

Outcast Coal Production (c.1943) by Graham Sutherland

A talk by Erin Saunders of the Youth Collective

Sutherland is noted for being one of the most highly commended British artists of the 20th century. The war artist's organic and abstract landscapes depict a greatly individualist and personal response to nature, which helped capture the grisly and poignant legacy of the Second World War.

I would like to introduce Graham Sutherland's piece *Outcast Coal Production: Excavators uncovering coal seam*.

Fashioned in 1943 out of pencil, crayon and watercolor, I'd like to ask you to closely examine the animated range of marks that make up this unadorned jagged landscape. Firstly, focus in on the delicate pencil marks, witness the exuberance and energy within these lines. This texture is then replaced in areas by the deep and threatening mark of the chalky pastel. Its dark and ominous colour, paired with its earthy application mimics the sooty atmosphere of the coal within the mine. The dark and threatening hills are backlit by a vivid and acidic yellow colour which floods the upper half of the page. Become aware of this fantastic contrast between the background and foreground. The wash of acrimonious yellow is perhaps emblematic of the bright scorching flames from the vats and machinery used within the coal mining process. Alternatively, the light could represent sun rays glittering thought from behind the gloomy hills.

Sutherland was a British painter, printmaker and designer, best known for his neo-romantic style. Among his war works, he became famous for his imaginative and often, abstract depictions of the Welsh coastlines of Pembrokeshire, and later, his religious representations of thorn adorned Christ like figures.

Born in London, Sutherland deserted his internship as a railway engineer to study art at Goldsmith's College, London from 1921-1926. He later went on to teach at Chelsea school of art, before his placement as a war artist, with the beginning of the second world war. From 1940 to 1945 Sutherland operated as an Official War Artist, working amongst artists such as Paul Nash, Henry Moore and Stanley Spencer. They recorded the twisted and tortured landscape effected by bombing, and specifically in Sutherland's case, the physically challenging labor undergone by the coal mining industry. The artist spent a long time at the tin mines in Cornwall, steelworks in Cardiff and at the quarries in Derbyshire, to record the impressive industrial output of Britain in the second world war. Even though Sutherland suffered from claustrophobia, his commitment to spending time deep inside the confined and hazardous mines is what made his work so fantastically emotive.

His work was intended to be an important record akin to black and white photography, however one can argue that it evokes so much more. Dissimilarly to photography, his landscapes are not exact or strict, but semi-abstract, allowing his work to express the emotional aptitude of a place. The light and dark between the colors evokes drama. His use of mixed media is tactile and gives the observer greater sense of the textures of the land. Furthermore, the blackness, emulates the terrible suffering felt in that period. It becomes impossible to detach emotion and sentiment from the mark making. Sutherland was aware of his own methods, and in an interview with the BBC, in 1966 he pronounces his work as “incorporating the original, but creating something quite different (...) making the original more real”.

Sutherland's success was not overlooked and Douglas Cooper, the infamous art historian described him as the “most distinguished and the most original English artist of the mid-20th century”.

My name is Erin Saunders, and I am a volunteer for Leeds Art Gallery youth collective.

Thank you for listening.