

***Radical Landscapes* at the Mead Gallery Addresses the Topic on Everyone's Lips**

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The more sensitive viewer might not make it past the front door of the Tate's *Radical Landscapes* exhibition at the Mead Gallery, University of Warwick. One is immediately confronted by Jeremy Deller's *Cerne Abbas* (2019), a work of neon light, depicting the ancient [land art](#) of the same name. The giant, with its shocked face and particularly prominent phallus, certainly makes a statement. As the exhibition does not shy away from nudity (one comment in the visitor book simply says 'BOTTOMS!'), this historic nude figure ideally sets the tone for an exhibition that explores man's intimate relationship with the land.



Jeremy Deller, "Cerne Abbas" (2019)

Once further inside, those who have visited the newly refurbished Mead Gallery will find the place completely transformed. Bright lighting and spaces between hung artworks contribute to a typical [white cube](#)-style exhibition format. What was a large, open space for the exhibitions *Dappled Light* (January–March 2022) and *Prophecy* (May–June 2022) has become a progression of three distinct galleries, each focusing on different aspects of Britain's changing landscape. The first gallery explores land art, land ownership and the human (often female) body within the landscape. Gallery Two appears to focus on smaller parts of the natural world. A single tree, for example, or a close-up of some strawberries. The connection between nature, nation and Britain's colonial past is also explored. In Gallery Three, themes of protest, war and the climate crisis are introduced, providing ample fuel for further contemplation when one leaves the space.

The exhibition includes notable works such as Paul Nash's *Landscape from a Dream* (1936–38), Henry Moore's *Atom Piece* (cast in 1965) and Peter Kennard's *Defended to Death* (1983). Yet, for me, the gem of *Radical Landscapes* is not one of the most famous, nor is it one of the louder, bigger pieces. I was particularly drawn to Anwar Jalal Shemza's oil on hardboard *Apple Tree* (1962). Hung on its own on a small wall in Gallery Two, this painting drew me back multiple times. It is incredibly abstract, with simple geometric shapes forming the 'tree'. The red and orange apples pop perfectly against the complementary green. The rough texture of the background contrasts with the block colours of the tree. The small accompanying text tells me that Shemza combined modernism with Islamic aesthetics to depict rural Staffordshire, where he lived from the early 1960s. Gazing at the painting, one certainly gets a sense of this eclectic mixture through the contrast of the natural subject matter with bright complementary colours and simple shapes.



Paul Nash, "Landscape from a Dream" (1936–38)

Other works that caught my eye include Ithell Colquhoun's *Attributes of the Moon* (1947), a [surrealist](#) and moody piece that blends the human body with natural forms and shapes, and Sutherland's *Green Tree Form: Interior of Woods* (1940), an abstract close-up that could have been lifted out of one of his larger landscape works. Another favourite was a collection of interactive teaching models by Brendel & Co. These anatomical flowers were originally used by museums and universities, although artists did contribute to their creation. They take on a new artistic meaning in this exhibition setting, particularly as they are displayed behind perspex, away from curious hands. One could go on. The broad range of mediums and styles means every visitor is likely to find a piece that resonates with them.

Radical Landscapes is a timely series of observations on our landscape. In a time of climate crisis and activist groups lobbying for radical changes, this exhibition proves that art has a role to play. The very fact that the Tate has chosen to collate these works, to address the topic headfirst, confirms its commitment to furthering the conversation. This iteration of the exhibition at the Mead Gallery brings this message to Coventry, and asks locals to consider their own radical responses and solutions for our landscape.

Radical Landscapes also proves that the recently renewed Mead Gallery is a space that can be dramatically reconfigured to suit the needs of the exhibition. It certainly makes me excited to see how it will be reshaped for future shows.

Glossary

Land art: Art made directly in the landscape, often by sculpting the land itself.

Surrealism: A twentieth-century artistic movement that explored the workings of the mind by depicting illogical scenes.

White cube: A gallery space of square or rectangular shape, with white walls and a light source that evenly lights the whole space.

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