

ALCHEMIST of the WOODS



David Nash is one of the environmental art heroes of our times. Known for his consuming passion for wood as his sculptural material of choice, this wide-ranging interview covers many areas of Nash's work and life, including 'the language of trees', his absorption in Platonic forms, the influence of Japan, experiments in other materials and truth to the tool.

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Chapel

Blaenau Ffestiniog, the town where the wood alchemist David Nash has chosen to make his home for the past nearly forty years evokes a particular Welsh form of gritty realism. A citadel of slate mining – the nineteenth century brought industry to this otherwise uncompromisingly rural part of Wales – a slag heap towers over parts of the valley head town, rivaling the encircling mountains. Much of Blaenau remains deprived, houses boarded up and other signs of poverty, which – despite the soaring beauty of near-by Snowdonia – seems, as

with much of interior Wales, impervious to change. This tough landscape has always been a surprise for urban art world types who find it at odds with Nash's romantic land art sensibility.

The contrast to Nash's chapel home and work centre is marked. Externally the large chapel building is unprepossessing and tidy. There is little to prepare one for what is inside the chapel's walls, which is, almost literally, another world. Hundreds of Nash's sculptures are here, some old and familiar, others new and less so. Quite a few reach nearly to the full height of the chapel-high ceiling. The one time I visited Chapel Rhw the overwhelming sense was of being amidst an extraordinary menagerie of creatures – wooden creatures – with Nash as their keeper. The sculptures stand frozen in life across the ground floor. The chapel space extends upstairs to a ringside of pews with yet further pieces and where many of his tools are kept, in neat rows.

Nash's home is in the modest extension that backs off the chapel itself. "This is where we live," Nash said warmly as he invited me in the winter day some years ago when I visited. Outside there was a well kept though compact garden, where Nash's nephew was logging. Immediately beyond the perimeter, dwarfing the garden was the massive, steeply rising quarry slagheap.

In the early years in Blaenau Nash worked completely from Chapel Rhw, but as his workload increased, it and he spilled over, into part of an industrial estate, a couple of road turnings away. The day I visited, a couple of men were working in front of the corrugated metal shed on different parts of a customised sphere – one third of Nash's sphere-cube-pyramid triads, which sell in six-figure numbers to private clients. The sphere's base sat waiting to be completed, alongside a number of other unfinished works. Over to another side of the yard was the sphere's top slice, as well as its middle. The yard's sheds are divided into at least three distinct rooms, the first holding wood-drying kilns, necessary in much of his work. A second room had been given over to collecting together and collating an archive; the slow if steady auditing of Nash's entire output. Upstairs was what looked like a study and research area. At the time a series of charcoal drawings were pinned to the wall. These consisted of fierce black strokes, – the drawings were swiftly realised in the aftermath of September 11th, part of Nash's response to the assault on the twin towers. As he talked, he mentioned how he identified with the firemen, because, he said, when working he wears the same out-

fits. There are so many pieces, I said. Yes, he replied, adding that he'd always been prolific.

Outside, back in the yard, I notice the cranes and pitchforks; despite the wood, this is industrial-scale land art. Nash himself calls the place a factory. Land art being produced and realised to a hectic schedule, keeping up with orders as they come in. He works, he would say later, two years ahead.

Looked at from afar though, and in the imagination, the gritty realism either fades or fades, and a 'magic realism', that erstwhile literary import from Latin America, can flower. The presence of Nash – master of a menagerie of vegetal beasts – hovering above such an imaginary tale, Blaenau in the mind's eye at least, could be turned into some North Wales Macondo; the remote, Amazonian town of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's wondrous *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

A life among the trees -

Today Nash is in his mid sixties, born some months after the end of World War II, in November 1945. He grew up in a South London commuter belt town, Weybridge, although from his earliest years the family



Courtesy top left and above