

OSBORNE SAMUEL

MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART

KEITH VAUGHAN (1912-1977)



Landscape with Nude Bathers, 1948

Oil on Canvas

40 x 56 cms

(15.72 x 22.01 in)

Available

Signed lower right

Provenance: Private Collection, UK

Exhibited: Olympia, London, 2002, # 248

Literature: Philip Vann and Gerard Hastings, *Keith Vaughan* (Farnham: Lund Humphries in association with Osborne Samuel, 2012), p. 87, illustrated p. 88.

Keith Vaughan was only twenty when he set up a darkroom in his family home to develop his own photographs. His subject would remain, principally, the male figure. The darkroom doubled as a studio where he could photograph models, but he also took many reels on Pagham beach, in Sussex, against a backdrop of shingle, tangled nets and the weathered hulls of boats. ? In these the figures are often silhouetted, their torsos braced, stretched or turning; at other times they

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are loose-limbed, sunbathing or playful. Vaughan acknowledged that these forms provided source material for his paintings without needing to consult them. The imagery, once rooted in his subconscious, 'just emerged when called'.

These photographs were both coded and covert, in that for many years they were little known. For Vaughan, photography granted a freedom he lacked in everyday life – justifying and legitimising a studied observation of the male figure. The resulting compositions draw their strength from a knowledge of how light could enhance the structure of the figure. When Vaughan developed the ideas as drawings, he abstracted and simplified, while retaining the sharply defined musculature, leanness and angularity of the originals. One example, a pencil *Study of Two Figures* (1948), bought by Peter Pears, was later used as a cover for Vaughan's *Journals*.

Comparing this drawing and *Landscape with Nude Bathers* (1948), it is easy to see that they originate from similar source material. The drawing shows two nude figures with a tree, one half-turned, the other facing forward. Neither figure is complete, suggesting a cropped or closely focused photograph. In the painting, the basic composition is identical – two figures and a tree – yet the right-hand figure is slightly distanced and thus shown more completely. Intriguingly, for a 'nude', it is also, quite visibly, clothed. Useful comparison perhaps ends there. The drawing, almost exactly half the size of the painting, is executed with a bounding, energetic line and dense hatching specific to its medium.

Through colour, and through a volumetric, almost sculptural approach, *Landscape with Nude Bathers* takes the subject in a different direction. It is clear, from a statement written contemporaneously, that the relationship of figure to landscape preoccupied Vaughan: The articulation of the arm-joint in the shoulder is the articulation of the branch in the tree-trunk, and the folds of the shirt round the arm pit are the folds of the bark around the tree joint. Hands are like leaves. The taut, tight curve of the spine is only warmed and more human than the curve of the tree trunk. Each part of the one is interchangeable with the other, yet the harmony is achieved without losing a shred of separate identities, the one a human being, the other a tree in the garden.

This description relates pertinently to *Landscape with Nude Bathers*, pointing attention to the green of the left-hand figure's spine which echoes the tree trunk. Hands may not be leaves, yet they grasp the tree's limbs. Each figure interacts closely with the tree, the right-hand figure's legs pressed so closely against the trunk as to join it. The conjunction was noted by John Berger in 1951, when he wrote of Vaughan, 'the vulnerability of his figures (their nakedness is like trees stripped of their bark) is poetically compelling'.

The palette of *Landscape with Nude Bathers* painting unites its figures with the landscape, in a soft green, blue, and ochre totality, as colour migrates from flesh to water to bark. Although the effect is quiet, a charged atmosphere pervades the scene. The tree provides a cruciform structure, offset by a blue-grey reverberation suggesting cloud, hill or headland. Reinforcing this is a vector from left to right, in the downward stroke of the branch and the imagined gaze from figure to figure, which pinions and exhilarates the landscape. Only the clothed figure's gaze is overt, returning us to the beach at Pagham, and what might be witnessed – and recalled – through the lens of the camera.

? Philip Wright, 'Keith Vaughan: the Pagham photographs', in *Keith Vaughan: On Pagham Beach, Photographs and Collages from the 1930s* (London: Austin / Desmond Fine Art, 2017), p. 8.

? Vaughan, quoted in 'John Ball in Conversation with Nicholas Goodison', *Keith Vaughan: Paintings and Drawings* (London: Osborne Samuel, 2007), p. 12.

? Keith Vaughan, *Journals 1939-1977*, ed. Alan Ross (London: John Murray, 1989).

? Keith Vaughan, 'Statement' (c. 1948), in Malcolm Yorke, *Keith Vaughan: His Life and Work*

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(London: Constable & Co., 1990), p. 143.

? John Berger, *New Statesman* (10 November 1951), quoted in Philip Vann and Gerard Hastings, *Keith Vaughan* (Farnham: Lund Humphries, in association with Osborne Samuel, 2012), p. 88.