

Ash Dome (1977) by David Nash

A talk by Laura Claveria, Assistant Curator at Leeds Art Gallery

Have you ever walked through a forest and suddenly found some interestingly shaped trees? Did you ever think that perhaps what you had in front of you was actually a work of art?

I have sometimes fantasized with the idea of serendipitously finding one of David Nash's "Planted Works", but I have never been that lucky to be honest.

The inclusion of Nash in the exhibition *Natural Encounters* was a sort of obvious one. Born in Surrey in 1945, Nash has created a significant and varied body of work in which the relationship between humans and nature is a central theme.

Leeds Art Gallery is lucky enough to have one of the 25 portfolios of 8 pastel and charcoal drawings the artist made in 1992 reflecting on a number of living sculptures he planted over a period of 15 years in a variety of locations from Wales to the Netherlands. The drawings were bought thanks to a grant from the Leeds Art Fund from Louver Gallery in New York where the artist had a solo exhibition.

For this short talk, I'll be focusing on one of them: *Ash Dome*, which is the first one he did and despite possibly being the most well-known of all of them, always allows for new and surprising ways into Nash's practice.

Nash's working ethos is pretty much one of collaboration with nature. For *Ash Dome*, he planted a ring of 22 equally spaced ash trees forming a circle of 30 feet or 9 metres in diameter.

As the drawing reads in a hand-written inscription, the sculpture was planted in 1977 in North Wales. The artist chose a particular hillside in his own woodland near his house/studio. Its actual location is often referred to as secret as he wants to keep it safe from vandalism and actually journalists or researchers that are invited to visit it are often taken around so that they don't actually know its exact location.

I guess that this adds up a level of mysteriousness despite the fact that Nash never intended any mysticism in his work. And actually he chose the number 22 particularly because of that. Firstly because that was the number required to make it big enough to fit in that particular bit of ground, and secondly to avoid the associations that other symbolic numbers would have had (like 12- linked to the apostles, for instance).

When he planted it in 1977 he knew he was committing to take care of it for decades, as he envisaged that the work would take more than 30 years to complete, so we cannot really blame him for choosing a place near his house.

The history of its inception is quite a laborious one. More than I ever imagined, as he shaped it completely from scratch and actually he chose ash because they are the most resilient species to being pruned and they are very strong.

So, it all started with planting the 22 saplings in an area of land he had previously cleared and he staked them to hold them in place until the roots got established. It was later that he decided to fence them to protect them, although he learnt this the hard way... He once confessed:

“the first thing that happened was some sheep got into the land and ate them, so I had to re-plant them and I put a fence round them. And then rabbits started nibbling the bark at the bottom, so I had to put rabbit guards on them”

He first pruned it in 1978. Later he grafted some branches that would ultimately become the lead growth. 5 years later, he very carefully made some V-shaped cuts into the trunk with a Japanese saw using a technique called fletching whereby the tree is sort of “bended over” and wrapped to allow the cambium layer to heal the cuts. In 1987 he pruned them again and removed the stakes 3 years later.

There is some footage of him pruning the tree and he looks very much as a respectful gardener or horticulturist. It personally reminds of my own father pruning our family’s fruit trees in a small village in Spain. My father is not an art person at all, but a very humble one that is deeply connected to nature and he shares that with Nash, I’d say.

So, Nash trained the trees to grow in a winding shape to form a vast dome at the top. He chose the dome because it’s a very simple space without a defined entrance to it. The idea of the dome also came from the foothills around as he was interested in creating a work that was genuinely “of” the particular place where it was. He once said:

“When I was very young my grandfather would point at these hills and tell me that they’re hollowed out, so this big dome space lived in my imagination whenever I looked at these mountains, the mountains you can see from the Ash Dome.”

By following what Nash has done with this sculpture through the years, you realise that is quite an interventionist type of practice. There is quite a lot of manipulation involved. He regularly prunes the trees, especially in the lower branches, to emphasize the linear form. And I’ve seen him washing other planted trees to prevent algae from growing too. But it’s interesting to note that when you compare images of the trees over the years, the shape in the most recent ones has become less sharp, more fluid, more integrated as if wanting to

go back to its original shape. They obviously need to find a balance and grow vertically towards the light and they've probably been eroded by the natural elements. But it also has a symbolic sense, like rebelling and not resigning itself to the artist's intentions, possibly finding a compromise over the years. I personally think it exemplifies a lesson about life and nature.

Some people may find that high level of intervention uncomfortable and he actually received some criticism in the 70s when the environmental movement had a "don't touch nature" sort of thinking. but he sees himself more connected to the way people approach nature in rural areas, much more hands-on and as part of their livelihood.

And I think is amazing that his sculptural concept is so coherent that totally resonates with what he's doing and what he believes in more than 40 years later.

It's also really interesting to know that he began the piece at a time of austerity and economic crisis with very high unemployment rates in England. The Cold War was still a threat and concerns about nuclear war were prevalent. In an interview once he actually said: *To make a gesture by planting something for the 21st century, which was what Ash Dome was about, was a long-term commitment, an act of faith.*" And that's why perhaps we still find it absolutely relevant and inspiring, especially in such a difficult period like the one we're currently living.

In recent years, the trees have sadly been struck by ash dieback, which caused a great deal of concern to the artist. He asked for advice to try and combat the disease but he finally realised that there was not much he could do and, although he always thought that the work would be there for much longer after he died and he hoped that his helpers took care of it, he finally accepted that that won't probably be the case.

This is actually what makes this artwork absolutely mesmerizing. It is a living sculpture that continues to grow and change and is the product of a wonderful and respectful partnership, that of humans and nature.

Also his relationship with wood is genuine, poetic and heartfelt in equal measure. A relationship that started in childhood but also grew from his experience working for the Economic Forestry Group. He once said: "The wood is a partner, and it leads me, it still leads me."

And it's hardly surprising that he had chosen charcoal as the drawing material for this and for most of his drawings. It's like representing wood with a material that actually comes from wood. It's like bringing the natural materials back into the drawing.

It actually helps him convey the sense of energy that comes from the living trees, their constantly evolving organic nature, that sense of spontaneity, as well as the tactile

elements through loose but controlled strokes, marks and smudges. When you look at the drawing you can feel the delicate and subtle movement of the leaves too.

But also the decision to make drawings is also to make the planted works accessible (being in remote locations as they are) and is a practical and commercial one too. He makes them to be able to present them to a wider range of people in exhibitions and to sell them, which he needs not just to maintain himself but to maintain the work itself as it requires quite a bit of maintenance that he can no longer do himself.

He has tried doing prints too, but truth is that being a skilful draughtsman, it takes him less time to draw these drawings than printing them.

His production of Works on Paper has quite an important role in his creative processes. It stimulates and enhances his sculpture practice. It helps understand it, they are not as sketches before making it. And interestingly, drawings of the ash dome have also changed over the years along with the sculpture itself.

For the *Natural Encounters* exhibition, I placed this drawing in a prominent place as part of the section called “The many paths leading to a tree” which includes at its centre a living olive tree. I thought Nash would be quite pleased with this.