



DAVID NASH August 2002

Starting out from London, it takes as long to get to Blaenau Ffestiniog in North Wales as it does to get to St Ives in West Cornwall - the difference being that when you get there there's only one artist. At least, only one who's widely known. And David Nash is very widely known: now in his mid-50's, he's shown all over the world.

Seemingly drawn ineluctably to a place associated with happy times as a child, Nash bought a disused chapel in Blaenau when barely out of art school. Over the years he and his wife Claire have created, ingeniously, a delightful home by adapting and adding to the chapel's rear rooms and beyond that is a magical garden Claire has also created (magical because you can't quite believe it can be there, so green and lush, where once there was nothing) and beyond that is ... the most enormous bank of slate mining spoil you've ever seen in your life. It's towering, it's widescreen; unlike St Ives, Blaenau isn't pretty. It's very dramatic, it rings with a huge working class history - the history of the slate mines, which over centuries have roofed millions of houses in many countries of the world, and to which the town owes its very existence. None of which you will find, actually, in Nash's work in any overt or simplistic sense. He's not embraced Welshness, not tried to be other than he is. His success has enabled him to expand into other buildings (the chapel is now just for storage and display of completed work), he employs people to help him handle and transport his work; recently he's carried out renovation of the local Market

Hall, a building steeped in history but which people can't quite decide what to do with, and Nash has exhibited his work there - "coming out" as he wryly put it, as a sculptor to the locality.

David Nash has worked almost entirely in wood. Arriving in Blaenau, you're reminded mining is often carried out deep in countryside, its communities essentially rural. With those slate mines come forests, vast acreages of oak and other deciduous trees as well as the more obviously commercial evergreens. And the mountains of Snowdonia are all around you. Nash's work is about discovering form - he extracts it the way slate comes from those mountains; it's about the interaction between steel blades and wood: a virtuoso with the chainsaw, Nash looks to cut into the tree. He talks about the language of wood, the vocabulary of a material. He searches for what he can do with it, saving and savouring its essence, yet slicing at it to make new words.

Nothing on this earth is immune to change, and wood can alter - cracking, twisting, warping. Time is thus built into Nash's work and he ensures that anyone buying his work knows it will change and go on changing: it's meant to. Owning some four acres of woodland near his home, he has created sculptures there made from living trees: he has drawn inspiration from foresters who plant for future generations, and specifically the old practice of pruning and shaping of trees to make timber of a particular shape needed for shipbuilding. His wonderful *Ash Dome* has been made by planting a circle of trees, nurturing, cutting and shaping them (for 20 or so years to date) so they will grow into an enclosing dome shape. In these times of frequent moves, of travel and job and home changes, there's something very affecting about this commitment, this - well, rootedness.

Nash works in every scale, from small to huge, but one common element to all his sculpture is a lack of "finished" surfaces. The saw tooth marks remain; when a wood or trunk has been split, it remains just as it was when the act was first carried out. He never paints any surface, but by charring it in some instances, he adds both colour and evidence of activity - the fire is like the saw. Influenced by surrealism early on, he has made lighter, wittier pieces, and yet drawing on a very different tradition, the tendency in more recent work has been towards a minimalist simplicity. All his work, though, retains a lot of humanity: it attracts.

I wonder if any artist just starting out has ever buried him/herself in such a remote place; devoid of galleries or other artists, it must have seemed to friends like career suicide. But as Nash says:

"the most important thing is to find yourself." I think David Nash's own creative spirit is a fragile one, easily overwhelmed. Nash was raised by cautious middle-class parents with their eyes fixed on "the professions." Nash jumped the mould, and maybe we never quite escape those early feelings: in his case "This isn't what I'm supposed to do, not what I'm supposed to be." It's a handicap and a spur all at once. He's notably prolific but that doesn't come from a great welling of confidence, a big ego. Rather, it stems from two things: the first is that for Nash, making work is a process of investigation. "We shouldn't start with the answer. We have to find the answer." The second is really his own nature. On his own admission, he tends to be reclusive: making work is something he loves to do, is compelled to do, it's a constant re-affirmation.

In recent years Nash has taken to making "stoves" in the often remote places where he goes to make work. On one occasion, this was a forest in Japan in the depth of winter where the stove was necessity for survival. He has built stoves both of wood and of stone, and the idea of charring wood to make sculpture came from this. But the stoves are "pieces" in themselves - moreover, like the early work of Richard Long, they're created in the wilderness and seen by the rest of us only by virtue of photography. There's something very haunting about those images of stoves burning, isolated - on a beach, in a forest clearing, on a mountainside. They embody the artist himself.

Hugh Stoddart