Nash, Paul (1889–1946)

Paul Nash was an artist who responded both to a British tradition of landscape painting – to the art of William Blake, Samuel Palmer and J.M.W. Turner – and to new developments in European modernism. He worked across several media: painting in watercolour and oils, book illustration, design and photography. He was a literary artist, inspired by the poetry of W.B. Yeats, the prose of Sir Thomas Browne, and by artist-poets like Blake and Dante Gabriel Rossetti and he was himself a writer of essays and letters which were published posthumously. Born in London, he achieved early success in the London art world, contributing to the ‘crisis of brilliance’ (Henry Tonks) that shaped modern art in Britain before the Great War. He served as an official war artist in both World Wars, and painted some of the most famous images of conflict, including *Wire* (1918)*, The Menin Road* (1919), *Battle of Britain* (1941) and *Totes Meer* (1940-41). Between the wars, he became a leading figure in British modernism, co-founding Unit One in 1933 and exhibiting at the International Surrealist Exhibitions (London in 1936, which he helped to organise, and Paris in 1938).

Nash’s practice as a landscape artist was transformed by his experience of serving in the First World War, first in the Artists’ Rifles (1914–17) and then as an official war artist (1917–18). His subject became the broken landscape of the battlefield, which he painted in brilliant colours and with an ironic sense of the resilient beauty of the natural world. In his most famous letter, he told his wife that he was ‘no longer an artist interested and curious’, but ‘a messenger who will bring back word from the men who are fighting to those who want the war to go on for ever. Feeble, inarticulate, will be my message, but it will have a bitter truth, and may it burn their lousy souls.’ After the war he said that he felt like an artist without a subject. He found his direction again from European modernism, working through a late response to Post-Impressionism towards abstraction and an idiosyncratic version of Surrealism. His surrealist landscapes explored the traces of ancient settlements – burial mounds, hill forts and standing stones – and the anthropomorphic character of flowers, roots and stones. Towards the end of his life he returned to Blake, painting a series of responses to the poem ‘Ah! Sun-flower’ (published in 1794), such as *Eclipse of the Sunflower* (1945), in which a giant sunflower hangs in the sky, its centre a black disc rimmed by the golden rays of its petals.

References and further reading:

Causey, A. (1980) *Paul Nash*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Includes a catalogue raisonné)

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Nash, P. (1949) *Outline: an autobiography, and other writings*, London: Faber & Faber.

IMAGE: Paul Nash, *Wire*, 1918

name of entry: ‘Nash, Paul (1889–1946)’

Material: painting entitled *Wire*, 1918.

Purpose of inclusion: example of artist’s work

Link to material (if online): n/a

Bibliographic details (if appropriate): n/a

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Other useful information: current location is the Imperial War Museum, London