

# David Nash

Born 1945. Sculptor.

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# 1. Making Art Outside

*The following chapters were archived in 2024, with acknowledgement and thanks, from an interview with Martin Gayford on the website of Apollo Magazine at [www.apollo-magazine.com](http://www.apollo-magazine.com). The interview was published in August 2019 under the title: 'Wood suits me, I'm a Saxon!'*



Ash Dome (1977–ongoing), David Nash. Photo: courtesy the artist; © David Nash

'Making art outside,' David Nash explains, 'is completely different from working inside.' He looks around the East Sussex drawing studio in which we are talking, and adds: 'In here we've got four walls, a flat floor and ceiling. We've neutralised the elemental forces. As soon as you go out there, you are dealing with slopes, wind, air, rain. You are in another dimension. You are not necessarily in competition with it, but you are in it.' Nash is not unappreciative of interiors. He still relishes the vaulted grandeur of the refectory at the Romanesque abbey of Tournus in Burgundy, where he had an exhibition in the late '80s. And he is very pleased with the high, classical spaces of the National Gallery of Wales, where his work is on show at the moment. But, essentially, he is an open-air artist. 'I like to get out there in the land, and make art with what's

there, and be out there.' So, in an absolutely direct way, Nash is a land artist.



David Nash (b. 1945) photographed at his home in Lewes, East Sussex, in May 2019. Photo: Benjamin McMahon

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## 2. Wood and Trees

His work is concerned with wood and trees – he doesn't distinguish between them – and two of his most celebrated works, Wooden Boulder (1978–ongoing) and Ash Dome (1977–ongoing) were made, and remain, in situ. But in neither case is that term entirely accurate, because the former moved a considerable distance over 40 years.

Wooden Boulder is what Nash terms 'a going sculpture'; Ash Dome, on the other hand, is 'a coming sculpture'. Wood, according to Nash, is always either coming or going – that is, growing, or beginning to return to its constituent elements. 'It's coming as a tree, or going as a dead piece of wood. When we make a table we borrow it out of the cycle, but if we put it outside it will go back into the cycle.' Wooden Boulder was – and perhaps still is – going in another sense. Nash carved an approximately spherical, half-ton chunk from the trunk of a 200-year-old oak in 1978, using a chainsaw (a favourite sculpting tool). It then travelled some 15 miles down the River Dwyryd, out into the estuary, where it disappeared in 2015 (though it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that it may re-emerge once more).

Ash Dome, a structure woven by Nash from living trees, was a growing thing, constantly coming into existence. But it is also going now, a victim of ash dieback. In neither case, however, is their creator disconsolate. This, he muses, is the one point that the naturalist and writer Roger Deakin got wrong in a wonderful chapter about Nash in his book, *Wildwood* (2007). He describes Nash searching obsessively for Wooden Boulder. While the artist admits he looked quite hard, he insists he wasn't sad. 'This was a going sculpture, so the fact that it was gone was a victory!'



Wooden Boulder (1978–ongoing), David Nash, in 1978. Photo: courtesy the artist; © David Nash

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Wooden Boulder (1978–ongoing) in Bronturnor stream, 1990. Photo: courtesy the artist; © David Nash

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Part of the point of these works was an engagement not only with the elements, but also with the dimensions – space and time. “The great thing

is that it's a narrative, and I'm big on narrative. I always felt with the Wooden Boulder and Ash Dome, it was the time experience – quite different from a painting or a conventional sculpture.'

### 3. A Paradoxical Quality

Nash's works have a paradoxical quality, which is one of the most appealing things about them. On the one hand they are utterly straightforward, simple and, up to a point, practical. On the other hand, they are metaphysical: concerned with the ultimate nature of things. Some of his most intriguing creations take the form of utilitarian objects. Ash Stick Chair (1979), for example, partly has the shape of a chair, and Cracking Box (1990) is a box of sorts. But neither is exactly functional. The pieces of ash that form the chair (subsequently cast in bronze) appear to be sprouting twigs, so that it is raised rather precariously off the ground as if on many legs, and the 'seat' would be prickly to sit on. Similarly the box would not be much use for putting things in, partly because Nash used unseasoned sapwood, which pulled and shrank as it aged, creating fissures through which smaller items would drop.

At a casual glance, some of Nash's work might be confused with craft. But there is a major difference. Arguably, craft is about making life more comfortable, by embellishing and beautifying our surroundings; art is about making us more uncomfortable, because it aims at making us think. Nash certainly does the latter. His Cracking Box is about the nature of wood, and the way we use it and transform it. In a way, it was made with enormous skill. As Roger Deakin observed, it 'thumbs its nose at basic rules of woodworking, triumphantly so'. Nash fitted it together with carved oak pegs, so the more the wood split and writhed, the tighter the friction of their irregular surfaces. So they pulled it together. 'I was told you had to have seasoned wood otherwise it will crack and bend and warp,' Nash says. 'I found that was quite right – but I thought it was fantastic. There was a dynamic in that. I was looking for a way of working in which the material would lead me, rather than my dominating it.'

Cracking Box is, like Wooden Boulder and Ash Dome, a living creature, animated, and with a narrative. But to make something like that would fill a true craftsman with horror. In the '80s, Nash recalls, he was pressed by the Crafts Council to exhibit at its London gallery. When he turned this offer down, he was asked why. 'Perhaps it was foolish, but I told them

why. They said, "You're being very snobbish." So I thought about it, then I explained what I'd like to do, which was going to make a real mess in there; there was going to be charcoal on the walls. They said, "We can't do that!" So I then said, "That's the difference. You want things neat and tidy, I want it rough."



Cracking Box (1990), David Nash. Chapel Rhiw, Blaenau Ffestiniog



Nash belongs to a group of artists who like to make things raw and rough – and preferably outdoors too. He is almost exactly the same age as Richard Long. Both were born in 1945, though Nash was not aware of Long's work until he saw it at the Hayward in 1972. They would usually be docketed as land artists, together with Americans such as Robert Smithson (who was only seven years older, though he now seems to belong deep in history). But as always happens when one starts to categorise artists, differences immediately appear. The American land artists, for example, as Nash quickly points out, mainly made works in the desert of the western United States. Clearly, desert isn't Nash's natural habitat. He is a woodland person. Then the art of Richard Long is all about walking, whereas Nash's is much more about staying put.

## 4. Exhibitions Around the World

Admittedly, he too has journeyed widely. Nash spent much of the '80s and '90s, he tells me, doing exhibitions around the world – in Tournus, Japan, Barcelona and many other spots. His motto in those years was: 'Have axe, will travel.' Nash would arrive and search for materials – often interesting varieties of wood, such as redwood in California – near the location of the show. From these he would develop ideas. 'The exhibition would require, say, 30 works, and I'd have four weeks, so there was a spontaneity to it.'

Fundamentally, however, his life and work have revolved around one place. 'My whole work comes out of my childhood in Ffestiniog.' In this respect, the comparison is with painters such as John Constable and Paul Cézanne, whose life's work is intimately connected with their early experiences of a particular terrain. The complication, however, is that Nash did not originally come from there. 'I had a bourgeois upbringing in Weybridge, Surrey.' But North Wales, and particularly the area around Ffestiniog, was a special place to him from early on. His grandfather, Nash explains, had been wealthy and lived in big houses. 'Later he didn't have any money, but he found this huge house for almost nothing. It had 40 acres of woodland, and a river that is mentioned in the Mabinogion ran through it. Every chance we got, my brother, mum, dad and I, we went up there. We just roamed. It was a fantastic adventure to explore it.'

It was in this landscape that, aged four or five, Nash had his first sculptural experience. Various artists have told me of such early encounters, the moment when the idea of becoming a sculptor was first seeded in their minds. For Antony Gormley, for example, it was encountering figures from ancient Egypt and Rapa Nui in the British Museum; Richard Deacon recalls the impression the majestic reclining Buddha at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka made on him as a boy. With Nash, it was a natural object that struck him. 'At one point on the bank there was an enormous rock, with a flat bottom but very rounded. It felt as high as this room to five-year-old me, perched on rocks, overhanging. I remember its power. It had immediacy, or animation.'



Stick Chair (2008), David Nash. Galerie Lelong & Co. Photo: © Galerie Lelong & Co; © David Nash

This is a crucial point for Nash and for all sculptors. After all, what they are doing is taking a bit of material stuff – stone, metal, wood – and changing it so that it is interestingly different. ‘Sculptures need to be animated in some way,’ Nash feels. ‘They have to go outside the normal time you are in yourself; in some way they have to have something a bit extra about them as an object, to make them. Balance is one of the things that may do that, making something appear to be off-balance.’ A figurative artist may make the material into the form of something else – a human being or an animal. Nash is trying to make it comment on itself: wood making a point about its own nature, and the way people interact with it.

That formative early encounter with a rock notwithstanding, stone is not the material that calls to Nash. This is despite the fact that he has lived for most of the last half-century surrounded by the towering waste tips of the slate quarries around Blaenau Ffestiniog. He is interested in the way these are accidental monuments, as imposing as the pyramid of Silbury Hill but made by chance. ‘They were made by tipping waste and letting it find its own place, so the tips look as they do because of the process of their making. They weren’t self-conscious.’ He learned from that

observation, but slate – or any kind of stone – was not for him. ‘I think people find the material through their temperament. I’m a sprinter, not a long-distance runner; a lot of stone carvers are long-distance runners. Richard Serra: steel is perfect for him. Wood just suits me, I’m a Saxon!’

## 5. Discovering More About Wood

That's just one Nash paradox: he is an Englishman from the Home Counties, whose life and work have revolved around a Welsh-speaking area of North Wales. He bought two cottages in Blaenau Ffestiniog for £300 in 1966; a couple of years later he bought a disused chapel that has functioned as a studio, and what might be called an environmental installation of his work. More poetically, an early visitor described Capel Rhiw as 'like a forest inside a chapel'. Nash found his way back there via art school, where he was making work somewhat in the manner of Anthony Caro, but made of wood. After a while, working in Ffestiniog, he became unhappy with what he was doing. 'I was making these big, complicated coloured objects but I was getting more and more dissatisfied with the colour just being a surface. I tried staining into the wood. That wasn't satisfactory.' After a while he set himself an exercise, to discover more about his material. 'I decided to address wood in the simplest way, an ancient way: with an axe.' He cut nine rough spheres from a small ash tree that had been felled. 'When the pieces of wood were separated from the trunk, I didn't touch them any more. I so enjoyed doing this! But I hadn't really thought of them being a work of art.' He put them aside in the chapel studio, where they were covered up, and emerged much later. 'They were there, all cracked and grinning at me.' It was his eureka moment. 'I thought, "Yes! This is the way!"'

With certain works, 'You could do more, but you decide not to. Perhaps it's more that there isn't any more that really needs to be done without losing it. You can fuss things and it doesn't make them look any better.' As artists have been saying for a long time now – since Rembrandt at least – a work is finished when the maker thinks it is, not when it has a neat and smooth surface. Roughness is important to him, as it is to Japanese potters, and so is geometry. In the early '70s, he was clearing old floorboards out of the chapel. 'Next I made some cubes out of boards, all different sizes. They weren't cut from solids, so there were no end grains, they were all mitred. I chopped the surfaces to make them rough.' They didn't look right to Nash, just on the floor, so he made a table for them. Then he realised that the table itself was a sculpture. This was the origin

of *Table with Cubes* (1970–71). A little later the last minister of Capel Rhiw came in to visit. ‘He loved what I was doing, which was wonderful. He said, “That table is interesting, it’s the same height as an altar!”’



*Pyramid, Sphere, Cube* (1997–98), David Nash. Tate, London. Photo: Jonty Wilde; © David Nash

It’s true that there is something deeply serious about Nash’s works, for all their directness and simplicity. He is concerned, like early Greek philosophers, with the four elements – earth, air, fire and water (and, like the Chinese, he would count wood as an element). ‘When I was 14 years old, a teacher told us about the four elements, and I was so excited by that. Then he said, “We don’t believe in that any more.” But I did. Somehow it sparked me.’ Then some years later he came across an early 19th-century Zen painting *The Universe, or Circle, Triangle, Square*. ‘I saw a postcard of the inspired drawing by a Japanese artist, Sengai, which I loved although I didn’t really know why. It’s freehand, but perfect. I realised that anything could be perfect, so long as you do it in the right way’.

Many of Nash’s works are perfect in a highly idiosyncratic fashion. Describing *Wooden Boulder* as it embarked on another leg of its odyssey, extracted by the tide from the alluvial mud of the Dwyryd estuary with a

loud squelch and floating away across the water, Nash exclaims: 'It was so alive, it had become a creature!' One wonders if, in a typically non-figurative manner, it is also a bit of a self-portrait.



Wooden Boulder (1978–ongoing) in the Dwyryd estuary, 2013. Photo: courtesy the artist; © David Nash

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