Total immersion

Ruth Guilding reflects on the significance of the painter's *oeuvre* as an exhibition and the launch of a first *catalogue raisonné* mark his centenary

ORIGINALITY was the issue confronting the post-Second World War generation of artists in St Ives. An ambitious younger set was pondering how best to handle the problem of abstraction and distinguish themselves from the others. Patrick Heron was changing from art critic to painter, Terry Frost was teaching and working as Barbara Hepworth's studio assistant and Roger Hilton, the last to arrive, was struggling with the validity of the whole painting project.

The landscape painter Peter Lanyon (1918–64) was perhaps the most conflicted of them all. In 1950, he resigned from the Penwith—St Ives's premier exhibiting society—when its founders, Hepworth and her husband, Ben Nicholson, insisted that its members must now classify themselves as Traditionalists, Modernists or Craftsmen.

> ‘Lanyon forged an expressive, gestural and wholly distinctive art of landscape’

***Trevalgan*, formerly in the collection of David Bowie, was exhibited in 1952 to critical acclaim**

Lanyon Estate/Modern Art Press 2018

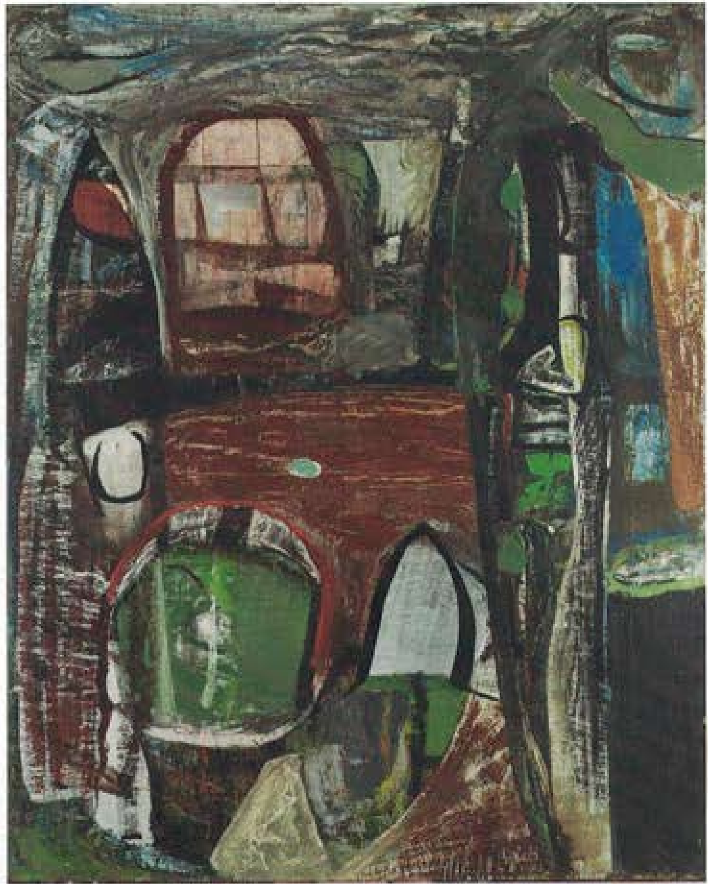
Lanyon was prone to describe the process of painting as 'a big mental fight'. Unlike most of his peers, he was from a very wealthy local family. A traditional art education had been followed in 1939 by private lessons from Ben Nicholson, who had fled wartime London with his family and remained ensconced above Carbis Bay.

From Adrian Stokes, he had learned about psychoanalysis and the revelation of the inner life. From Hepworth, Nicholson and their refugee friend Naum Gabo, he had absorbed the gospel of Constructivism and, as a flight mechanic in the RAF, he had begun making assemblages out of salvaged aircraft parts. But demobbed now and in his early thirties, he was struggling to assert his new sense of ownership as the colony's sole Cornishman.

It is Lanyon's struggle to translate his special sense of identity into a new abstract-landscape art that informs this small, beautiful exhibition. Each of the paintings here has been chosen by curator Toby Treves (author of a sumptuously illustrated new *catalogue raisonné* of Lanyon's paintings) for their manifest sense of 'home'.

Lanyon's forebears had enriched themselves from the proceeds of tin smelting and the local mines and railways, something that troubled the painter's conscience. But now he had begun to build his brand, referring to the mining districts around Zennor, Pendeen, Botallack and St Just as 'my country', and positioning himself as unique among the 'foreigners' who were his fellow painters.

When, in 1949, he painted Godrevy Lighthouse in St Ives bay, the landmark for a reef that had endangered shipping for centuries, he was still feeling his way and digesting the lessons of Cubism and Constructivism, but from the models that he was making of scrap and plate-glass fragments, he gradually resolved



Above left: **Halsetown (1961). The settlement was built in the early 19th century to house tin miners in the bleak, boulder-strewn landscape around St Ives.** *Above:* **Levant Zawn (1953), a narrow sea-inlet in the cliffs studded with mine workings**

oe Bar (1962), a gauzy aerial view from the collection of Sir lan Bowness, who championed and promoted Lanyon's work

ow the elements of plan, elevaion and cross section could o-exist in one image.

With *Trevalgan* (1951) ('one f my best') and *Boulder Coast* 1958), he broke through the ounds of traditional landcape, producing an upended erial view in which cliffs and eep mineshafts beneath the arth, the sea and the wind ver the fields of West Penwith nder veils of rain-driven light re all persuasively represented t once.

'While I'm moving about the country here, with all the history underfoot, I find the sky on my back as I climb the hills and the sea behind me, then at my side and it becomes the same thing in my painting, but it is not remote because I have it up my side and in my belly and I carry a load of miners in my own workings,' he claimed in 1952.

Lanyon now decided that all his past work had been superficial. Guided by a passionate uncertainty, he made paintings with no static or fixed viewpoints that were precipitations of his feelings about time and place. In the years that followed, he worked hard to push his painting further, running, swimming and cycling over the Cornish landscape, climbing and exhorting younger artists to lie down or hang precipitously over the edge of a cliff.

A trip to America alerted him to the commercial potential of Abstract Expressionism and when, in 1959, he added gliding to his repertoire, his clumsier, worked-over, earthy landscapes became weightless, taking flight.

Gliding made him god-like, revealing a panorama of the earth and air and water beneath him and the fluctuating weather systems that sweep across Cornwall at the land's end. New works such as *Halsetown* (1961) and *Loe Bar* (1962), representing the majestic half-mile sand bar that divides Loe from the sea, were scaled up to produce the maximum impact on the giant white walls of his new patrons' Modern Movement studios and houses.

Lanyon had forged an expressive, gestural and wholly distinctive art of landscape, loaded with his personal narratives of home and belonging. In finding his groove, he had ensured that he would be remembered as one of the most significant British landscape painters of his time.

'Peter Lanyon: Cornwall Inside-Out' is at Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert, 38, Bury Street, St James's, London SW1, February 9–March 16 (020-7839 7600; https://hh-h.com). 'Peter Lanyon: catalogue raisonné of the oil paintings and three-dimensional works' by Toby Treves is published by Modern Art Press (£150)

Next week: Kettle's Yard reopened