

KEITH VAUGHAN – A REVIVAL?

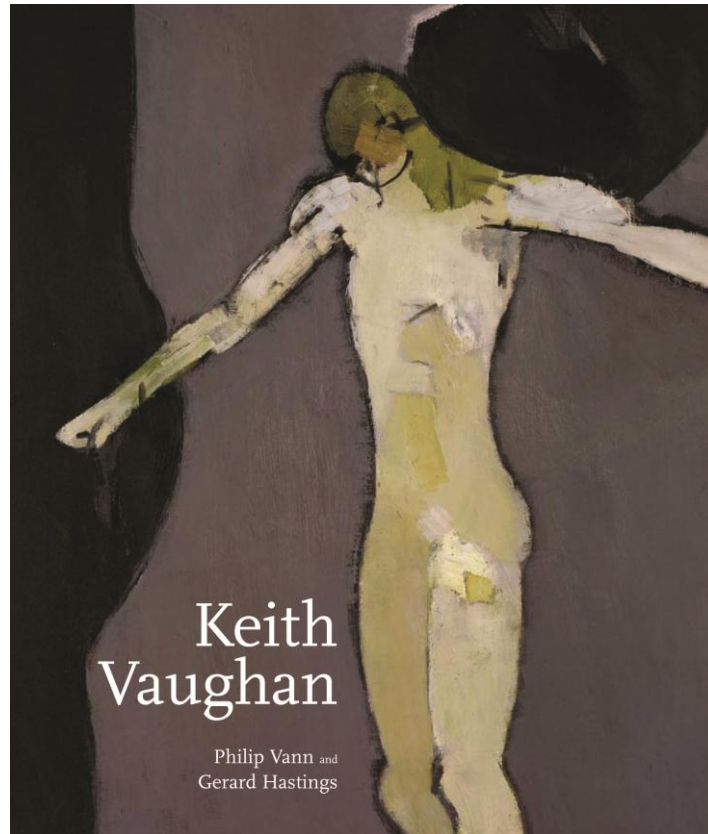
By Christopher Andreae



Keith Vaughan, Belsize Park, London, 1953, painting *Second Assembly of Figures*.
Photographer unknown.
(Hastings and Evans Collection)

It is just over 100 years since the English painter Keith Vaughan (1912 – 1977) was born. The male nude was his principal subject. But he was also a powerful landscape painter.

He was self-taught, and evolved over a long career a style that was like sculpture in paint – it was structured and bold, a build-up of a kind of impassioned, angular patchwork of planes. His virtually always male, vertical figures seem strangely isolated, sometimes like symbolic mannequins. Or they interact but do so introspectively, as though each figure is separately imprisoned within its own dream. Some groups of figures are like shades or ghosts, spectral, haunting, movingly introverted and sad. Then there are others that appear to be exerting or exercising themselves with a sort of exuberant muscular bravado. The arms of a statuesque figure stretch out horizontally and give him the air of a classical discus thrower – or a crucified Christ.



Cover of *Keith Vaughan* by Philip Vann and Gerard Hastings published by Lund Humphries in association with Osborne Samuel 2012. £40.

Angst is never far away, though any sort of consciously religious connotations are certainly rare in his work. His figures often seem fraught with mute longing for something unspecified – but it is not necessarily going to be fulfilled. Crowded groups of figures, in a series painted over many years, gather in what he called “assemblies.” Some of these figures merge indistinguishably into each other in an almost abstract conglomeration. Individuals can be completely lost in the mass.



Seventh Assembly of Figures (Nile Group) 1964 oil on canvas 122 x 137.5 cm by Keith Vaughan. The Hargreaves and Bail Trust. Courtesy of Osborne Samuel

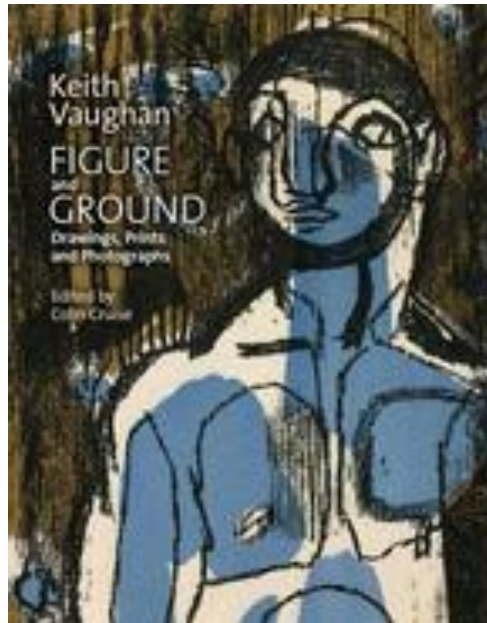
Certainly Vaughan is an original.

This centenary of his birth has provided useful opportunities to re-assess and re-display Vaughan's work and life. There have been revealing exhibitions and books – deep and thorough looks at his (very complex) character and the strength of his particular vision. In answer to suspicions that he has been unfairly neglected, all this recent advocacy, discussion, exposure and publishing activity adds up to a vigorous attempt at revival – a revival driven by the ardent convictions of his admirers.

Whether or not it will place Vaughan higher up the scale of art-world estimation remains to be seen. He has still stopped short of the ultimate accolade of a full-scale retrospective at the Tate or any major art institution, though he was given in his lifetime a major show at the Whitechapel Art Gallery under Bryan Robertson's directorship. The Tate owns 13 of his works, admittedly, and also Vaughan's extensive, intensive journals are now housed in the Tate Archive. But, with one exception, it has been up to private commercial galleries to stage recent celebratory exhibitions, such as Osborne Samuel in London, in 2011 and 2012. This gallery's catalogue for its 2011 and 2012 Vaughan exhibitions can still be seen and read in full on line and amounts to an impressive retrospective in itself. Anthony Hepworth Fine Art, London, and Bath, held a show in 2012 of works on paper.

It was Pallant House Gallery in Chichester that was the only *public* gallery to commemorate Vaughan's birth – with an exhibition called *Keith Vaughan: Romanticism to Abstraction*.

And now, at the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff (until November 24) is an exhibition of drawings, prints, book illustrations and photographs under the title "Figure and Ground." There is to be a second showing of this exhibition from February 17 to March 28 2014 at the Tessa Sidey Gallery, The School of Art, Aberystwyth University. Since the show consists of highlights from the Keith Vaughan holdings housed here, the works will, in effect, be returning home. There is a book published to coincide with this exhibition which effectively prolongs its shelf life.



Cover of *Keith Vaughan, Figure and Ground, Drawings, Prints and Photographs*, edited by Colin Cruise. Published by Sansom & Company Ltd 2013. £16.50

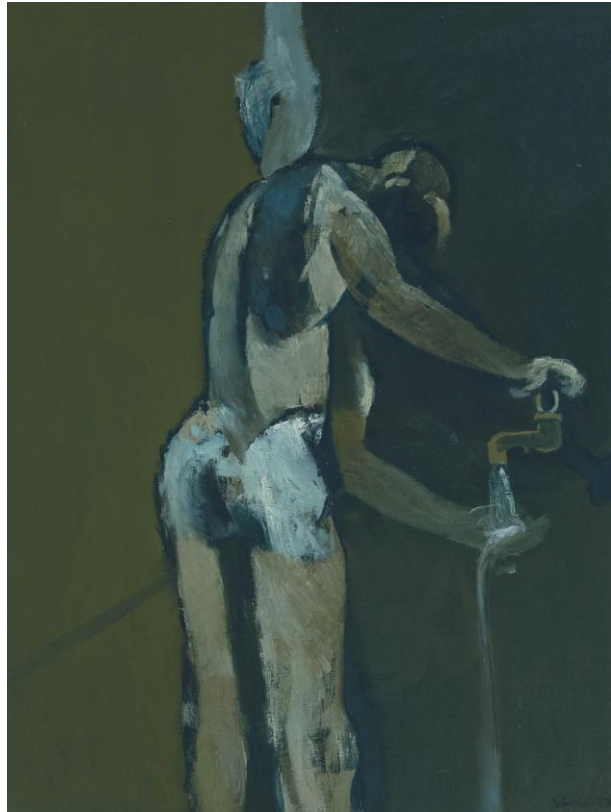
One of the new books about the artist, (“Keith Vaughan” published by Lund Humphries) contains a lengthy, very considered and sympathetic essay by Philip Vann on the intricate cross-currents of Vaughan’s character and his work. The exclusive concentration, in his paintings, on male figures, stems from his homosexuality, and it is today possible to be open and frank about this (as Vaughan himself was in his exhaustive journals). It was not always so, of course, as Vaughan noted: “It is difficult to bear in mind that with all one’s honours, distinctions, success etc. one remains a member of the criminal class. My sexual relationships, on the rare occasions when they have been successful would, or could, earn me at least life imprisonment if known & prosecuted.”

Vann adds to this: “His almost exclusive subject matter – the male nude – was a daring, courageous if perhaps ultimately irresistible choice, especially during the pre-1967 era (in Britain) and the pre-gay liberation movement period . . . when society seemed to be governed, unchallenged, by what Christopher Isherwood called ‘the heterosexual dictatorship.’”



The Raft 1948 oil on cardboard 51 x 76 cm by Keith Vaughan. Private Collection. Courtesy of Osborne Samuel

Vaughan did not hide the appeal of the male body as his main interest and theme, and he was critical of homosexual writers and artists who wrote about or painted “women” when they really meant “men” even if this subterfuge was perfectly understandable. Presumably he felt this compromise was a cop-out. On the other hand, some critics of his work accused him of his own sort of cop-out because they felt he sanitised his male figures by obscuring their genitals. This is fairly preposterous when you consider the constraints of the time in which he spent most of his working life. There is, anyway, not the slightest doubt that his figures are not female. His defence was along the lines that he deliberately made his figures human rather than erotic. There is, however, an unspoken assumption in this attitude that the male figure alone can epitomise universal humanity – yet a comprehensive view of the human race and its potential as art can hardly leave out “woman.”



Nude Washing at Tap 1951 oil on canvas
83.8 x 63.5 cm by Keith Vaughan. Private Collection.
Courtesy of Osborne Samuel

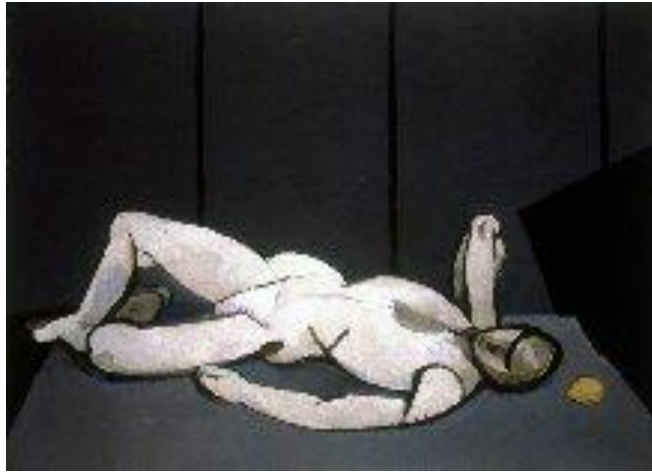
Vann doesn't agree with what he calls the "charges that Vaughan's paintings of the male nude are coyly evasive, wilfully opaque or furtively prurient" Instead he returns "to Vaughan's own statement that he starts off by making the image of the human figure erotic ('because that's the first thing that strikes you about it')" but then "the erotic image soon ceases to be human and you paint the eroticism out." One problem with this argument could be that while the male figure is to Vaughan himself unmistakably erotic, to many others it doesn't seem erotic at all. This is not a matter of a deliberate "heterosexual dictatorship" for which there is no justification. It is simple fact. The "eroticism" of the male nude is not necessarily "the first thing that strikes" *everyone*.

Nevertheless, Vaughan's paintings are inarguably powerful, charged, monumental and sensual. His feelings are translated into vigorous paint and memorably expressive imagery that are decidedly more potent than a mere exposure of private emotion could be. The rigour of his paintings is in essence the intimate and inward made outward and public. His fascination with modern dance is a significant ingredient, his painted figures performing with taut, energetic movements and gestures.

One possible reason that the Tate passed him by, is hinted at in an acerbic comment in his journal at the time “pop art” surfaced, in the 1960s. Like the abstract expressionists in the U.S. “serious” British artists like Vaughan were *affronted* by the flippancy of this jokey new tendency. It was, ironically, a significant exhibition staged by Bryan Robertson at the Whitechapel Gallery two years after the Vaughan retrospective there, that aroused his resentment – the ground-breaking “New Generation” exhibition of 1964. It made Vaughan feel virtually extinct: “After all one’s thought and search and effort to make some sort of image which would embody the life of our time, it turns out that all that was really significant were toffee wrappers, liquorice allsorts and ton-up motor bikes I understand how the stranded dinosaurs felt.”

The art establishment, and of course the media, could not ignore the vitality and wit and currency of so-called pop art. Inevitably this “new” art would come to mean that some of the “old generation”, including Vaughan, started to look dated and out of touch. (Bryan Robertson, however, continued to believe in Vaughan’s art). It can’t have helped that both Vaughan’s art and pop art were in reaction against the aftermath of the war, though they reacted in opposite ways: to Vaughan (whose brother had been killed early in the war) those lost years cast a grim shadow across the late forties and fifties. For all his originality and experimentalism, it has been only too easy to categorise him as a prominent figure “of his generation.” The youth culture in the sixties turned away from the wartime and post-war heroism and privations by celebrating – however facetiously or satirically – the lighter, inconsequential side of life.

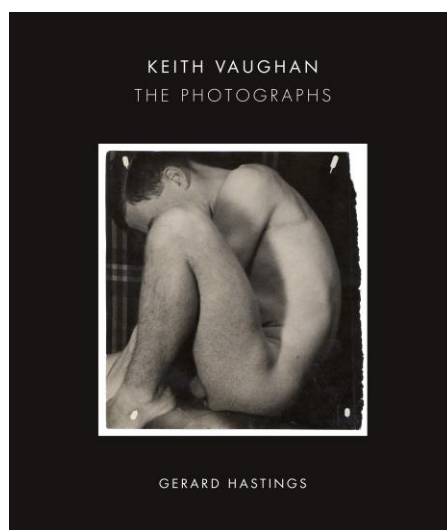
Yet Vaughan knew and admired David Hockney, for example, who was surfacing at this time and was thought of as one of the pop artists. And Hockney certainly benefitted from Vaughan’s example. Vaughan even came some way, after a while, to understanding the character and attraction of New York art, which he initially dismissed as “hollow.” (He mentioned Rothko, who had been given a major show at the Whitechapel in 1961.) The Tate, on the other hand, could once again not ignore the shift from Paris to New York as the centre of the art world, and Vaughan and the other post-war British artists were once more somewhat sidelined.



Reclining Nude 1950 reworked 1958 and 1960
oil on canvas 86.3 x 119.4 cm. by Keith Vaughan. Private Collection.
Courtesy of Osborne Samuel

Another more contentious reason for Vaughan not being given the highest honours might be that the homoerotic character of his work, however much played down, may not have sat altogether comfortably with the establishment at the Tate. This is only a guess, but if Bryan Robertson had become the Tate director, this obviously would not have been any sort of obstacle. However, in spite of his remarkable achievement at the Whitechapel, politics and personal antipathy intervened and what would have been an inspired choice of a Tate boss never occurred.

Theoretically there should be no difficulty today for the Tate to belatedly consider a Vaughan exhibition. But it is interesting that the most recent book of all published on Vaughan has radically broken what has, until now, still remained something of a taboo.



Cover of *Keith Vaughan The Photographs* by Gerard Hastings
Published by Pagham Press 2013. £25.

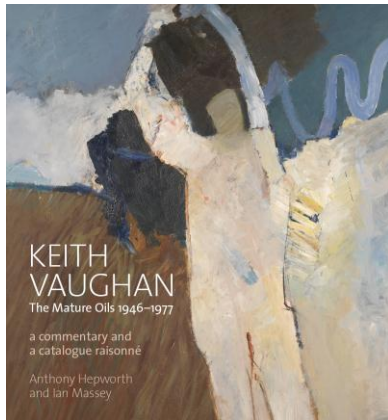
“Keith Vaughan: The Photographs” by Gerard Hastings, published by Pagham Press, goes further than before in displaying this aspect of Vaughan’s work. The photographs in this book are certainly more explicit than the images in his paintings. Vaughan himself let a few of his photographs be seen. Philip Vann gives them close attention. But this book, solely concentrated on his photographs, shows a number that have never been seen in public before and strongly emphasises the importance of his photographs to his paintings. Hastings makes the point that Vaughan’s usual inhibitions disappeared when he was looking through a camera lens. He quotes Vaughan’s close friend the artist Prunella Clough as saying “Keith used the camera almost as a justification to look – *really* look – at the male nude When Keith had a camera fixed to his eye, it legitimised his gazing at another unclothed human being.”

Hastings mentions the fact that another friend of Vaughan, John Ball, “had reservations about making Vaughan’s photographs public; he was reluctant to reveal information concerning the artist’s visual sources” (i.e. photographs). Given the long history of serious painters using photography as source material this reservation seems strangely old-fashioned. But more to the point, Ball’s “nervousness,” writes Hastings, was also “related to the notion that eroticism, when centred on the male (as opposed to the female) nude, is suspect in the public imagination” He believed that homophobic attitudes still lingered. And he “was concerned that autobiographical information, or content of a directly sexual nature associated with Vaughan’s work, might diminish its standing.” Clearly neither Vann nor Hastings has such qualms today. The photographs, for all their homoeroticism, are no less informative as the evidence of an essential part of Vaughan’s inspiration than any artist’s sketchbooks, or the postcards pinned up on their studio walls.

List of recent books on Keith Vaughan

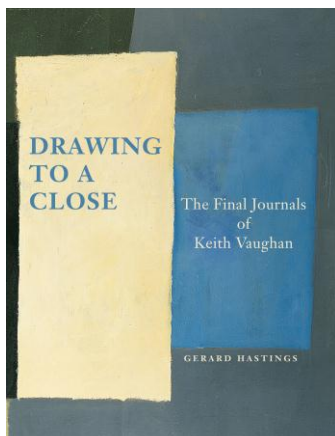
Keith Vaughan, by Philip Vann and Gerard Hastings, 2012, published by Lund Humphries in association with Osborne Samuel, £40

Keith Vaughan: The Mature Oils 1946 -1977, a commentary and a catalogue raisonné, by Anthony Hepworth and Ian Massey, 2012, published by Sansom & Company, £40



Cover of *Keith Vaughan The Mature Oils 1946 – 1977 a commentary and a catalogue raisonné* by Anthony Hepworth and Ian Massey. Published by Sansom & Company Ltd 2012. £40

Drawing to a Close, The Final Journals of Keith Vaughan, by Gerard Hastings, 2012, published by Pagham Press, 2012, £45



Cover of *Drawing to a Close The Final Journals of Keith Vaughan* By Gerard Hastings
Published by Pagham Press 2012 £45

Keith Vaughan: Figure and Ground, Drawings, Prints and Photographs, edited by Colin Cruise, 2013, published by Sansom & Company, £16.50

Keith Vaughan: The Photographs by Gerard Hastings 2013, published by Pagham Press, £25

Christopher Andreae is the author of *Joan Eardley*, 2012, published by Lund Humphries
