



Vaughan, Keith (1912-1977)

by Shaun Cole

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A painter of figures and landscapes in oils and gouache, British artist Keith Vaughan specialized in the depiction of male nudes in landscape.

Vaughan was born on August 23, 1912 at Selsey Bill in Sussex, England, but moved to London with his family soon after his birth. He received no formal art training and worked in advertising until 1939, when he became a full-time painter.

During World War II, he served with the Pioneer Corps. He used his travel opportunities to study landscape throughout Britain and was able to make drawings and gouache paintings.

Twelve of the sketches and paintings Vaughan made during this period were purchased by the War Artists' Advisory Committee and displayed at the National Gallery in London, alongside works by artists such as Graham Sutherland, Henry Moore, and John Piper, whom Vaughan greatly admired.

In 1946 Vaughan shared a house with fellow artist John Minton, who introduced him to Duncan Macdonald at the Lefevre Gallery, where he held his first exhibition of oil paintings and continued to exhibit until 1952.

Vaughan was above all else enthralled by the male human body, which, as Bernard Denvir observed in the catalogue of an exhibition held at Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery in 1981, "assumed in his work an importance it had never known before in the history of British painting."

Vaughan's paintings depicted "Man," often naked and usually too indistinct to identify as individual portraits, in relation to his landscape, his environment, his space. Implicit in much of his work is man as a homosexual in opposition to his fellow man and a hostile world. The work is that of someone who felt himself to be an outsider, looking at situations and relationships in which he cannot participate.

Vaughan's paintings are true to his experience: each figure and element of his landscapes was drawn from a place he had visited, a landscape he had walked through, or a person he had known.

Throughout his career, Vaughan maintained a difference between the works he intended for exhibition and those that were purely private. This second group--created throughout his career--consists of several hundred pencil and pen and ink drawings all depicting young men.

Although the tone of the drawings altered during his career, and range from the tender to the erotic, they are free of the inhibitions that sometimes appear in his paintings intended for exhibition. They reveal more fully his love for and obsession with the young male body.

Vaughan also designed book jackets and textiles and in 1958 received the Designer of the Year award for his work with the progressive textile firm, Edinburgh Weavers.

Vaughan was also commissioned to make a number of public works of art. The Arts Council invited him to create a mural, entitled "At the Beginning of Time," for the Dome of Discovery at the Festival of Britain in 1951. In 1954 he designed an abstract ceramic mural for Corby New Town, Northamptonshire. In 1963 London County Council commissioned him to paint a mural for the Aboyne Estate Clubroom in Wandsworth, London.

Vaughan taught at Camberwell School of Art, London (1946-1948), the Central School, London (1948-1957), and the Slade School (1959-1977). He became an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Art in 1964 and in 1965 he was awarded a CBE (Citizen of the British Empire).

Like many gay men of his generation and class, Vaughan was troubled by insecurities about his sexuality. Much of what is known about his sexuality comes from his journals, which he began writing in August 1939 and continued until the morning of his death thirty-eight years later.

On the grounds that "the truth is not necessarily beautiful but is of value and helpful to others," he decided to be truthful about his homosexuality. Following this line he wrote explicitly about his sexual practices with other men, masturbation, and experiments with sadomasochism.

Vaughan's journals give insight into the relationships he had with other men, particularly with his working-class lovers, John McGuinness and Johnny Walsh, and his long-term companion and lover Ramsey Dyke McClure. Like many middle-class gay men of his generation, he was attracted to an ideal of working-class masculinity. This inclination proved frustrating for him as he longed to find a partner who could be his intellectual equal as well as attracting him physically.

Although Vaughan wrote freely about his sexuality in his journals (and in the erotic short stories he wrote for his own pleasure), he was a product of his age. He had grown up at a time when gay men were driven underground into their own subculture and made to feel guilty about their sexual preferences.

Even though the artist lived to see the advent of the gay liberation movement, he failed to embrace it or to understand its significance. "Gay Lib just seems to want homosexuals to come out and flaunt themselves, declare their tastes--but why?" he asked in his journal.

After being diagnosed with bowel cancer in 1975, and also suffering from severe kidney disease and depression, Keith Vaughan committed suicide on November 4, 1977 by taking an overdose of drugs.

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About the Author

Shaun Cole is curator of Designs at the Victoria and Albert Museum. He is author of *"Don We Now Our Gay Apparel": Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* and has curated numerous exhibitions, including "Graphic Responses to AIDS" (1996), "Fashion on Paper" (1997), and "Dressing the Male" (1999), as well as two innovative "Days of Record" to document Tattooing (2000) and Black British Hairstyles and Nail Art (2001).

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