



art Root and branch reformed

This marvellous sculpture exhibition reveals the aching beauty of wood



JUDITH FLANDERS

David Nash ★★★★★
Yorkshire Sculpture Park,
West Bretton (01924 830 302)
until February 27 2011

Chainsaws and fire brigades are not the sort of thing one readily associates with an artist at work. But David Nash wields a chainsaw like a fine-tipped pen. To be sure, many of his works are massively hewn. Others, though, are wood sculptures of an exquisite nature: only millimetres thick, incredibly fragile, almost fluttering.

At Yorkshire Sculpture Park – one of the great outdoor venues for sculpture – more than 200 pieces are on show for the next eight months, in a retrospective covering the four decades of his remarkable career.

Not for Nash the slickness of the 'Cool Britannia' school, the lewd gaudiness of the YBAs. Instead, in a more old-fashioned British way, he has lived and worked quietly in Capel Rhiw, a disused Methodist chapel in north Wales that Nash bought and converted some 40 years ago. Sticking always to the

medium of wood – that basic material that has served humanity for millennia – he transforms it through his art, displaying its dazzling variety and scope. His are dynamic, tactile explorations of the possibilities of form in wood.

Nash, 64, never has trees cut down specifically for him. He uses trees that have died naturally, or been felled for other purposes: he has a contacts book full of tree surgeons, who ring him when they find something they think he'll like, and he also uses offcuts from timber yards.

The damage from the Great Storm of 1987 is still a valuable source, and one of his new pieces in Yorkshire is from an almost mythically vast elm-root that was uprooted then. *Think and Butt* – one section of which alone is over 8ft in diameter – was being readied when I visited him in April, and this is where the fire brigade comes in.

Several of Nash's sculptures have a charred surface. The four classical elements are a major influence, and – as well as earth, wind and air, all part of a tree's natural growing process – he frequently applies fire to bring out

dense charcoal patterns.

Nash and his assistants, covered in protective garments, faces masked like beekeepers, build a scrap-wood tepee around the pieces. This is lit, and gradually the flames flare out, a cue for everyone to step back. When the scrapwood exterior is burned away, the sculpture emerges red-hot. The carved fissures in the wood gleam like eyes winking bright orange. Then, as everything cools, the now ash-covered pieces emerge, like some kind of asteroid.

Once the fire brigade is reassured that everything has gone to plan, Nash hoses the work down, steam rises and the wood turns instantly from white to black: like medieval alchemy, the piece transforms itself out of air, returning to earth as art.

This act of creation is

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Charred David Nash's 'Trunk and Butt' at Yorkshire Sculpture Park

breathtaking, and the finished pieces retain, latent within them, a sense of potentiality, of becoming.

In one gallery, a film, *Wooden Boulder*, shows an oak boulder that Nash carved and then placed in a Welsh stream in 1978, as it travels slowly downstream and ultimately washes out to sea in the estuary tides. This simple voyage becomes epic – when the boulder finally disappears, the viewer feels the loss, as of a person.

Now, in the same gallery sits *Cracking Box*, a beguiling sculpture formed by cutting several sections of an oak-tree trunk and rejoining them in the shape of a cube. This was made nearly two decades after *Wooden Boulder*, yet remarkably it is carved from the very same tree – just one that has gone on a different journey.

One of the most interesting things about this exhibition is its charting of how Nash's ideas have developed down the years. *King and Queen* appears as a charred-wood sculpture in one gallery; then, on the drive as the visitor enters the park, there is the piece again, this time in bronze, the two pieces signifying elemental change in their transformation from solid wood, to liquid metal during casting, and then back to solid (in bronze). Earth, air, water, fire.

Some of Nash's earliest pieces, wildly complex towers, are on show too. But his great breakthrough was 1971's *Nine Cracked Balls*. These are roughly hewn balls of wood that Nash has left to shape themselves over time, in the form of cracking. His emphasis here is on how raw wood changes, both before and after his intervention. Unlearning everything he had learnt at art school, he decided instead 'to let the land show [him] the way'.

This is wonderfully achieved in the park's beautiful new permanent piece, *Oxley Bank Black Steps*,

where 71 charred oak steps, embedded in loose coal, drift gently up a hillside. The coal and the wood echo the history of West Yorkshire coal mining, and they also stress man's dependency on nature: man-made and nature-made are vividly shown to be irrevocably intertwined.

Meanwhile, there's also a film keeping us up-to-date with *Ash Dome*, the circle of ash saplings planted by Nash in the late-Seventies in a Welsh wood. These have now grown into trees, and over the intervening three decades Nash has carefully pruned and shaped them to create a living dome. An impressive 'sculpture out of nature', it echoes the forms of the encircling hills of Snowdonia.

In the film, we witness artist and trees maturing together, in a quietly moving tribute to an undemonstrative, understated artist whose work packs a huge emotional punch. One of the don't-miss exhibitions of the year.

Andrew Graham-Dixon is away

MUST SEE

John Hoyland
Lemon Street Gallery, Truro (01872 275 757) to Sat. Perhaps Britain's premier abstract painter of the past 50 years, Hoyland returns with works of a darker character, ones said to be inspired by the passing of time, the awareness of ageing, and the loss of friends'

Andy Warhol
Hay Hill Gallery, London W1 (020 7439 1001) to Jul 17. A look at Warhol's creative processes, with 50 screenprints shown alongside their preparatory drawings

John Brett
Barber Institute, Birmingham (0121 414 7333) to Jul 4. Last chance to see portraits by the pre-Raphaelite more famous for his landscapes