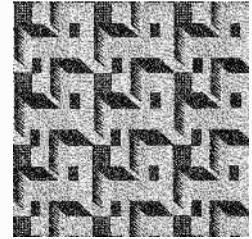


## “From a Sheet of Paper to the Sky”

Article by Inga Fraser

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### A Methodological Statement



Figure 1

Inga Fraser, *From a Sheet of Paper to the Sky*, 10 minutes 22 seconds.

This short film, “*From a Sheet of Paper to the Sky*”, grew out of research that I conducted for an essay of the same title, written for the catalogue accompanying the *Paul Nash* exhibition at Tate Britain (October 2016 to March 2017). In that essay, I argued against the traditional art historical tendency to review an artist’s work in different media separately, and instead proposed that a consideration of Paul Nash’s painting alongside his three-dimensional and textile designs, his printmaking, and photography, resulted in a fuller understanding of both the conceptual underpinnings and the recurring visual motifs in Nash’s work.

During the course of the research, I amassed a large number of images of his work—from catalogues, archives, and public and private collections—which, when sorted chronologically rather than according to material, yielded new insight into Nash’s oeuvre; for instance, disproving the assumption that an artist’s work in design is necessarily derivative of their painting.<sup>1</sup> Instead, such analysis showed that work executed outside the sphere of “fine art”

might pre-empt and direct work executed in Nash's "primary" medium of painting. In parallel, I looked among Nash's writings for evidence to support this reading of him as an "intermedial" artist, and found much to substantiate my hypothesis.

Nash was a lively and stimulating writer and, as well as various unpublished lectures and other notes, he wrote articles for a range of popular and specialist periodicals including *The Listener*, *Week-End Review*, *Architectural Review*, and *Signature*. Copies of these articles, Nash's drafts and other unpublished material are all held in the Papers of Paul Nash in the Tate Archive.<sup>2 3</sup> Budgetary and spatial economics restrict the scope of any one exhibition.<sup>4</sup> I could demonstrate the breadth of Nash's work to a greater degree in the illustrative images accompanying my essay in the catalogue but, still, a book is similarly defined spatially and financially. It seemed I had a point to make that was best made visually, with direct reference to the works themselves and to the "voice" of Nash as found among his various writings. Consequently, when asked to present a paper on the theme of my catalogue essay for the Paul Nash study day organized jointly by Emma Chambers at Tate and the Paul Mellon Centre, I proposed to make a short film that would allow space and time for the works, and for Nash, to speak for themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Concurrently, I was reading a collection of essays published last year on the nature of documentary film in contemporary visual culture. In their introduction, the editors define documentary "not as a category or genre [. . .] but as a critical method",<sup>6</sup> and identify a present-day need to "interrogate the processes by which we transform lived experience into meaning through representational practices."<sup>7</sup> The authors' texts raise questions as to what may constitute "a stable and proper document", the possibility of non-linear temporal progression in visual culture, and the ethical relations between object and subject.<sup>8 9 10</sup> Given the material I wanted to present, and with these methodological approaches in mind, I wanted to experiment, in a modest way, with a different way to communicate ideas about an artist's work. I was aiming for a simplified presentation of Nash's work outside the clamour and constraint of the exhibition or book, in a format which would allow for the examination of a greater number and type of works, for different perspectives, and for easier juxtapositions: enlarged details alongside architectural *mises en scène*.

Though spare in its construction, the film is no less subjective. As the film historian, Christa Blümlinger, notes, "observed objects. . . are intrinsically subject to change because they are exposed to the transformative influence of the gaze."<sup>11</sup> As I sorted the images, manipulated them in the editing software, and ordered them alongside the quotations from Nash I had selected—choosing to give prominence to lesser quoted passages from his writings in which he advocates the close relationship between design and art—it is most definitely my gaze directing that of the eventual viewer of the film. I hoped to lead the viewer through my own analysis of the material, towards the conclusion that themes and motifs overlap to such an extent in Nash's work that they must be considered in tandem. In Nash's words, "the two occupations, picture-making and applied design, as expressed in relation to printed and woven textiles and in decorations for books and so on, do not work eccentrically but in close sympathy."<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, by means of the sequential succession of images that prompt the viewer to recognize connections between Nash's works, I hoped to hint at the artist's own tendency to recognize hidden patterns in nature, art and the built environment, and his attribution of a certain mysticism to these associations.<sup>13</sup> It is this ecumenical approach to the observed world—demonstrated in his expansive definition of pattern as "a surface figured", in which "figure includes everything from a constellation to the check on this shirt and surface comprises everything from a sheet of

paper to the sky”— which first led me to want to consider Nash’s design and art output as a singular and related body of work.<sup>14</sup>

## About the author

Inga Fraser is a curator, writer, and art historian based in London. Previously Assistant Curator of Modern British Art at Tate, she is presently undertaking an AHRC-funded collaborative doctoral studentship with Tate and the Royal College of Art, researching artists’ engagement with film in Britain in the first half of the twentieth-century.

## Footnotes

1. Catalogues including Alexander Postan, *The Complete Graphic Work of Paul Nash* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973); Susan Lambert, *Paul Nash as Designer* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1975); Andrew Causey, *Paul Nash* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980). See “Select Bibliography”, in Dr Emma Chambers (ed.), *Paul Nash* (London: Tate Publishing, 2016), 181, for further list. Archives at the Tate include TGA 769 Writings, artwork, correspondence, photographs, and ephemera relating to Paul Nash; TGA 7050 Correspondence and papers of Paul Nash and his wife Margaret; TGA 7127 Miscellaneous papers of Paul Nash; TGA 8313 Letters and papers of Paul Nash; TGA 8611 Artwork and reproductions by Paul Nash. Other public collections include the Prints, Drawings & Paintings Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum.
2. Some of which also appear in Andrew Causey’s *Paul Nash: Writings on Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
3. See Note 1 for details.
4. For instance, the chrome and glass bathroom that Nash designed and was built for the dancer Tilly Losch, the wife of Edward James, relates to earlier paintings such as *Lares* (1929–30), but would have been prohibitively expensive to reconstruct in the context of this exhibition. It was reconstructed in 1979 by the architect Julian Feary for an exhibition on design in the 1930s at the Hayward Gallery and it is from that reconstruction that the colour slide images in the film are taken.
5. All but one of the readings, an excerpt from an article in *Architectural Review*, are from Nash’s words. The article in *Architectural Review* (February 1944: 2–8) is credited to “the editor”, and titled “Exterior Furnishing or Sharawagdi: The Art of Making Urban Landscape”. The article was illustrated with photographs taken by Nash of benches by the sea in Swanage and he was sent a transcript of the text, which is now among his papers in the Tate Archive. All the works depicted are by Nash, excepting the portrait and studio photographs, which include those by Helen Muspratt, Francis Bruguière, and Tom Stuttard, and the colour photograph of the Hayward Gallery reconstruction of Nash’s bathroom design, which was taken by the architect on the project, Julian Feary. The film excerpt is Jill Craigie’s *Out of Chaos* (1944).
6. Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg, “Introduction: The Documentary Attitude”, in Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg (eds), *Documentary Across Disciplines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 18.
7. Balsom and Peleg, “Introduction”, 15.

8. Christopher Pinney, “Bruises and Blushes: Photography ‘Beyond’ Anthropology”, in Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg (eds), *Documentary Across Disciplines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 22.
9. See Ariella Azoulay, “Photography is Not Served: *The Family of Man* and *The Human Condition*”, in Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg (eds), *Documentary Across Disciplines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 110–41.
10. See, for instance, essays by Sylvère Lotringer and Sohrab Mohebbi, in Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg (eds), *Documentary Across Disciplines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 236–50 and 280–93 respectively.
11. Christa Blümlinger, ‘Reading Between the Images’, in Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg (eds), *Documentary Across Disciplines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 178.
12. *Paul Nash: An Exhibition of Applied Design 1908–1942* (London: CEMA, 1943), 3–4.
13. See for instance Nash’s interest in the writings of Sir James George Frazer (1854–1941) and Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682).
14. Paul Nash, [unpublished text on pattern]. Tate Library and Archive: The Papers of Paul Nash. TGA 7050.3(X), 3.

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