

NewArtCentre.

Nicholas Pope

Heavenly Space

14 May - 30 August 2021



At Slant: On the Work of Nicholas Pope

by George Vasey

The poet Emily Dickinson once wrote; “tell the truth but tell it slant.” You can measure a poem’s truth, Dickinson suggests, in metaphor and simile — unravelling itself on the mouth and in the head. Too much truth, too soon can get lost. It can overwhelm. Poetry and art often does its best work at slant. In other words, it offers a fresh perspective. The words, images and sounds of others can help us make better sense of the world. They are a compass that can guide us when we are lost and lose us when we assume we know our way.

The awkward and opaque are cultivated in poetry and art, cocooned from the desire to impress and be understood. A deeper truth awaits those who persevere. Dickinson’s words feel apt in relation to Nicholas Pope’s sculptures, which are literally — as well as metaphorically — at slant. His sculptures and drawings are often wonky — standing up but often looking like they will fall down. Their physical wonkiness is accompanied by a thematic williness. We look and we are made aware of looking. Our eyes dart around, our attention and imagination pulled in opposite directions.

All sculpture asks to move, but these works make specific demands on us. Pope’s sculptures are a train we board, a car we drive, a trip we go on; this is transportive work. Elevated and earthy, spiritual and scatological. The materials and metaphors come hard and soft, and over a fifty-year career Pope has persistently defied expectations demanding a certain agility from his public.

This at slant-ness has been a persistent motif throughout Pope’s career. While his earlier sculptural works — with their stark use of materials such as wood, chalk, clay and stone — were less visually excessive than his more recent output, there remains a persistent enquiry into balance and gravity. Wobbliness and wonkiness are the DNA of Pope’s work as well as a desire to defy gravitational reality in favour of imaginative suspense. While the sculptures arc, soar and dance around the gallery space they have a particular relationship to the ground. Without a pedestal in sight, they remain rooted to it and — with a sudden gust of wind or misplaced elbow — ready to return to it at any moment.

Phyllida Barlow has talked of the floor as an anarchic space. If walls divide, Barlow suggests; floors connect. We can see this connection to the ground throughout most of Pope’s sculptures. *Yews*, 1981, encompasses enlarged skittle-like carved wooden boulders. The individual sculptures lean into each other, forming a small crowd and look like they are involved in a conspiratorial conversation. *Small Wall Terracotta*, 1977, incorporates a fattened snake-like clay form with a distended neck that looks like it is crawling up a wall. There is a sense in both works of a certain fragility that casts their verticality in precarious terms. Standing up and crawling up the wall, but just about.

Medium Weird, 2020, is around one and half metres tall and the sculpture is the chest height of an average adult. It encompasses cocoon-like shapes stacked on top of each other, with small sausage-like forms protruding from the surface. Pointing at the sky, they suggest elation. The top of the sculpture looks like bunny ears or perhaps a tail. The title feels equivocal — it is neither totally odd, or quite strange, but medium weird. Peculiarity is a personal intuition rather than empirical fact, yet Pope holds these distinct states in suspension. Animal habitats, vegetables, bits of human anatomy. There is a casual relationship to the subject that results from an omnivorous eye.

At nearly two and half metres tall, *John The Baptist Pointing the Way and Lit by His Own Light*, 1993-96, towers over the heads of most people. With its slim vase-form and surface covered in tendrils, it looks like it is groping the surrounding air. Incorporating an oil lamp, the work can be lit, and the work shares the presence of actual fire with Pope’s work *The Apostles Speaking in Tongues Lit by Their Own Lamps*, 1993-96. John the Baptist is a revered Christian saint and was an early prophet and preacher. The presence of theological iconography is a recurrent theme throughout Pope’s work.

Illumination can guide and blind us, help lead the way or get us lost in the dark and similarly faith like light (and art and poetry) makes the unseen palpable. I’m reminded of communities going into darkened caves with lanterns, painting effigies to their gods. The flickering light casting animated shadows onto rock surfaces. Painting becomes a portal to commune with the invisible.

Alongside his sculptural works, Pope has maintained a persistent approach to working on paper, and his wood-cuts continue his vocabulary of biomorphic forms. The large print *Black Landscape*, 1985, combines cell-like formations with contoured lines suggesting a map. We could be squinting down the lens of a microscope or looking out the window of a plane at the incoming shoreline. The mapping here feels psychological as much as topographical. The woodblock print *White on Black*, 1985, articulates a different type of movement with the action transposed to a tunnel like cavity with viscera passing through it. There is a distinct sense throughout these wood-cuts of moving between aerial and interior points of view, microscopic as well as telescopic.

Faith, belief, being found, getting lost — art revealing mystic truths, or not. These are grand topics for conversation and in Pope’s hands they are dealt with lightly, grounded in everyday pathos and humour. Who is Pope talking to? What is he hoping to find?

More than anything, I would suggest that Pope’s work exists because it has to. I write these words to figure out what I think and similarly Pope weaves, carves, cuts, moulds, and draws to understand how to move forward. Joan Didion famously wrote that we tell stories in order to live. Making sculpture is similarly an act of asserting a personal will on the world. Whether the journey is in the head or on foot, the world translated into words or through materials, we each find a way of making sense of our environment. Pope’s work is forward motion. It stands up at slant, but just about.

George Vasey is a curator and writer. He is currently working on curatorial projects with the Wellcome Collection, National Portrait Gallery, London and Leeds Art Gallery. He has previously worked as a curator at Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland and as a Curatorial Fellow at Newcastle University. In 2017 he co-curated the Turner Prize at Ferens Art Gallery, Hull. He is a trustee at New Contemporaries and on the executive committee for AICA-UK (Association of International Art Critics).



Nicholas Pope
Silver Washbasin
2002
Glazed ceramic
50 x 53 x 64 cm
19 3/4 x 20 7/8 x 25 1/4 in



Nicholas Pope
*Black Landscape (Mr and Mrs
Pope Spiked and Holed)*
1985
Woodcut print on paper
163 x 130 cm (unframed)
64 1/8 x 51 1/8 in (unframed)
Edition 1 of 9





Nicholas Pope
I am Sad Today, Very Very Sad
2001
Glazed ceramic
50 x 77 x 77 cm
19 3/4 x 30 1/4 x 30 1/4 in



Nicholas Pope
Apostles Piss Font
1995
Glazed ceramic
116 x 91 x 91 cm
45 5/8 x 35 7/8 x 35 7/8 in



Nicholas Pope
Pedestal Washbasin
2002
Glazed ceramic
94 x 44 x 44 cm
37 1/8 x 17 3/8 x 17 3/8 in



Nicholas Pope
Gold and White Shapes
(A Conversation Snippet)
1985
Woodcut print on paper
111 x 182 cm (unframed)
43 3/4 x 71 5/8 in (unframed)
Edition 2 of 7





Nicholas Pope
Medium Weird
2020
Fired stoneware
142 x 45 x 36 cm
55 7/8 x 17 3/4 x 14 1/8 in





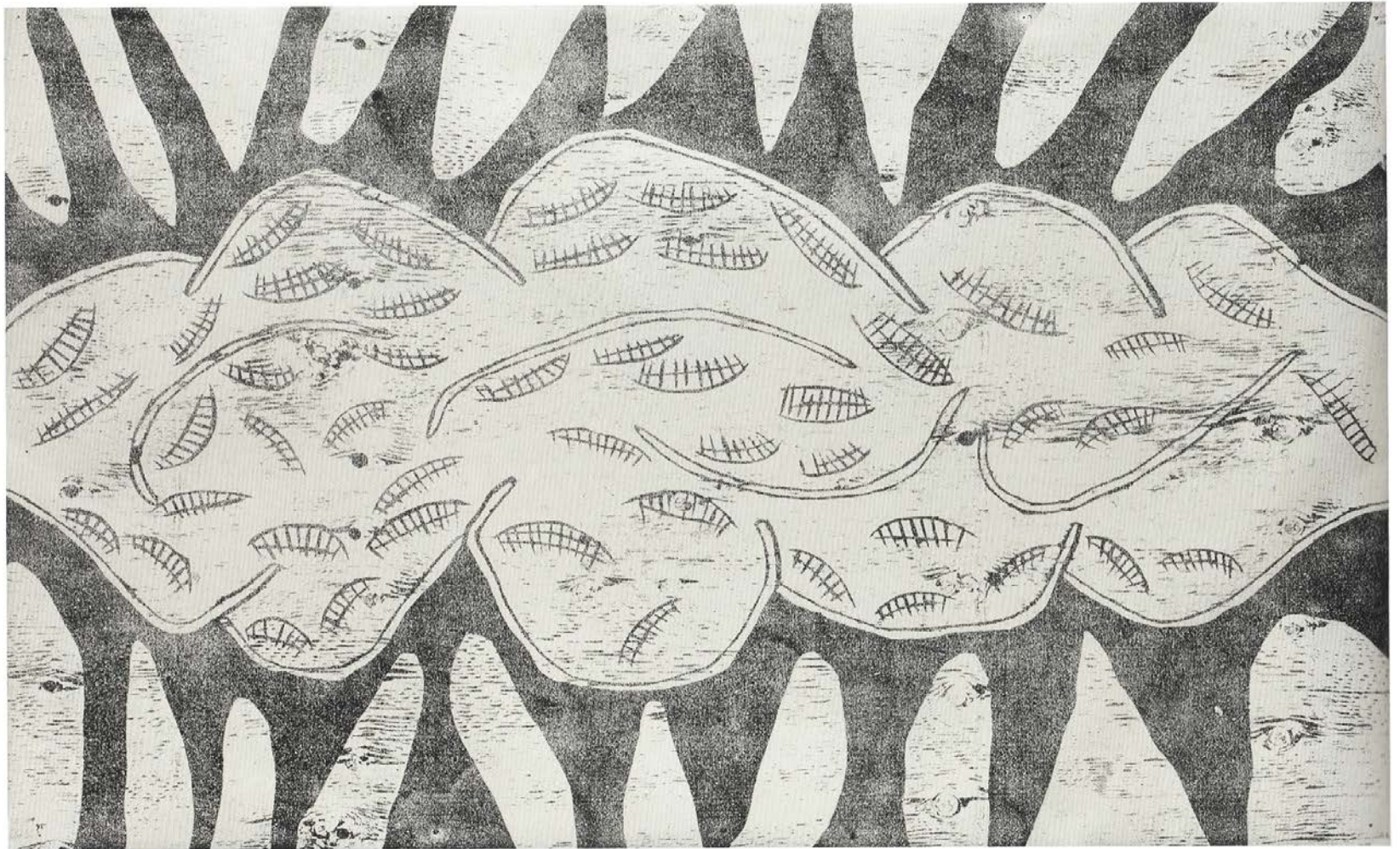
Nicholas Pope
*John the Baptist Pointing the
Way and Lit by His Own Light*
1993-96
Terracotta, metal, oil,
wick, flame
235 x 68 x 68 cm
92 1/2 x 26 3/4 x 26 3/4 in





Nicholas Pope
Heavenly Space
1991
Cast aluminium
166 x 86 x 86 cm
65 3/8 x 33 7/8 x 33 7/8 in

Nicholas Pope
*White on Black (Myself In
Difficulty)*
1985
Woodcut print on paper
112 x 180 cm (unframed)
44 1/8 x 70 7/8 in (unframed)
Edition 3 of 7





Nicholas Pope
The Vicar
1997
Carved and painted wood
280 x 60 x 54 cm
110 1/4 x 23 5/8 x 21 1/4 in



Nicholas Pope
Small Wall Terracotta
1977
Fired clay
55 x 7 cm





Nicholas Pope
Yews
1981
Carved yews in eight parts
Various dimensions
(height 88-140cm)

Nicholas Pope
Iron Holes
1978-2014
Cast iron
7 parts, dims variable
maximum height 42 cm





Roche Court
East Winterslow
Salisbury, Wiltshire
SP5 1BG

nac@sculpture.uk.com
www.sculpture.uk.com
T: +44 (0)1980 862244
[@newartcentre](#)

NewArtCentre.