

Ahead of their two-person exhibition at Tate St Ives, artist Jonathan Michael Ray looks closely at a painting by Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, revealing their shared fascination for what's under the surface of the ancient landscape of West Cornwall

What Lies Beneath

BY JONATHAN MICHAEL RAY



Wilhelmina Barns-Graham
Rock Theme, St Just 1953
Oil paint on canvas
60.8 × 106.6 cm

THIRTEEN MILES ALONG THE COAST FROM ST IVES, St Just is a world apart from what most visitors seek in Cornwall. This is not a quaint harbour town, bathed in light and catering to the throng of summer tourists. It is an ancient place up on the headland. Set back from the cliffs and often shrouded in sea fog, it is fully exposed to the elemental force of the Atlantic winds. The landscape is littered with mine shafts, engine houses, carns and stone circles. This is a place of excavation and deep time: a civilisation that exists because of the land. Walking here, along the South West Coast Path or the Tinner's Way, is an exercise in looking down as much as up. And this act of looking down can take you through all of these layers, as well as within yourself.

The Scottish-born painter Wilhelmina Barns-Graham (1912–2004) was based in St Ives for much of her life. She would have discovered this version of West Cornwall for herself when she arrived in 1940, as did I, when I moved here in 2018. Although the town of St Just and its people may have changed a fair bit over the past 70 years, the experience of the surrounding landscape captured and communicated in her painting *Rock Theme, St Just* 1953 does not feel dated. While perhaps not an exact depiction of a specific scene, the colours, forms and mood of the painting reflect a deep encounter with this most mysterious place.

What immediately strikes me is that more than half of the scene seems to be beneath the surface of the earth. It alludes to what cannot be seen – an antithesis to landscape painting in general. Barns-Graham generously gives us a palette true to life, with earthy tones and granite greys. Towards the top of the canvas, an ocean horizon line and distant headland orient the viewer within the scene. But the real business of the work is in its abstraction.

I wonder whether my own first-hand experience of this enigmatic landscape has helped me to appreciate her abstract yet beautifully reverent work. I first saw the painting at Tate's stores earlier this year, and while taking down the following fragmented notes, I thought that encountering this painting in person reveals some of what Barns-Graham must have felt, as much as what she saw:

two forms, quite concrete, stand sentient in the foreground and underground, emerging through the surface of the land

these solid granite blocks

carved monolith or cliff face with chasms, standing stone or sculpture ochre and umber tones bury and hold these monumental forms in place.

a deep black pit in the bottom centre.

thin washes of paint, grey like fog, a transparency concealing a hole

scraping back to reveal earlier layers, applications.
a process like scratching around in the dirt

black wash in the middle ground. a dark space. a formless form

the distant background sky, sea and land, fixed, calm, figurative, and in balanced opposition to the theme.

and then down down again to the deep dark tunnel and what might lie within.

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Rock Theme, St Just was presented by the Wilhelmina Barns-Graham Trust with Art Fund support in 2018. It is included in *Wilhelmina Barns-Graham and Jonathan Michael Ray*, Tate St Ives, 28 May – 2 October.

Jonathan Michael Ray is an artist who lives and works in Cornwall.