

PONDERINGS UPON PAUL NASH, THE ANCIENT SOUL WITH A SURREALIST HEART BY REBECCA LAMBERT

The great stones were in their wild state, so to speak. Some were half covered by the grass, others stood up in cornfields or were entangled and overgrown in the copses, some were buried under the turf. But they were wonderful and disquieting, and as I saw them then, I shall always remember them.

Nash remembering back to his first encounter with the Avebury Megaliths in 1933. (Nash 1951, p. 11)

Paul Nash (1889 –1946) and I have a history. I vividly remember the first time I saw one of his works, *The Menin Road* (1918), painted during his tenure as an Official War Artist, during the Great War. It made an immediate, and profound impact on me. To my young eyes, the burnt out, broken trees, reminded me of the standing stones which I was lucky enough to see peppered throughout the landscapes I roamed as a child. To this day, I cannot explain why I formulated this connection, but it has

stuck with me.

When I met this physically, and psychologically, immense painting again, at the Nash retrospective in 2016 (Tate Britain), I was reduced to tears. The destruction and pain emanating from the canvas literally hit me like a gunshot, but so did the recollection of my childhood interactions with, not just this painting, but also those beautiful megalithic landscapes that, although still physically there, are, for me, forever gone. I still traipse those landscapes, and see those monuments, but now through the eyes of a middle-aged person, who has fought too many battles, rather than that wee, wide-eyed girl.



Paul Nash, *The Menin Road* (1918)

My dad had a book of Nash's paintings, so as soon as we got home from London, I dived in. I'd never seen anything like them. Cylinders that resembled over-extended hay bales, as 'Equivalents' for the Megaliths (1935). The giant stones of Avebury painted in an ethereal glory that I couldn't even begin to comprehend. It was at this point in time that I knew these paintings would stay with me forever. Although at that young

age I couldn't even begin to contemplate just how much Nash, his works, and his imagination, would steer the course of my life.

I did not find Surrealism, Surrealism found me.

From a 1942 letter to Herbert Read. (Causey 1980, p. 263)

To this day, Nash's imagination, especially the art he produced during the 1930s, penetrates how I perceive and experience landscapes, both ancient and modern. Through his engagement with Surrealism, whilst channelling the landscape visions of Blake and Turner, Nash created works that captured past, present, and future. I see him everywhere, from the Barbican housing estate in London, to skate parks, and, of course, underpasses.

Nash and Avebury

The landscapes I have in mind are not part of the unseen world in a psychic sense, nor are they part of the unconscious. They belong to the world that lies, visibly, about us. They are unseen merely because they are not perceived.

Paul Nash (1938) 'Unseen Landscapes', *Country Life*, 21st May

Nash first visited Avebury in 1933 and the experience was a profound one. He perceived the surrounding landscape as a 'living presence' (1937), and not as 'the controlled experience of prehistory offered by Keiller's restoration' (Smiles 2005, p. 148). His 'reconstruction' of Avebury began in the late 1930s, and

even drew some rather piqued comments from colleagues. Years later, Stuart Piggott referred to Keiller's efforts as 'megalithic landscape gardening' (Smiles 2005, p. 148).

Nash and I hold similar positions on the somewhat thorny issue of restoration and preservation. Although cordial towards Keiller, Nash disagreed with his approach towards Avebury. As he perceived it, Keiller craved lucidity, whilst the artist yearned for the primordial:

Avebury may rise again under the tireless hand of Mr Keiller, but it will be an archaeological monument, as dead as a mammoth in the Natural History Museum. When I stumbled over the sarsens in the shaggy autumn grass and saw the unexpected megaliths reared up among the corn stooks, Avebury was still alive. (Nash 1939, p. 8)



Paul Nash, Circle of the Monoliths (1937-38)

Avebury is part of the UNESCO World Heritage sites which also encompasses Stonehenge. Through Keiller's well-intentioned intervention the site has lost 'something'. Its enigma? Its sacredness? It's difficult to define. As a prehistorian, I can only speculate and hypothesise as to what these huge constructions were erected for. We can reconstruct by examining stratigraphies, cropmarks etc, and place stones back into positions ascertained from these surveys. However, we can never fully comprehend how the sourcing of the raw materials, their transportation, and erection, truly affected those people 4,500 years ago, especially if, and I truly believe this was the case, they believed the stones, wood, soil and water held the spirits of their ancestors and the deities of their world. For Nash, this was a key aspect to, not only Avebury, but also a number of other ancient sites within Wessex. Through his art, he proposed 'a mode of engagement with prehistory that works with what cannot be known, what must be intuited' (Smiles 2005, p. 149).

By the late 1930s, Nash was exploring notions of the British landscape through a combination of Surrealism, folklore and archaeology, primarily Later Prehistory. It is this aspect of his work that inspires me deeply and helps to guide my own creative practice. I see him everywhere, not just within rural downland contexts, but urban ones too. The most visually obvious, for me, of these inner-city locations is the Barbican housing estate in London. Built between 1965 and 1976, this 40-acre estate, conceived by Chamberlin, Powell & Bon, is a masterpiece of Brutalist architectural design.

I have lived in London for nearly 14 years and find this location one of real comfort and peace. I think that one of the main reasons for this connection is the fact that the first time I visited the site I was immediately confronted by Nash's *Equivalent for the Megaliths*, in the form of the robust, cylindrical concrete pillars that are distributed throughout the housing

estate. They stood before me, so clear, so pristine, sentinels along a processional way that I knew Nash would immediately espy if he was stood alongside me. This strange, foreboding city began to feel slightly more welcoming to this country girl. I began to actively seek out Nash whenever, wherever, and however I could within the capital and, later, within other cities and townscapes.

1935 saw Nash commissioned by John Betjeman on behalf of the Architectural Press to create *Dorset: A Shell Guide*. He beautifully described Dorset, (the county in which he finally passed over) as 'scarred and furrowed by events of the past' (Nash 1936, p. 9; Fill 2016, p. 49). This sentence has stuck with me for many years. Nash wrote this within the context of deep history, but, for me, it is only now beginning to resonate within a different context.

The area where the Barbican estate now stands was levelled to virtually nothing during the bombing raids on London during the Second World War. An area that was 'scarred and furrowed' by (recent) past events. Did the architectural design for the Barbican estate unconsciously look back to the deep past for stability? For reconnection with what once was? This is highly unlikely, and is purely theoretical conjecture on my part, but it brings me comfort whenever I walk within the elevated walkways and passageways of this most glorious Brutalist construct. Past, Present, future, together as one.

Simon Grant has described how 'Nash had a playful, fantastical way of imagining, and presenting the past' (2016, p. 14), and it is this aspect of the man, the artist, that I particularly try to channel, and present, within my own work. Seeing concrete pillars as megaliths, or even their equivalents. Ramps within skater parks as trilithons and winding sacred rivers. Concrete bollards as modern menhirs. Underpasses as liminal places.

For these unconventional ways of seeing, I have Paul Nash to thank. Within a single painting he could convey 'the accumulated intensesness of the past as present' (Myfanwy Evans, writing in *Axis*, 1937; Grant 2016, p. 14). I would never presume to believe that I can, or could ever, portray these landscapes in a way even slightly akin to Nash, but his art, his writings, have inspired me to see differently. Yet it isn't only Paul Nash who drives me to experience landscape through different eyes. The imagination of contemporary artist, Mark Leckey, has enabled me to take my work further, towards a theoretical hybrid encompassing the visual and audial aesthetic, the elemental, the physical, the liminal – landscape punk! Leckey possesses the ability to create a present whilst having a foot rooted within the past, not as a restraint, but as a means to move forward.

I had a sense of being propelled into the future
while at the same time reversed into the prehistoric
past. A past which held an animistic idea of the
world, in which rocks and trees could speak.
(Mark Leckey, in Wallis & Coustou 2019, p. 16)

The way that Leckey perceives the world resonates deeply with me. His incorporation of prehistory, folklore, hauntology, permeating the landscapes and soundscapes of his youth, which continue to bleed into the present and, possibly, the future, truly mesmerises me. Although we grew up in different parts of England (Leckey is originally from the Wirral, North-West England, and I grew up in the far south and Isle of Wight) upon first exposure to his work, the epic *Dream English Kid*, I intuited that I had encountered someone who just 'knew'. The connection that I've experienced through Leckey's work is indeed profound. His images and soundscapes have enabled me to comprehend, and convey, feelings that have resided within

me since early childhood.

I'm asked by lots of people, who would I most like to explore the past with? I think a lot of them are rather surprised when I don't suggest some famous historical figure but instead a painter who left this world far too soon. To be able to walk alongside Paul Nash, both within the Wessex downlands and the streets of London, amongst many other places, would be beyond my wildest dreams. As an artist, and a person, he sings to me, and will continue to do so until my end of days. For me, he brought the past, present, and future together poetically. He saw landscapes with the eyes and sensibility of an old soul but presented them to the world in a way that only he could. Nash's art reminds me to engage with landscape less empirically. Along with Mark Leckey, and Nicholas Monro, another artistic favourite of mine, Nash showed me that the deep past, the present, and the future, are not separate entities. They are connected: temporally, spiritually, physically. No longer restrained by the ailments that wracked his corporeal self, Nash, the Surrealist with the ancient heart, is now free to soar. He is everywhere, everywhen, constantly by my side, guiding me onwards, reminding me to feel, not think, to look inwards in order to see, and for this, I will be forever grateful.

I believed that by a process of what I can only describe as inward dilation of the eyes I could increase my actual vision. (Nash 1949)

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