

# **Modernism in St Ives**

**24 May – 21 September 2008**

## **Notes for Teachers**

Information and practical ideas for groups  
Written by Angie MacDonald

## Work in focus



**Peter Lanyon** (1918-64)  
*Porthleven Boats* 1950-1  
Painted metal and wood  
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## For discussion

- Look closely at *Porthleven* ensuring you see it from all angles. How do you think it was made and what materials has the artist, Peter Lanyon, used?
- Do you think it is a sculpture? Give reasons for your answer.
- Lanyon said these constructions helped him to work out his paintings. Can you think why?
- Compare this work with Naum Gabo's *Spiral Theme* 1941. What do they have in common?
- This display creates some striking 'conversations' between works. Choose two works that you feel speak to each other in some way (they might share characteristics or they might be strongly contrasting) and explain why. Also compare/ contrast works to paintings in lower gallery two.

## Things to think about

**Constructions.** *Porthleven Boats* has been constructed out of metal and scrap-wood that Lanyon had in his studio. Consider the range of materials artists use to construct 3-D objects, including junk and discarded materials. It is also interesting to compare the type of scrap materials a contemporary artist such as Adam Chodzko uses (see Chodzko's *Mask Filters* in upper gallery two).

**Porthleven.** This is one of a number of constructions (see also *Tall Country and Seashore* 1951 included in this exhibition) made by Lanyon while he was composing his large painting called *Porthleven* (also in the Tate Collection), inspired by the Cornish fishing village of Porthleven.

**Roll and pitch.** Porthleven lies at the end of a long steep valley and the unusual harbour is constructed with an inner harbour enclosed behind the outer to protect the boats. Lanyon said that his painting *Porthleven* included a number of shapes that 'roll and pitch – like boats around the inner harbour'. This construction suggests the movement as well as the shape of boats.

**Naum Gabo & constructivism.** Lanyon began making constructions in 1939 when he was working in Naum Gabo's studio in Carbis Bay. He acknowledged Gabo as the key inspiration for his sculpture. The Russian-born Gabo spent time in St Ives during the Second World War and was to have a strong influence on a number of artists associated with St Ives. Gabo's radical approach to sculpture, known as constructivism, was based on the reduction of form to its geometric essentials. He also advocated the use of non-art materials to make sculpture. See Gabo's *Linear Construction No. 1* 1942-3.

**Experiments in space.** Lanyon described his sculptures of the 1950s as 'experiments in space to establish the illusion and the content of space in painting'. They were directly related to his paintings helping him to work out the composition and structure. He said they helped to see 'how the image was cooking'. Compare Lanyon's work with other artists included in the display who play with illusionism, often denying traditional perspective and depth.

**Process rather than product.** Lanyon maintained that these constructions were not complete things in themselves but experiments that helped him to work out his paintings. How can you tell if and when something is finished? What types of preparatory works do artists use to help them produce final pieces?

**Abstraction.** Consider how Lanyon's work, like many of the works in the display, explores an abstract language. This exhibition provides a good introduction to the ways artists use line, colour, transparency, shape and form to play with the illusion of space. It also demonstrates the wide range and, often experimental, use of materials.

**A sense of place.** How does *Porthleven Boats* convey ideas about a place? Many of St Ives School of Moderns were interested in capturing their sensation or experience of place rather than a view of the landscape. Lanyon would explore a place in different ways such as climbing the cliffs, cycling in the wind or driving fast along the coast roads.

**Consider nineteenth and twentieth century responses to the Cornish landscape by comparing and contrasting some of the works in this display with the paintings in lower gallery two (*Dawn of a Colony, Picturing the West, St Ives 1811-1888*).**

## Practical ideas

### Quick/ simple activities

**Draw what you hear.** Find different and inventive ways to record the landscape. Listen to, rather than look at a landscape. Lie on the beach and draw your view of the cliffs...

**Sketchbook turnaround.** Draw four different views, one on top of the other, of the same object or scene (this could be one of the gallery spaces or the view from lower gallery two). Alternatively if you are working as group, draw one view and then move to the next person's sketchbook.

**Constructions.** Create simple constructions using your own scrap materials (such as old CDs, recycled materials, driftwood etc). Find different ways to transform 2-D surfaces into 3-D objects.

**Take a line for a walk.** Encourage students to make bold line drawings from direct observation. Ask them to imagine the idea of taking a line for a walk – using it to meander over the landscape or objects in view (this activity works well in lower gallery two).

### Extended projects

**2-D/3-D.** Students to use their sketches as the basis for paintings that they then transform into collages, reliefs and sculptures. Encourage them to experiment with the sensations of space, light and movement. Students could then make drawings and paintings of their work to transform them back to two dimensions. Challenge them to distinguish between those pieces that are experiments / ideas and those that are finished objects.

**Physical to digital.** Students to design and make constructions that they then 'situate' in the landscape. This could be done literally and in 3-D (and recorded through digital photography/mobile phone) or in 2-D with the use of Computer Aided Design. If there is limited access to computers, students could photocopy and collage their designs.

## Further Research

**Peter Lanyon (1918-64)** studied at the Penzance School of Art 1936-7. Encouraged to paint by the critic Adrian Stokes, he studied briefly at the Euston Road School in 1938. He was a student of Gabo and Nicholson in the 1940s, applying their Constructivist ideas to his abstract landscape images. Returning to Cornwall from wartime service in the RAF he became a founder member of the Penwith Society of Arts. He taught at the Bath Academy of Art 1950-7. He ran an art school at St Peter's Loft, St Ives with Terry Frost between 1957-60. Lanyon died following a gliding accident in 1964.

### **Constructivism (from the Tate Glossary, [www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary](http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary))**

Particularly austere branch of abstract art founded by Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko in Russia around 1915. The constructivists believed art should directly reflect the modern industrial world. Tatlin was crucially influenced by Picasso's Cubist constructions (*Construction* 1914) which he saw in Picasso's studio in Paris in 1913. These were three-dimensional still lifes made of scrap materials. Tatlin began to make his own but they were completely abstract and made of industrial materials. By 1921 Russian artists who followed Tatlin's ideas were calling themselves Constructivists and in 1923 a manifesto was published in their magazine *Lef*: 'The material formation of the object is to be substituted for its aesthetic combination. The object is to be treated as a whole and thus will be of no discernible 'style' but simply a product of an

industrial order like a car, an aeroplane and such like. Constructivism is a purely technical mastery and organisation of materials.' Constructivism was suppressed in Russia in the 1920s but was brought to the West by Naum Gabo and his brother Antoine Pevsner and has been a major influence on modern sculpture.

[www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk) Further information on all Tate works and glossary

[www.tate.org.uk/learning/schools/naumgabo2401.shtm](http://www.tate.org.uk/learning/schools/naumgabo2401.shtm) Teachers' Notes on Naum Gabo

[www.ubu.com/sound/gabo.html](http://www.ubu.com/sound/gabo.html) Gabo reading his *Realistic Manifesto* (1920)

### **Books on Peter Lanyon**

Causey, A, *Peter Lanyon: Modernism and the Land*, Reaktion Books, 2006

Garlake, M, *Peter Lanyon*, Tate Publishing, 1998

Garlake, M, *The Drawings of Peter Lanyon*, Ashgate, 2003

Stephens, C, *Peter Lanyon: At the Edge of Landscape*, 2001

### **Books on St Ives Artists**

*Homecoming The Pier Arts Centre Collection at Tate St Ives*, Essay by Andrew Dalton, 2003

Axten, Janet, *Gasworks to Gallery: The Story of St Ives*, Tate Gallery, 1995

Bird, M. *The St Ives Artists*, 2008

Cross, Tom, *St. Ives and British Modernism*, 1999.

Cross, Tom, *Painting the Warmth of the Sun, St Ives Artists, 1939-1975*, Penzance, 1984

Davies, Peter, *St Ives Revisited – Innovators and Followers*, Old Bakehouse Publications, 1994

Gale, M & Stephens C, *Barbara Hepworth: Works in the Tate Collection*, Tate Publishing, 1999

Gardiner, M *Barbara Hepworth, a Memoir*, Salamander Press, 1982

Hammacher, AH, *Barbara Hepworth*, Thames and Hudson, 1968 Revised Edition, 1987

*Barbara Hepworth, A Pictorial Biography*, Tate Publishing 1970. Reissued 1985

Lax, Julian, *St. Ives. Eighty Years of Modernism*, 2001

Phillips M & Stephens C, *Barbara Hepworth Sculpture Garden*, Tate Publishing, 2002

Oldham, Alison, *Everyone was Working, Writers and Artists in Post War St Ives*, Tate St Ives/Falmouth College of Art, 2001

Tufnall, Ben, *On the Very Edge of the Ocean*, Tate St Ives, 2007

Thislewood, D (Ed), *Barbara Hepworth Re-considered*, Tate Liverpool, 1996

Val Baker, Denys, *Britain's Art Colony by the Sea*, Samson and Co, 1959

Whybrow, Marion, *St Ives: 1883-1993: Portrait of an Art Colony*, Woodbridge, 1994

*St Ives 1939-64, Twenty-Five Years of Painting, Sculpture and Pottery*, Tate Gallery, 1985

The St Ives Artists Series, Tate Publishing includes: *Terry Frost, Barbara Hepworth, Patrick Heron, Roger Hilton, Bernard Leach, Janet Leach, Alfred Wallis, Bryan Wynter and Christopher Wood*.

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