

bernard jacobson gallery

Ben Nicholson

Selected Works

4th – 28th February 2009

'Looking at them you feel at once that by their presence the world is made less vicious and less arbitrary. They are the opposite to everything that is most boring and most lifeless. What was inchoate has been stated, a thought made visible without being explained away'

- Christopher Neve, 1993

The works on display at Bernard Jacobson Gallery from the 4th of February date from across Ben Nicholson's distinguished career and range from his fully abstract white reliefs to his later pencil drawings of architectural ruins. Born in 1894, and one of the leading figures of British modernism from the 1920s until his death in 1982, Nicholson was described during his lifetime by one French critic as the 'first English painter of universal significance', and was instrumental in defining a position for characteristically British art within the international scene. Whilst he is often associated with his more abstract works, the current exhibition builds upon the success of the Tate's current touring exhibition in presenting a more rounded view of Nicholson's oeuvre.

Born in 1894 to a family of painters, Ben Nicholson had his first one-man show at Adelphi Gallery, London, in 1922, having studied briefly at the Slade between 1910-1911 (about which time Nicholson later commented that he had learned more from the billiard table in the nearby Gower Hotel than through any classes). From the outset of his career his work was notable in its ability to fuse diverse influences, from the soft lighting and sense of searching structure, witnessed in the work of the so-called Italian primitives - Giotto, Uccello, or Piero della Francesca, for example - to the latest advances of the European avant-garde - be it Picasso's synthetic cubism or Mondrian's uncompromising abstraction. In fusing these diverse influences, Nicholson showed a rare ability to distinguish the key elements in each that related to his own practice. So it was that he was able to wander back and forth between the poles of this show - the pure abstraction of his white reliefs, the synthetic cubism of his still lifes or the tentatively observed figuration of his landscapes - and bring to bare upon each of them his warming and harmonious vision.

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Nicholson's pre-eminence in the British scene during the interwar years was unrivalled, helping not only to establish modernism and abstraction in Britain, but British modernism on a world stage. He was also a key founding member of the St Ives group who pushed abstraction through into the post-war years. But as these works show, it is the gentle poetry of his paintings above any art historical constructs, that continues to make his art of relevance. As Christopher Neve has said, 'He shows us the interplay, the syncopated dance that exists somewhere between geometry and intuition, and which, except in the greatest art is kept always just out of sight.'