



Noga Engler *Down The Line* oil on canvas 133 x 77 cm, courtesy the artist and Noga Gallery

Paintscapes

IN OCTOBER 2011 A MAJOR EXHIBITION OF Clare Woods' paintings opened at the Hepworth Gallery in Wakefield. These new paintings have moved away from the urban nights by ponds on the Heath of previous work, and into the immediate landscape of the Hepworth Gallery — which was also the nature that surrounded Barbara Hepworth, alongside Ben Nicholson, Henry Moore and David Hockney.

It is this landscape, both in real terms as well as art-historically, that Woods explores; landscape as nature, animated and cyclical. But contemporary culture has entered these paintings through a different door, by extracting the striking colours and light directly from the West Yorkshire landscape.

From old guard Yorkshire masters to a clutch of contemporary newbies, from California to dystopia, **Marianne Morild** finds there is still a lot to be discovered in painting the land.

It is the kind of relationship to nature that may evoke ideas of psychedelia and acid culture, but equally ideas of childhood, when one is small, not far above the shrubs, staring tiny flowers right in the face, and the colour and scent of heather is strong. It is an intense, heightened experience of nature, which is not romantic in the same sense as Graham Sutherland's paintings, but more knowing, in some ways almost sampling its romantic heritage.



Clare Woods *The Intended* 2011 enamel and oil on aluminium 2.5 x 10.5 m (7 panels of 2.5 x 1.5m) courtesy the artist and Stuart Shave Modern Art, London

Jane Callister *Fire on skunk mountain* acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches
courtesy the artist photograph Tony Mastres



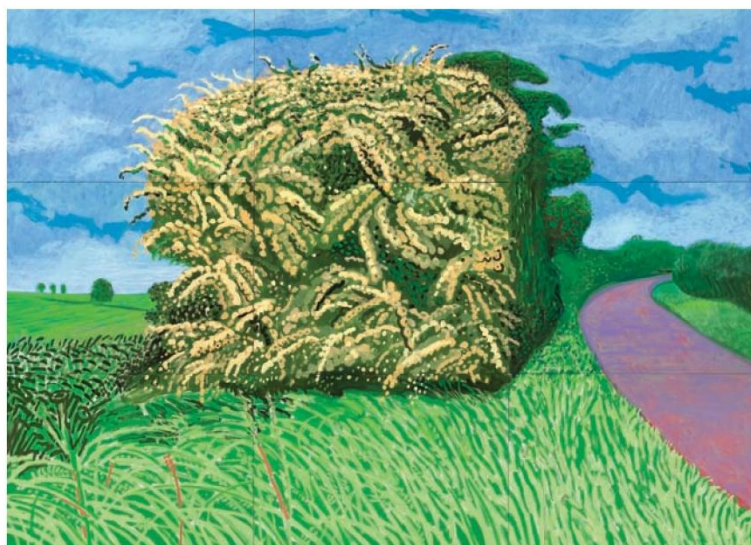
Woods' paintings scan like cinema-scope backdrops from the Wild West of Technicolour, and titles like *The Intended* are reminiscent of Clint Eastwood films; as though *Wuthering Heights* were reworked as a Western. It is clear that it is a direct relationship between the painter and the landscape itself that has brought them about, the experience of being steeped in nature's own goings-on is right there in the boulders, skulls, trolls and craggy limbs. Woods has always displayed nature as a player in the landscapes she paints, she has the ability to make it seem at times both animated and alive, but also at other times as dead as bones.

These paintings seem to contradict Hockney's early experience of Yorkshire as a place eternally enveloped in

coal dust and rain, which played some part in his relocation to California in search of light that made sharp shadows. Somehow, in Woods' paintings Hockney's America has migrated and re-settled in Yorkshire.

Hockney's new work, however, has moved on. Now Hockney is not only bringing us his preoccupation with super-sizing nature, as in *Bigger Trees Near Warter*, 2007, but more a reinvestigation of the colours of his own landscapes; both those of his native Bridlington in East Yorkshire and the Californian landscape where he has worked for some 40 years, as well as the landscape of his persona. It now seems that the colours of California have been internalised, that Hockney's painting cannot be repressed by either weather nor others' smallmindedness. These new

David Hockney *The Big Hawthorne* 2008 oil on 9 canvases, 275 1/2 x 366 cm
courtesy of the artist © David Hockney photograph Richard Schmidt





paintings describe a landscape with wrinkles, contentedness, an acceptance of the smallness and naivety of the places he paints and an astonishing freshness in approach to formidably familiar scenes. There is a sense of age in these paintings, timber laid out beautifully, ready for transport and transformation into useful things, crinkly hedgerows that are at the same time stately and mad, the contradictions of childlike, cartoony strokes and beautiful, grown-up vistas happily married together. It is interesting to see the Yorkshire landscape presented by Woods and Hockney, two painters at either end of a careerspan, seeing how their paintings merge in some ways, as if there is some agreement between the two about the sheer impact of the land.

Nogah Engler's paintings are engaged with a very different experience of nature where the eye is led through paths that suddenly turn up a mountain wall or into negative space; huts are hidden behind spiky mountain ranges and obstacles are put in our way. Here are landscapes that twist themselves around, not only concerned with loss and decay, but also possibilities and potentiality.

Some disturbing and dramatic motives, as in earlier work evoking the pogroms of Eastern European Jews during the second world war, are tempered with a delicate touch and pared-back colours. Where Woods' paintings are unbridled in the lushness and intensity of layered paint, Engler's colours are finely tuned and subdued, transparent and erased or running out in washes. Engler evokes the backgrounds

of renaissance paintings through emotionally laden paint, but we are asked to look, not at the divine, so much as the ruthlessness of nature and of humans.

Quivering on the brink of dystopia is something that seems to preoccupy many painters at the moment. In the 2011 group survey show, *The Future Can Wait*, similar concerns could be seen in the works of Wieland Payer and Monica Ursina Jaeger. Political breakdown, ecological disaster, futuristic ruins and humans as impassive refugees and spectators are all subjects that lend themselves to investigation within the tradition of landscape painting.

But what of paintings that engage landscape in a way that belongs to the painting itself? I don't know what Jane Callister's relationship to the 'real' landscape is, or to what extent it guides or influences her work, but her pouring, dripping, stretching and stalking of the paint create landscapes that exist in the painting and perhaps only there. Callister's work of ten years ago seemed suggestive of landscape but still ambiguous, whereas her more recent works certainly engage nature. The forces of nature and the forms created by it are explored in an almost scientific way. Gravity and entropy pull forms apart and melt them together, blending and breaking the surface as well as the form of the canvas itself. The paintings crumble in small shards on the floor, missing corners are filled in by three dimensional forms, eeking the paintings out beyond their borders. The candy-coloured gushing paint floods in lava-like eruptions that equally form new continents.

Through this approach to painting it is possible to continue to be surprised at the landscapes conjured up; to construct, interact or even destroy them. As with scientific enquiry into nature, Callister's paintings are well conducted experiments that reflect a hypothesis of what will happen if paint is combined in a certain way and subjected to certain external influences, a balance between accident and control. In this way the painting is less a painting of events that happen to a landscape, but rather is the actual landscape and event itself.

These different approaches to landscape painting suggest that artists' interests in what constitutes and challenges our surroundings reflect current cultural concerns. It also seems to indicate that painting continues to be able to address these issues in a serious and responsible way.

David Hockney will be showing at The Royal Academy, London until April 2012.

Clare Woods *The Bloody Kernel* 2011 enamel and oil on aluminium 3 x 4m (4 panels of 2 x 1.5m)
courtesy the artist and Stuart Shave Modern Art, London