films, Music and Painting* (London: Readers Union / British Council, 1948).

¹⁸ Malcolm Yorke, *The Spirit of Place: Nine Neo-Romantic Artists and Their Times* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 19.

¹⁹ Garlake gives numerous examples of the hostile language which was indiscriminately employed to attack modern art at this time and she noted that Picasso was routinely, if somewhat erroneously, cast (and just as routinely condemned) as an equally abstract and modern artist. (*New Art New World*, 38).

²⁰ First labelled as such in a survey of British painting written by Robin Ironside in 1939 and published by the British Council in 1946. Later Raymond Mortimer used the term ‘Neo-Romantic’ in an article of *The New Statesman*, March 28, 1942, p. 208, referring to the work of Frances Hodgkins, Graham Sutherland, Ivon Hitchens, Henry Moore and John Piper, whom he singled out for their anti-humanism and preference for mysticism, pantheism, the sublime – all accessed through the artist’s identification with nature. He saw them mainly as reacting against the war by producing escapist art.

subjective, at odds with eighteenth-century rationalism,²¹ rejecting the didacticism of Neoclassical history painting in favour of imaginary and exotic subjects, with surrealist undertones. There was a strong emphasis on imagination, emotion and originality.



41. John Piper, *All Saints Chapel, Bath*, 1942
 42. John Craxton, *Dreamer in Landscape*, 1942

The wartime painting of John Piper, an eloquent example of this tradition, still relied on traditional historicism and his book *English Romantic Artists* of 1942 restated the values which the war was being fought for. Garlake argued that Piper's contribution to the modernisation of British painting could be seen as "an updated Picturesque", his work being "filled with the incident and variety described two hundred years earlier by Uvedale Price."²² Commissioned by the WAAC to capture the affects of the war on the British landscape, Piper travelled the country, capturing the melancholic atmosphere of historical sites. His scenes did not always directly relate to bomb-damage but reflected his original vision and a sense of loss and nostalgia. His reputation as a painter of historic architecture, in particular of ruined buildings is visible in a work such as *All Saints Chapel, Bath* (1942), produced on site following the bombings of April 1942 by the first so-called 'Baedeker raids', whose

²¹ See Anita Brookner, *Romanticism and Its Discontents* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000); Hugh Honour, *Romanticism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).

²² Garlake: *New Art, New World*, 65. Incidentally, Charles Harrison differentiated between neo-Romanticism from what he called the 'neo-Picturesque'. He believed that the neo-Romanticism of Nash and Graham Sutherland updated and complicated the romantic landscape with infusions of Surrealism. The neo-Picturesque of John and Myfanwy Piper, Geoffrey Grigson, and John Betjeman, on the other hand, involved "a nostalgic reinstatement of just that Victorian bourgeois manner which the Surrealists had so often parodied". See Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

targets were cultural rather than strategic, and where therefore aimed at the specific destruction of national heritage.

Meanwhile, the treatment of the subjects of another Neo-Romantic artist such as John Craxton, suggested the inspiration of Palmer and Blake and in 1941 the artist claimed that, “Palmer took the essence of something and paraphrased it so that one had a poetic image of it. It was a distillation of nature.”²³ In the 1940s, Craxton drew and painted landscapes which included shepherds or poets, “my means of escape and a sort of self protection. A shepherd is a lone figure, and so is a poet”²⁴, he claimed. His *Dreamer in Landscape* (1942) was yet another interpretation of the romantic theme of the artist-genius lost in contemplation of an ancient nature, detached from the present, providing a welcome escape from the surrounding contemporary horrors – a creative cradle to the artist. Wartime painting therefore was characterised by a predominant idealism, nostalgia and the lingering perception that art should fulfil a redemptive role.

There are significant ideological parallels between the writings of eighteenth-century theorists and the art of late wartime artists. The Picturesque implied change and progression, differentiating it from static classicism and the preservation of ideal canons. The work of Piper, Vaughan, Craxton, Kent and Minton focused both on a nostalgic outlook on the past but also encouraged the idea of the regeneration of the ruins into a new social structure. The idealism of the Neo-Romantics could therefore have been less self-contained and retrospective than it was believed and the message of their art in many ways prefigured future efforts of reconstructing the landscape marred by the damage of war.

The Neo-Romantics also reused compositional devices provided by historical painting endowing them with a new symbolism. One eloquent example of this was the panoramic vista. Raymond Williams has observed that the “very idea of landscape implies separation and observation,”²⁵ and in the late eighteenth century - a time when the proscenium frame and the movable flats were being simultaneously developed in

²³ John Craxton: *Paintings and Drawings 1980-1985* (London: Christopher Hull Gallery, 1985), 21.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Frogmore: Paladin, 1975), 120.

the theater - the idea that the landscape itself could be a scene became inscribed in the language.²⁶ Postwar artists were inspired by eighteenth-century landscape aesthetics in which the autonomous creator was strongly supported by state authority and had a very well-established status. In this context, the prospect became an example of the neo-Picturesque metaphor for freedom, which also contributed to the formulation of the autonomous modernist.²⁷ This view was opposed to that of Shaftesbury's intuitive perception of the landscape²⁸ through aesthetic sensory pleasures, determined by the taste and sensibility of its individual creator. By the end of the 1940s, however, this type of symbolic imagery had been replaced by a total shift to intuitive creation as gestural abstraction emerged as a fresh spontaneous expression of the freedom of the creative individual.

However, the roots of postwar landscape painting should always be first sought in romantic imagery, the appreciation of the genre's historical resonance, as well as the promotion of the idea of the untouched, wild and innocent landscape in the wartime painting of the neo-Romantics. The uniquely intimate relationship of the artist with a primordial nature was one of the most influential aspects which contributed to the liberation of landscape painting from ideology in the 1950s. Garlake identified this transition when she wrote that,

From a construction of the artist as an innocent inspired by communion with nature and untouched by social intercourse, it is only a short step to the construction of all landscape as natural and divorced from ideology. The perceived ideological emptiness of landscape art, which assisted readings of its codes in terms of atmosphere and intuition, made it a prime vehicle for the assimilation of modernist forms. New work could be set off against the old and familiar: Graham Sutherland against Palmer, Piper against the

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 149,154. The word "scenery" seems to have been applied to the landscape for the first time (at least in print) in 1784 in William Cowper's *The Task*. See also John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 23-24; and John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997), 615-624.

²⁷ Garlake, *New Art, New World*, 66. To illustrate the use of the metaphor of the prospect in neo-Picturesque painting, Garlake brought to mind John Minton's *Surrey Landscape* (1944), in which a widening panoramic vista is obstructed by a spiky branch in the foreground of the picture, a symbol of the obstacles set by the war in the way of a temporarily unattainable freedom.

²⁸ The philosopher A.A.C. Shaftesbury (1671-1713) had defined individual taste as "that which is dictated by the senses as opposed to the reasoning faculties; it implies the spontaneous, instinctive, imaginative, the directness of emotional experience and also the aesthetic pleasures derived from sensory response." From Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 199.

Picturesque, Lanyon against Turner. The modern contribution to tradition was extended to a reassessment of a core concept in English landscape art: the spirit of place or *genius loci*.²⁹

In an evaluation of the origins of modernist place it is essential to take into consideration the various perceptions of the concept throughout British (specifically English) cultural history. Firstly, for the picturesque artist working towards an aesthetic ideal such as devised by William Gilpin in 1782, an identification with the *genius loci* meant a re-ordering of nature and its transformation into an artifice. For Alexander Pope, for instance, the spirit of place related to the process of ordering wild nature into an aesthetically pleasing new structure, where it could be found only in an area existing inside the boundaries of say, an aestheticised garden.³⁰ The Picturesque trend in eighteenth-century painting was elitist, highly prescriptive and based on the formal, pictorial appreciation of landscape. It offered a distanced perspective, mostly alienating the viewer from the scene contemplated.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the rationalist ideas of Enlightenment aestheticism were being challenged by looking at the experiences of beauty and sublimity as being non-rational (instinctual). For the Romantic artist of the nineteenth century, the spirit of the place was determined by the natural order of wilderness and the poet seemed much closer to perceiving the vulnerability of nature in a modern sense. For example, whilst still adopting the language and vision of picturesque writers, in *Guide to the Lakes* (1810), the poet William Wordsworth promoted the remarkable natural appearance of the Lake Country through analysis of nature's power and process. It was "the wondrous activity of natural forces underlying the

²⁹ Garlake, *New Art, New World*, 67.

³⁰ Alexander Pope (1688-1744) made the *Genius Loci* an important principle in garden and landscape design with the following lines from Epistle IV, to Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington: "Consult the genius of the place in all;/That tells the waters or to rise, or fall;/Or helps th' ambitious hill the heav'ns to scale,/Or scoops in circling theatres the vale;/Calls in the country, catches opening glades,/Joins willing woods, and varies shades from shades,/Now breaks, or now directs, th' intending lines;/Paints as you plant, and, as you work, designs." Pope's verse laid the foundation for one of the most widely agreed principles of landscape architecture, that landscape designs should always be adapted to the context in which they are located. See Pope, *Of false taste; an epistle to the Right Honourable Richard Earl of Burlington. Occasion'd by his publishing Palladio's designs of the baths, arches, theatres, &c. of ancient Rome*, 3rd edn. (London: L. Gilliver, 1731) in Mara Miller, *The Garden as Art* (New York: SUNY Press, 1993), 75.

visual impressions, not the conformity of these impressions to picturesque standards, that commanded his reverent attention.”³¹

The exploration of wild nature became a common romantic endeavour. Differentiating between the picturesque and romantic attitudes to landscape, Alison Byerly wrote that, “The “arrest” of stasis enforced by the picturesque perspective contrasts sharply with the emphasis on motion that links [romantic] imagery with narrativity and the sublime. The importance of motion to an understanding of landscape is reflected in the Romantic obsession with walking. The extensive walking tours of Romantic writers have been linked by some critics with their interest in political freedom.[...] an immersion in historical narrative. The picturesque moment of contemplation, by contrast, seems a deliberate attempt at aesthetic contemplation.”³² An interesting parallel can be drawn here between the physical, dynamic exploration of nature in Romanticism and the experiential approach of a postwar painter such as Peter Lanyon, who clearly distanced himself from the contemplative aesthetic approach to landscape-as-vista and immersed himself in the active exploration of the wider context of his landscape subjects, a point I will come back to later on.

Wartime neo-Romantic landscape³³ was a natural consequence of the nineteenth-century tradition, providing a reaction to naturalism by focusing on feeling and internal observation. It was characterised by the lack of the urban element - the setting was an invented landscape, often an idealised rural scene which seemed disrupted by ruins, suggesting a “dislocated spirit of place”³⁴, as a response of the individual to the contemporary historical situation. Although frequently accused of being insular, nostalgic or idealising, the major contribution of neo-Romantic art was its strong introverted nature, the value it placed on the individual and the artist’s intuition. In this sense, a real shift in the perception of the *genius loci* occurred mid-twentieth-century with Paul Nash’s revision of the concept.

³¹ John R. Nabholz, “Wordsworth’s ‘Guide to the Lakes’ and the Picturesque Tradition,” *Modern Philology* 61, no. 4 (May 1964): 289.

³² Alison Byerly, *Realism, Representation, and the Arts in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 22.

³³ For more on Neo-Romanticism, see Malcolm Yorke, *The Spirit of Place*.

³⁴ Garlake, *New Art, New World*, 69.

A reviewer of one of Paul Nash exhibitions wrote that, “For the English painter to observe is to interpret”³⁵ - Nash’s modern approach involved the imaginative interpretation of nature in a way unique to the artist; the painter was the original ‘inventor’ of a place by showing it to the viewer in his chosen light. His non-interfering attitude towards a wild nature³⁶ allowed him to discern what was unique to a certain place. He “created places by visually redefining them, filtering their history, mythology and lineaments through his sense of the mysterious and evocative”.³⁷ This theory was the exact opposite of the picturesque approach to landscape, where the artist resorted to a specialised vocabulary of specific patterns and structures in order to arrange the landscape according to a prescriptive model. Thus for painters like Nash and Sutherland, the *genius loci* or spirit of place was determined by the distinctive quality of a certain place and the ability of the artist to interpret it. They sought the character of a place without considering its wider significance and implications as related to its history, community, traditions, as T.S. Eliot or Peter Lanyon would have considered landscape. Nash’s Dorset or Sutherland’s Wales provided artists like Lanyon with models, but it is important to point out that neither were native to their regions of choice, nor were they involved in establishing an artistic community in their regions, like Lanyon.

Influenced by the romantic art of William Blake, who had spiritually transformed nature as a means to find a national voice, “Nash established a model for modernist painting about places in which the ordering intellect of the individual is paramount and the place is invented by the artist, acting as the *genius loci*, in order to express some aspect of the relationship between landscape and humanity.”³⁸ The most important aspect here is that the *genius loci* is not external to the artist anymore, but the latter entirely identifies with it and is instrumental in creating it. Nash thus initiated the shift from aesthetic to phenomenological considerations of place in

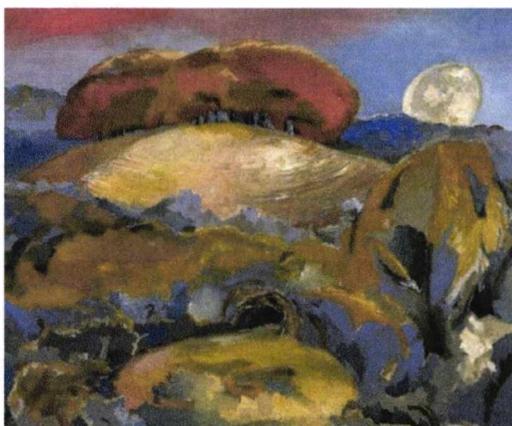
³⁵ J. P-H, review to *Contemporary British Painters* by Paul Nash, in *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 72, no. 422 (May 1938): 250.

³⁶ Garlake referred to the writing of J.A. Walter who claimed that the very reason why primitive landscape was popular was because of the open stand against order and conformity that urbanisation brought to contemporary societies. He saw the genre, the product of the individual artist, an outsider to society, as a “threat to the social fabric”. Later, Cornish art could be seen as having adopted this stance and role within British postwar painting.

³⁷ Clare Colvin, “Introduction,” in exh. cat. *Paul Nash Places* (London: South Bank Centre, 1989), 4-9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

British painting. By mental conversion of a wild scenery, the neo-Romantic artist would bring to the created image the unique and personalising touch of its creator, who would from then on be linked with the place³⁹. He achieved this by using elements specific to a certain landscape which he endowed with metaphorical connotations, however he never used these as cultural symbols, but always considered them through his personal interpretative prism. For example, in a work such as *Landscape of the Moon's Last Phase* (1943-4), inspired by the Wittenham Clumps in Berkshire, a recurrent subject in Nash's late mystical landscapes in the Romantic style of Palmer and Blake, the changing seasons became personal symbols of life and death to the artist and the place itself, which was the site of ancient earthworks, evoked primitive human times.



43. Paul Nash, *Landscape of the Moon's Last Phase*, 1943-4
 44. L. S. Lowry, *Regent Road, Lytham St Anne's*, 1945

Essentially, the modernising effect of Nash's painting on the future of the landscape genre, and, implicitly, on the whole of postwar painting, lies in the liberation of landscape from ideological constraints. From landscape as the symbolic expression of political and social values, Nash made the transition to a greatly personalised conception of landscape.

This view greatly differed from that of the Essex landscapists working at Great Bardfield (e.g. Bawden, Aldridge etc.), or artists such as Greaves, Fell, Lowry, whose perception of the landscape could be closely associated with the concept of human

³⁹ This can be illustrated through the already well-established parallels in public perception between Sussex and Ivon Hitchens, Dorset and Paul Nash, Cornwall and Peter Lanyon, Val d'Oise and Monet or Aix-en-Provence and Cézanne.

intervention as labour in the landscape and the latter “as productive system rather than aesthetic object.”⁴⁰ Illustrative of this approach is Lowry’s late wartime work *Regent Road, Lytham St Anne’s* (1945), featuring his well-known panoramic scene. Although figures are barely distinguishable in the distance, the focus is on the widening street in the foreground, inviting the viewer to walk into the lives of the local community living and working here. By contrast, Nash’s *Landscape of the Moon’s Last Phase* (1943-4) of the same period is purged of any sense of ideology and socio-historical placing and devoid of the physical presence of human figures. The latter is very much a mental landscape and the projection of a personal vision, rather than a concrete depiction of reality. Such an approach was different though from that of fellow wartime artists such as Piper and Minton by the fact that it focused on the artist’s inner world, rather than dealing with a more general allegory of a universal subject such as the war.

In *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955), the historian W. G. Hoskins deplored the ruin of the countryside by invasive modernisation concluding that the ideal Arcadian landscape was a thing which belonged to history. He wrote that, “Since the last years of the nineteenth century ... and especially since the year 1914, every single change in the English landscape has either uglified it or destroyed its meaning, or both [...] Poor devastated Lincolnshire and Suffolk drones day after day the obscene shape of the atom-bomber, laying a trail like a filthy slug upon Constable’s and Gainsborough’s sky.”⁴¹ The poetic, visionary landscapes of the Neo-Romantics steeped in the tradition of Palmer and the Ancients met this need of preserving an ideal view of Britain and provided a more general emotional response embracing the national landscape and its history. While Neo-Romanticism continued to be a strong influence into the 1950s and 60s, the loss of the nostalgic outlook in the postwar period, was in many ways a positive, constructive development which gave way to innovation in, what was perceived as, the national British artistic tradition. No longer was there a need to use general symbolism in order to convey the idea of the ideal, invented landscape as new modernist forms of expression provided a fresh formal synthesis of the landscape and the narrative was relegated to the past.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ William G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992), 231.

The contribution of Nash and Sutherland profoundly marked the future of British landscape painting. Their work was unprecedented through the fact that it obliterated the actual representation of the outside world in favour of personal idiosyncratic interpretations of the artist's environment. Although strongly reliant on the historical model of English Romanticism, their late wartime paintings, influenced by the psychological and emotional mutations caused by the crisis of war, left a lingering imprint on the way landscape was to be rendered in the 1950s. From general metaphor, landscape became the intimate projection of the artist's inner vision of the world. This transformation was reflected on a stylistic level, as well, and the simplification of form to the point of abstraction in their work was naturally assimilated in the paintings of mid-twentieth-century modernist innovators such as the St Ives artists – a contemporary substitute to the archaic, idealising view of landscape supported by Ayrton, Ironside and Newton.

ii. The Modernist Influence. Landscape and Form

There was no one single viable style in the 1950s and the British art scene was quite eclectic in this period, however certain particularities surfaced. Against the imagined landscapes of the Neo-Romantics a decade earlier, the painting of the 1950s seemed to have returned to the perceptual awareness of the visual world, whilst maintaining the formal re-organisation on canvas in the tradition of the early twentieth-century European avant-garde. From the late 1800s to the 1960s, formalism dominated modern art starting with Impressionism, when the 'painting for painting's sake' doctrine was applied to the naturalist study of landscape. A new importance was given to the idea of contemplation, aesthetic appreciation and concerns of technique and practice. These interests assisted the postwar re-evaluation of the work of the most prominent exponents of the early European avant-garde (e.g. Monet, Cézanne, Picasso) as the foundation of twentieth-century abstraction.⁴² By contrast, the Neo-Romantics had worked with symbols and the instances when they used stylisation or abstraction were intended merely as a means to illustrate the subjectivity of their

⁴² Nina Lübbren, "Re-Viewing Landscapes," *Art History* 25, no. 2 (April 2002): 257. Lübbren refers to Gottfried Boehm, "Das neue Bild der Natur: Nach dem Ende der Landschaftsmalerei," in Manfred Smuda (ed.), *Landschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 87-110; W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 13, 20, 33; Nina Lübbren, *Rural Artists' Colonies in Europe, 1870-1910* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 111-112.

vision. Another motive might have been that of acquiring a cosmopolitan status for British art. For example, although the introduction of Surrealism into the English awareness is often attributed to Nash, the artist himself saw “the essence of the modern movement as being ‘architectural’ rather than ‘decorative’, obliging the painter to *impose* order upon chaos rather than to recognize or to discover it; [...] Nash’s resulting attachment to abstraction was an assumed attachment, effected by a sense of responsibility on the part of one who saw himself as a leader of the English avant-garde,”⁴³ Thistlewood suggested. Hence, on some level, the adoption of abstraction in the case of the Neo-Romantics might have been a controlled development, intended to complement the native romantic tradition and realign national painting to the standards of contemporary continental modernism.

Throughout the period of transition from the 1940s to the 1950s, the long-standing connection with the visual world continued shaping even the most experimental forms of expression in British painting. Andrew Forge, along with several other postwar writers, welcomed the change from the wartime reliance on general metaphor to a reorientation of the artist towards the outside world. Transcending Neo-Romanticism, the emerging postwar painting, grounded in the synthesising vision of the European modernist masters, started finding a new, individual voice, just as fresh cultural developments reinforced the focus on abstraction.

Another prevalent strand in British painting – the dichotomy between the English or northern European romantic/expressionist tradition and the French or southern European classical/formalist tradition – was carried through to the postwar period. It seemed that, whereas from the perspective of the first, landscape was the result of a mental projection or an imaginative act, from the perspective of the second, landscape was the outcome of a visual ordering process, an aesthetic act. The first was concerned with a subjective, personal perception of nature and painting, often with the spectator being the only ‘figure’ in what seemed to be an internalised reflection of the outside world. From the second viewpoint, landscape, even when abstract, was still produced to actual standards of proportion and scale and there was a constant concern

⁴³ David Thistlewood, review of *Paul Nash* by Andrew Causey, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 21 (1981): 186. See also J. P-H, review of *Contemporary British Painters* by Paul Nash, 250.

with formal and spatial attributes. The latter approach focused mainly on aesthetic contemplation and the objective nature of painting.

The dichotomy between a strong romantic national tradition and foreign formalist influences had always been an important point of contention in Britain, with traditionalists resisting the latter in favour of allegory and narrative in art. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the advent of formalism brought about a new awareness of aesthetic and compositional values. This view was introduced by Roger Fry with the promotion of the French avant-garde proposing a new amalgamation of naturalism and formalism which continued permeating British art ever since. In 1955, Nikolaus Pevsner argued a case against a naturalist predilection defining *The Englishness of English Art* as the innate Anglo-Saxon love of the natural, while suggesting that in fact it was Celtic formalism which inspired Britain's most notable contribution to the modern movement.⁴⁴ He believed that the latter was a quality which should have been cherished, instead of the sole promotion of the Gothic-Romantic lineage.⁴⁵ Criticising the Ruskinian argument that 'progressive' English art was essentially naturalistic, Pevsner claimed that this tradition limited the scope of national art in the early twentieth century. As William Vaughan remarked, "Pevsner's acceptance of the division between the naturalistic English tradition and the formalist Celtic one is a symptom of how deeply rooted such thinking had become by this time"⁴⁶

A definition of postwar landscape painting would however require a much more complex evaluation of these contrasting views. The naturalist-formalist or romantic-classical conflict affected most of English avant-garde art before 1950, starting with artists such as Nash, Moore, Hepworth and Nicholson, who experimented with various realist and constructivist forms of expression before

⁴⁴ William Vaughan wrote that, "There is a certain irony in seeing the characterisation of English art that was forged in the nineteenth century as proof of its progressiveness being used in the twentieth century as a means of defining its lack of relevance in the modern world. Perhaps those who now ecstatically claim a rebirth of the nation's artistic greatness in the rediscovery of an 'English' Romantic tradition should take note. They should at any rate think very carefully about the concerns that have marked the development of the concept of 'Englishness' in the visual arts, and the extent to which these can still be regarded as relevant to the study of the history or the current practice of art in this country." (William Vaughan, "The Englishness of British Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 13, no. 2. (1990): 11. See Peter Fuller, "Editorial," *Modern Painters* 1, no. 3 (1988): 4.

⁴⁵ Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art* (London: Architectural Press, 1956).

⁴⁶ Vaughan, "The Englishness of British Art," 11. See Peter Fuller's editorial in *Modern Painters* 1, no. 3 (1988): 22.

reaching a personal synthetic vocabulary of their own. Similar differences became evident in the work of Heron's 'Middle Generation' artists, mostly associated with St Ives – the realism-abstraction debate was, on some level, another form which this argument adopted. In the first half of the twentieth century, several British theorists of modernism attempted to reconcile precisely such divergences in their writing.

Roger Fry: The Roots of a 'Flexible' British Formalism

Since the nineteenth century, art-historical debates focused on the dichotomy between on the one hand, naturalism and the reliance on the outside world, seen as the main feature of a valuable national art, and on the other hand, the formalist tendencies, often regarded by more conservative minded critics as foreign and in danger of adulterating the link with nature.⁴⁷ The merging of form and reference had been argued by Roger Fry in the beginning of the twentieth century, when he fashioned the new European developments in art into influential historical narratives. His Post-Impressionist exhibitions (1910, 1912) brought to London contemporary work produced over the previous thirty years by the initial founders of the modernist approach to landscape.⁴⁸ Soon the weight of the southern European influence on British painting became evident. "Modernist painting as advocated by contemporary critics like Roger Fry and Frank Rutter, was to be increasingly preoccupied with the analysis of form, the rigorous self-scrutiny of the medium, the abandonment of narrative and the mimetic and with the expression of inner states of consciousness. For many [...] a rhythmic, decorative landscape, conveying an all-important sense of both harmony and stability, could be best produced through time spent away in the South of France – in the landscapes of Puvis de Chavannes, Denis, Matisse and Cézanne."⁴⁹ The relationship between the formal qualities of art and location therefore became more relevant, as British artists started their inspirational journeys abroad. The painterliness of unmodulated colour on the unprimed canvases of the

⁴⁷ See Vaughan, "The Englishness of British Art," 11; Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, (London: Omega Books, 1988), 4; See Peter Fuller's editorial in *Modern Painters* 1, no. 3 (1988):18; *The Works of John Ruskin: Library Edition*. Edited by E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, Volume XXIII (London: George Allen, 1906), 245-425; See also Dagobert Frey, *Englisches Wesen in der Bildenden Kunst* (Stuttgart and Berlin: Kohlhammer, 1942), 442-445.

⁴⁸ See Maurice Denis 'Definition of Neo-Traditionism', 1890, the first theoretical text which insisted on the flatness of the picture plane, one of the essential starting points of modernism. In Herschel B. Chipp (ed.), *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 94.

⁴⁹ Ysanne Holt, *British Artists and the Modernist Landscape* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 7.

Post-Impressionists came from the sense of stability and permanence inspired by the clement climate and peaceful lifestyle of the South which allowed them to focus exclusively on expressivity of form and colour. Southern European formalism thus opened up a whole new catalogue of creative possibilities to British artists from that point onwards.

Fry passionately promoted this type of painting, yet there were flexible limits to his formalism. When Clive Bell's book *Art* appeared in 1914, Fry was unconvinced of his assertion that 'significant form' lay at the root of all aesthetic experience⁵⁰ and was entirely separate from a thing's actual form. For Bell, recognition of a work of art as representing something was less important than capturing its true inner nature (i.e. 'significant form') which in itself could convey feeling. Conversely, in his review of *Art*, Fry argued that form on its own was not the constant in aesthetic experience – it had to be linked with something which would render it 'significant'.⁵¹ In a later lecture of 1933 entitled 'The Double Nature of Painting', he reiterated the idea that representational content was equal in importance to formal means with which it can and does interact.

Indisputably, Fry formulated the basis of modern aesthetic formalism when he wrote that, "The great occupation of the graphic arts is to give us first of all order and variety in the sensuous plane, and then so to arrange the sensuous presentment of objects that the emotional elements are elicited with an order and appropriateness altogether beyond what Nature herself provides."⁵² The main idea here was that, whilst nature is fundamentally disordered, disunified and out of our imaginative control, the role of art was to produce 'unity in variety'. Whereas life or nature were characterised by practicality, art or aesthetic appreciation were theoretical and selective⁵³, and therefore capable of restoring coherence to nature. Decades later, Clement Greenberg's writing was still largely constructed on this idea as he

⁵⁰ "There is no state of mind more excellent or more intense than the state of aesthetic contemplation." From Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1913), 83.

⁵¹ See Roger Fry, from an article published in *The Nation*, 7th March 1914 and his article in *The Burlington Magazine* 35 (1919): 8.

⁵² Roger Fry, "An Essay in Aesthetics" in *Vision and Design*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1998), 24.

⁵³ See Deane W. Curtin, "Varieties of Aesthetic Formalism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 40, no. 3 (Spring 1982): 316.

distinguished between “ourselves” and “our vision”⁵⁴: whereas our lives are disrupted and chaotic, our vision, the product of high culture, aims to bring a much required balance and unity to nature. This type of thinking dictated that imagination, the tool of the superior artist (in the Romantic tradition), detaches man from his basic instincts and helps produce this positive re-ordering process through art. Greenberg thus also developed on another one of Fry’s ideas – that the lay public did not comprehend the true function of art, which was closely related to the study of form and accessible only to initiates.

Overall, the formalist approach to landscape imposed a well-defined distance between the artist and the outside world, which became a subject transformed by discerning aesthetic and visual evaluation. Drawing on Kant’s theories on the quality of aesthetic judgement⁵⁵, Fry imposed the necessity of “disinterested intensity of contemplation” of nature, with art being able to arouse emotion through the elements of design.⁵⁶ From this perspective then, nature and art were far removed from each other - there was no overlapping of the two, such as would be the case in the phenomenological standpoint later applied to the work of Cézanne – paradoxically, Fry’s favourite formalist pioneer.

Herbert Read: Form as Organic Development

Whilst Fry is credited with introducing modernism to Britain, the later theories of Herbert Read developed from his ideas, yet persistently challenged them with new interpretations of the concept. Read’s most eloquent ideas revolved around the opposition of the classical and romantic and he believed that great artists such as Moore or Picasso were successful in achieving the reconciliation of the two. “Read’s prototype paradigm featured precisely this periodic alternation: outwardly addressing nature (creating natural equivalents) and inwardly addressing self-ordered preferences (exploring abstract relationships in a spirit of play or nervous replenishment). This model had applications beyond the individual artist: it explained the modernist

⁵⁴ See Clement Greenberg, “Art (Piet Mondrian)” *The Nation* 58 (4 March 1944): 288.

⁵⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1951), 38-39.

⁵⁶ Fry, “An Essay in Aesthetics”, 22.

project."⁵⁷ Read's definition of modernism therefore readjusted the balance between emotional content and form, bringing together the romantic tradition with new developments in southern European formalism: one of his most characteristic arguments was that all art was essentially abstract, but its pattern was informed by sensibility.

This type of romantic expressionist theory aimed to counteract Fry's notion of form as design, "the conscious ordering of the 'given' elements in poetic composition, and to assign everything of real importance to the unconscious"⁵⁸ – this formed the basis of Read's new definition of modernism.⁵⁹ It relied on the holistic approach of Gestalt theory which referred to the form-forming capability of our senses, thus providing a medium between 'significant form' and psychology. Elements from psychoanalysis and even phenomenology helped Read redefine form by maintaining the visual, affective element, but associating it with universally pertinent philosophical ideas.⁶⁰

Read persistently pursued intentionality, or the relationship between mental acts and the external world in art and, at the time, this meant being equally involved in supporting Constructivism and Surrealism. The concerns of the two movements could not have been more different: one concentrated on formal precision, harmony and elegant proportion, the other was engaged in the irrational and the indefinite. Controversially, Read defended both. "At a time when modernism was split along such ideological lines this gave rise to accusations that he was hedging his bets."⁶¹ His native and adoptive protégées Moore, Hepworth, Nicholson, Nash, Mondrian and Gabo, had experimented with both opposing forms of expression. The idea of Constructivism, with its geometric purity and formal language intended to transcend national and ethnical restrictions. It was initiated by Gabo, then dissolved by the mid-

⁵⁷ David Thistlewood, "Herbert Read's Organic Aesthetic [1] 1918-1950," in David Goodway (ed.), *Herbert Read Reassessed* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998), 220.

⁵⁸ Solomon Fishman, "Sir Herbert Read: Poetics vs. Criticism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 13, no. 2 (December 1954): 158.

⁵⁹ See Herbert Read, *The True Voice of Feeling: Studies in English Romantic Poetry* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), 21.

⁶⁰ David Cohen, "Seeing Moore: The Case of Two Critics, Herbert Read and Peter Fuller," essay in *AICARC* (London: International Association of Art Critics, 1991). See also David Cohen, "Herbert Read and Psychoanalysis," in Malcolm Gee (ed.) *Art Criticism Since 1890: Authors, Texts, Contexts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

⁶¹ Thistlewood, "Herbert Read's Organic Aesthetic", 219.

1930s when Moore and Nash distanced themselves from the trend due to what they thought was the lack of humanity and the potentially oppressive effect of pure abstraction and ideal design, adopting Surrealism as a modernist alternative. During the 1940s, Nicholson, on the other hand, started focusing more on still life and landscape subjects, combining Constructivist ideas with subtly suggestive colour and shape.⁶² In his introduction to *Ben Nicholson : Paintings, Reliefs, Drawings* (1949), Read demonstrated how such contrasting modernist ideas could be brought together as he recalled Worringer's thesis from *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (1907) to define Nicholson's approach to art. He wrote of "the psychological function of the abstract element in art", claiming that it was possible "not only of the two attitudes (abstract and naturalistic) being found together within the same period [...] but within the same personality."⁶³ Abstraction and naturalism were no longer mutually exclusive, as they were now seen as originating in equal measure from the individual unconscious.

Such a mode of thinking inevitably influenced young postwar painters and a formally re-defined naturalism characterised landscape painting in the early 1950s. Private lessons with Nicholson led Peter Lanyon to produce reliefs and constructions such as *White Track* (1939–40) in which stacked planes conveyed natural dynamism. Lanyon claimed that Nicholson helped him understand that there were actual plastic values which he had lost due to his complex considerations of the landscape⁶⁴ - this was evident in his early postwar works, distinguished by their thin colour and precise design. Lanyon also made a number of constructions directly inspired by Gabo's poetic spatial forms, and indirectly by Hepworth's more figurative curvilinear shapes. Gabo's constructions were to have a far longer lasting effect on him than Nicholson's; he called these 'Gaboids'⁶⁵. With the occasion of the exhibition *New Movements in Art, Contemporary Work in England* (March, 1942), Herbert Read singled out Gabo's *Construction In Space: Spiral Theme* as "a miracle of precision and harmony" and

⁶² Charles Harrison, "Englishness and Modernism Revisited," *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 1 (1999): 81-82.

⁶³ John Summerson, review of *Ben Nicholson: Paintings, Reliefs, Drawings, The Burlington Magazine* 91, no. 557 (August 1949): 237. In the introduction to the exh. cat., Herbert Read wrote that, "In certain cases it seems possible for an individual to alternate between the extremes represented by this polarity – to tend in one psychological phase towards an affirmation of the world which results in a naturalistic style, and in another. . . to tend towards a rejection of that world which results in an abstract style of art."

⁶⁴ See Andrew Lanyon, *Peter Lanyon 1918-64*, ltd. ed. (Newlyn, 1991), 28.

⁶⁵ Adrian Lewis, "British Avant Garde Painting 1945-56 Part 1," *Artscribe* 34 (1982): 17-33.

pointed out Lanyon and other young Constructivists as evidence that “expansion and development are possible in this direction”⁶⁶.

Lanyon’s art nevertheless contained direct reference to the local landscape, as he introduced imagery, association and metaphor into these predominantly formal pieces. The issue of the duality between the naturalist roots and cosmopolitan formalism was evident in the wartime correspondence between Lanyon and Gabo – there was a dominant “sense of a conflict between Constructivism - which was intellectually attractive and appeared to be the art of the future - and the landscape painting in which Lanyon was emotionally immersed”⁶⁷. By 1949 though, Lanyon seemed to have distanced himself from Gabo, working on the reconciliation of his interests in formal modernism, on the one hand, and perceptual ‘placeness’ and local tradition, on the other, which he had started pursuing in the *Generation* series of 1946 and 1947 (e.g. *Landscape with Cup* 1946; *Earth* 1946; *Tinstone* 1947).

At this time, young British artists were exposed to various influences. The work of Roger Hilton, for instance, was shaped by the encounter with Constant and Cobra, Mondrian and de Stijl, but also the English proto-constructivists Pasmore and Heath, and the perceptual abstraction of Frost and Heron. Hilton’s resulting paintings typically featured an organic form of non-figuration: dense colour shapes alternated with gestural linear passages rendering his works both expressive and formally grounded. A constructivist idea predominantly influencing his work during the early 1950s was the utopian notion of “the extension of abstract painting into relief, hence into architecture, transforming the artist’s role to embrace environmental design as a whole.”⁶⁸ This view continued in the works from the mid 1950’s (e.g. *October 1956*) in which “we no longer have the feeling that the frame of the picture is a window frame *through* and *behind* which we see the forms and the space which the design creates; [...] the traditional illusion of forms existing behind and beyond the canvas is

⁶⁶ Herbert Read, “Vulgarity and Impotence, Speculations on the Present State of the Arts,” *Horizon* V (1942): 267-76.

⁶⁷ Margaret Garlake, “Peter Lanyon’s Letters to Naum Gabo,” *The Burlington Magazine* 137, no. 1105 (April 1995): 237.

⁶⁸ Adrian Lewis, *Roger Hilton* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 38. Patrick Heron showed that in his more non-figurative phase, Hilton successfully managed to manipulate pictorial space rather than create recessionary space within the picture in the conventional sense. Serge Poliakoff’s views about abstract painting transcending the frames of the picture into the wider cosmos may have also been influential in this respect.

here more or less reversed; this is a set of forms so powerful that they appear to be projecting themselves bodily out from the surface of the picture into the actual space of the room,"⁶⁹ Heron recorded. These compositions were simultaneously abstract and figurative through the strong impression of space which Hilton managed to convey. The transition from formalism to perceptual reality in his painting was also helped by his move to Cornwall: the shapes of the local landscape inspired a more muted, earthy palette and his solids became more organic by the rounding off of their hard constructivist edges as they melted into human form and landscape outlines.

The Constructivists used abstraction as a means to show that art was a self-sufficient reality and stressed that they did not abstract from the perceived world, in the tradition of the European avant-garde. Nevertheless, its most radical exponents, such as Kenneth Martin, argued that abstract art developed its own organic reality and contained an inherent sense of proportion. This view was also affected by Read's knowledge of the work of the physicist L.L. Whyte, who maintained that "nature is essentially formative", that one single "unitary or ordering principle" governs science as well as art. In 1951, with the occasion of the ICA's *Symposium on Form in Nature and Art*, discussing a theory of the organic, developing sensibility, Read argued that there was a parallelism between form or pattern in nature and art and the gradual realisation of the effectiveness of these patterns was an aesthetic process.⁷⁰ As opposed to the formalism devised by Fry, in which art was considered independently from nature, it now seemed that the two overlapped with respect to the similarities in the intrinsic mechanisms regulating them. Read wrote that, "the work of art is not an analogy – it is the essential act of transformation; not merely the pattern of mental evolution, but the vital process itself."⁷¹ Art thus ceased to be the formally re-arranged

⁶⁹ Patrick Heron, "Introducing Roger Hilton," *Arts Magazine* (May 1957): 22.

⁷⁰ Read claimed that, "The increasing significance given to form or pattern in various branches of science has suggested the possibility of a certain parallelism, if not identity, in the structures of natural phenomena and of authentic works of art... The revelation that perception itself is essentially a pattern-selecting and pattern-making function... that pattern is inherent in the physical structure or in the functioning of the nervous system; that matter itself analyses into coherent patterns or arrangements of molecules; and the gradual realization that all these patterns are effective and ontologically significant by virtue of an organization in their parts which can only be characterized as aesthetic – all this development has brought works of art and natural phenomena onto an identical plane of enquiry." In David Thistlewood, "Organic Art and the Popularization of a Scientific Philosophy," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 22 (1982): 311.

⁷¹ See Herbert Read, *Art and the Evolution of Man* (London: Freedom Press, 1951), 39.

interpretation of nature and worked in the same way as the erratic mental processes themselves, dictating its own outcome.

The ICA's exhibition *Growth and Form* of the same year, designed by Richard Hamilton, promoted organic constructivist and expressionist forms of abstraction, both dominated by process. These works focused entirely on natural subject-matter, with abstract patterns emerging from the scientific study of the natural patterns of organisms. "This was the Institute's answer to the problem of 'closed' contemporary expression: each work respecting the organic principle would thus reveal its creative logic openly."⁷² Although inspired by logical constructions found in nature, this form of art indirectly generated an imagery which took the form of irrational symbolism, whilst being the product of a natural organic development.



45. Roger Hilton, *October 1956*, 1956

46. Peter Lanyon, *Headland*, 1948

47. Bryan Wynter, *Deep Current* 1956

A good example of the way in which such theories permeated postwar painting could be found in the allusive patterns of Bryan Wynter. Although coming from an entirely different critical angle, Patrick Heron observed how Wynter's "brushsigns"⁷³ of the late 1950's produced deep space and movement and "rhythms of all-over fluidity [...] which one may well identify with the observable rhythmic patterns of water – the shallow water of streams or rockpools, where the organic,

⁷² David Thistlewood, "The MOMA and the ICA: A Common Philosophy of Modern Art," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 29, no. 4 (Autumn 1989): 325.

⁷³ Heron wrote about Wynter's new abstract structures that they resembled "a grille, or network of brushsigns (I think the word 'brushstroke' no longer applies where the *stroke* is itself become the chief *object* in the picture) strings itself along either vertical or horizontal lines... It is as though Wynter were looking into a system of hanging, semi-transparent bead-curtains, ranged one behind another." In the introduction to *Bryan Wynter: Paintings and Drawings* (Falmouth: Falmouth School of Art, November-December 1975).

nearly-repetitive ripples create an all-over dance, [...] almost hypnotic in its effect on us.”⁷⁴ A connection was thus established between the repetitive processes found in nature and aesthetic artistic patterns with an ambiguous recessional dynamic, a play between surface arrangement and inherent pockets of depth. Whether Wynter’s visions of nature were inspired by deep emotions or were more a fulfilment of formal needs, the end product frequently resembled an intricate pattern of an angular dynamic, a surface net which caught the viewer’s gaze and held it at the surface of the picture, merging a sense of natural rhythm and involvement with formalist detachment. Another explanation could lie in the fact that the artist reportedly experimented with the drug mescaline in an attempt to access deeper levels of consciousness and help express their ‘truths’ more directly in his art. His contribution to postwar painting could be perhaps this fusion of perceptual, processual and psychological aspects, which, in great lines, could also be attributed to Read’s theories about form as organic development.

Patrick Heron: Form as Aesthetic Gratification

Heron’s vital role in articulating modernist theory in postwar Britain has been a recurrent reference in this thesis. His writing declared obsolete the romantic and surrealist preoccupation with the unconscious and encouraged the modernist concern with the formal aesthetic autonomy of the picture. In the art he promoted, landscape became a visual object, capable of yielding pictorial unity through abstract patterns, following the early example of the French masters whose discoveries were redefined in a contemporary context. In many respects, this way of thinking continued Fry’s post-impressionist theories. American Abstract Expressionism had also an important role in the reorientation towards formal concerns in British postwar painting, although its impact was selectively assimilated.

Receptive mainly to the optical innovations of American abstraction, Heron’s aesthetic maintained its association with the more idealist theories of Fry⁷⁵ and Bloomsbury, which held form and emotional content as equally relevant in art.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ However, Heron’s considerable understanding of modern art was based primarily on visual appreciation, and the interest in the moral meanings given to subject matter by the theories of Bell, Fry, Wilenski, Hulme, and later by Fuller, was lost.

Heron's writing reflected the essential gap between Fry and Greenberg's ideas.⁷⁶ Greenberg did not believe nature had aesthetic value and his formalism was built strictly on the supremacy of pure abstract form, whereas Fry consistently pursued the belief that form had to be allied with something in order to become expressive; he never claimed that aesthetic response was elicited solely by means of contemplating autonomous form. Unlike Greenberg, Fry did not promote the importance of the structure of a visual language over its content and rejected any form of iconicity. Instead, he linked the elements of design to their emotional effect arguing that representation intensified the latter. For Greenberg, on the other hand, emotion and criticism in art had to develop on an entirely impersonal level and the focus should solely be on formal harmony.⁷⁷ "The truth is not what is felt but what works and is consistent with itself"⁷⁸, he wrote. Heron took a middle position between the two viewpoints.

Both Fry's legacy, and Greenberg's influence were present in British postwar painting, yet, the work of a majority of artists dealing with landscape, especially Heron's so-called 'Middle Generation' were initially influenced more directly by his theories evolved from Fry and the art of the French avant-garde. For his Hanover Gallery exhibition *Space in Colour* (1953), Heron selected a group of contemporary peers whose majority (i.e. Hilton, Lanyon, Frost, Scott, Hitchens, Vaughan, Heron) worked at the time with abstraction, yet maintained the ties with perceptual reality and many of them happened to be associated with St Ives. Their work had entirely discarded 'invented' imagery and narrative. New European and American modernist models influenced their vision, though mainly from a technical point of view. Heron's show aimed to demonstrate that their approach to painting was characteristic of a fresh and vibrant British avant-garde, unique through its aestheticism based on the emotional awareness of the visual world.

⁷⁶ "Fry's formalism turns out to be of a 'mixed' variety. An essential aesthetic quality of the work of art, what distinguishes art from natural beauty, is the consciousness of a particular artist's intention to convey certain emotions through formal qualities. Artifactuality is aesthetically relevant. Greenberg, while recognizing the emotional genesis of painting, allows it to be aesthetically relevant only as completely generalized, beyond recognition as the product of a particular artist's emotion." (From Deane W. Curtin, "Varieties of Aesthetic Formalism", 320).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Clement Greenberg, "Religion and the Intellectuals," *Partisan Review* 17 (May-June 1950): 466-67.

The identification with the French modern tradition which Heron inherited from Bloomsbury meant that he generally repudiated the northern and English romantic expressionist tradition with its preference for ‘literary’ and ‘sublime’ qualities, supporting instead the plastic, decorative values and the pursuit of beauty in art. Calling a painting ‘decorative’ was in Heron’s view a high compliment, because it implied that it existed purely for its aesthetic qualities. Heron dismissed the expressionist and metaphysical qualities in the art of some of Read’s favourites, Klee, Kandinsky and Miró, preferring instead the sensual formalism of southern European art e.g. Matisse, Bonnard, Cézanne, Picasso. His peers too rejected the nationalistic constraints of Neo-Romanticism with its visionary and literary connotations, as well as the objectivity of Euston Road realism. They also distanced themselves from Constructivist imagery and aligned themselves with Heron’s preference for French modernism and his special predilection for Cubism and Braque which was strongly anchored in the observation of the outside world, yet provided a synthetic transcription of reality in abstract form and intense colour.

Heron’s writing revolved almost exclusively around the importance of visuality in art. “The visual life which we lead through our eyes merely by having them open is the subject of painting. But the moment something is thought to symbolize something, at that moment the visual is switched off and the mind focuses internally on the thing that it symbolizes”⁷⁹, he argued. This is why iconic forms of abstraction from the 1960s onwards, which were clearly more concerned with symbols, rather than images, were of no interest to the critic. “A maxim which he often repeated, ‘I love images and hate symbols’, stakes a claim for the perceptual over the conceptual; the image catches (and pleasures) the eye, involving it in the intricacies of seeing, whereas the symbol is linguistic and therefore detracts from visuality.”⁸⁰ For this reason, Heron could not accept the alternative theories of Greenberg’s main opponent Harold Rosenberg, either; Rosenberg proposed that the artist’s emotional role in painting was just as aesthetically relevant as form, thus reducing painting to mere subjectivity and placing it out of the reach of criticism

⁷⁹ Heron in David Cohen, “A Premium on Pleasure - Paintings, Patrick Heron, Tate Gallery, London, England,” *Art in America* 6, no. 1 (June 1999).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

altogether,⁸¹ which was in many ways Read's line of thought too. Heron dismissed such views, believing that the role of art was not that of psychological speculation, but in the Matissean tradition, art should be a 'good armchair', relaxing to the senses and a perpetual visual delight.



48. William Scott, *Composition*, 1952
49. Keith Vaughan, *House by a Lake*, 1955

The allusive abstractions of Lanyon, Hilton, Frost, Scott and Vaughan provided examples of how Heron's ideas were best reflected in 1950s painting. Few of these artists ever painted from the subject, yet experience filtered through in their flat, seemingly autonomous arrangements. Scott compressed the forms in his paintings, seeking beauty in plainness, in simple, precise and impactful images such as *Composition* (1952) in which his experience of painting in Pont-Aven in the 1930s combined with the fresh influence of French Tachisme. Scott, like Heron came in contact with American painting in the early 1950s, yet honoured his allegiance to early European modernism (e.g. Cézanne, Bonnard).⁸² Another artist supported by Heron, Keith Vaughan came from an entirely different background, that of Neo-Romanticism, yet in the late 1940s and 1950s he discovered a new interest in Cézanne, Matisse and particularly de Staël. This is visible in the synthetic clusters of solid shapes and thick paint in some of his landscapes such as *House by a Lake* (1955), which has a very strong post-impressionist feel, yet the effect of Cubism is also distinguishable.

⁸¹ See Clement Greenberg, "How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name," *Encounter* 17 (December 1962): 67-68.

⁸² See Alan Bowness, M. Ragon and W. Schmalenbach, *William Scott: Paintings* (London, 1964).

Heron's work of this period, although much more patterned, was visibly inspired by the French tachiste daubs and American colour-field stripes (eg. his 'garden' paintings of 1956 and his 'stripe' paintings of 1957-8), but still retained its probable links with nature and the painterliness of the human touch. Although at first impressed by the energy and originality of the Abstract Expressionists, he gradually became disillusioned by the inherent symbolism and iconicity in their work, thinking little of the underlying expressionism of American art. He merely paid attention to surface qualities, the retinal impact of colour and the balance, symmetry and simplicity of composition. Heron was an aesthete who considered cultural context and theory marginal in art and his criticism was entirely dictated by perceptual sensibility.

Adrian Stokes: Form as Subjective Experience

Heron and Stokes shared an interest in the role of perception in painting. Heron, however, understood perception as the awareness of the environment through the physical sensation of optical vision. In Stokes's case, it was about physical sensation interpreted in the light of complex experience. As early as 1937, the indispensability of contemplation of the outside world had been argued by Stokes as a reaction to theories such as those of Read dealing with art as a projection of the unconscious. Stokes wrote in *Colour and Form* (1937) that, "in the future more and more people will release upon the visual field as fantasy those projections of wish-fulfilment that hitherto have found a disease-ridden home in transcendental beliefs [...] aesthetic contemplation of the external world may soon possess an increased value to the educated man, [...] if civilization and science are allowed to survive."⁸³ In the context of the cultural climate contemporary to Stokes, this could be seen as a clear separation from the fantastic imagery and incongruous juxtaposition of subject matter in trends derived from Romanticism and Surrealism. He insisted that it was impossible "to reproduce the material of the unconscious in the raw, in spite of the obvious fact that art is the mirror of life"⁸⁴ and that the creation of art was in fact the identification of inner states with the organisation of the outside world. In other words, the artist's mental projection of the perceptual world could produce art which

⁸³ Adrian Stokes in *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes*, edited by Lawrence Gowing, vol. II, *Colour and Form* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 12.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

ultimately contained multiple inherent layers of meaning – subjectivity, exteriorised. Although Stokes was writing at an earlier date, he came very close to Heron’s ideas as far as the aesthetic manifestation of perception was concerned, Stokes’s focus on art as an expression of a holistic experience involving all human faculties, distanced him from Heron’s predominant preoccupation with purely optical perception. Both Heron and Fry argued the role of the ‘image’ in art, yet it soon became clear that, while Heron reduced its definition to that of a visual effect, Stokes imbued the image with more profound psychological functions.

Stokes chose ‘life’ over aestheticism and disagreed with the Bloomsbury critics who, in his view, tried to separate form and image. He condemned the fact that they set formalist limitations to the expressivity of the image⁸⁵, a capacity that should acknowledge representation, as well as transcend it. Against the theories of Fry, Bell and Berenson, Stokes looked back to Walter Pater, whose criticism was based on a type of ‘description’ that rendered impossible the separation of the actual image from the psychological revelry it induced.⁸⁶ Unlike Heron and Fry, Stokes believed that a series of contextual aspects contributed to the creation of artworks – seeking understanding in the final, visual object was not sufficient. To him, the compositional elements in the paintings of the Bloomsburians Bell, Fry, Grant, with their thick, clear contours seemed to isolate the subject from background or context; Stokes tried to counteract this in his own painting by an overall treatment of the picture, where composition and colour both contributed to effectively creating a sense of space⁸⁷, a movement in and out of the picture. “Stokes wants to deflect his readers from the conception of form either as a structure which holds together content, or as an idealised diagram for which content is merely a pretext. He thought Significant Form was a patterning imposed on content, like a line around a shape. [...] The hints, congruities, dimensions and intimacies that modify the artist’s thought in daily life are refracted into a coherence which is only in part visual, the image in form, something that is intuited rather than seen. [...] Almost in a journey backward through time, the

⁸⁵ See Eric Rhode, “Adrian Stokes. The Image in Form,” paper presented at a symposium organised by Stephen Bann, November 1992, <http://www.pstokes.demon.co.uk/ads5/symp.htm>.

⁸⁶ Peggy Deamer, “Adrian Stokes and Critical Vision,” *Assemblage* 2 (February 1987): 127.

⁸⁷ See Peggy Deamer, “Adrian Stokes: Surface, Form, and (Dis)Content,” *Architecture and Psychoanalysis* (25 October 2003).

observer is able to intuit the means by which the artist has reached the form.”⁸⁸ In Stokes’ theories, the focus was on content; it was content which determined its visual manifestation in form and not vice versa, whereas the ‘image in form’ was the result of an entirely subjective, intuitive projection of content.

Stokes was a great admirer of Cézanne and his insistence on a unified picture plane derived from his appreciation of his work; this was distinct from the formalism of Clement Greenberg which provided the theorisation much of the abstract painting from the end of the 1950s onwards. Adopting Melanie Klein’s theory of art as a process of reparation, the harmonious fusion of the elements at the surface of the picture could stand for personal reintegration. “It was this pursuit of an overall unity that prompted his desire for an art without gesture or incident. Stokes claimed that successful images are the effect of settled movement⁸⁹, which lends the picture a natural, organic unity.⁹⁰ This brought him close to Read’s belief that art should have its own inherent development, akin to that of nature. In this sense, Stokes used his Renaissance aesthetic to champion Nicholson, Hepworth and Moore, precisely the artists Read supported.

Although opposing Read’s predominant reliance on the unconscious in art, Stokes was similarly ambivalent about the importance of the outside world vs. that of inner vision in art. He persistently argued that form should never be isolated from imagery, from the notion of visual likeness. By annulling the latter, all inherent meaning in form would also be annulled which, to him, was unacceptable. Stokes was in fact a convinced formalist: he promoted plasticity, proportion, geometry and the spatial interest in art, yet he believed that the surface of a work of art was at the same time objective and subjective. Form was plastic but also symbolic and metaphorical. He actually supported art which was instantaneously flat and therefore easier to perceive visually, yet he maintained that the flatter and simpler this surface, the more efficient mental projection was upon it. Whilst insisting on the importance of our visual capacity, for Stokes, the eye had a double function: that of opening onto the world, as well as that of opening onto the inner world and projecting the workings of

⁸⁸ Rhode, “Adrian Stokes. The Image in Form”.

⁸⁹ See “A Drama of Modesty: Adrian Stokes on his Painting,” *Studio International* (April 1973), reprinted in exh. cat. *Adrian Stokes* (London: Arts Council, 1982), 36.

⁹⁰ *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes*, vol. II, *Colour and Form*, 9.

imagination onto the flat surface of the artwork. This is where he clearly distanced himself from Heron, who rejected the romantic tradition. “Stokes, like Ruskin, valorised the flatness as both an aspect of its immediacy and an essential condition for its ability to symbolize.”⁹¹ He was looking for the ‘otherness’ in objects, that extra dimension which was not merely perceivable visually – presumably, the viewer’s own subjective interpretation of a specific object. By contrast, Heron promoted the flatness of surface in art as a springboard for instant aesthetic gratification.

Stokes’s theories on the complexity of visual perception were confirmed by the work of several artists experimenting with non-figuration, associated with the St Ives community. In Peter Lanyon’s own copy of Stokes’s *Colour and Form* (1937), the paragraph about “the identification of inner states with the organisation of the outside world” was underlined, clearly pointing to the fact that Lanyon sought clarification of the means by which this creative process worked. Incidentally, Lanyon spoke of trying to create “an image which goes on through time unattainable, inscrutable but underlying all our immediate desires as an assurance of reality”⁹², which echoed Stokes notion of ‘image in form’. Although Stokes never wrote directly about Lanyon’s art, his writing seemed to have indirectly influenced him. Incidentally, Terry Frost wrote in connection with the work of a new wave of abstract artists (e.g. Hilton, Pasmore, Lanyon) that, “Seeing is a matter of looking and feeling, for things do not look exactly like you think they do. To look with preconceived notions of visual experience is to destroy the possibility of creating again that experience in paint. If you know before you look, then you cannot see for knowing.”⁹³ It seemed that while Frost supported the importance of visual experience, he too pointed to the complex process through which the artist’s vision synthesises the outside world, promoting the role of intuition as an alternative to both the strictly formal and the mimetic rendering of the subject.

Just as modernist aesthetics in the twentieth-century came to equate formalism, Adrian Stokes challenged this view, offering an alternative criticism based

⁹¹ Peggy Deamer, “Adrian Stokes: The Architecture of Phantasy and the Phantasy of Architecture,” *Annual of Psychoanalysis: Architecture and Psychoanalysis* 33 (2005): 125-137.

⁹² Unpublished manuscript (1948) in Chris Stephens, *Peter Lanyon: At the Edge of Landscape* (London: 21 Publishing, 2000), 23.

⁹³ Terry Frost in *Nine Abstract Artists: their Work and Theory*, edited by Lawrence Alloway (London: Tiranti, 1954).

on his personal reading of the early Renaissance and by insights derived from psychoanalytic theory. The critic devised an entirely subjective outlook on aesthetic experience in which the artwork itself, stripped of historical and other contextual links, was the main focus. Imagination acquired a new role in aesthetic contemplation, which was now out of bounds for professionalized art history.⁹⁴ While the visual world was essential in the production of art, its creation was now more than simply an aesthetic translation of the act of seeing the world. Subjectivity permeated the painting of the 1950s on all levels, most effectively surfacing in the abstract painting which took its cues from landscape.

Landscape as Visual Pattern vs. Landscape as Experience: A Case Study

This section has shown how dialogues as well as differences between formalism and perceptualism characterised British postwar painting. In 1957, Andrew Forge conducted a series of conversations with Peter Lanyon and Anthony Fry, whose main subject was a trip to Bakewell in Derbyshire and the artists' subsequent perception of the place as reflected in their work. Very early in the discussion, Lanyon introduced the idea of landscape as experience, with Forge simplistically claiming that "his affinities are with the Abstract Expressionists and the Modern Americans"⁹⁵, in the sense that he was more concerned with his personal perception and the overall 'feel' of a place, than the straight-forward conversion of a scene into pictorial form. There was far more however to Lanyon's work than adopting an American-style introspective form of abstraction. He was interested in significant historical and anthropological details within the landscape, which would communicate to him about the life and history of a certain place.

⁹⁴ See David Carrier, "The Presentness of Painting: Adrian Stokes as Aesthete," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1986): 765.

⁹⁵ "Derbyshire 1957," transcript from telephone recording of Andrew Forge interviewing Peter Lanyon and Anthony Fry. Recorded: Thursday, 25th July, 1957. Transmitted: Sunday, 28th July, 1957. (London: BBC Third Programms) TLO 34911/TAV 297B.



50. Peter Lanyon, *Landscape with Cross*, 1957
 51. Anthony Fry, *Dance, Blue and Yellow*, 1960

Fry, on the other hand, had quite a different outlook. The son of a painter and a great nephew of Roger Fry, he was interested in the aesthetic and formal qualities of the landscape (e.g. colour, texture and structure – horizontal-vertical), which was a very visual take on the scene, considered in pictorial terms from first contact. He continued very much in the manner in which European modernists abstracted from the scene, seeing landscape mostly as a transcription of visual arrangements and drawing his inspiration from the synthetic approach of the great European masters Matisse, Bonnard and Cézanne.

Lanyon's take was quite dissimilar; he never worked in front of a subject, being more concerned with the sense of place and "making an image which is not exactly the direct visual impact of something in front of me, but an image which is crowded, which is saturated with other things that belong to me in different ways"⁹⁶. He was always searching for human intervention within a place, in order to be able to identify with being in it. Most interestingly, Lanyon associated the physical process of painting with that of the way the landscape was built, "layer after layer". The landscape would evolve from nothing into something, through a continuous accumulation of elements, echoing the creation of the physical landscape. This approach was in many ways reminiscent of Stokes' theory about the transcription of

⁹⁶ Ibid.

experience in painting, which should not concentrate solely on composition or perspective, but record their layering; “the important relationships aren’t those that operate across the lateral surface of the painting, but those that imply a layered relationship from front (the eye of the viewer) to back (an implicit space in/on/behind the canvas)”, he argued.⁹⁷ Incidentally, Lanyon wanted to project his painting out of the picture; place “comes forward from it – it is actually happening as a fact now”.

Meanwhile, Fry wished to preserve the flatness of the picture plane. “So it’s absolutely got to be fought out on the canvas and there’s no answer [...] the spectator must physically identify himself with a position in space, in the painting.” For this artist, the actual making of a landscape was very much concerned with the actual process of making marks on and across the canvas. He also differentiated between the actual place at large and his specific view of it, and his main reason for choosing a certain view had a lot to do with a “rhythmic sequence”, which seemed to come together at a certain point. Consequently, one might say that Fry saw a part of the landscape as a painting even before touching any of his brushes, conducting this visual evaluation of the scene in pictorial terms.

Fry also claimed that he was trying to capture the mood of a scene, which he defined as its sense of place. Lanyon disagreed with this view that the mood of a painting was imposed by the actual place, claiming that it was determined by the experience the artist lived in it: “Tony is concentrating on the essentially visual thing, he does believe that this thing is there, outside him like that. I don’t, you know.”⁹⁸ Both artists, however, explained that the use of abstraction resulted from a need to transpose the spectator more effectively into a certain place.⁹⁹ In addition, Lanyon did not see landscape from a static viewpoint anymore, as a vista. He physically explored it from all angles and tried to bring this across in the work. Fry, on the other hand,

⁹⁷ Deamer, “Stokes: The Architecture of Phantasy”.

⁹⁸ “Derbyshire 1957,” transcript from telephone recording of Andrew Forge interviewing Peter Lanyon and Anthony Fry. Recorded: Thursday, 25th July, 1957. Transmitted: Sunday, 28th July, 1957. (London: BBC Third Programms) TLO 34911/TAV 297B.

⁹⁹ Fry: “I want to take the spectator into this place or rather I want to project the landscape around him so that he may enter and exist in a world where I have been. That is why I dispensed with the traditional foreground, middle distance, background. After all, the foreground may be behind me.”

Lanyon: “I very often had to take hold of the sky and put it down the side. I had to get rid of the horizon line and [...] be much more involved physically with the thing.” (TAV 297B, Tape No: TLO 34911)

merely explored the place visually before painting it, making sketches but looking at it more as an outsider, a tourist, rather than trying to identify with it and become acquainted with its wider context. Ultimately, he ended up painting the view from a spot chosen on aesthetic impulse.

Lanyon maintained he had a clear picture of what he intended to paint as well as what he would call the work, leaving its conflicting elements (allegiance to either the painting or to the subject) to determine the final image. This, again, brings to mind another one of Stokes' concepts – the 'image in form', the mental projection of subjective experience into a visually definite substance. With Fry, it was quite the opposite as his method relied on process and actual vision rather than concept and inner vision. He had no idea of the actual image he would produce before starting to paint. He saw marks as separate from the image and the artist's responsibility would have to nurture both equally. He maintained that the "whole exciting thing about painting [was] keeping them both true – the marks real to the subject and the marks true to each other".¹⁰⁰ Instead, Lanyon aimed for a perfect overlapping of the two "to make the mark [...] so sort of anonymous that the subject in a way will come right through through the mark or the gesture that I make."¹⁰¹ For him, painting was about making an invisible complex idea, visible, while for Fry, painting was a far less introspective process and concentrated on the aesthetic surface.

As far as the figures were concerned, for Lanyon, their role was interchangeable with that of the viewers of his paintings. His works demanded active participation of the viewer as the main protagonist. For Fry, it was more important to see figures as means to give a sense of scale to the landscape, which, once again, denoted his formal concerns. Fry concluded this parallel evaluation by establishing an interesting distinction between two different approaches to landscape painting. On the one hand, there was the English and northern landscape tradition, in which Lanyon painted, and in which the painter-as-spectator was the only figure in the picture; this type of painting was concerned with the subjective nature of painting. On the other hand, the Southern landscape tradition, in which Fry himself was painting was

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

produced to human scale, consistently defining space and showing concern for the objective nature of painting.

There were however, inconsistencies to Fry's differentiation. Although a follower of the great British landscape tradition, Lanyon was completely against symbols in his painting, claiming that painting can't be something that stands for a thing that has already happened, the artist needed to produce new things and a novel, fresh experience. His work thus provided a good example of the way in which the Romantic tradition adopted phenomenological interests in postwar painting. Meanwhile, Fry tended to re-make something from nature, rebuilding a real visual scene with a scale and space on its own, very much in the way that Roger Fry's Post-Impressionists had considered landscape; this view, too was slowly to be replaced by the sole focus on process, the instinctual transcription of subjective feeling in trends developing from Tachisme and Action Painting.

The idea of the landscape as a view aesthetically synthesised in painting in the style of the early European avant-garde gave way to a more complex psychological approach to the environment. It seemed that from the 1950s onwards, abstraction originated a lot less from observation of nature and a lot more from the sensual perception of the world surrounding the artist, "the total sensual experience of the body within a place"¹⁰². Instead of focusing on landscape painting as the contemplation of a scene which stretched out in front of the painter, the focus had shifted to the experience of inhabiting and moving within a certain place. The following section will elaborate on the origins and development of this phenomenological outlook in postwar landscape painting.

iii. The Phenomenological Angle. Landscape and Experience

At the beginning of the 1950s, the reaction against the pure geometry of Constructivism, as well as against the mythical, historical and descriptive tendencies of wartime painting increasingly called for a perceptual involvement in art. In 1957, Andrew Forge spoke of a "oneness of form and content" in postwar painting which

¹⁰² Stephens, *Lanyon. At the Edge of Landscape*, 71.

differed significantly from the painting of the 1930s and 1940s, where the main interest revolved around the invention of imagery, resulting in “exceedingly complex images put together so as to embody a clear-cut poetic idea about a landscape or a particular natural form”.¹⁰³ Forge argued that artists such as Nash and Sutherland seemed more interested in the inherent character of organic objects and the artist’s mental projection of these, rather than the actual visual experience of nature (e.g. Nash’s *Sun and Convolvulus* or Sutherland’s *Thorn Heads*). These images seemed more conceptual than perceptual, in the sense that they were dealing with a metaphor of the landscape¹⁰⁴ instead of being the synthesised expression of the artist’s communion with the landscape itself. These were pictures which “could be fairly described as poetic. One looks at them as illustrations of an idea; one reads them, as it were, from the outside”¹⁰⁵, Forge argued. The Neo-Romantic landscapes were subjective interpretations, yet the form they adopted was that of a universally accessible metaphor. By contrast, the 1950s painting of Frost and Lanyon was perceptual and much more effectively reflective of the artist’s inner world precisely by the way it related to the natural environment.

Another important switch in postwar painting signalled the transition from autonomous formalism to more humanised, organic forms of abstraction. Before the war, an essentially visual approach and geometrical patternization was used as a means of eliciting formal control - classicising tendencies of a historical time more balanced and ordered. Abstracted images were achieved through the systematic reduction of the forms of reality in the search for universal truths. After the disruption of the war, a prevalent adoption of free gesture became evident, marking the actual movement of the body in space. The latter came from a need to prove the immediacy and veridity of the here and now, of the artist’s presence in the world. Phenomenology assisted the development of abstraction in modern art, generated by the critical need to prove the existence of the world itself.

¹⁰³ TAV 297B, Tape No: TLO 34911.

¹⁰⁴ For instance, the series including *Eclipse of the Sunflower* (1945), one of Nash’s last oils (produced at a time when his health was weakened by asthma), represented in fact images of the premonition and glorification of death suggested by the relentless cycles of nature.

¹⁰⁵ TAV 297B, Tape No: TLO 34911.

Forms of gestural abstraction such as Tachisme developed on the foundations of a complex psychological and philosophical network of influences e.g. the French Existentialism of Sartre, Camus, Genet and Simone de Beauvoir, which infiltrated the circle of Parisian avant-garde visual artists but also that of British artists¹⁰⁶ and discussed in the writing of David Sylvester ('The Auguries of Experience', 1948), Herbert Read (*Existentialism, Marxism and Anarchism*, 1949) and Michel Tapié (*Un art autre*, 1952). Together with other influences, including Zen Buddhism and Jungian archetypes, they drew on the fact that the artist had to seek the essence of existence through gesture, the physical action of making marks on the canvas.¹⁰⁷ As Fiona Gaskin has recently argued, this process "had resonances in the existentialist idea of the phenomenological *epoché* developed by Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) who had derived his ideas partly from the German philosopher Edmund Husserl."¹⁰⁸

In his book, Merleau-Ponty stressed the important role of the body in human experience, supporting the existential perception of the world against the mental assessment of reality. He extended Edmund Husserl's account of the 'lived body' (as opposed to the physical body), and Henri Bergson's "*le vécu*" (the survival of lived experience) and created the notion of "embodiment" as opposed to the traditional Cartesian separation of mind and body.¹⁰⁹ From this view, the body image is neither in the mental realm nor in the mechanical-physical realm, rather, the body represents

¹⁰⁶ See Fiona Gaskin, "British Tachisme in the Post-War Period 1946-1957," in *Artists and Patrons in Post-War Britain*, edited by Margaret Garlake, Courtauld Research Papers No.2 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), Note 94, 51.

¹⁰⁷ Zen philosophy dictated that this could only be achieved once the individual's mind was cleared of all outside influences and thoughts.

¹⁰⁸ "Husserl argued that in order to study the structure of consciousness, one would have to differentiate between the act of consciousness and the phenomena at which it is directed (the object-in-itself, transcendent to consciousness). Knowledge of essences would only be possible by isolating all theories about the existence of an external world. He called this procedure *epoché*. These new concepts prompted the publication of the *Ideen* in 1913." From Gaskin, "British Tachisme", 42. See also Mary Warnock, *Existentialism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), chapters 2 and 4.

In brief, the notion of *epoché* referred to the hypothesis developed by Husserl according to which all belief in the existence of the real world, which we generally take for granted, and all action in the real world, is annulled. "This self-consciousness develops in that the onlooker that comes to himself in the *epoché* reduces 'bracketed' human immanence by explicit inquiry back behind the acceptednesses in self-apperception that hold regarding humanness, that is, regarding one's belonging to the world; and thus he lays bare transcendental experiential life and the transcendental having of the world." From Eugen Fink, *Sixth Cartesian Meditation: The Idea of a Transcendental Theory of Method*, translated by Ronald Bruzina (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 40.

¹⁰⁹ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 408.

the individual in his engaged actions with things and people¹¹⁰; the body is incarnate subjectivity.

Published at the end of the Second World War, the chapters on ‘the Body’ in Merleau-Ponty’s book introduced “forms of perception he characterised as ‘preobjective’”¹¹¹; Foster, Krauss, Bois and Buchloh elaborated that, “Because the individual’s body is lived in its orientation to space – its head above, its feet below, its front fundamentally different from a reverse side it cannot even see – that body effectuates a “preobjective meaning” that determines the gestalts the individual must form.”¹¹² ‘Preobjective meaning’ here referred to the non-articulate significance of the individual’s elemental experience, which was impossible to reproduce in explicit form as in the objective world. This could thus stand for a form of seeing and knowing that would have to be called ‘abstract’, the critics argued. In Merleau-Ponty’s writing, the ‘preobjective’ stood for his concern to break down the dualism of body and the world, mind and body, objective and subjective and pointed to some phenomenological and elementary being that was fundamental and precedes language.

Merleau-Ponty considered visual experience as inconclusive and incomplete, because of the ‘perspectival’ limits of human perception. In the same year that his *Phenomenology of Perception* was published, 1945, he wrote an essay entitled *Cézanne’s Doubt*, in which he singled out the painting of the master precisely because of the complicated position he had towards, and his desire to elucidate the state of being-in-the world with others and with other things and because he believed life and art overlapped in his work. The philosopher’s views theoretically support the change from prewar landscape painting, which was mainly about *seeing* and relied on a

¹¹⁰ See David W. Smith, “Phenomenology,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, The Metaphysics Research Lab, Center for the Study of Language and Information. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, California, 2003).

¹¹¹ Hal Foster, Rosalind E. Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 495.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 687. The critics also wrote that, “Since Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology places the subject’s body – its bilateral symmetry, its vertical axis, its having a front and a back, the latter, invisible to the subject him – or herself – at the centre of the subject’s intention toward meaning – those artistic projects which depended on bodily vectors for their aesthetic experience are particularly open to phenomenological analysis.” (*Ibid.*, 495).

formal aesthetic which used art as a tool of knowledge, to postwar landscape painting, which was simply about *being*.¹¹³

Following the English translation of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) in the 1960s, there was an increased interest in the way the spatial coordinates of vision help elucidate the significance of objects. In Britain, Peter Lanyon's work was an eloquent example of how the phenomenological approach applied to landscape painting and was highly illustrative of a predominant perceptual trend in postwar art. At the time Lanyon started painting at the end of the Second World War, the French philosopher had just published *Cézanne's Doubt* (1945)¹¹⁴ in which he proposed that Cézanne's Provence landscapes were not simply objects of contemplation, but the expression of complex, lived bodily experience. Although it was doubtful that Lanyon should have come into contact with Merleau-Ponty's work, he was nevertheless drawn to Cézanne for precisely this perceptual approach to landscape painting.

In the late 1950s Herbert Read's writing reflected his knowledge of the connection which existed between Cézanne and the phenomenological movement in the philosophy of art through the artist's renewed sensibility to nature.¹¹⁵ He clarified his analysis of Cézanne's originality by reference to Husserl, discussing the concept of 'eidetic purity' (the very accurate and vivid recall of visual images) and the related notion of 'Gestalt'¹¹⁶ (referring to the individual's perception of the configurational wholeness and uniformity of psychological and physiological events). "To renew one's sensibility toward one's environment is the method of both the traditionalist and

¹¹³ The latter adequately reflected the romantic distrust of rationalist, positivist Victorian thinking, grounded in the psychological and philosophical studies in existentialism and phenomenology developed by Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Freud and Merleau-Ponty himself.

¹¹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," in *Sense and Non-Sense*, translated by Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

¹¹⁵ Read wrote that, "It is all a persistent attempt to correlate art and reality. It is the research, not of the absolute, but of the concrete, of the image, and behind it all is not only the divorce of the artist from the processes of production, but also the concurrent attempt to establish a philosophy of reality, a [sic] phenomenism that owes nothing to divine revelation or universal truths, but brings to the analysis of human existence the same faculties that the artist brings to the analysis of nature." Read in the introduction to Maurice Raynal, *History of Modern Painting, from Baudelaire to Bonnard. The Birth of a New Vision*, translated by Stuart Gilbert (Geneva: Albert Skira, 1949), xvii.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xi-xxii. " 'Eidetic purity' is always the image distinguished and rendered autonomous, as in the phenomenological analysis, that is underscored by the context." Forrest Williams, "Cézanne and French Phenomenology," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 12, no. 4 (June 1954): 481.

the revolutionary,”¹¹⁷ argued Read, effectively alluding to the dual nature of Cézanne’s vision – on the one hand, adhering to classical formal values, on the other, trying to connect with nature through the unmediated channels of perception.

Merleau-Ponty argued that there was a period in the 1880s, when Cézanne was interested in primarily describing the phenomenological exploration of his motifs, rendering the subjective effects of his vision of nature, which resulted in the strong distortions or abstractions in the work of this period. He thus managed to transcend tradition and push the boundaries of a new, unprecedented means of identifying with his environment. His reading was based on the artist’s knowing the world was the product of living in it; he claimed that the master had come to reject Renaissance perspective “and the intellectual diagrammatics in which representation of nature was substantially prefigured, in which the idea preceded vision.”¹¹⁸ Instead of the classical canon of beauty which dictated that the whole picture instantly needs to come together in a harmonious visual entity, Cézanne experimented with a new time-space relationship. He attempted to achieve this by directing the viewer’s eye movements to explore the patterns of the picture sequentially and all over the surface of the work, challenging the nature of painting as a pure spatial art and, implicitly, complicating the task of elucidating the image. Analytic skills were now required from the viewer, even as the artist’s final aim was that of achieving a unified, synthetic vision of nature.

Cézanne’s concern with ‘the realization of the motif’¹¹⁹ was to try to capture the way that things came to be in the world through perception: his immense output and the constant reworking of the same subjects proves this. “Instead of eschewing line as did the Impressionists he added many of them not merely to locate the solid object in space, but to locate it dynamically”¹²⁰, as opposed to the static views of the Nabis. Compositional distortions were another means by which Cézanne could render the dynamics of the active relation of the seer and the seen, they helped capture ‘seeing in time’ on canvas. “Cézanne’s fanatic concentration on the dynamics of

¹¹⁷ Read, introduction to *History of Modern Painting*, xiii.

¹¹⁸ Andrew Causey, *Peter Lanyon: Modernism and the Land* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 102.

¹¹⁹ See Kurt Badt, *The Art of Cézanne* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), chapter *The Problem of Realization*, 195-228.

¹²⁰ Joyce Brodsky, “A Paradigm Case for Merleau-Ponty: The Ambiguity of Perception and the Paintings of Paul Cézanne,” *Artibus et Historiae* 2, no. 4 (1981): 128.

perceiving put the image of that act before the spectator, through the bodily act of painting. Thus Cézanne was being-in-the world as perceiver and as ‘lived body’ in the same way that the viewer is.”¹²¹ An important idea to stress here is that, in phenomenology, the role of the artist overlaps with that of the viewer both as active participant and creator of the image. Merleau-Ponty wanted to avoid a clear-cut distinction between seeing and touching, the eyes and the body; instead he wanted to show how the two worked together. For him, to see was to see from a position immersed in the world, rather than from that of a distant onlooker or outsider.

Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of Cézanne showed that the artist wished to immortalize on canvas the image of a landscape “at the point of perception *before* the intellect processed the information according to humanly devised conventions.”¹²² This pure, unmediated perception of the outside world was one deeply connected to the experience of the present, as opposed to being a conjecture of an ideal past. The philosopher argued that the artist aimed to capture matter in the process of ‘taking form’, in the process of ‘appearing to perception’ and showed no interest in rearranging the elements which are already there in nature. Instead, he wanted to assimilate everything, then create something entirely new. He wrote that “the artist is not satisfied to be a cultural animal but takes up culture from its inception and finds it anew: he speaks as the first man spoke and paints as if no one had ever painted before”¹²³. Cézanne himself claimed he wanted to paint nature as if seeing it for the first time, which was one of the points Lanyon himself emphasised in his art.

Both in the art of Cézanne and Lanyon, there was no concrete underlying meaning before the image was created and the only tool available to the artist was intuition. Merleau-Ponty argued that the painter who conceptualises and seeks the expression first misses the mystery, which cannot thus be renewed every time he takes a fresh look at nature. The moment of elucidation can only come at the point when the overall composition of the picture is seen globally. We then realise the existence of an emerging order, the appearance of an object in, organising itself before our eyes. (e.g.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 129-130.

¹²² Causey, *Lanyon: Modernism and the Land*, 102.

¹²³ Merleau-Ponty “Cézanne’s Doubt”.

Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* series). Art becomes meaningful through the viewer's reading of it.

In order to understand the development of phenomenology in postwar landscape painting, it is important to elaborate on the parallel between the traditional, visual approach to landscape derived from early modernist formulations and the perceptual approach, dealing with the experience of the body in landscape. From the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, modernism heavily relied on the aesthetic appreciation of the gaze. In postwar landscape painting, however, a significant shift occurred from regarding landscape as object of contemplation, with the gaze separating the subject from the things seen, to the idea of landscape as direct experience, born out of the physical, active involvement of the artist in the subject of his art. As Malcolm Andrews has written, for Cézanne and Monet the conception of the motif as yielding multiple pictures, "meant saturating oneself in the site so that it ceases to be just a visual field, ceases perhaps to be a 'landscape', but becomes a complex of sensations, of light, colour, smell, sounds, tactile experience. It becomes an environment".¹²⁴ This implied that, we started perceiving nature as an event, a process, rather than the subject of contemplation, the contact with nature now requires involvement, rather than distant control.

In *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth-Century France* (1990), Nicholas Green examined the specific subjective experience of nature, which he believed resulted from two perceptual processes. The first ordered the visual field in a series of tableaux, landscape being seen as a visual scene contemplated by the viewer. The other included the viewer in nature's wholeness, implying an "all-encompassing totality in which the individual is submerged."¹²⁵ Green used as an example the Forest of Fontainebleau "in order to measure provincial response and resistance to the metropolitan vision he has posited"¹²⁶, the

¹²⁴ Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 192.

¹²⁵ Nicholas Green, *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth-Century France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990) in Lübbren, *Rural Arists*, 90, 133.

¹²⁶ Stephanie Ross, reviews of *The Languages of Landscape* by Mark Roskill; *Landscape and Power* by W. J. T. Mitchell; *Toil and Plenty: Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England 1780-1890* by Christiana Payne; *The Idea of the English Landscape Painter: Genius as Alibi in the Early Nineteenth Century* by Kay Dian Kriz; *Art and Science in German Landscape Painting 1770-1840* by Timothy F. Mitchell; *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth-*

‘metropolitan gaze’ being extended to the countryside. In nineteenth-century painting there was very much critical emphasis on the gaze, the sense of sight, the visual perception of the outside world. Nina Lübbren wrote that, the gaze predominantly “figured as active, masterful and distanced from its object. This is the controlling gaze of the panorama painter, situated on a look-out point and viewing the scene spread out beneath him.”¹²⁷ Unlike Green who dealt mainly with the notion of urban landscape, Lübbren was interested in the idea of the Fontainebleau artists wishing to ‘immerse’ themselves in the wild rural landscape.

Interpretations of the concept of ‘immersion in nature’ and affinities with the *sous bois*¹²⁸ landscape approach (i.e. the closeness of the artist’s contact with nature) could be read into the postwar work of Peter Lanyon. Andrew Causey wrote that, “Lanyon’s objective was not to be ‘situated on a look-out point’, but to move around so that his presence could not be identified either as a fixed point within, or as distinguishable from the landscape.”¹²⁹ The artist was not interested in a panoramic angle overlooking the landscape from a strategic well-chosen point, but to immerse himself into the landscape, which he considered as an extension of his own body. Lanyon’s ‘landscapes of immersion’ though represented mainly a conceptual formulation for a new type of landscape painting which would differentiate it from that of the Newlyn *plein airists*, such as Stanhope Forbes, Lamorna Birch, Harold and Laura Knight, whose work was “informed by the eye, so that the relation of colonist to native was a controlling and objectifying one.”¹³⁰ By contrast, Lanyon, a native of the Cornish landscape, adopted a subjective approach to his subject, which he felt comfortable exploring as an insider. Although radically different in the actual approach to the subject, both forms of landscape painting following Green’s

Century France by Nicholas Green. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 411.

¹²⁷ Lübbren, *Rural Artists*, 90.

¹²⁸ Lübbren’s writing analysed the traditional approach of the artist towards the landscape, characteristic of the art of the Fontainebleau-Barbizon *sous bois* artists, such as Courbet, Corot, Rousseau, Daubigny, all working *en plein air*. The name *sous bois* itself originated from the closeness of the artists to the vegetation captured in their paintings. As the physical proximity to their subject did not allow a distancing of the artist from the subject, which would normally generate depth and perspective within the picture, many of their works were overwhelming close-ups which invited the viewer to participate in them, to establish almost a physical presence and become an explorer of the picture. Reminiscent of this approach are the images of Sussex landscapist Ivon Hitchens, who established the same quality of intimacy between the viewer and the scene brought close to the foreground of his paintings.

¹²⁹ Causey, *Lanyon: Modernism and the Land*, 146.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

definition: the contemplative, visual stance, hailing from nineteenth-century painting and the dynamic experience of and identification with the landscape adopted by an artist such as Lanyon in mid-twentieth-century displayed an interest in this aspect of 'immersion' in the landscape.

Lanyon thus radically distanced himself from traditional landscape painting by breaking with the convention of regarding landscape as a static background view, an object contemplated rationally and reordered on canvas.¹³¹ In this, he was supported by Stokes writing which reversed the conventional view, making the perceiving artist the primary reality and landscape the projection of his identity¹³². "Whatever the degree, whatever the distortion all men impute themselves to their surroundings, even a sense of duration or succession discovers itself occasionally as a simultaneity, as forms arranged in space"¹³³, Stokes argued. The finished work should be "an augmentation upon a surface. A rose facing outwards from a stem. A face, the outward part, the augmentation of all that is within the head."¹³⁴ Similarly, Lanyon's view on the visual manifestation of private experience was, as he wrote to Paul Feiler in 1952, that "painting ... is a turning outward of experience - a making immediate of a time process in space. Paint represents space and makes it actual. I do not start with the idea but with the experience. My source is sensuous.. My aim so far as I can see is to make a face, an 'actuality', a thingness' for experience."¹³⁵ Causey argued that Stokes was really only trying to explain a way through which the temporal dimension of individual feeling, or in fact life itself, could be turned into a spatial, visual expression, through what Stokes referred to as "the arrest of time and its organisation as space",¹³⁶ which, on many levels, brings to mind Merleau-Ponty's theories on the creative process of Cézanne.

More than any human to human relationship, his rapport with the outside world could potentially reveal primordial truths about his psychological make-up.

¹³¹ Andrew Lanyon, in "The Real St Ives Story," Rose Hilton, Anthony Frost and Andrew Lanyon in conversation with Michael Bird, *Tate Etc., Visiting and Revisiting Art Etcetera* 8, Autumn 2006.

¹³² Causey, *Lanyon. Modernism and the Land*, 110.

¹³³ Stokes, "Inside Out: An Essay on the Psychology and Aesthetic Appeal of Space" (1947), in *Critical Writings*, vol. II, 159.

¹³⁴ Stokes, "Colour and Form" (1937), in *Critical Writings*, vol. II, 21.

¹³⁵ Peter Lanyon, letter to Paul Feiler, 1952 in Causey, *Modernism and the Land*, 148.

¹³⁶ Stokes, "Colour and Form", in *Critical Writings*, vol. II, 16.

Causey recalled an example Stokes provided of such a rapport as seen through his perception of the relentlessly pulsating, throbbing sea: “through all the sensations of vastness and of superhuman force and rhythm which such a scene gives to the senses, surely we attend a parable of inner economy, of those forces within, seemingly foreign to us. We are looking on Nature, but at the same time we look on a clearer distribution of forces within ourselves.”¹³⁷ In this sense, Stokes as well as Lanyon and Turner before him, made a direct connection between the forces of nature, as they are perceived and translated by the artist through the forces within themselves. Commenting on Turner’s famous *Snow Storm* (1842) and his claim to have been tied to the mast of the *Ariel* in order to fully experience the unleashed elements of nature first hand, Malcolm Andrews wrote:

Turner’s concept to embed himself in the experience of the play of natural forces, and to let that experience dictate the terms on which the landscape image is constructed, is a new development in the relationship between the artist and the natural world. It advances one step further those moves towards a more sustained practice of open-air painting, which European landscapists had undertaken over the previous 60 years or so, in order to immerse themselves in the same elements they were recording. [...] The idea of nature as a congregation of forces of growth and decay, a site of constant energetic movement and change, undermines the conception of landscape as a fixed, stable arrangement of natural forms ordered by the artist at a distance – a physical distance, in terms of both a prospect viewpoint and a studio finishing [...] the experience of nature as a constantly changing organism, not as a kind of grand-scale still life. Landscape is a living environment, not a ‘*nature morte*’.¹³⁸

The perceptual approach to landscape implied that nature itself was a constantly developing form of life, just like the human body, to which it became a physical extension. Its presence stimulates and challenges the individual, making him aware of his own ontological being. Lanyon claimed that “landscape, the outside world of things and events, is the proper place to find our deepest meanings ... These things take us to places where our trial is with forces greater than ourselves.”¹³⁹ The artist, who admittedly suffered from vertigo, needed to experience a state of physical and emotional distress and peril, a life-threatening situation, which would allow him

¹³⁷ Stokes, “Inside Out”, in *Critical Writings*, vol. II, 161.

¹³⁸ Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*, 178-9.

¹³⁹ Unpublished manuscript, 1948, quoted in Stephens, *Lanyon: At the Edge of Landscape*, 22.

to explore his individual self and find himself¹⁴⁰. This was in essence an existential journey of self-exploration, which recalled Turner's quest for the Sublime as he braved the fury of nature lashed to the mast of the vessel, then painted it 'to show what such a scene was like' in reality. Incidentally, Lanyon himself "sought to recreate his experience of a place or an event [in painting] so that the viewers could re-experience it themselves".¹⁴¹

Just as Merleau-Ponty had found in Cézanne's art, in Lanyon's work, subject and object overlapped, there was no distinction between the two. "Unlike traditional perspective or Nicholson's setting of objects against a landscape, the space in his work seemed both to recede and to project from it. This was 'derived from a physical involution with my subject', that is to say the artist and the place became involved with, rolled into, each other."¹⁴² The problem of landscape thus became one of painting environment, place and a revelation of a time process as an immediate spatial fact on a surface.¹⁴³ We have here the same idea that permeated Turner's landscape painting: "the need for an almost physical union with nature, the subject as "a sensual and emotional engagement"¹⁴⁴.

Investigating the modernist dilemma of two approaches to the landscape: one, through which the latter is accessed exclusively through visual contact, the other, through embodiment or 'immersion' in the scene, the first, typical of the painter-beholder, the second, of the painter-participant, Causey managed to identify pertinent parallels between the work of Lanyon and two ground-breaking French modernist regionalists, Courbet and Cézanne. This comparison was supported by the fact that the postwar years in France had brought about a new need to search for national identity through the regionalist landscape¹⁴⁵, which was equally the case in early postwar Britain.

¹⁴⁰ Peter Lanyon, "A Sense of Place," *Painter and Sculptor V* (Autumn 1962): 3.

¹⁴¹ Stephens, *Lanyon. At the Edge of Landscape* (London: 21 Publishing), 25.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁴³ Manuscript, nd (c. 1951-2).

¹⁴⁴ Stephens, *At the Edge of Landscape*, 71.

¹⁴⁵ Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France between the Wars* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 39.

Courbet Revisited

In May 1953, the Marlborough Fine Art gallery in London held the first representative exhibition of Gustave Courbet's work in England which received a favourable review in *The New Statesman* by John Berger, the critic praising his regionalist realism deeply linked with Courbet's native Franche-Comté. David Sylvester also spoke of the importance of the "Courbet revival" of 1953¹⁴⁶ for contemporary British painting and in 1957 Peter Lanyon enthused about the quality of paint in Courbet's Ornans countrysapes.¹⁴⁷ Causey believed Lanyon may have found Courbet interesting for several reasons: firstly, he was a regionalist like himself, his realism was more actual than ever in the contemporary critical climate dominated by Berger's writing. Besides, Lanyon enjoyed Courbet's painting technique in which he used solid layers, resistant to the eye's scrutiny which could relate, in some ways, to Stokes's notion of 'surface colour'.¹⁴⁸

However, another aspect which linked Lanyon to Courbet's work may have been the latter's interest in being involved in the picture, as an active participant, rather than contemplate the view as an external observer. Fried had alluded to this idea in *Courbet's Realism* (1990), when he wrote that, "the wholeness of the world in Courbet's paintings is directly analogous to the sense in which the painter-beholder can be said to inhabit all of his body; anywhere is a good enough place to sit down to paint because he is wholly there...".¹⁴⁹ "Wherever I put myself is the same to me; it's always good as long as one has nature under one's eyes."¹⁵⁰ In Courbet's work, there was no need to depict the landscape from a preferred spot, as his art was no longer about the aesthetic rendering of a view, but aimed for a phenomenological involvement in his environment. By contrast, the Barbizon works of his contemporary Corot were painted en plein-air and concentrated almost exclusively on the visual

¹⁴⁶ David Sylvester, "Curriculum Vitae," in *About Art: Critical Essays, 1948-1997* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997), 23.

¹⁴⁷ Lanyon in "Derbyshire 1957," transcript, 21.

¹⁴⁸ Stokes argued that colour in painting should be 'surface colour', not 'film colour', where the former is understood to be readily available, located on the object and not, like film color, experienced as floating a- spatially in our minds eye. He made a distinction between 'surface colour' and the perception of a 'specific illumination', the true colourist being he who is able to unite these two expressions in the work of art. (See Stokes, "Colour and Form" in *Critical Writings*, vol. II, 19).

¹⁴⁹ Fried cited in Robert Linsley, "Mirror Travel in the Yucatan. Robert Smithson, Michael Fried and the New Critical Drama," *Res* 37 (Spring 2000): 7.

¹⁵⁰ Gustave Courbet, in Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, 281.

aspect, which is why Monet would later look upon him with great admiration. Conversely, the motivation behind Cézanne seeking inspiration in the work of Courbet would be entirely different, as he felt drawn to the regional ties and the sense of embodiment in Courbet's work.

What both regionalists Courbet and Lanyon had in common was this wish for the artist to fully identify with the landscape by focusing on a certain dynamic of the picture. The latter comes across as real, because it naturally involves its creator who identifies better with the landscape he knows best, the landscape of his native region. This approach of the native replaced the conventional distance between viewer and scene typical of the artist as controlling on-looker or visitor to a certain place. Just as Cézanne would relate to his native Provence and Courbet to Franche-Comté, so would Lanyon to Cornwall.

William Scott wrote that, during his years of teaching in Corsham Court from 1950-7, Lanyon thought "in a very personal and ... eccentric manner"¹⁵¹; he taught students to paint "lines and marks (in chalk, dust and watercolour on the fields, trees, roads, etc, within the grounds of Corsham Court."¹⁵² His first teacher, the Cornish landscapist Borlase Smart had encouraged him to project himself imaginatively into a scene – 'feel', he said, 'when you paint rocks, the thousands of tons of stone that are taking a hammering from the waves'¹⁵³. Lanyon, in turn, encouraged his students to respond physically, by walking and climbing over the land, stretching and leaping, exploring the denseness of grass and undergrowth, looking at it from new angles, from between the legs or from height, and exploring its surface as a map. Students were asked to collect pebbles and stones and to see in these the larger landscape thus contrasting nature's minutest detail with its largest dimensions.¹⁵⁴

Courbet's lack of interest in choosing a specific viewpoint denoted the fact that the artist did not solely rely on the scrutiny of the eye. Similarly, Lanyon

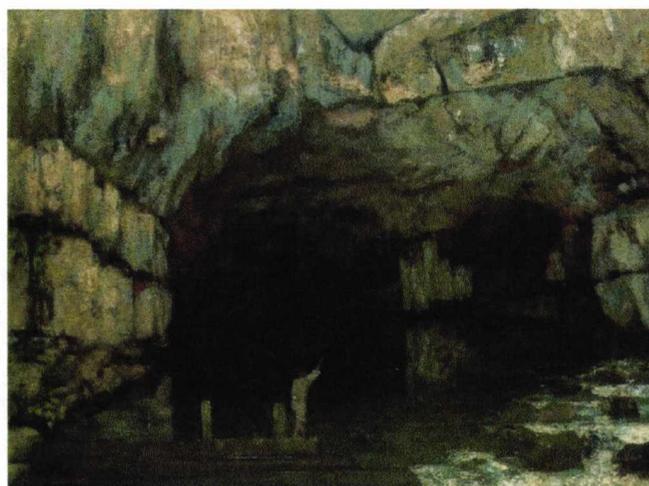
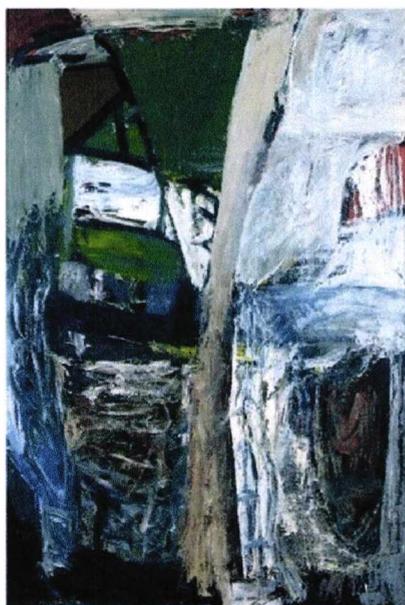
¹⁵¹ William Scott, letter to the Tate Gallery, 17 July 1975, *Illustrated Catalogue of Acquisitions 1974-76* (London: Tate Gallery, 1978), 122.

¹⁵² Haydn Griffiths, in Causey, *Modernism and the Land*, 224.

¹⁵³ Michael Bird, *The St Ives Artists. A Biography of Place and Time* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2008), 63.

¹⁵⁴ Tom Cross, *Painting the Warmth of the Sun. St Ives Artists 1939-1975* (Penzance: Alison Hodge, 1984), 137.

physically explored the landscape from all angles and through all possible means, be it by walking, climbing, running, driving, flying. He did all this in order to make nature “as immediate to him spatially as possible, squeezing out empty space”¹⁵⁵, for instance by climbing up a rock face. This is visible in his impenetrable paintings of 1954-6 made of vivid colour (e.g. *Sandbar*, 1956).



52. Peter Lanyon, *Sandbar*, 1956

53. Gustave Courbet, *The Source of the Loue*, 1864

Causey found a typical parallel of this in Courbet’s work *The Source of the Loue* (1864), in which the same kind of closeness and oneness with nature is achieved, helped by what becomes a current, a channel of communication with the essence of nature and the artist through the water flowing into the dark cave. He argued that, “The relationship between the artist and motif is dynamic, one of give and take, in the same way Lanyon felt himself in the landscape and the landscape in him. With Courbet one feels the rockiness of rocks and, at the same time the rocks as presences close to us and corresponding with our bodies, in the way Lanyon had tried to describe as a rock climber, his body pressed close against the Cornish cliffs.”¹⁵⁶ This is precisely what Lanyon himself has wished to be able to express in his painting, the “thingness” of things, of certain elements in the landscape, which would make the experience as real to the viewer as it was for the artist.

¹⁵⁵ Causey, *Modernism and the Land*, 149.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

This process of identification with the landscape was best sought out in his late 'weather paintings' which he started producing from 1957. In Forge's interview, Lanyon showed how keen he was to explore the landscape far further than the horizontal axis of the land, the ground and below ground. Through the new aerial access to the landscape when gliding, he added the dimension of height to that of depth and extent as he embarked on an exploration of the vertical axis. "Extending the vertical axis introduced contrast between the dark, constricted ambience of mines and cliff-faces, and the freedom of air and the swift, silent movement of the glider."¹⁵⁷ What Harold Rosenberg saw as physicality in Pollock's painting process could never apply to Lanyon's art, for whom the physical element was not limited to the movement of his arm, in the act of painting. The physicality of the painting process started with the movement of the artist's body in the landscape. In his case, the artist was not just a person looking at, but investigating, getting acquainted with a place, gathering information. This is shown in Lanyon's recorded tapes of 'Offshore in Progress'¹⁵⁸, produced in 1959 in which he wrote, "I think it is the logical result of this constructive process which, starting in a extreme awareness of oneself in a place, ends in an extreme awareness of oneself in a painting,"¹⁵⁹ This, once again, recalls Merleau-Ponty's core ideas on the phenomenological approach of Cézanne.

Phenomenological Considerations of Place in Postwar Painting

Peter Lanyon once suggested that his paintings were as much *about* the body and the self as they were *about* landscape.¹⁶⁰ The same idea was suggested by the cultural geographer Edward Relph in *Place and Placelessness* (1970), in which he described places as " fusions of human and natural order and [...] the significant centers of our immediate experiences of the world"¹⁶¹, emphasising the essential experiential nature of place. For Relph, place had the capacity to order and focus

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁵⁸ *Offshore* was inspired by a sudden storm at sea observed from several locations during a walk along the shore at St. Ives. The dramatic dynamic of the brushstrokes record both Lanyon's physical and visual sensations as the storm came inland. Describing the creation of the painting Lanyon said: "...a gale of wind is circling offshore at the top of the picture, and below on the inshore side are black shapes that derived from anchors and grapples and tarred nets stretched out on the grassy hill in the foreground." Lanyon, in "Offshore in Progress," transcribed by Adrian Lewis in *Artscribe* (March 1982): 58.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁶⁰ See Stephens, *At the Edge of Landscape*, 10.

¹⁶¹ See Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976), 141.

human intentions, experience, and behaviour spatially. The actual physical exploration of space in Lanyon's case greatly contributed to his perception of place; he understood that the successful landscape painter should open his senses to all aspects of a particular place in order to re-create the 'existential' insideness which connects him to his environment.¹⁶² The embodiment of the artist in the scene, was characterised by dynamism and sometimes this aspect could be so overwhelming and intense that it would interfere with the actual logic of the painting. As Lanyon stated, "What I didn't recognize was that I hadn't pushed the painting far enough away from myself, that the involvement of myself in the sea, in the roughness, the tumble-in, the going-out ... it was all too active... The image was lost behind a mess of painting."

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In his art, place became an entirely subjective concept, as it stood for intimately lived experience. "When Lanyon started to learn how to fly gliders, [...] it was as though he was experimenting in order to discover whether experience could come up with anything as powerful as imagination,"¹⁶⁴ Michael Bird noted. This suggests that Lanyon replaced the notion of 'imagined' place in the romantic tradition with a new phenomenological take – landscape as lived experience, adapted to the twentieth-century sensibility. This brings to mind perhaps the differences between the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre in relation to the creative process. For Sartre, imagination was vital in our understanding of the world. In his view, the artist begins with a mental image of his subject, and in painting, he 'simply' constructs "a material analogue of such a kind that everyone can grasp"¹⁶⁵; the work of art thus directly refers the viewer back to an image in the mind of the artist. In *L'Imaginaire* (1940), Sartre wrote that, as opposed to perception, which relies on our senses and is incomplete, imagination is total, yet very much pre-determined by our expectations of what reality should be like. For the imaginary process to happen, this 'analogon' i.e. an equivalent of perception was required, for instance, a work of art, which through the process of imagination is endowed with the characteristics we choose to attribute to it, which renders it, quasi-real. Imagination thus sets us free, by enabling us to constitute the world based on our intentions.

¹⁶² Anthony Wallersteiner, "Peter Lanyon: Coastal Journey: St. Ives," *The Burlington Magazine* 143, no. 1176 (March 2001): 175.

¹⁶³ Lanyon, "Offshore in Progress", 56-60.

¹⁶⁴ Bird, *The St Ives Artists*, 156.

¹⁶⁵ Jean P. Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1972), 220.

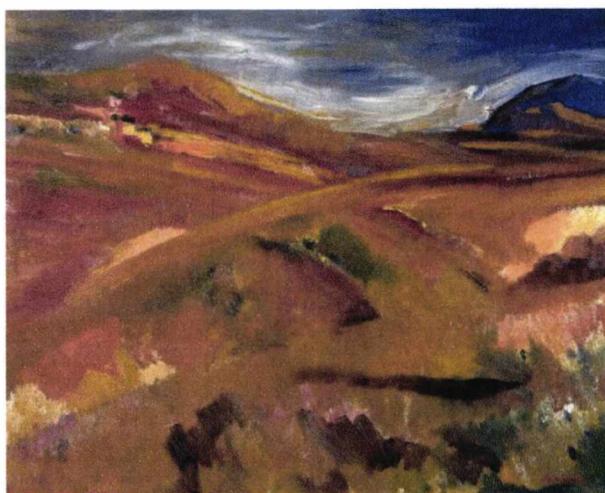
By contrast to this view, Lanyon's art, as shown before, seemed to be based on the phenomenological considerations of the creative process devised by Merleau-Ponty. In *The Adventures of the Dialectic* (1955), the latter criticised Sartre for precisely his distancing of imagination from lived experience. He wanted to reunite the visible/perceptual with the invisible/imaginary. While for Sartre, imagination was the negation of the world, for Merleau-Ponty, imagination was the expression of it. Merleau-Ponty believed that imagination must have some prior, unexplainable knowledge of essences which enables it to create its objects. In my view, the role of experience here actually overlaps with that of imagination. Lanyon's work was closely grounded in life experience. For instance, he considered being part of the RAF during the war as an important stage which encouraged him to find a new pictorial language which would most aptly translate lived experience. "War had changed Lanyon's attitude to painting. In the struggle to find a new form for his work his concern now was for the physical reality of landscape realized in time and space, and for human beings in an ever changing world. He was deeply dedicated to his subjects in Cornwall, but in order to capture their mood he looked for the new pictorial forms which fitted his own physical and emotional experiences."¹⁶⁶

This need to identify with a particular place through intense personal experience also recalls, for example, the postwar work of David Bomberg. During a summer visit to the north Penwith coast in 1947 the artist produced a series of profoundly expressive works as a result of his close involvement with 'the darker and more turbulent moods of Cornwall'. During six weeks of concentrated work in Zennor, he began to produce "a number of big, difficult and dangerous pictures in a state of high excitement. Towards the end of his time there the weather broke and there were storms, but he continued to paint outdoors in the rain, stimulated by the way in which torrential downpours and enormous curtains of cloud shouldered their way into the pigment."¹⁶⁷ His paintings recorded the changes of weather, scorching heat or driving wind and rain, the most extreme movements of the sea, and the strength of form in the granite landscape. In a painting of this period, *Tregor and Tregoff* (1947), he captured the bleak hills and strong late summer sun in red and

¹⁶⁶ Cross, *Painting the Warmth of the Sun*, 78.

¹⁶⁷ Christopher Neve, *Unquiet Landscape. Places and Ideas in Twentieth-Century English Painting* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), 153.

ochre, in a form of expressionism unfamiliar to most of the St Ives artists at the time.¹⁶⁸ The subject of this process was not merely the painter's visual impression of nature, but its immense scale and energy, experienced first hand. It was the mass of the landscape that Bomberg felt he needed to convey, in his words, the 'billions of tons of living rock', weighing down on the land, beaten and formed by the heavy weather, just as it was beating down on his own back.



54. David Bomberg, *Tregor and Tregoff*, Cornwall, 1947
55. Terry Frost, *Red, Black and White*, 1955

The notion of the revelation of deep personal experience was often offered by artists in the 1950s as an explanation of their work. Similarly, personal struggle could result in an epiphanous experience, helping the artists suddenly become aware of the essential nature or meaning of something. Another artist whose perceptual awareness of his own being in relation to the environment strongly influenced the way he painted was Lanyon's friend, Terry Frost. He spoke of a physical challenge, the physical deprivation of starvation whilst in a Stalag prison camp during the war, which similar to Lanyon's experience gliding or Bomberg braving the storm, brought about "a tremendous spiritual experience, a more aware or heightened perception", which never left him. "There are moments when I can tune into the 'truth', contact the other part of us and nature,"¹⁶⁹ partly as a result of that experience, he argued. Whilst

¹⁶⁸ Cross, *Painting the Warmth of the Sun*, 178.

¹⁶⁹ Terry Frost, "Important Thing Is Obviously Wanting to Do Something," undated typescript, Tate Archive IGA 7919.2.8.

painting in Leeds from 1954, Frost was inspired by the open Yorkshire Dales, producing a series of works strongly relying on sensory experience. The artist explained the metamorphosis of memories of perceptions into the plastic dimension of painting in *Red, Black and White* (1956), through this account of a walk to Herbert Read's house at Stonegrave:

We ... struggled through the snow, so deep it came over the tops of wellingtons; the angle of the hill seemed about 45 degrees and we had to lean to walk and counter the slope. It was a clear bright day and I looked up and saw the white sun spinning on the top of a copse. Afterwards and now I recall that I thought I saw a naples yellow blinding circle spinning on top of black verticals. The sensation was true. I was spellbound and, of course, when I tried to look again 'it' had gone, just a sun and a copse on the brow of a hill covered in snow. I don't think I really stopped to see it. I do remember my heart almost stopped at the experience and it was gone. So I came back and I painted *Red, Black and White* 1956. I didn't come back and just paint the picture. I never was able to do that. I never wished to do that. I always have to absorb the moments and let them go for I have to make the idea, the discovery. Sometimes I go for a couple of years before I can get clean as it were and discover the moment again in paint.¹⁷⁰

Although the work comes across as strictly schematic at first sight, its underlying source is perceptual reference. Through a complex process, Frost would eventually exteriorise actual lived experience on the flat surface of the canvas by means of a balanced structure (e.g. he often used the Golden Section) and colour of varied intensity, opacity and depth. Objective visual landmarks in the landscape thus become highly personalised shapes as they stand for the sensations, memories, the surprise of a particular experience.

Another artist whose indirect contribution to the redefinition of perceptual place is often overlooked, is Ivon Hitchens. The artist consistently expressed an interest in the narrative within the landscape, hence his preference for the horizontal format. Nevertheless, his was no 'traditional' narrative, but a 'first-person' narrative: Hitchens wanted to endow the viewer with the literal ability of exploring the illusionary space of his paintings. The artist made a general criticism of contemporary painting for its lack of "solid reality [where] the space between one object and another is of differing proportions, differing in tone and colour and significance. This is both

¹⁷⁰ Terry Frost: *Paintings, Drawings and Collages* (Exeter: South West Arts, 1976).

mental and visual,”¹⁷¹ he argued. Presumably, what Hitchens meant here was that, because most of the abstractions of his contemporaries were simply autonomous constructions, the empathy with the visual logic and balance of the outside world was lost, therefore making it difficult to identify with the space of those pictures; this made it impossible for the viewer to virtually ‘inhabit’ their pictorial space or ‘travel’ within the picture, as it were.



56. Peter Lanyon: *Offshore*, 1959

57. Ivon Hitchens: *Study on a Hot Day*, 1948

Garlake linked the way Hitchens perceived place to the recent theories of Tony Hiss about the notion of ‘simultaneous perception’. In *The Experience of Place* (1991), the American environmentalist argued how profoundly we are affected by the places around us. He wrote of a multi-sensory perception of the environment in which we are equally aware of ourselves and everything surrounding us and “look for ways in which we are connected to or are part of our surroundings”¹⁷². He considered that simultaneous perception of a place “diffuses the beam of attention even handedly across all the senses so we can take in whatever is around us which means sensations of touch and balance, for instance, in addition to all sights, sounds and smells.”¹⁷³ Hitchens was said to lie down on the grass and paint in a very close proximity to his subject, ‘taking the pulse of nature’: leaves shifting, the wind blowing, the sun shining through the foliage, the flight of insects and birds through the summer sky (e.g. *Study on a Hot Day*, 1948). As his senses sharpened, the artist became aware of the smallest of these moments, which were recorded with precise swaths of colour. The most insignificant outside stimuli became a new visual reality on canvas, one which would

¹⁷¹ Ivon Hitchens, “Notes on Painting” (1956), in Garlake, *New Art, New World*, Note 98, 264.

¹⁷² Tony Hiss, *The Experience of Place* (New York: Random House, 1991), 21-2.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, xiii.

equally pulsate, breathe and move, with his gesture recording this natural dynamism. Hitchens considered his work in musical terms; he believed that the visual 'sound' is of the first and greatest importance and without it the picture is useless. He claimed his pictures were painted to be 'listened' to", stressing the importance of holistic synaesthetic harmony.

It seems that in the immediate aftermath of the war which had threatened sovereignty, fractured geographical and political identities and cultures and left landscapes scarred and damaged, place became invested with deep and special significance. During this time, Romanticism unsurprisingly re-flourished and the first psychological accounts of the phenomenology of place and space started appearing. National identity too took a great meaning in these circumstances. War not only strengthened the idea of place and the landscape as a redemptive genre, but equally, in a counter direction, it encouraged the idea that art should set itself apart from society entirely, either as a perceptual investigation divorced from social questions, or from the point of view of complete formalism.

Conclusion

The definition of 'place' posed difficulties in British postwar painting because the notion was very different from the way it was perceived in the historical and representational idioms of the English visual and literary tradition. Neo-Romantics such as Piper and Minton sought a way of understanding 'place' by reverting to the Picturesque for the ideological capabilities of its symbolism. Their reinterpretation of eighteenth-century models reiterated the focus on place as a metaphor of creative freedom, as opposed to the traditional aesthetic perception of place. In the wartime climate, this approach was particularly suitable for endowing place with nostalgic, idealising and patriotic connotations. The visual records of the neo-Romantics provided a timely vision of the national heritage at a time of crisis, showing the spirit of place as unsettled by the ravages of war. These artists actively pursued an ideal rendering of place which would restore the world to its original harmony, by using a pronounced elegiac tone and a tendency for escapism. The concept of *genius loci* was linked to rural settings, and from its role of facilitator of escapism, the concept became closely attached to that of regionalism, as an important means of preserving traditions and establishing a modernist national culture. While highly metaphorical, the neo-Romantic reading still implied the existence of a physical, external place, hence it continued to rely on narrative.

In the later work of artists such as Nash and Sutherland, the 'sense of place' became a feeling, an aura, a vague quality which could not be quantified. Place was no longer linked to an external, aesthetically perceived *genius loci*, like it had been the case in eighteenth-century art, but it was determined by the artist. Moreover, 'place' could no longer be separated from the individual's relationship with a locality. While symbolism was still present, the latter became more and more detached from social and political ideology. Within this new form of personal symbolism, the metaphor of freedom referred less to national freedom and was centred more on the individual. The descriptive elements in the work of Piper and Minton gave way to increasing stylisation and gestural freedom, paving the way for the new modernist developments of the 1950s.

As opposed to the term 'landscape', 'place' is hard to define precisely because it relates to an individual's psychological constitution. The research of several cultural geographers endorse this idea. Meinig wrote that "a well-cultivated sense of place is an important dimension of human well-being"¹, while Lowenthal and Prince supported this idea claiming that places are linked most of all with persons by historical events or literary allusions.² Relph's view is most relevant to this argument, as he focused on the essential experiential nature of place. He wrote of the *genius loci* as "belonging to a place and the deep and complete identity with a place".³ One of the theories emerging from this is that of 'insideness' - the idea that the more strongly an environment generates a sense of belonging, the more strongly that environment becomes a place. Places, he wrote, "are fusions of human and natural order and are the significant centers of our immediate experiences of the world"⁴.

With the Neo-Romantics, place became internalised and a means of coping with psychological trauma. Nash's greatest breakthrough was to cease considering 'place' as an external referent and redefine it as an expression of the inner world. The relationship with 'place' became a very personal process of emotional purging. These artists did not need to experience 'place' physically – imagination and memory provided the means by which to conjure up the 'sense of place'. This view differed from the view of a 'place' as a result of direct, embodied experience in the work of postwar artists such as Lanyon and Hitchens.

With the advent of modernist formalism, the concept became irrelevant for many artists working with autonomous abstraction, and no special importance was given to it. From this perspective, life was separate from art, therefore landscape was only important as an external source of visual harmony which would inspire independent arrangements of colour and form in painting. On the one hand, the European legacy was visible in the formal constructions of postwar artists such as Heron, Scott or Pasmore, in which the notion of 'place' was annulled altogether,

¹ Donald W. Meinig, *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 49.

² David Lowenthal and Hugh C. Prince, "English Landscape Tastes," *Geographical Review* 55 (1965): 186-222.

³ Edward Relph: *Place and Placelessness (Research in Planning & Design)* (London: Pion, 1976), 55.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

landscape now being solely relevant as visual aesthetic object. On the other hand, American formalism focused on an abstract expression of subjective feeling which, again, excluded the implication of 'place'. David Ley argued that modernist formalism created spaces not places.⁵ Alloway's exhibition *Place* (1959) illustrated this idea. Denny, Smith and Rumney's autonomous, environmental abstractions, alterable by audience participation, wanted to mark a clear break with the notion of place linked to locality, such as in St Ives painting. Alloway claimed these artists were inspired by the subjective spatial extensions of New York School abstractionists such as Newman and Rothko. It is interesting to remember that Relph criticised modernism for being a dehumanising process, where the lack of 'place' meant a lack of identity. There is a paradox here if we consider the spatial abstractions shown by Alloway, which were meant to be an expression of pure subjectivity. The title of his exhibition could, in this sense, be seen as ironic: without the link to locality, without any historical or cultural reference and the individual's relationship with a locality, no notion of 'place' can exist. It seems that what these artists produced instead was a conceptual, formal rendering of space.

Contemporary definitions point towards the fact that the 'sense of a place' or, one may say, the 'atmosphere' of a place, does not refer to aesthetics but the way by which the individual inhabiting it acts or defines it. Artists such as Lanyon and Hitchens reinforced the perceptual nature of 'place'. Their approach to landscape differed from the romantic approach of Sutherland or Nash, who worked predominantly with imagination and memory, Heron or Scott who used landscape as the subject of a formal aesthetic exercise or Smith and Rumney, who conceptualised space. The works of Bomberg, Lanyon, Hitchens or Frost were testaments that such places existed in reality, hence their often specific titles. Place was no longer a generalised metaphor, as had been the case with Nash. Instead, place helped towards an intuitive understanding of the world, accessed perceptually, by all human senses. The sole participant in these works was the artist-viewer, turned explorer of their visual world; from this phenomenological angle, art totally overlapped life. 'Place'

⁵ David Ley, "Modernism, Postmodernism and the Struggle for Place," in *The Power of Place: Bringing Together Geographical and Sociological Imaginations*, edited by John A. Agnew and James S. Duncan (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 47.

was no more external to the body, but became the embodied experience of the natural environment, generated by the process itself of painting the landscape.

Lanyon's art was particularly important to postwar constructions of place, as his phenomenological approach was built on a solid ideological foundation. It referred both to the issue of place as socially constructed, historical entity and as subjective experience central to the definition of the self. While it was linked to a specific location, it also contained symbolic, social and historical associations; it was both about culture and nature.⁶ His ties with St Ives gave his work an extra dimension, a wholeness born out of the union of knowledge and experience of place, akin to that of Cézanne or Courbet. It thus seems that the concept of 'place' is loaded with meaning and is far more relevant for artist and viewer than 'landscape', yet it eludes definition precisely because of its personal significance for each artist in turn.

The object of this thesis was to situate the genre of landscape painting within the postwar context and demonstrate that its definitions cannot be considered simplistically. Its adaptability in postwar art systematically contradicts Andrew Forge's view of the slow disappearance of the genre in the modern world. Breaking its redemptive and descriptive shackles, landscape was reinvented both by the modernist concern for introspection and formal technicalities, culminating in the late 1950s as the abstract expression of phenomenological experience.

A chief interest of this thesis was to prove the existence, and reinforce the position of, an alternative, humanist modernism in Britain which challenged formalism. From the beginnings of modernist theorisation, there were quarrels within contemporary criticism about how modernism should be conceptualised, with some proponents arguing for a view of it as being simply about form and artistic language, and others suggesting that it was principally about expression. These issues continued to be present in the way artists described their works and in their intentions towards the creative process. In this sense, the phenomenological understanding of some

⁶ See Chris Stephens, *Peter Lanyon. At the Edge of Landscape* (London: 21 Publishing, 2000), 17.

British postwar artists of this process helped them develop an idiom which set itself apart from Greenberg's limiting reading of modernism.

This thesis has shown that a series of comparable and conflicting trends coexisted within British postwar landscape painting, originating from various art-historical and ideological sources. Its intention was to collate and examine material which has not been considered in one place before. It has cast a wide angle on the topic, dealing in each chapter with subjects which could have been allocated the space of an entire thesis, and has hopefully opened up new ways of considering postwar landscape painting which would benefit from further scrutiny and investigation.

There are several leads here to future research in areas which due to limitations of space could not be explored fully. Firstly, the postwar exchanges between British, continental European and American artists and the effect these relations had on their art should be investigated in more detail. Also, a comparison between regionalist tendencies in British, French and American art may result in findings which may further explain the way the artist's approach to landscape developed in the aftermath of the war. Another interesting topic of research could be the gendered debate between British modernist painting, characterised by a predominant lyricism, referentiality and in this sense, a certain feminine nature, and American painting, which was typically geometrical, programmatic and supported by a typical militant masculine discourse. An in-depth investigation of the political and social positions of the two countries should provide the ideological backing to such readings of postwar art. Lastly, this thesis has focused exclusively on the subject of landscape in painting, yet in view of the considerations on phenomenology in the last chapter and the increasing awareness of landscape as environment, further research could be done on the subject of landscape in sculpture, installation and land art in the postwar period.

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