

OSBORNE SAMUEL

MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART

KEITH VAUGHAN (1912-1977)



Moon and Rocks on Ben Gairn, 1955

Oil on board
35.6 x 42 cms
(13.99 x 16.51 in)

Signed and dated lower right

Provenance: 	
Peter Meyer
Hon. Hugh Davies
Osborne Samuel Gallery, London, 2012
Sir Peter Shaffer
Private Collection

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Exhibited: Leicester Galleries, London, 1956
Hatton Gallery, University of Durham, Newcastle, 1956 (no.32)
Arts Council of Great Britain, 1957 (no.28)
Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1962 (no.176)
Agnews Gallery, London, 2012 (no.15)

Literature: Anthony Hepworth & Ian Massey 'Keith Vaughan: The Mature Oils 1946-77', Sansom & Co Bristol, 2012, p.93 No. AH197 (illus).

It could be argued that this small, but poetic, landscape represents the final manifestation of Neo-Romanticism as far as Vaughan's work is concerned. It contains several key characteristics of that tendency such as the ominous landscape subject filled with ambiguous, looming forms, rich foliage, suggestions of undergrowth and the gable-ends of old barns or farm houses. It is an atmospheric night scene and includes the ubiquitous sickle-shaped moon that quintessential Neo-Romantic logo.

Bengairn Hill is in Southern Galloway in Scotland and from its peak the dramatic East Stewartry Coast can be seen. Despite its lower slopes being surrounded by rocky outcrops and tall pine trees, the title for the painting may refer to an ancient stone cairn that crowns the hill's summit. Vaughan visited Galloway in 1953, two years before he painted *Moon and Rocks on Ben Gairn*. 1955 was a landscape year for Vaughan. Of the eighteen oil paintings he completed, eleven depict pure landscape subjects while only seven represent cityscapes, still-life subjects or paintings with figures. *Moon over Ben Gairn* is one of five Scottish landscape paintings he completed, the others being *St. Abbs Berwickshire I & II* (1952/1953) and *Coast above Berwick I & II* (1952/1953). The moon in a twilight landscape, of course, had been a haunting pictorial component long before Blake, Palmer and Calvert illuminated their nocturnal landscapes with its silvery light. During the Second World War Sutherland, Piper, Craxton, Minton, Ayrton and Vaughan came to appreciate the emotional and atmospheric allure of black-outs and moonlight in their Neo-Romantic paintings and included harvest moons, crescent moons, half-moons, full moons, new moons and waning moons whenever they could. John Craxton recalled that John Minton once came running up to him in Piccadilly Circus panting out 'Johnny, Johnny have you heard? They're back at last moons are back! They're selling like hotcakes. Start painting moons darling!', before dashing off again towards Soho. The moon, as the central subject and primary regulator of atmospheric effect, appears in numerous early works by Vaughan and even features in his final works (see *Landscape and Moon*, 1973 and *Moonlight*, 1976).

In *Moon and Rocks on Ben Gairn* Vaughan applies his paint generously and the textured impasto operates as counterparts of the rugged landscape forms. He is pushing ever closer towards abstraction in the jumble of ambiguous foreground shapes, the general formalisation of the squared-off landscape and the tilting tree boughs. Nevertheless he does not discard the object but achieves equilibrium between abstract representation and figurative observation. A fine amateur musician, he compared this approach to painting with qualities inherent in music:

I don't think great painting ever has or ever will dispense with the subject. The starting point, in the natural world, must be recognizable in order to gauge the extent of the artist's creative flight. Like a key in music. One has an infinite series of harmonic and melodic progressions, modulations away from the key, away from the longed-for resolution, but their value depends on their relation to the dominant, the common chord, the world of nature.

(Keith Vaughan, letter to Norman Towne, December 29, 1949)

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