

‘Sombre , magnificent’:

Clare Woods and the neo -romantic past

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Painted in late 1939 and early 1940, Graham Sutherland’s *Black Landscape* is inevitably read in relation to its historical moment at the beginning of the Second World War. A dark, pregnant mountain, its more phallic cousin, and the skeletal hemlock plants set against a louring, pink-red sky come to stand for a pervasive anxiety at the outbreak of war. But the painting would hardly matter if its intention was as trite as to make comment simply on the state of world politics and their impact on individual psychologies. The power of Sutherland’s art comes from its range, ambiguity and mystery. Embodying Auden’s *Age of Anxiety*, it speaks of states of unease deeper and broader than those relating to the world today – and of a deeper, ancestral time than just the immediate moment. It is of its time but also aspires to make a statement that is universal.

The turning point for Sutherland’s art was said to be his discovery of the Pembrokeshire estuary landscape where he found the twisted roots and plants that would people his paintings of the late 1930s. The artist himself, however, very quickly noted that in his paraphrasing of those found organic forms there was something akin to the paintings of Picasso and the Surrealists. As with the work of contemporaries such as Paul Nash and Henry Moore, his seemed to open up ideas of the unconscious, of deeper impulses, of the erotic and the uncanny. Like all great art, *Black Landscape* both belongs to its time and seeks, at least, to speak of something more universal, deeper and longer.

Recently, Clare Woods wrote an appreciation of *Black Landscape*. In it she wrote of anxiety – of how, having moved from Bethnal Green in East London to Kington in the Welsh borders, her fear of the human threat apprehended in the city had been displaced by a fear of something larger and less tangible. She found a parallel for this new-found anxiety in *Black Landscape*. Coincidences abound, Woods’ urban fear was not simply that of the unseen person, of anticipated individual attack; it was less abstract and founded on experience. Woods had been in the area when, on 7th July 2005, a terrorist detonated a bomb on the Number 30 bus travelling through London’s Tavistock Square. The event made actual the common anxiety that attends the city, the crowd, the metropolitan mass. Fear to walk about the city at night is not just the recognition, based on rational evaluation, of the possibility of attack by muggers but also the deeper, unconscious fear of the dark, of the unseen and unknown. Part of the horror of the July bombs was that in their randomness they made real what ought to be irrational fears. The image of the red double-decker bus, in a familiar London street, violently ripped open – a hideous perversion of one of the iconic images of the city – was repeatedly reprinted and broadcast, bombarding on-lookers and reiterating and reinforcing the nightmare notion that amongst the crowd and anonymity of the city might really lurk the bogeyman. In the country, the obscurity of night brings on the senses of dread and fear, and turns benign presences – hills, trees and unseen animals – into disembodied threats. In the city, it is the obscurity of the crowd that conjures up such fantastic images.

Woods turns repeatedly to the Neo-Romantic culture of mid-twentieth-century Britain and its fascination with the British landscape, its ancient and rural past and threatened, ruined architectural heritage.

From the 1930s through to the 1950s, the opportunities and threats of modernity opened up a seam of thought that looked to an ancient, mystical, pastoral Britain both for a model and as solace. Samuel Palmer's timeless shepherds and William Blake's 'ancient times' provided a template for Sutherland and his contemporaries; the landscape became not a picturesque object of vision but a palimpsest inscribed with the histories of human life and occupation. Standing stones, ancient burial sites, legend and mythology embodied a perceived relationship between humankind and the land, reanimating ideas of *genius loci*, the spirit of a place, of the abstract and unknown. Ancient cultures and beliefs were now understood afresh in light of theories of the unconscious and, unsurprisingly, there formed a natural dialogue between this new romanticism and Surrealism.

Neo-Romanticism was of its time. It was a response to the progress of modernity, not only to the threat that was seen to be posed to the countryside and to rural life, but also to the supposed rationality of the city. It gathered momentum with the rise of Nazism and Fascism in Europe and was seen by some as a retreat into a nationalistic nostalgia in the run-up to and during the Second World War. It was also, crucially, forged in the shadow of the earlier war. After his time as an Official War Artist in the First World War, Paul Nash made a number of paintings of landscapes that encompass still pools of water. Innocuous, unremarkable, dull, these places and images become perhaps more compelling when one recalls the recurrent attention he paid in his wartime paintings to the pools of stagnant water that formed in the muddy shell holes of the Western Front. If the broken trees that he seemed to use as metaphors for the dead in such works as *The Menin Road*, 1919, were replaced by the more optimistic saplings of his later *Landscape at Iden*, 1929, these pools speak perhaps of the War's persistent presence long after the Armistice. In the 1920s and 1930s, its long shadow fell across England's landscape.

Clare Woods has also made paintings based on woodland ponds and they have a similar sense of unease or disquiet. Their dark surfaces capture the sky's reflection, hinting at a world unseen beyond the dank recesses of the painting's space. Sinuous branches and clumps of foliage become ambiguous presences as they are silhouetted against the light or reflected in the water, the instability in their presence and position in space adding to their symbolic potential and the possibility of them being something other than what they seem. If not anthropomorphic themselves, they conjure an atmosphere of threat and anxiety akin to walking in a forest at night. In fact, this aspect of their imagery combines with the hard surface and luminous density of Woods' enamel and household paints to bring to mind the great sequence from Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in which Snow White runs through the dark wood as branches become skeletal hands reaching out and clutching at her. In a painting like *Daddy Witch*, 2008 (Arts Council Collection), Woods perfectly captured the unspecific and inexplicable sense of dread that comes in a dark wood.

The large-scale works made for this exhibition mark a departure. While still looking back to the Neo-Romantic moment of the 1940s, these are now based on images of monumental rock formations. Indeed, this relationship with the Neo-Romantics is reinforced; the central motif is the landscape of *Brimham Rocks*, the natural structures in the Yorkshire Dales that were cited as a formative influence by Henry Moore. They were also depicted by Sutherland in a poster for *Shell*

Petrol and discussed by him in an article in 1937. ¹ The soft, stratified sedimentary stone allowed for extraordinary forms to be carved out by glacial waters and subsequent wind and rain. In the rounded, convoluted, undercut shapes that result echoes of faces and bodies have inevitably been found, and the various rocks have been given such names as The Sphinx, The Watchdog and The Camel. They are naturally formed, totemic presences in a wild landscape. As such they were an obvious subject for Neo-Romanticism.

Tying in with ideas of ancient populations and mysticism, Neo-Romanticism described an erotic, abjected bodily landscape. In Snowdonia John Piper found an undulating terrain of full, rounded rocks, rough scree and rising slopes that he could depict as if the sumptuous forms of a reclining female figure. To the south in Pembrokeshire, Sutherland found an estuary landscape of roots and broken branches that he turned into bodily forms: truncated, dismembered, sexualised figures. Moore's sculpted female figures were both imagined in the landscape and as one with the landscape. Their breasts and hips rise and slope down like the land and their forms are hollowed out, the opened orifices and spiralling crevices evoking subterranean tunnels. The cavities and hollows are balanced, frequently, with rising phallic forms – landscape, body, totem and phallus fuse in Moore's work. The body, for these artists, is one with nature, its forms and drives fusing with those of the land and its occupants.

Sutherland's essay on Brimham Rocks reveals the anthropomorphising gaze he brought to bear on them and seems to demonstrate that Woods' paintings echo his text.

'It is a primitive environment... Their outlines, devoid of order or rhythm, confuse the eye as the crazy cacophony of church bells confuse the ear... The setting sun, as it were precipitating new colours, turns the stone, rising from its undulating bed of bright green moss and blackened heather, yellow, pink and vermillion. The coloured patches which streak the surfaces give emphasis to the form and variety to the eye. These patches are warm, even in a cold light. But now they assume tones of blood... Here it is as if, by a kind of prodigality of nature, the natural processes must add to the patterns inherent in matter. '2

The rocks embody the very essence of nature, it seems, being at once both figure-like and entropic, contained and formless.

The process of Woods' image making is gradual and unexpected. Getting to know the landscape by moving over, in and through it, she takes photographs of different views, aspects, details and vistas. In the studio these digital images are selected and stitched together to produce a panoramic image that is both subjective and descriptive, realistic though contrived. Over the collaged photographs is laid clear acetate onto which Woods traces certain aspects of the image. This is the crucial moment of editorial selection as the flat photographic image is translated into a linear pattern of black outlines. Drawing her pen around the forms in the photograph, Woods will not necessarily simply follow their outer edges but also selected details, of form or patterning, so that the main shape of the subject is diluted or disguised by the confusion of profile with surface. This, then, is not the drawing of a silhouette but more akin to camouflage. The almost abstract patterning of this line drawing is then made into a stencil, cut to follow the linear pattern so that it can be removed gradually and the colour placed in the complex structure of inter-twining areas

of board. One result of this process of progressive translations of the image is a pattern of fluid-looking shapes – irregular blobs or long, sinuous, feathery forms. The paint – until recently enamel or household paint but more recently oil – is then applied within the intricately delineated areas. The rich, dark, rather acidic colours further obscure the object of depiction as they build and intensify the sense of ominous threat and eerie strangeness that pervades the work.

A sense of the landscape of rocks from which Woods set off in her painting journey remains, buried, disguised and extrapolated into something other than itself. The disconnection of the paint from the motif and pattern from form enhance the potential for suggestive ambiguity; the rocks become heads, breasts, phalli, parted thighs. Complex mottled surfaces, curvaceous forms and the movement of the paint both support the image of the rocks and obscure it behind suggestions of other things. A sequence of long, thin, irregular forms might be random but also suggest stratification, the energy of convergent colours and brush marks may or may not derive from a cascading stream but certainly obtain erotic overtones in Woods' treatment. In a typically Neo-Romantic way, the landscape and the body become synthesised in an evocation of ancient ideas of mother earth, of nature's fecundity and of some associated sense of dread. Woods presents the rocks as brooding presences; ominous, looming personages with an enhanced air of threat deriving from the harsh, bitter and dark palette with which they are described. A human presence is not only represented through these anthropomorphic suggestions; in one work, one of the details conserved in the artist's selection is a name carved into the surface of a rock. In this place, and translated into art, a piece of graffiti becomes a marker of a past human occupation akin to a Celtic cross or the paintings at Lascaux. This trace fits into a romantic type, then, but also introduces the feeling of dread that derives from a sense of an unseen presence, a common theme in gothic literature and films, and an extension of that fear that Woods had felt in the metropolis.

The incised record of a past human presence also opens up the question of time, that these forms and this landscape are witness to, as well as a stage for, the passage of history. For the Neo-Romantic, the landscape was less the unchanging idyll of the classical imagination and more a shifting, organic, entropic entity under constant change and revision. Interestingly, Woods notes that the rocks of Brimham are thought to have been carved not only by rivers, winds and rain but also by human hand. Whether this is accurate or not, her interest in this further human trace and the tension between authentic nature and the man-made is telling. All landscapes have been shaped and reshaped by humankind and culture. The scale and fluidity of Woods' painted forms somehow capture this sense of contingency that is in contrast with the idea of permanence more typically attached to such forms as Brimham Rocks.

Contrived artificiality is a key element in the mix of Woods' art. The flowing, layered forms of her paintings are interrupted by straight lines. These are not painted lines but points of disjuncture where colours change abruptly or apparently coherent contours appear misaligned. Some of these are the points at which the boards of her enormous paintings meet, but others are deliberately made in paint. They derive from the edges of the overlapping, collaged photographs in the early stages of her images' development. They have no descriptive function; on the contrary, they undermine the paintings' efforts to suggest rocks

and bodies. This small act of reflexivity, the highlighting of the process of the making of the object helps protect Woods from some of the potential pitfalls of her approach. Woods sees her large paintings as continuous with her early work as a sculptor, seeing them as three-dimensional objects with a scale and presence in space that require the viewer to move around them. Like sculpture, they are also concerned with their own materials and, as these disjunctive lines reveal, with the process of their making.

To be a landscape painter, especially one clearly aligned with the Neo-Romantic culture around the Second World War, is a risky strategy for an artist in the early twenty-first century. The artists and culture she chooses to study and emulate were deeply unfashionable and derided for at least a generation. In the modernist histories that dominated from the 1960s, British art of the 1940s was an embarrassing nationalistic and conservative reaction against modernity. It was seen as 'a dark decade of British art... best forgotten.'³ Our art culture now similarly attaches greater value to the metropolitan than to the rural: an artist will be seen as having a greater intensity or integrity if working in the urban grit of Bethnal Green than amidst the owl-hoots of the Welsh borders. Woods, perhaps, offsets this simplistic assumption with the knowingness of her art: she is not simply influenced by Neo-Romantic art of the mid-twentieth century, but plays with it as her subject, as reflected in her choice of Brimham Rocks that was a key site for Sutherland and Moore. The disruption of any cohesive image by the referencing of process and artificiality similarly makes this work as much about art and representation as about the body-landscape duality.

This seems even truer of the latest works in which Woods has eschewed the landscape for sculptures. Tellingly, these sculptures are all from the period during and after the Second World War and are all works associated with the culture of miserable dread that followed in the wake of the war and the Holocaust. By Jean Fautrier, Moore and Sutherland, the works Woods addresses in these paintings are icons of the visual culture of that historical moment, representations of human frailty and human cruelty. All use a degree of natural form, of organic abstraction, to conjure their sense of threat. Fautrier's *Large Tragic Head* was made in 1942 during the brutal Nazi occupation of France. A decade later, Moore's *Warrior with Shield* was an evocation of human vulnerability and suffering as relevant to the Cold War during which it was made as it was to the memory of the Second World War.

Like these sculptures, Woods' paintings are curious and unsettling. They are, perhaps, celebrations of the power of the earlier works of art. One might presume they are driven by a desire to recapture and recapitulate the bronzes' messages of fear and dread. They might also, however, be reflections on the ways in which imagery operates. Perhaps there is a dialogue between these new paintings and her others, the latter being of landscape features that suggest the human form, the former being of representations of the human form that recall the landscape. All have a tension between their circumscribed wholeness and a contingent instability. Woods revisits the art of the past: the romantic vision of the landscape as an eroticised body and the use of the human head as a vehicle for the tragedy of their time. In 1944 Cyril Connolly wrote that 'the masterpieces appropriate to our time are... sombre, magnificent yet personal statements of our tragedy.' Woods revisits the works of that time, or their central motifs and characteristics. In looking to the past, she uses ideas of landscape and nature to reflect feelings of anxiety and threat. At the same time, she

reflects upon the ways in which such ideas are represented. It is an art that is intense, sincere and yet also reflexive, about the natural realm, the human psyche – and about art itself. It is, as Connolly prescribed, an art that is sombre and magnificent.

1. Graham Sutherland, 'An English Stone Landmark' in Myfanwy Evans (ed.), *The Painter's Object*, London, 1937, pp. 91–2.

qq.

2. Sutherland, 'An English Stone Landmark', 1937.

3. Alan Bowness, *Decade 40s: Painting, Sculpture and Drawing in Britain 1940–49*, Arts Council exh. cat., 1972, p. 5.