INTERVIEW

Descending Vessel (1987), David Nash.
© David Nash and Galerie Lelong & Co,
courtesy of the Fernet-Branca Foundation

DAVID NASH, TIME AND NATURE

Wood, erosion and seasons… David Nash's art is rooted in our planet Earth. We met him in his home in Wales, where he's hidden himself away in a former chapel. This is where he sculpts his life-size works with the help of a chainsaw and welding torch, watched by an audience of trees. "They look at me…"

David Nash was born in 1945 in Surrey, England. Today acknowledged as one of the most illustrious British exponents of Land Art, he works relentlessly with his material of choice, wood, to create installations or sculptures. While his creations are exhibited in museums all over the world, his largest formats have been created for the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in Wakefield, or his own home, in Blaenau Ffestiniog, Wales. Here, Nash resides in a former chapel, impressive in its dimensions and brightness. It houses some of his oldest pieces, which Nash is fond of reworking, attesting to a cyclical approach to time. This summer, David Nash's work is being shown at the Fondation Fernet-Branca near Basel, while another exhibition has recently wrapped up at the Museum Lothar Fisher in Neumarkt, Germany. The Galerie Lelong which represents him in Paris is also unveiling his new works on paper until 13 July.

After you finished your studies, you decided to settle here, in this former church in Blaenau Ffestiniog. Why?

I bought it in 1968 for 200 pounds and as I didn't have to work to earn money, I was able to devote myself to my art. But I taught in different schools from 1970 onwards, working with students experimenting with all types of mediums. For me, creativity is one and the same whatever the medium, and what I'd teach them in particular was to develop confidence in themselves, whether in painting, sculpture or video art.

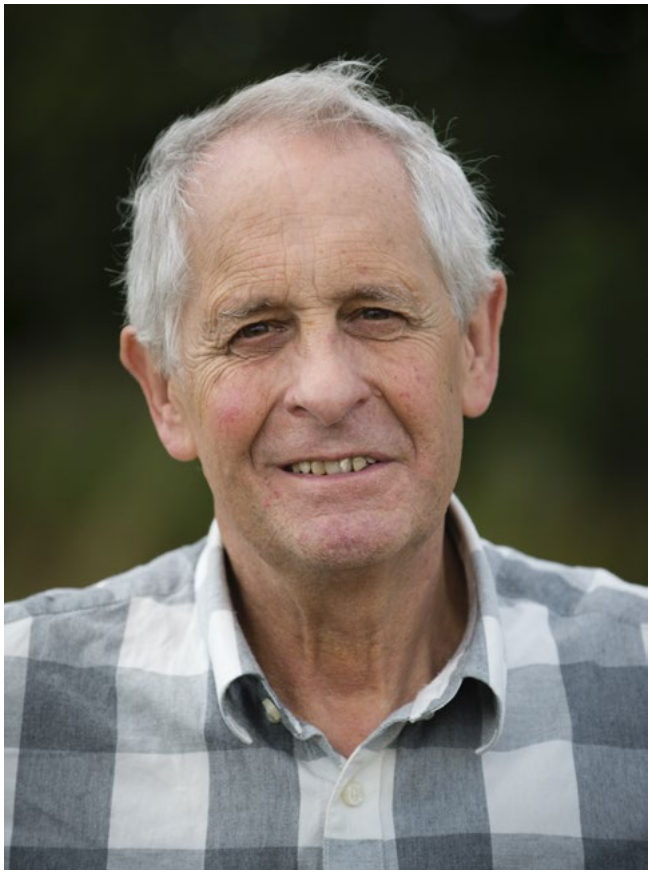
You once said that if you'd been an artist in an earlier century, you'd have been a landscape artist. Is this because you're deeply rooted to this land of Wales?

Even if I experimented with many materials like glass, metal or plastic at the Chelsea School of Art, I found my path using wood, which I already put together as a child after picking pieces up during walks. My grandparents spent most of their lives here in Wales, and my father was born here. He felt very attached to this land. The language is different here, with its own syntax, grammar, and another way of thinking. When this chapel was still operating, it was Calvinistic Methodist, which was quite rare in the midst of many other Baptist, Canonist, Presbyterian congregations… but it also drew many people. In the 19th century, the town developed through the trade of slate, exported all over the British Empire. Before there were only a few farms, but when the factories opened, many workers came to live here. You could count up to 26 chapels in this little town! But even if my roots are here, I nonetheless like how I always feel a bit isolated here in Wales because I didn't come here to be with people but to be an artist on retreat.

You're surrounded by hills, forests and clearings. How has this environment fashioned your work?

After two years – the time needed for a space to become part of your body in an almost unconscious manner –, my practice really evolved. My working method is empirical; in other words, I start off from the wood, its form and nature, rather than trying to find a piece from a given idea. Wood is therefore my favoured material even if I started working with bronze ten years ago because I can afford to. This is also a reaction to climatic conditions – having produced sculptures to stand outside –, as my works haven't always been made in the material best suited to staying outdoors for a very long time… I am keen on experimenting and like being surprised by the results of my own work. I observe the surfaces and reactions of wood. For example, I've wondered whether or not to stain it but staining didn't work for me. So I restrict the use of colour – which I love – to drawings.

David Nash.
Photo Martin Neeves



So your pieces are often produced in the middle of nature?

Yes, most of my work is done outdoors because it's not possible to manipulate the materials this way in a studio. And then trees, which are my primary materials, are very heavy, so I've taken up the habit of creating sculptures wherever they've fallen. Which allows me to take some of the weight off and to move it around already cut. When I take part in overseas exhibitions, namely in Japan, I go and look for resources directly on the spot. For *Ash Dome*, found a few kilometres from here, and made up of 22 huge ash trees in a circle, I wanted to create a sculpture while constructing a space to mark the new millennium. The idea of time is very important because for on-site works, I commit to having my work stay around for several years. This is what sets me a little apart from Land Art, namely from the 1970s, that consisted of a gesture performed by artists before they moved onto something else. I like to return to my works.

That was also the great era of Arte Povera… Do you see, in your use of raw materials and your return to its essence, a link between this movement and your own work?

At first, I thought that the name of this movement came from the fact that the artists were poor and could only use inexpensive materials. And perhaps that was the initial reason… Then there was an art critic who backed the movement up with philosophical reasoning even if for me this wasn't the root of the issue. I even met Mario Merz qnd Piero Manzoni, but also Yves Klein, who wasn't directly part of the movement, but could be associated with it. You know, I've never been an assiduous reader of art criticism. When I was a teacher, I had access to many art journals in schools but I only looked at the photographs because I feared being too easily influenced and I prefer staying a little bit isolated.

What was your own education at the Chelsea School of Art like? The last avant-garde movements were underway in those years…

It's true that we were in the middle of reform in the 1960s. Our art school wasn't a university and we weren't obliged to get good results in exams. We focused on practice, so I started off with painting before deciding that I wanted my work to take hold of space rather than existing on a single plane. Artists would come and see us. We were nonetheless taught art, and I had a very good teacher for the period from the pre-Renaissance to the latest in contemporary art.

So you discovered Paul Cézanne…

Yes, his geometry and the way he understood it, like a reconstruction, were very important to me. I was taught to draw in a fairly minimalist way, using cones and cylinders. Constantin Brancusi's work was also fundamental for me, and also learning that he lived in permanent contact with his works. This enabled me to become aware that I wanted to reside where I worked. At the same time, I really appreciate ancient Chinese painting and the speed with which it's executed. My temperament pushes me to execute my pieces quickly. Because either I know where I want to go, or else I realise that I'm lost and I simply start something else. So I have many pieces underway, and as you can see in my studio, many pieces of wood that aren't completed.

"First the tree, then the form", David Nash.
Courtesy of the Museum Lothar Fischer

"David Nash. First the tree, then the form", until 3 June.
Museum Lothar Fischer, Weiherstraße 7a, Neumarkt (Germany).
www.museum-lothar-fischer.de

"David Nash. New Editions", until 13 July.
Galerie Lelong & Co, 13 rue de Téhéran, Paris 75008 (France).
www.galerie-lelong.com

"David Nash. Nature to nature", until 30 September.
Exhibition with Lelong & Co. Gallery and Annely Juda Fine Art.
Fondation Fernet-Branca, 2 rue du Ballon, 68300 Saint-Louis (France).
www.fondationfernet-branca.org

It's really fascinating to discover this superb installation of works – we feel like we're inside a museum. Probably the biggest museum devoted to your work…

Yes, I've wanted to keep many pieces that seemed important to me, since the start of the 1970s. You can see that I always deliberately let myself be dominated by the material to create a form. I don't imagine, from the outset, making something specific, but it's as if I seek to get rid of whatever's superfluous. I've used circles and triangles ever since I've been really young, just as I discovered Japanese calligraphy very early on. The circle represents the spiritual world whereas the triangle conjures up action, and combining the two we get a cube. Other works result from processes, like bringing together a piece of fresh wood and a lathe, then letting it create a texture and observing the material react… I did this as an exercise even if I knew nothing about conceptual art at the time.

Your methods could be seen as leading to quasi-primitive gestures. Has this been intentional on your part?

This was especially the case of my burnt wood pieces because I wanted to get back to basics or return to the four elements. Wood leads to the idea of the tree, whose strength comes from minerals in the soil and oxygen in the air, whereas fire brings to mind light and heat. Through an association of ideas, the telluric force of the tree is present… Burnt wood is frightening and attractive at the same time. It turns the spectator's experience towards other deeper, more organic surfaces. When I burn something, its size changes, but also its distance, as well as its sense of time because we no longer know if it's an old or new piece. Critics have sometimes mentioned the word "truth" in relation to my work, and I think that this is to do with the fact that it's based on simple materials and tools. We can sense if something is invented or overly sophisticated. But I don't invent anything and I like thinking that I simply "find" things. Richard Long has also said that squares, triangles and circles are universal forms that haven't been composed, so they belong to no one. No one can make claims to them, and I admire this idea.

Some critics have defined your work in terms of Buddhism or shamanism…

No, that's not my approach at all, and on the contrary, I'm very attached to the act of producing. I expect to obtain results from a creation, not in commercial terms but in terms of the pleasure of producing new forms. My prime motivations are very basic, and after that I can think about philosophy and what I am, but through my activity. I'm really a practising artist and I don't spend much time speaking with other artists.

Even Andy Goldsworthy who you met when you were very young?

It's true that I spent time with him before he became very famous, and I can say that there's still a big misunderstanding regarding his work because he isn't a photographer. He creates pieces, and only for the sake of revealing them does he photograph them. Like Richard Long, for whom performance practice is in the action and not the image, whose goal is simply to leave a trace of it. Richard Long is a very important artist in my mind, and we're the same age, even if he became known earlier than me… Going back to philosophy, let's say that I've learned from Oriental thought and Taoism that we can't grow by ourselves. So I can't deny that there's a certain philosophy in my work. I don't want to shut myself up in theory though, but prefer to apply it to daily life. The architect Buckminster Fuller once wrote: "God is a verb". I love this phrase, which means a lot to me.

Three sun vessels for Huesca (2005), David Nash.
Courtesy of the Beulas Fondation