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David Nash's Artistry in Wood

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David Nash with "Red and Black Dome," 2006.

KEW, ENGLAND — The sculptor and land artist David Nash first made use of wood when he constructed colorful towers out of beams and planks scavenged from demolition sites. But then he went out into the countryside and found even more interesting materials: trees blown down in storms or struck by lightning, sometimes felled, or about to be, seemingly at the end of their lives.

Out of these trunks and branches, working in locations around the world, he has in the last 40 years created a series of extraordinary and varied sculptures and installations, some that could last for hundreds of years and others already decayed, or in the process of decay, that will be reabsorbed into nature.

The artist was born in Surrey in 1945 and received his initial training at Kingston College of Art, just upstream on the Thames from the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. But after graduating, at 22, he took himself off to Blaenau Ffestiniog, a depressed slate mining village in North Wales — a move that most of his aspiring contemporaries in the late 1960s would have seen as artistic suicide — where he turned an abandoned Methodist chapel into a studio, which has been his base ever since.

The rich productivity of this migration into potential obscurity, from which he has built an international reputation, is unfolded in a fascinating exhibition, "David Nash at Kew: A Natural Gallery," which is part retrospective, part work-in-progress and is artfully scattered both outdoors in the gardens and in a trio of indoor spaces.

Visitors to this show-cum-sculptural-treasure hunt are provided with a map to locate the works, with the added attraction of a good chance of seeing David Nash himself at work creating new pieces in situ in his

wood quarry in the heart of the gardens until October (with a further indoor conservatory display to be installed this autumn), after which the whole show will remain in place at Kew until the end of spring.

There are more than 14,000 trees at Kew Gardens, so it would have been legitimate for the artist to wonder whether visitors might not be able to see the Nashes for the trees. But the quartet of his works placed within view of the main entrance gate to the gardens — two towering charred oak columns, the massive “Oculus Block” made from the fused trunks of two eucalyptus trees, and an intriguing circle of cast-iron cones recalling mountains in classical Chinese landscapes — are more than sufficiently eye-catching to send visitors in search of more.



Furrowed Oak, 1991, Polish oak.

Although most of Mr. Nash’s work is created outdoors, nearly all is designed to be shown indoors, not least for conservation reasons, the artist explained when I caught up with him at Kew’s Shirley Sherwood Gallery, which contains some key pieces and his steadily updated “Family Tree” mural illustrating the development of his thought and works from the early 1970s until today.

He is an admirer of Inuit stone carvings. “Inuit sculpture is at its best when you can see the form of the original stones from which they are made. This preserves the sensation of the passage of time,

how long the stone has taken to reach this form,” he said. “This is also a very important element for me. It’s the aesthetic I start with, the ultimate shape of the sculpture being determined by the original form of the wood.”

And this collaboration between him and the material he “borrows,” as he likes to put it, from woods and forests is constantly evident in his works.

But he also employs certain forms that he sees as universal, notably those of the cube, the sphere and the pyramid. His engagement with them goes back to a childhood love of geometry, and he returns to them over and over. “You find them everywhere in the natural world,” he said. “And they appear, for example, in Buddhist philosophy: the cube representing the material; the sphere, the spiritual; and the triangle, the dynamic.”

During the first decade of his wood sculpting he used only basic tools, such as axes, handsaws, chisels and mallets, a stage that he said was vital in teaching him the very different qualities of various types of wood. Then he began using chain saws, which vastly expanded the scale of the works he could undertake, leading to impressive monumental works, often weighing several tons.

He is now creating a new column in his “Wood Quarry” at Kew from a 300-year-old oak — probably one of the trees that were here when the gardens were laid out — which was moribund and scheduled to be cut down.

Nash is working on it while it is still rooted in the ground. Having cut off the branches and outer sap wood, he was pleased to find that it was remarkably free of rot spots. Using a cherry picker, he moves around the

trunk marking out the cuts with ropes and then slices into the wood with a chain saw. In this case he is carving the trunk into a stack of tilting cups, apparently balancing one on top of the other, giving this solid column a vertiginous illusion of precariousness.

Wood sculptures gradually rot, so the artist has experimented with various long-term solutions. Prominent among these is charring the wood, effectively encasing the sculpture in a hard carbon outer shell and producing wonderful coruscating light effects on its jet-black, reflecting surfaces. "Charring deters insects from boring into the wood," said the artist, "and also woodpeckers. Although during the mating season they'll attack almost anything."

He has also cast some of his wood pieces in bronze. Five recent ones have been arranged on a lawn by the large glass Temperate House. The artist's use of bronze upset some of his more purist admirers: "For some of them it was rather like when Bob Dylan went electric," he said.

Amid the palms, ferns and rock gardens in the Temperate House are 19 other works in bronze, oak,

elm, ash, lime, yew, redwood and mizunara, some closely echoing natural forms, others looking like ritual objects and monuments of mysterious, lost civilizations rediscovered in jungle settings.



"Cairn Column," 2012.

Shortly after our meeting, Mr. Nash was taking a few days off from his residency at Kew, making it possible to visit him at his studio-home Capel Rhiw at Blaenau Ffestiniog.

Close by in the Ffestiniog Valley is Cae'n-y-Coed, a 2.5-hectare, or 6-acre, sloping tract of wood and the scene of 16 grown sculptures, some of which are still visible, others having returned to nature. The best-known of these is his "Ash Dome," a ring of 22 ash trees that he has been pruning and training since 1977 to create a lofty arboreal cupola.

High up on the opposite side of the valley a year later, he carved out his "Wooden Boulder," an oak sphere, which he rolled into a mountain torrent. Over the following 30 years he recorded its progress downstream, tumbling over waterfalls, lingering in pools and lodging under bridges, floating semi-submerged along the River Dwyryd and into its tidal estuary (a journey documented in a delightful film at the Shirley Sherwood Gallery at Kew). "Wooden Boulder" last surfaced briefly in May 2008 before disappearing into sea.

Describing the Ash Dome as a "staying sculpture," Mr. Nash said "Wooden Boulder," his signature "going sculpture," was at the opposite extreme.

"Not that it's lost," he added. "It's just somewhere else."