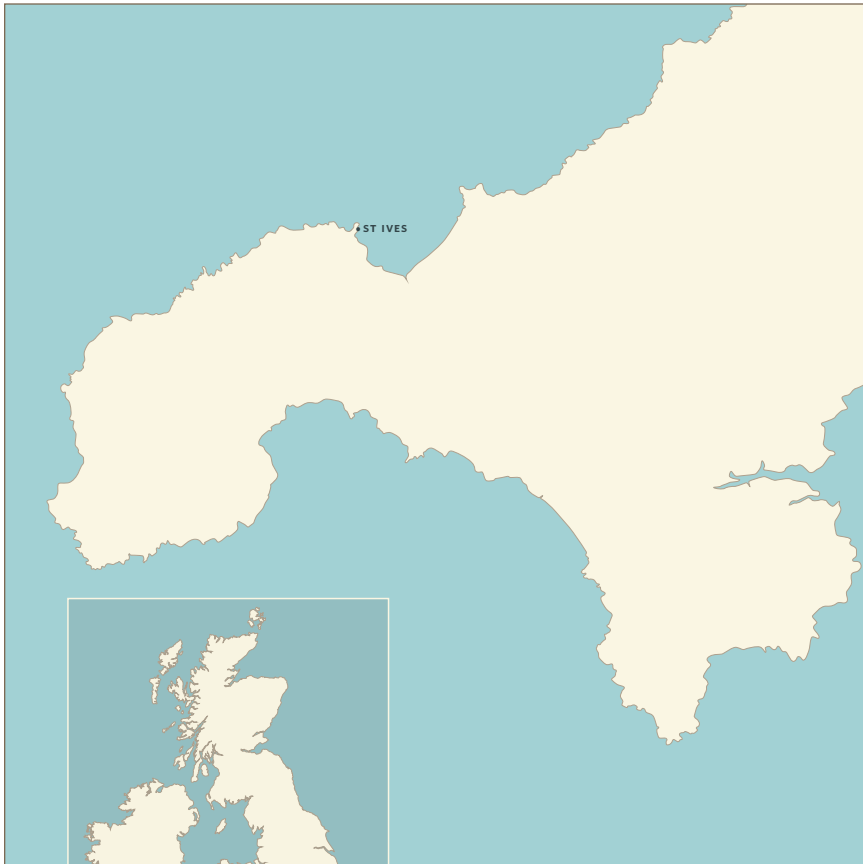




ART IN FOCUS

St Ives Abstraction



Art in Focus: St Ives Abstraction

There are few places in England as remote as the westernmost reaches of Cornwall, and yet it was here that one of the most distinctive schools of twentieth-century British art developed. Far away from London both geographically and culturally, the small fishing village of St Ives found itself at the forefront of British modernism, and—as some of its artists would argue—a leading center of international modern art. The artistic community centered in St Ives represented a fusion of the interests of local and visiting artists. It had grown over the early twentieth century through the short stays and longer-term periods of residence of painters and sculptors from other parts of the United Kingdom, as well as from countries as far afield as the United States and Australia, including the foundation of the highly influential Leach Pottery by Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada in 1920. However, it was the arrival in 1939 of Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson, along with the Russian sculptor Naum Gabo, that heralded a decisive change in the history of art in St Ives. Bringing with them established reputations and links to the international art world, Hepworth and Nicholson settled into life on the coast and embraced the influence of these new surroundings.

The work of St Ives artists is significant in the development of British abstraction. Paintings and sculpture that eschewed figuration in favor of a strict abstract aesthetic had already been embraced by British artists, many of whom became part of the St Ives colony. However, works produced in St Ives often complicated the binary between figuration and abstraction by integrating elements of both, challenging the international supremacy of “pure” abstraction and countering the assumed relationship between the notion of chronological development in the arts and the disappearance of figuration. By incorporating abstract elements to evoke the atmosphere and sensory experience of life on the Cornish coast, St Ives artists sought new ways to represent landscape in particular.

cover:

Ben Nicholson, *15 July 1949 (St Ives Harbour)*, 1949, oil and graphite on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, © 2013 Angela Verren Taunt / All rights reserved / ARS, NY / DACS, London

back cover photograph:

View of present-day St Ives, looking toward harbor

John Wells explained this imaginative synthesis in a letter to fellow St Ives artist Sven Berlin, shortly before the end of World War II, in 1945, “But how can one paint the warmth of the sun, the sound of the sea or the journey of a beetle across a rock or thoughts of one’s own whence and whither? That’s one argument for abstraction.” This comment suggests how St Ives artists used abstraction to reinterpret the tradition of British landscape painting. By concentrating on natural subjects, the artists also turned away from the catastrophes of the war and its difficult aftermath.

Art in Focus, now in its seventh year, is an academic initiative for members of the Student Guide Program of the Yale Center for British Art. Introduced to every aspect of exhibition practice, the students intensify their engagement with the Center’s collections, strengthen their research skills, and practice writing in new formats. Student curators select objects for exhibition, write text panels and object labels, and make decisions about installation under the mentorship of Center curators and staff.

Art in Focus: St Ives Abstraction has been curated by Daniel Roza (SM '15), Kathryn Kaelin (SY '15), Alexander Shaheen (TC '13), Hannah Flato (DC '14), and Juliana Biondo (ES '13). Cassius Clay (BK '13) provided editorial support. In researching and presenting the exhibition, the students have been led by Linda Friedlaender, Curator of Education, and Jaime Ursic, Assistant Curator of Education, with curatorial guidance from Imogen Hart, Assistant Curator of Exhibitions and Publications; Rosie Ibbotson, Postdoctoral Research Associate; and Cassandra Albinson, Curator of Paintings and Sculpture.



Patrick Heron, *Three Cadmiums*, 1966, oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund, © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London

Landscape

A state of mind becomes a place.

—CHRISTOPHER NEVE, *UNQUIET LANDSCAPE: PLACES AND IDEAS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY ENGLISH PAINTING*, 1990

The art of the St Ives School is inextricably linked to its landscape. Artists were captivated by this place of unceasing drama where the sea meets the shore, where sailboats with towering masts glide on waves that crash against rocks, and clouds soar across the sky. As the trauma of World War II and its aftermath shattered old ideals and beliefs, artists looked to nature to reaffirm their sense of a productive reality and to discover a new order to life. Nature-based abstraction and its search to define universal truths became a salient feature of artworks produced by the artists associated with St Ives.

To experience the landscape fully, artists immersed themselves in nature. Barbara Hepworth was known to stand on cliffs with arms outstretched and Peter Lanyon would press his body against the earth, trying to feel it spinning. Additionally, many artists took advantage of the natural materials found around them. For example, Ben Nicholson carved wood and stone into organic forms that remained true to their materials.

When looking at abstractions of the St Ives landscape, it is important to remember that the works are mostly a conscious effort to avoid the mimicry of traditional landscape painting. Rather than experiencing art as a window onto a landscape, the artists of St Ives sought to make art that was an experience in and of itself. They harmonized line, form, and light in order to bring their work alive. The movement of light upon water or the rhythm of boats rocking on waves became blueprints for images



arranged like a mosaic. From specific landscapes, artists were able to convey universal experiences that transcended geographic and political boundaries. Similar to musicians, the artists sought to convey experience, rather than capture realistic, recognizable images. In the quest to express the reality of their experience, they jettisoned the fidelity of the image to create patterns of abstracted landscape.

—*Daniel Roza, SM '15*

Peter Lanyon, *Penwith*, 1948, oil on board, Yale Center for British Art, Gift of George E. Dix, Yale BA 1934, MA 1942, © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London



John Minton, *Cornish Landscape*, 1946, oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Gift of George E. Dix, Yale BA 1934, MA 1942, © Royal College of Art

Community

A consciousness of place informs the work of St Ives artists. The organic forms and quiet color palette evident in many of these works reflect both the place where they were produced, and where they were to be seen—essentially in domestic interiors.

The artistic community of St Ives first developed around 1880. The outbreak of World War II prompted a new generation of artists to leave London and look to St Ives for its relative isolation and comparative immunity to the social transformations effected by the war. Turning away from the impersonal mechanization of warfare, these artists focused on landscape and seascapes, as well as quiet, domestic still lifes. They created art that was itself rooted in the day-to-day reality of where they lived, deploying simple lines and abstracted shapes to create art that was both particular to place and yet also universal and transcendent in character.

Artists like Ben Nicholson turned to nature-based abstraction and handmade materials in order to figure, and refigure, space in relation to oneself. Experimenting with the fundamental elements of color, form, and line, many St Ives artists sought to articulate a more immediate sense of personal vision. Peter Lanyon used landscape as a metaphor for the human body, exploring through his painting how one experiences a particular place. Paradoxically, it was the *community* of St Ives that enabled these artists to articulate the “interiors of consciousness”—to give form to memory, to lend shape to subjective experience, to realize an authentic, genuine image of an individual’s past.

—Kathryn Kaelin (SY '15)

Color Palettes

Furthermore we have brought to this task of re-complication certain European resources of sensibility and instinct which contrast extraordinarily with the American painters, who seem, by comparison, far more dominated by the sheerly conceptual, by exclusively intellectual or systematized modes of working. Hence the accusation that our pictures look 'too hand-made.' Actually—they are meant to be.

—PATRICK HERON, *PAINTER AS CRITIC: PATRICK HERON, SELECTED WRITINGS*, ED. MEL GOODING, 1998

There is something consciously imperfect about the work of St Ives artists, a do-it-yourself aesthetic using muddied colors. Their palettes give a visual voice to abstract compositions in assertive, but elusive color shifts. A bright-white, left-of-center rectangle in John Wells's *No. 3, 1957* and Sandra Blow's *Red Circle* exemplify the St Ives artists' interest in strong gestural movements. Regardless of size and scale, both works have a formal presence in shape and color. Each composition is grounded with muted tones that suggest softer, earthier marks, lines, and textures. The tension between exclamations of color and the calmer, muted color fields that ground them, helps to distinguish St Ives artists.

The experience of World War II stands behind the work that came out of St Ives. Questions about reality versus a perceived reality of things came to be associated with the work produced by the seaside artists' colony. The break in consciousness that was an unavoidable consequence of World War II produced a new sense of what artists deemed authentic. A post-war rawness and economy stood in stark opposition to more staid traditions of representational portraiture and landscape painting made with costly oil paints on canvas.



Sandra Blow, *Red Circle*, 1960, mixed media on board, Yale Center for British Art, Gift of Professor Carl Djerassi in homage to Diane Wood Middlebrook, Yale Ph.D. 1968, © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London



Ben Nicholson's *September 1960 (Wood)* uses plywood as a material and a support, not canvas. Slightly to the right of center, a bare strip of wood extends from top to bottom. As a "color," this intervention suggests a rough honesty, an acknowledgment that materials are what they are, and perhaps nothing more. Likewise, a war cannot be called anything but what it is, a war. It cuts, pierces, and tears against everyday experience. Nicholson shares his art-making and narrative process with the viewer literally by constructing a painting of texture, color, and shape. Together these elements may be read as a coming to terms with a new, foreign, vague, and increasingly unknowable world.

Patrick Heron's *Three Cadmiums* (1966) stands apart from other St Ives works in its use of saturated color. It does not oppose moments of audacity with terrestrial color beds. It is an exclamation unto itself. It is an explosion. The shapes repeat themselves and the analogous colors delineate and flirt. Artists working in the St Ives community set themselves to the task of representing things as things—truth as reality itself. Their color palettes document this burden of truth.

—Alexander Shaheen (*TC '13*)

John Wells, *No. 3, 1957*, 1957, oil on board, Yale Center for British Art, Gift of George E. Dix, Yale BA 1934, MA 1942, © Jonathan Clark Fine Art, Representatives of the Estate of the Artist



Gesture

Compare John Wells's *June 1958* to Terry Frost's *Linen Blue and Yellow* (1961) and Sandra Blow's *Red Circle* (1960). Follow the physical gestures captured in paint. Allow the visible, directional strokes to lead your eye across the surface. Can you imagine the moment the artist's hand first touched brush to surface? Imagine the artist clutching and dragging a brush, manipulating the paint as if an extension of the artist's own arm.

Just a few years before these works were painted, the Tate Gallery in London had hosted the exhibitions *Modern Art in the United States*, in 1956, and *The New American Painting*, in 1959. Eighteen American artists including Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, and Jackson Pollock—famed for exploring the power of gesture and color in large-scale, non-figurative painting—were introduced to British audiences. The St Ives artists had been experimenting with abstraction independently as well.

John Wells's *No. 3, 1957* and *June 1958* explore the particularities of gesture on an intimate scale. In *No. 3*, he scrapes a horizontal figure eight into the oil, crisscrossing the right two-thirds of the long narrow board with a delicate, repetitive stroke to remind us of the flatness of the picture plane. The translucent layer of green blocked across the left recedes and provides depth of atmospheric color in direct conversation with a white block hovering just under the surface marks. In *June 1958*, Wells's atmospheric tones are anchored by his quick, gestural lines as muted passages of thinned oil paint dissolve into the surface ground. Flat black swatches balance on an axis line where the center is bolstered by a

Terry Frost, *Linen Blue and Yellow*, 1961, oil and collage on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Purchased with contributions from the following Friends of British Art: Joan and Bugs Baer; Louise and David G. Carter; Lee MacCormick Edwards; Christopher Forbes; Alison P. Henning; Rose and Larry Hughes; Gale and Bernard Kosto; Elaine and Melvin Merians; Claire and Millard Pryor; Alison and Ross D. Siragusa, Jr.; Ira Spanierman; Liz and Bill Tower; George Weiss; Nicolette Wernick; Miriam M. and Charles O. Wood III, © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London

vertical smear of red earth tone. Scribbles, scratches, and scrapes become supportive ghost-strokes, almost tangible shadows as the viewer is pulled in to look more closely by the small dimensions.

In Sandra Blow's *Red Circle*, gritty atmospheric tones recess as she scrapes inelegant spirals through impasto layers of white. Blow offsets the muted background with a bold, circular sweep of cadmium red that intensifies the compositional contrast. Her brushstrokes and smudges float forward and sink back, seemingly suspended in space. Utilizing the crispness of pure whites, Blow betrays the subtlety of her marks and smudges. Reiterating her red circle by overlapping a dark passage in the upper right corner, she toys with the viewer's understanding of space and shadow by defying visual gravity in the picture plane.

Terry Frost's *Linen Blue and Yellow* uses a gestural language similar to that found in the works of Sandra Blow and John Wells. Frost directs the viewer's eye downward via a dark vertical then abruptly flips direction upwards with an archetypal arrow. Covering the canvas with paint, he then aggressively scrapes and rubs away at it. He gives the viewer an opportunity to experience the gestural and physical process of making and creating by revealing squeezed paint from a tube across surface; slicing a linen strip, gluing it down yet flaunting the rough-cut edge. The immediate physicality challenges the viewer's idea of a finished artwork.

St Ives artists manipulated paint and gesture to allow for a palpable, visual experience. By controlling size, color, composition, and paint-handling, the artist creates a visual experience for the viewer.

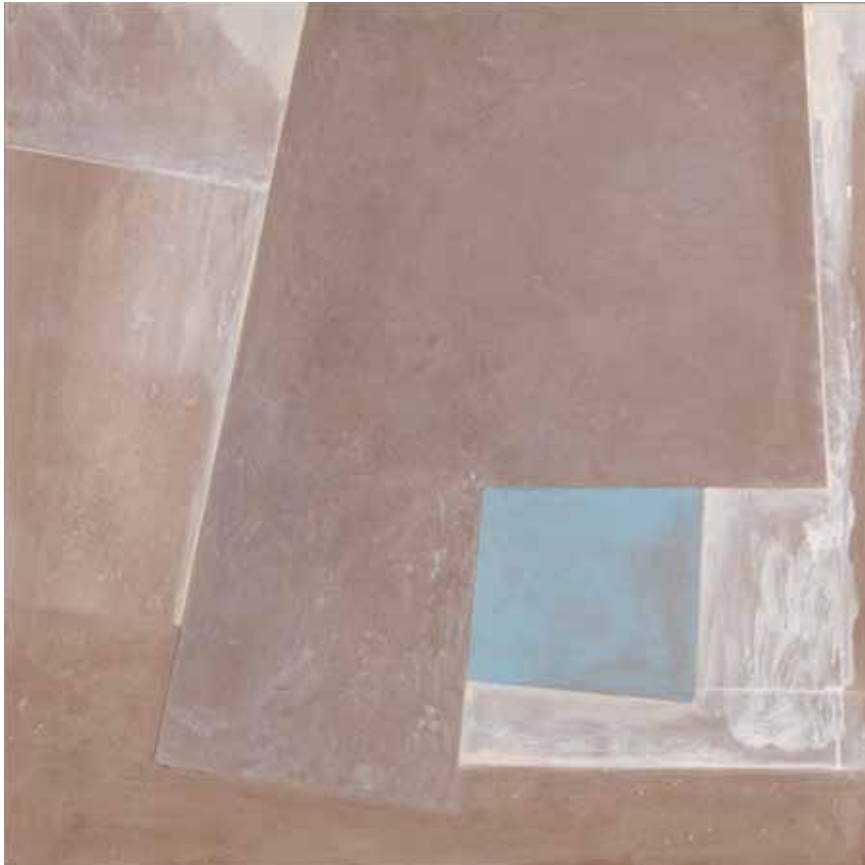
—Hannah Flato (DC '14)

Artist Materials

Man-made and often discarded materials such as plywood, stone, masonite, and paper lie at the very core of the stylistic stamp left by the artists living in St Ives during the twentieth century. The manufactured materiality evident in the works of St Ives artists refers to the physical characteristics that make an object's substance both unique and recognizable. Living and working in St Ives allowed artists to find a goodness in nature that was in sharp contrast to the devastation of World War II in London and across Europe.

The St Ives community of artists was interested in depicting the essence of nature. By looking to natural beauty, they were seeking to capture that which was untouched. Located on the coast of the Celtic Sea, St Ives enticed artists with its dramatic landscape of lush greens and jagged rocks. The artists of St Ives, however, wanted to transcend simple representation. They were interested in emotion and how visual sensations could be perceived by all the senses, not just sight. The materials chosen by these artists were often found, discarded materials, un-manicured, and raw. Ben Nicholson's *1969 (Winter Blue)* appears unfinished where the edges of the painting are uneven. The frame serves to contain the work in the center, as if without it the work would decompose and fall apart. The oil colors painted over masonite demonstrate local earthy tones such as weathered reds and ochres, rich viridian greens, and an overcast spectrum of grays inspired by an untouched coast.

Utilizing a visual language evocative of collage techniques gives St Ives artworks an impulsively arranged feel as opposed to a labored, strategically designed composition. Roger Hilton's *Painting, Summer 1963* and Ben Nicholson's *May 64 (Kepler)* appear collaged, yet on closer



inspection are purely painted. The overall weathered aesthetic is emphasized through the artists' choice of plywood scraps, cardboard, and masonite exposed to the elements rather than linen supports primed with gesso. Reflecting the ruggedness of the landscape, St Ives artists chose materials to echo the ruggedness of life near the coast.

—Juliana Biondo (ES '13)

Works in the Exhibition

Trevor Bell, 1930–
Orange On Top
1959, oil on canvas
Paul Mellon Fund, B1993.28

Sandra Blow, 1925–2006
Red Circle
1960, mixed media on board
Gift of Professor Carl Djerassi in homage to Diane Wood Middlebrook,
Yale Ph.D. 1968, B1995.11

Terry Frost, 1915–2003
Linen Blue And Yellow
1961, oil and collage on canvas
Purchased with contributions from the following Friends of British
Art: Joan and Bugs Baer; Louise and David G. Carter; Lee MacCormick
Edwards; Christopher Forbes; Alison P. Henning; Rose and Larry Hughes;
Gale and Bernard Kosto; Elaine and Melvin Merians; Claire and Millard
Pryor; Alison and Ross D. Siragusa, Jr.; Ira Spanierman; Liz and Bill Tower;
George Weiss; Nicolette Wernick; Miriam M. and Charles O. Wood III,
B2001.4

Barbara Hepworth, 1903–1975
Sphere With Inner Form
1963, bronze
Paul Mellon Collection, B1984.6.2

Patrick Heron, 1920–1999
Three Cadmiums
1966, oil on canvas
Paul Mellon Fund, B1988.1

Roger Hilton, 1911–1975
Painting, Summer 1963
1963, oil on canvas
Paul Mellon Fund, B1998.30

Peter Lanyon, 1918–1964
Penwith
1948, oil on board
Gift of George E. Dix, B.A. 1934, M.A. 1942, B1991.41.2

John Minton, 1917–1957
Cornish Landscape
1946, oil on canvas
Gift of George E. Dix, B.A. 1934, M.A. 1942, B1991.41.4

Ben Nicholson, 1894–1982
1938 (Composition)
1938, gouache on board
Paul Mellon Collection, B2006.14.6

Ben Nicholson, 1894–1982
15 July 1949 (St Ives Harbour)
1949, oil and graphite on canvas
Paul Mellon Collection, B2006.14.7

Ben Nicholson, 1894–1982
Still Life (Sweet Peas), Oct. 4, 1951
1951, oil and graphite on board
Paul Mellon Collection, B1995.23.2

Ben Nicholson, 1894–1982
May 1955 (Gwithian)
1955, oil on canvas
Paul Mellon Collection, B1985.19.2

Ben Nicholson, 1894–1982
September 1960 (Wood)
1960, oil on plywood
Paul Mellon Collection, B1985.19.3

Ben Nicholson, 1894–1982
May 64 (Kepler)
1964, oil and wash on board
Paul Mellon Collection, B1993.30.24

Ben Nicholson, 1894–1982
69
1969, oil on masonite relief
Bequest of Solomon A. Smith II, Solomon Byron Smith,
and Barbara Neff Smith Collection, B1993.37.5

Ben Nicholson, 1894–1982
1969 (Winter Blue)
1969, oil on masonite relief
Paul Mellon Collection, B2012.1.3

John Wells, 1907–2000
No. 3, 1957
1957, oil on board
Gift Of George E. Dix, B.A. 1934, M.A. 1942, B1991.41.1

John Wells, 1907–2000
Night Flowering
1957, oil on canvas board
Gift of George E. Dix, B.A. 1934, M.A. 1942, B1993.17.3

John Wells, 1907–2000
June 1958
1958, oil on board
Gift of George E. Dix, B.A. 1934, M.A. 1942, B1993.17.4

ART IN FOCUS: ST IVES ABSTRACTION

Yale Center for British Art
April 12–September 29, 2013

OPENING TALKS & RECEPTION

Friday, April 12, 2013
4–6 pm

EXHIBITION TOURS BY STUDENT CURATORS

Saturday, April 13 and Sunday, April 14, 2013
2 and 3 pm



YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART