

David Nash at Kew: A Natural Gallery – review

Kew Gardens, London

By Laura Cumming

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Here's looking at yew: David Nash's Red and Black Dome, 2006 at Kew Gardens. Photograph: Andrew Mcrobb

Three magnificent figures rise as high as the trees in a clearing at Kew Gardens. Everyone stops to stare. Towering above our heads, strength coursing through their limbs, they appear to forge forwards through the sun and rain like strange new beings breaking into motion. They are, in fact, trees themselves.

Trees, to be precise, which are still recognizably trees; they have yet to be turned into sculptures by David Nash, although that will happen in the next few weeks. What's visible just now is the raw material: these monumental oaks, their roots and branches sawn off, stationed on the earth like statues. Each has been turned upside down, so that the boughs become legs and the trunks are torsos. The wonder comes from a simple act of inversion.

What will Nash do to make them his? The one sure thing is that he will not leave them in this pure state. Whatever they are now – mighty striding figures, bare forked animals, marvelous old forms three centuries in the making – he will work them into something else. Craft will overcome concept.

David Nash OBE (b.1945) is the great woodworker in a celebrated generation of British sculptors that includes Tony Cragg, Bill Woodrow and the Richards: Deacon, Long and Wentworth. He makes everything out of trees. His works involve hewing, carving and occasionally charring trees where they have collapsed in the landscape from storm or disease – he is perennially green-minded – and sometimes shaping live specimens where they grow.

His sculptures may allude to the wooden objects of daily existence, such as chairs, ladders, shelters and tables; or they may tend to a geometric abstraction that can't help resonating with our material world in any

case. A gigantic charred sphere on a grassy knoll at Kew resembles a perished rubber ball. A humped kernel recalls a nut or seed.

Kew Gardens is the inevitable destination for Nash, in one sense: the sculptor of trees surrounded by thousands of natural tree-sculptures. But this is also a most risky enterprise. A park filled with so many stunning variations on the essential tree form is bound to throw an emphasis on beauty (and variety) that is not always kind to this artist, whose work is so much the result of conspicuous labor.

Take the Temperate House, where a dozen and more sculptures are positioned among the palms, ferns, waterfalls and towering trees like creatures in a jungle. They are placed with enough sensitivity so that one might only glimpse them by chance, and there is a certain camouflage effect in the affinities between natural and man-made shapes.

But Nash's columns are heavily incised, his totems hacked, his lattices coarsely hewn and his primordial humps obviously worked with a chainsaw. The blackened table bearing a charred cone, cylinder and cube is particularly unsuccessful next to a fringed pond, like some attention-seeking piece of atrium decor.

Everything growing around these sculptures looks ingenious, strange and subtle by comparison, so that one is forced back upon considerations of method and materials for anything like a decent appreciation.

Which may be why the curators have no choice but to draw attention to them too; to note that this work was carved of elm or that one axed out of oak; that this was made in Japan and that one on location in Napa Valley.

But these anecdotes add nothing to the works themselves other than a spurious air of legend. Visually, they make very little difference. I had imagined that because Nash never overworks his surfaces – splinters, fissures and knots are an integral part of each piece – the character of the wood itself would be crucial; and perhaps it is to him. But again, that is not embodied or expressed in the work.

In recent years Nash has cast some of his wood-works in bronze. There is a beautiful piece, *King and Queen*, in which two slender tapering stacks are delicately positioned so as to suggest a human relationship – together but separate, pausing, waiting, a conversation unresolved. It's a tremulous union made stately by the darkened bronze.

The idea irresistibly recalls Henry Moore's royal couples, of course, and that is very much how it goes with Nash. His art is constantly harking back to early modernism, reprising Cézanne, Picasso or Moore, Brancusi's *Endless Column* or Epstein's *Rock Drill*. Depending on your viewpoint, it may seem timeless or oddly old-fashioned. But at its worst, it can come across as kitsch – Brancusi redone with knobs on.

This is an immense retrospective, spreading from park to pavilion and filling two galleries. It includes drawings, studies, films about (and by) Nash, numerous sculptures and an outdoor studio full of works in progress. What it shows, over several hundred acres, is a peculiarly variable oeuvre.

Every now and again something mighty will come of an oak, or something wondrous from an ash. There is a powerful work near the main entrance called *Oculus Block*, a foursquare lump of eucalyptus emerging from the natural fusion of four trunks from one root. Nash discovers interior passages and secret viewing points within, making a grand canyon out of a tree.

But then again the nearby *Charred Cross Egg* is a great blank of a work: a huge elongated egg of charred wood, carved all over with heavy crosses. None of these attributes enhances any of the others and together they cancel each other out. Only the title has impact, by virtue of its bluntness.

That Nash is dedicated to trees has never been in doubt. His writing about them is a kind of prose-poetry in itself, full of empathy for their solitude, purpose and grandeur. What he makes of them with his axe and chainsaw is something quite different, alas – a much less eloquent art.