



Nicholson, *1934 (Relief)*, 1934, Tate

Ben Nicholson

This exhibition is the first major retrospective of Ben Nicholson's work seen in this country since 1974. Work from the twenties to the seventies is shown with roughly equal weighting, the aim being, as Nicholas Serota says in the preface to the catalogue,¹ to demonstrate that Nicholson's inventiveness was sustained throughout his long career. Jeremy Lewison curated the exhibition and his detailed knowledge of Nicholson's painting is certainly evident; the quality of the paintings selected is extremely high, and the juxtapositions made in the hanging are often stimulating, as well known works are illuminated by lesser known ones. As an argument for Nicholson's place in the modernist canon, this exhibition is hard to fault.

¹Jeremy Lewison, *Ben Nicholson*, Tate Gallery, London, 1993. ISBN 1-85437-130-4.

A substantial catalogue accompanies the show, containing essays by Jeremy Lewison and Virginia Button which address aspects of Nicholson's work which have been neglected or require reconsideration. The essays are complemented by notes on each of the pictures and a very detailed chronology. Among the most interesting chapters are those on Nicholson's 'primitivism' (rightly placed within a broad consideration of the concept in the inter-war period), the relation between painting and architecture, and an essay about the making of Nicholson's reputation. The latter analyses the role played by art institutions, particularly the British Council, and the disjunction between the artist's cultivated popularity abroad and comparative neglect at home.

In making both exhibition and catalogue, the organisers have drawn heavily on Nicholson's papers, now lodged in the Tate Gallery archive, which have not been previously available to scholars. The exhibition features an extensive display of letters, photographs, books and catalogues, seen alongside smaller paintings and drawings, which form an attempt to tie Nicholson's life and work together. The catalogue essays often makes this explicit: Lewison claims, for instance, that the still life paintings became more complicated as the relationship between Ben and Winifred Nicholson was disrupted by the former's relationship with Barbara Hepworth (p. 30). This linking of life and art is part of a response to the standard charge against Nicholson's work, that its technical sophistication masks a hermetic paucity of expression. It does, however, tend to miss the deliberately autonomous character of much of the art, quite unsuited to biographical or psychological interpretation which is, in any case, at odds with Nicholson's stated hostility to 'literary' readings. Even on the rare occasions when he makes such links himself, for instance in *October 2 1934 (white relief - triplets)*, the comparison seems forced. In the early to mid thirties there is perhaps a stronger argument for such an approach, since some of the paintings were made personal, with heads or profiles bearing the features of Hepworth, as for instance in *1932 (Au Chat Botté)*, or with objects carrying the artist's initials. These elements are combined with a deliberately naive handling and the presentation of a frugal, rural lifestyle. This was the period of Ben and Winifred Nicholson's stay in Cumberland, and if even these works seem calculated and detached, this may be because of the artificiality of their existence which, as Lewison notes, was cushioned by private income, separating both art and life from the harsh experiences of the farming community around them (p. 35).

The focus of the essays is not only biographical, but examines the internal coherence of the work and contemporary influences and parallels. The biographical approach comes across more strongly in the exhibition than the catalogue, where it is tempered by analysis of the critical reception and of Nicholson's presentation of himself, particularly his 'editing' of the past by the destruction or reworking of older pieces. Virginia Button discusses the transformation of Nicholson's postwar image in which he was dissociated from the Constructivist movement and presented, especially by Herbert Read, simply as an exceptional individual (p. 69).

The catalogue's substantial bibliography clearly shows how little attention Nicholson has received in recent years, especially in this country. This neglect is largely due to the standard opinion that his work is too calculated and sophisticated, compounded by intellectual trends against pioneering, avant-garde, male artists, especially those of a rationalist cast. Whereas in the past Nicholson's works were attacked as experimental and unresolved, now they appear over-resolved. If Nicholson is primarily presented as an individual, it is likely that his reputation will continue to be troubled; if his isolation is seen as a post-war intellectual construction and his work is placed in a historical context, it may regain much of its interest and importance. The extensive work in the catalogue lays the groundwork for such an approach. The factors that have made Nicholson's work unpopular are themselves worthy of analysis, and may reveal as much about the cultural climate of Britain as they do about the artist himself.

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Ben Nicholson is at the Tate Gallery until the 9th January 1994. It will be shown at the Musée d'Art Moderne, St Etienne from 10th February until 25th April 1994. The exhibition is sponsored by the British Land Company plc.