

## Unquiet Nature

“The countryside is waiting indestructibly to return where urbanization has encroached upon it, lurking only just beyond the last houses of a suburb, the confines of a village, or just out of earshot of a busy main road. There it crouches, weird, untamed, in a profound sense unknown, ready to reclaim its own from the pride of man.”

Ithell Colquhoun, *The Living Stones: Cornwall* (1957)

The countryside has often been portrayed as a pastoral idyll, an orderly world of agriculture and country estates. But as Simon Schama has suggested ‘There have always been two kinds of arcadia: shaggy and smooth; dark and light; a place of bucolic leisure and a place of primitive panic.’ Perhaps an unconscious wariness of the uncivilized wildwoods and their nature spirits endures?

The looming presence of trees seems to have a particularly unsettling power. Strange bestial features might be traced in the trunk that dominates Blaze Cyan’s *Croft Castle*. In Graham Sutherland’s *Pastoral* branches stretch out as if

vengeful nature might ensnare the unwary traveller. Paul Nash's *Monster Field* photographs reveal an unsettling primal energy: 'we are not studying two fallen trees that look like animals, but two monster objects outside the plane of natural phenomena'.

Humans project their troubles on to the environment around them and artists have channelled fears and anxieties into their depictions of nature. The Neo-Romantic artists of the 1940s were inspired by Samuel Palmer's visions of the Kent countryside made a century earlier, but the shadow of war took that paradise on earth and twisted it into something dark and menacing.

In Michael Ayrton's *Entrance to a Wood* the path ahead is barred by reaching branches and the spiky forms of Graham Sutherland's *Green Lane* seems more likely to result in a strange encounter with the Otherworld of Arthur Machen's stories than an innocent stroll in the country.

There are also those edgelands where urban spaces and nature meet: places where disuse allows nature to recolonise and abandoned equipment and graffitied walls

are swallowed up by encroaching greenery. Perhaps they are survivals, like George Shaw's remnants of woodland, spared the axe during development but now incongruous and edgy.

The exposed and lonely character of heathland also lends itself to the bleak and desolate. Edward Burra's *Near Whitby, Yorkshire* makes us question the wisdom of following the road into the intimidating blankness beyond. A sense of expectancy is a feature of eerie landscapes. In Thomas Hardy's *Return of the Native* 'when other things sank brooding to sleep the heath appeared slowly to awake and listen'. For Hardy it was this timeless landscape's indifference to human dramas that provided its power. From a contemporary perspective the irony behind such perceptions of threatening nature is the catastrophic impact of human activity on the environment.

## **Graham Sutherland (1903-1980)**

### *Pastoral*

Etching, 1930, IV/X from the 1973 edition

Stuart Southall Collection

*Pastoral* marked a change of direction in Sutherland's work and the way he saw and represented nature and natural forms. The title is perhaps an ironic reference to his earlier Samuel Palmer-influenced work, which he had come to see as heading down a 'total cul-de-sac'. The result is anything but pastoral, being the first time he created a landscape that reveals nature's drama and cruelty.

Sutherland evokes a scene of brooding, malevolent intent, as the trees and plants take on a life of their own, moving and reacting to the dark, hostile environment.

The grotesque oak tree with hollow trunk leans over, monster-like, as if to swallow up the two leafless trees which resemble reaching tentacles. The dramatic shadows contribute to the discomfiting atmosphere.

## **Graham Sutherland (1903-1980)**

*Cottage in Dorset, Wood End*

Etching, 1929, signed and numbered 42/60

Stuart Southall Collection

In 1928 the Sutherlands started visiting Dorset, staying at Corfe Castle. They returned annually over the next few years, Sutherland finding much stimulating subject matter in the local landscape. *Cottage in Dorset, Wood End* offers glimpses of his later expressive style used to portray the more hidden aspects of nature. This evolving approach is shown in the shape and movement of the trees as they wave their bare, unnaturally twisted boughs in the chill winter wind.

Sutherland conveys a sense of unease, as a solitary bird flies across the dreary landscape. This is no cosy cottage in the woods with smoke rising gently, the scene is devoid of life save ivy rambling up the chimney. The dense, dark woods where the light has failed to penetrate create a fearful, unsettling atmosphere as to what may lie in wait both within and beyond.

## **Graham Sutherland (1903-1980)**

### *Green Lane*

Oil on canvas, 1945

Southampton City Art Gallery

Sutherland would walk in the overgrown lanes of west Pembrokeshire to soak up the atmosphere, later allowing these sensations to infuse his landscapes. He would paraphrase and simplify what he saw to produce a landscape of abstracted, tangled natural forms to express the 'intellectual and emotional' essence of the place.

*Green Lane* with its sinister undergrowth and sweeping, sickle-shaped curves enveloping the winding road is an enigmatic composition. Shrouded in bright, ethereal sunlight the lane disappears into the distance, perhaps an inviting place offering shelter and protection. Yet the hollows and dark shadows suggestive of decay take on a threatening presence. Sutherland creates a sense of unease as to what is simmering beneath the undergrowth or what might emerge from the interior of the lane.

## **Michael Ayrton (1921-1975)**

*Entrance to a Wood*

Oil on canvas, 1945

Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London

A prolific and versatile artist and sculptor, Michael Ayrton tended to work in themes: his later bronze sculptures being obsessed with the Greek legends of Daedalus and the Minotaur. *Entrance to a Wood* was part of a series focussing on trees and landscape executed in a Neo-Romantic vein and shows the influence of Graham Sutherland who encouraged him and whose work he much respected. Ayrton was fascinated by tangled roots and gnarled tree trunks. Like Paul Nash his trees take on a menacing sentient presence.

Ayrton completed this dramatic and disconcerting painting in June 1945. The spiky fallen tree resembles some strange horned creature surrounded by creepers curled like barbed wire, ready to pounce on anyone or 'anything' that crosses the blocked path to sunlight.

## **John Craxton (1922-2009)**

### *Dark Landscape*

Oil on canvas, 1943

Southampton City Art Gallery

During the summer of 1943 John Craxton spent time sketching in Pembrokeshire alongside Graham Sutherland. Craxton was moved by the prehistoric landscape where Sutherland taught him how to 'invent' and abstract from nature, which he thought was much like Picasso's approach, although he found total abstraction too limiting.

*Dark Landscape* shows that Craxton learnt the lesson well, synthesising natural organic forms and reinventing them with mysterious, unsettling undercurrents. The interplay of dark shadows and bold line evokes a feeling of movement as the luminous, contorted landforms writhe, uncomfortably intertwined, as if disturbed by some otherworldly force. Craxton explained that these paintings were a '*kind of refuge*' and his '*means of escape and a sort of self-protection*' as he wanted '*to safeguard a world of private mystery.*'



## **Edward Burra (1905-1976)**

### *Blasted Oak*

Watercolour on paper, 1942

Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London

Jane Stevenson wrote in her biography of Edward Burra that *'being disquieting was part of his mission in life'*. Severe illness suffered as a teenager had left him without energy and often in pain. Art became his escape. Burra's love of the macabre is a constant presence in his paintings and there is often a sense of simmering menace.

Burra had always been interested in landscape. During the Second World War, with overseas travel impossible, he turned to the country around his home at Rye in Sussex. It was captured in characteristically strong colours created by building up layers of pigment. In this disturbing vision the trees seem unnaturally contorted, their twigs curled like claws. The blackened form of the lightning-struck oak can be seen on the left and in the foreground a severed tree limb seems to be embracing some abandoned machinery half-buried in the undergrowth.

## **Edward Burra (1905-1976)**

*Near Whitby, Yorkshire*

Pencil and watercolour, 1972

The Ingram Collection of Modern British and  
Contemporary Art

Towards the end of his life Burra produced a series of disturbing portrayals of the English landscape, channelling the strangeness and latent menace of earlier work into unsettling visions of the countryside. His sister Anne would take him on trips, driving to remote locations where they would park on the roadside while Burra looked and slowly absorbed his surroundings.

The road winding onwards is a common feature in these works but in many the highways are populated with trucks and traffic queues, an invasion of natural beauty by the noise and pollution of a mechanised age. *Near Whitby* is startlingly empty: only the road, wayside markers and field patterns in distant sunlit valleys hint at human presence. The moors rolling to the horizon, the enveloping clouds and sudden blast of sunshine combine to make this a forbidding vision of a powerful and indifferent nature.

## **Paul Nash (1889-1946)**

*A Dead Tree, Romney Marsh*

Black and white negative, c.1930-4

Tate Archive. Presented by the Paul Nash Trust 1970

Paul Nash's preoccupation with mortality originated during childhood illness and was then reinforced during a lengthy struggle with asthma that eventually claimed his life.

*A Dead Tree, Romney Marsh* is a startling object in its own right, but there is also something frightful and unnatural about its skeletal form lingering on despite the loss of leaf, twig and bark. Although spring will bring no fresh life to this haggard specimen, the energy conveyed in its curving limbs suggests an uncanny vitality. The dead tree is an inescapable symbol of mortality and it has been suggested that Nash also associated sawn off stumps and piles of chopped wood with the dead, particularly as a result of his experiences during the First World War.

**Blaze Cyan (b.1969)**

*Dusk*

Etching, 2013

Courtesy of the artist

*Dusk* was taken from an old dead tree on Wimbledon Common in London, reminding me of something from an Edgar Allen Poe story. The process of etching used to create it, faithfully re-created its spooky almost human-like expression, like witches casting spells in the woods.

*Blaze Cyan*

## **Monica Poole (1921-2003)**

### *Driftwood*

Wood engraving, 1979

Julian Francis Collection

Using finely engraved lines and patterns, Poole drew out the inherently strange beauty of trees, plants, rocks and shells, commenting '*There are so many fascinating forms in the natural world which are overlooked because they occur in objects that are normally not considered attractive.*'

*Driftwood* focuses on the weird entities to be discovered in the odd tidal zone where land and sea meet: objects eroded and contorted by the action of the waves. The driftwood is stripped and bleached like bone, resembling the remains of some long-lost mariner. There is a surreal, dreamlike mood, a sense of a moment frozen in time and an eerie stillness that might be shattered by the strange shape looming in the sky.

## **Monica Poole (1921-2003)**

*Dead Trees, Sheppey*

Wood engraving, 1976

Julian Francis Collection

Poole was fascinated by curious and intricate structures found in the natural world. Her landscapes often focus on tree stumps, weather-beaten trunks or contorted roots. It has been suggested that her fascination with lifeless rock forms and dead trees resulted from personal battles with illness, depression and bereavement.

*Dead Trees, Sheppey* is a bleak vision of natural forms enduring even as they are hollowed out and stripped of bark and branch by the elements. There is also a sense of wooden fingers reaching skywards in entreaty to an all-powerful but indifferent nature.

**Blaze Cyan (b.1969)**

*Croft Castle*

Charcoal and conte on paper mounted on wood, 2016

Courtesy of the artist

This particular tree is one of the ancient Spanish chestnuts located at Croft Castle in Herefordshire. The story goes that the seeds were obtained from the Spanish Armada ships in 1588 and planted on the estate in great numbers. Whether this is true or not, there are vast avenues of these trees planted deliberately there. The estate is surrounded by woodlands of ancient oaks and the place is mysteriously rich in veteran trees.

*Blaze Cyan*

## **Annie Ovenden (b.1945)**

### *Murder on the Moor*

Oil on board, 2021

Courtesy of the artist

Maybe because they are carrion birds, crows are commonly associated with death and darkness.

Historically in folklore and fables they are thought to be related to death; no doubt all this influenced the collective name for them. To paint a 'Murder' I knew I needed to come up with the feeling that something unnatural was going on and so ruthlessly I set out to commit the perfect murder!

On the edge of Bodmin Moor, close to where I live, in a stand of beech trees is a rookery. Rooks and crows are all part of the corvid family. The 'caw, caw, caw' racket that they make as dusk begins to fall certainly feels creepy, with this in mind I decided to set my murder on the moor.

Against this background, adding a cold sky light, I set the erratic dipping and diving black flying crows. So have I committed the perfect murder or will it come back to haunt me? I guess time will tell!

*Annie Ovenden*



**Laurence Edwards (b.1967)**

*Nothing is Final (Let the Wind Blow)*

Bronze, 2015

Courtesy of the artist



This sculpture was made by repeatedly cutting leaves or petals out of a wax body and sticking them to its outer edges, every displaced leaf eroded the figure. After countless extractions and fastenings, a final removal saw the whole form suddenly shift from body to matter, colony to swarm. Entropy seemed to shroud the memory of a body.

*Laurence Edwards*

**Laurence Edwards (b.1967)**

*Quill*

Bronze, 2019

Courtesy of the artist



Encasing this body was an exercise in trying to create a form that described its contents. The chrysalid shape that evolved kept breaking, the figure seemed to want to release itself, to signal. I provided it with masts, pylon forms, antennae. I think of burial, earth, landscape when contemplating this piece.

*Laurence Edwards*

## **Ghost Box**

*'As the Crow Flies' by the Advisory Circle*

LP and CD Inner Sleeve Artwork, 2011

Design by Julian House

This is an album of instrumental electronic music, drawing its influences from folk music and vintage TV soundtrack influences. The challenge for Julian was to come up with a visual language to show those two worlds that seem, on the surface, at odds with one another. Jon Brooks the composer, Julian and I are all fans of the author Alan Garner and particularly the 1969 TV adaptation of his children's book *The Owl Service*. This had a weirdly haunting title sequence made up of a series of slowly animated, block-coloured photographs.

Julian created a series of digital photographic collages, with bold single colours to each layer and then photographed these from an old TV tube screen to bring them back into the analogue world, with the texture of an old broadcast. These were set out in a grid reminiscent of a storyboard for a TV title sequence.

*Jim Jupp*