

Post-war British abstraction

Though less popular abroad than it once was, British art of the 1940s and '50s is still highly sought after at home, writes *Emma Crichton-Miller*



1. *Deep Blues*, 1971, William Scott (1913–89), oil on canvas, 122 x 198cm

For the Festival of Britain in 1951, the Arts Council of Great Britain organised an exhibition titled '60 paintings for '51', featuring work by 54 artists. Only three paintings in the entire show were abstract: works by Peter Lanyon, Victor Pasmore and William Gear. And although Gear's *Autumn Landscape* (1950) won one of five prizes, alongside figurative works by Lucian Freud and Ivon Hitchens, the president of the Royal Academy, Sir Alfred Munnings, was scathing in his denunciation of it. This was perhaps the nadir of British abstraction. Even Ben Nicholson – who before the war had been, alongside his second wife, Barbara Hepworth, a pioneer and champion of European-inspired abstraction, a friend of Mondrian and Gabo, and an editor, with Gabo, of the 1937 anthology *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art* – had reverted under pressure from his gallery to what was considered more British, figurative imagery.

But in this intensely creative period, all was not lost. Nicholson contributed a vast,

purely geometric mural to the Festival of Britain, created for the Riverside Restaurant on the South Bank. Victor Pasmore had turned in 1948 from realist painting towards abstract constructed reliefs, related to architecture and the built environment, and gathered a group of 'constructivist' artists including Kenneth and Mary Martin and Adrian Heath. Some of these featured in Lawrence Alloway's influential publication *Nine Abstract Artists* (1954) – and an exhibition of the same name the following year – which also included Terry Frost, Anthony Hill, Roger Hilton and William Scott. The influential critic and scholar Herbert Read, whose book *Art Now* (1933) introduced the abstract art emerging in Europe, continued to collect work by British abstract artists in the 1940s and '50s. Ivon Hitchens, who had moved to Sussex when his London home was bombed in 1940, pioneered an idiosyncratic, highly abstracted landscape painting. Meanwhile, in Cornwall, under the influence of Nicholson and Hepworth, a distinctive St Ives

school of British abstraction emerged. John Wells, Wilhelmina Barns-Graham and Nicholson continued pre-war experimentation, and younger artists took up the baton: Scott, Hilton, Frost, Lanyon, Patrick Heron, Alan Davie, Bryan Wynter and Paul Feiler. They forged a colourful abstract idiom anchored in natural forms – above all, the landscape of West Cornwall – and the human body. While the constructivists exhibited frequently in mainland Europe, American galleries began to show the work of Lanyon, Heron and Scott, themselves influenced by the Abstract Expressionism dominant in the United States. By 1959, the St Ives school had become so renowned that Mark Rothko dropped by. During the following decade, however, Pop art, colour field painting and the figurative work of Bacon, Freud and others of the London School drew attention away from the St Ives avant-garde.

Today, the market in post-war abstract British art is led by Hepworth and Nicholson.

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COLLECTORS' FOCUS

Matthew Travers of London dealership Piano Nobile, who will open two shows in the autumn, 'Ben Nicholson: Defining Works 1929–1954' and a small group show of 'Abstract Painting in Britain 1960–1965', explains Nicholson's appeal: 'He could be much more experimental [than later artists] about what it meant to play with abstraction.' By the 1950s, he suggests, 'There was more an aesthetic of abstraction, influenced by Abstract Expressionism. Reflecting this hierarchy, the world auction record for Ben Nicholson is £3.7m, realised against an estimate of £600,000–£800,000, at Christie's London in 2016, for *April 57 (Arbia 2)*, which exemplifies Nicholson's interest in painting, whether representational or non-representational, that is 'both musical and architectural, where the architectural construction is used to express a "musical" relationship between form, tone, colour'.

Alongside Nicholson, though at a slightly different price point, Heron, Lanyon and Scott continue to attract international interest, if not at the pitch seen in the mid 2000s. Travers says, 'There was a huge explosion of interest in post-war abstraction and the strength of the American market led people to look at British artists.' Since the financial crisis of 2008, there has been more discrimination, with prices for the less well-known artists plateauing. The auction record for Patrick Heron is held by his vivid representational work *The Blue Table with Window* (1954), which sold at Sotheby's London in 2011 from the Evill/Frost Collection for £1m (well above the top estimate of £350,000): recently, though, it sold again through the same house for £609,600.

There has been growing interest in Lanyon – who died after a gliding accident in 1964, at the age of 46, intensifying competition for

his small *oeuvre* – since a retrospective at Tate St Ives in 2010–11, and the Courtauld's 2015 exhibition 'Soaring Flight', devoted to his *Gliding Paintings*. His record was achieved at Christie's London in 2018, when *Orpheus*, 1961, was chased to £1.3m (estimate £500,000–£700,000). 'That shifted the dial on his prices,' says Alice Murray, a Christie's specialist. More recently, *Rising Air*, 1961, sold at Sotheby's London in June 2021 for £958,800 (estimate £400,000–£600,000), while at Christie's in May 2022 the oil on board *Tree Top Nest* (1956) realised £567,000 (estimate £100,000–£150,000). This was from Sir Nicholas Goodison's collection. Murray remarks: 'We've had immense success with single-owner sales. Collectors want fresh to market, museum-quality works.'

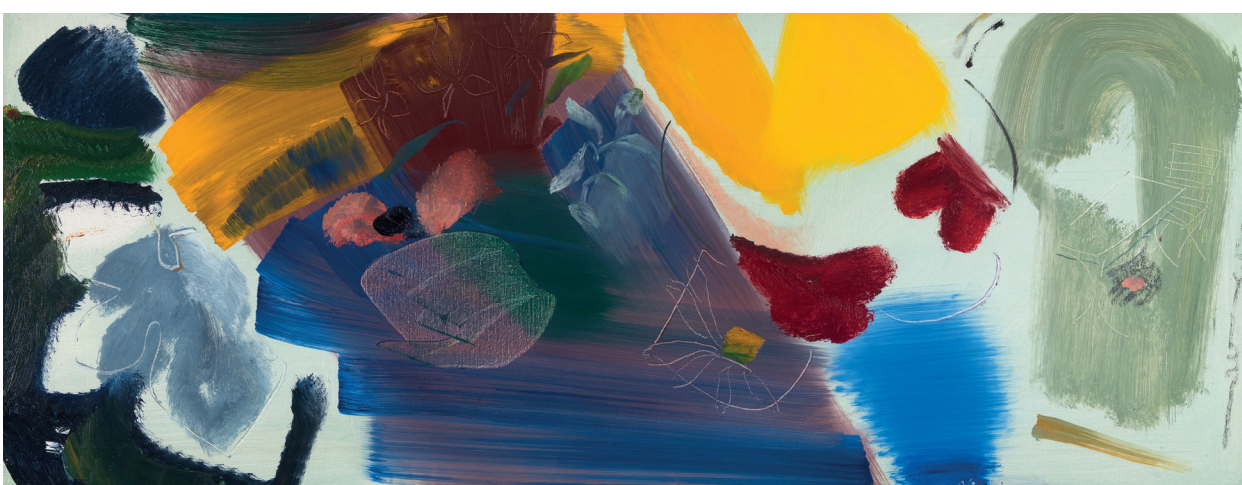
Another artist recently seeing a surge is Bryan Wynter, whose canvas *Flowering Monolith* (1957) sold at Christie's London in March 2024 for £207,900 (estimate £50,000–£80,000), from the collection of Sir Ralph Ehrmann. The same month, another canvas from 1957, *Meeting Place*, consigned by MoMA, was chased to \$533,400 at Sotheby's New York, from a low estimate of \$60,000. André Zlattinger, head of modern British Art at Sotheby's, notes that while it was won by a collector in the UK, the underbidders were international.

The Scottish-born, Belfast-raised William Scott, whose earlier 'table top' works were the focus of attention in the 2000s, now draws collector interest for his later, more abstract paintings from the 1960s and '70s. His *Deep Blues* (1971, Fig. 1), included in his retrospective at the Tate in 1972, achieved a world auction record £837,800 (estimate £300,000–£500,000) at Sotheby's London in November 2020. Piano Nobile will show *Expanded* (£350,000), a canvas from his

Berlin Blues series, painted in the mid 1960s, when, Travers says, 'He hits his most abstract moment.' Having showed with Martha Jackson Gallery in New York in the '50s, Scott has long had American collectors, as well as a loyal Irish following. Zlattinger says, 'There was a momentum some years ago of Asian buyers interested in his work, but less today. British collectors, however, love them.' He notes that other painters – Hitchens, Davie, Frost, Hilton, Feiler – will draw interest for a great work, especially from the 1950s or early '60s. Davie's and Frost's markets have been weakened, he suggests, by the plethora of later works on paper available.

Richard Coles of the London gallery Godson & Coles agrees, saying that the big names – Nicholson, Heron, Frost, Scott – are eminently collectable but that 'finding good examples has become increasingly difficult'. They have currently a 'very good' Scott and 'one of the best Terry Frosts from 1959'.

Peter Osborne, who has been dealing in modern British art since the 1980s, regrets that the rigorous constructivists do not have much of a market today. He thinks they were hampered by never really finding British patrons: 'There was a broader acceptance of what art could be outside the UK.' He and his partner Gordon Samuel exhibited the constructivists' work in 2005 – shortly after their London gallery Osborne Samuel opened, and the 50th anniversary of Alloway's exhibition – but found little interest. As for other British post-war abstract painters, he suggests that his original collectors are now selling – but that there is little international interest. However, 'a great picture by Feiler, Hitchens or Heron will always draw attention in the UK'. At the British Art Fair in September they were planning to show a floral composition by Hitchens (£150,000; Fig. 2) recently found in New York. **A**



2. *Flowers, Black, Blue and Yellow*, 1966, Ivon Hitchens (1893–1979), oil on canvas, 44.1 x 116.8cm. Osborne Samuel Gallery, London. (£150,000)

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Courtesy Sotheby's

Courtesy Osborne Samuel Gallery, London. © The estate of Ivon Hitchens