

# PORTHMEOR

A Peter Lanyon Mural Rediscovered



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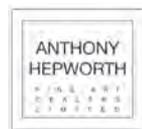
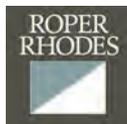
# Victoria Art Gallery, Bath

**Bath & North East  
Somerset Council**

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Exhibition guest curated by Anthony Hepworth

Sponsored by Roper Rhodes, Target Chartered Accountants  
and Anthony Hepworth Fine Art Limited



## FOREWORD

Half a century later, memories of Peter Lanyon's seven-year stint as a member of the teaching staff at the Bath Academy of Art (1950-7) still circulate amongst his erstwhile students. They recall, for example, being made to lie down in the grounds of Corsham Court and survey the swelling earth, the trees and the scudding clouds from a much lower perspective than the one they were accustomed to. The exercise demonstrated that, for Lanyon, it was never enough to merely appraise an outdoor subject from a safe distance; instead he had to experience it as an active participant, investigating it from above, below and even, sometimes, from within (he overcame his fear of heights by taking up gliding and forcing himself to descend the shafts of Cornish tin mines).

*Porthmeor* (1962-3), the mural that lies at the heart of this exhibition, began its life in St Ives, a few miles from the most south-westerly point in Britain. From there it then traversed the ocean that had been its inspiration, only to spend the next 38 years adorning the home of a New Jersey millionaire. It has long been a wish of the Lanyon family to see the mural reunited with *Porthleven*, its full-scale study in gouache and ink. However, the logistics of moving the two huge works have only served to frustrate such worthy plans, and it was entirely down to the vision of Anthony Hepworth and Martin Lanyon that the Victoria Art Gallery came to

be on the receiving end of a tantalising proposal: Bath stands more or less mid-way between the normal resting place of the mural in London and that of the mural study in West Penwith, making it the ideal location at which to give them what is, amazingly, their first ever joint public showing.

The co-operation of the Lanyon family has been critical to the realisation of this project. Likewise the sterling efforts of the catalogue's author, Michael Bird, whose painstaking research and insightful analysis have unravelled the fascinating story of the mural's gestation, which helped in no small way to put both Lanyon and St Ives on the international artistic map. Thanks are also due to the many private collectors who selflessly lent their pictures and constructions to the exhibition, and to Toby Treves and Martin Lanyon for supplying photographs. The three exhibition sponsors, Roper Rhodes, Target Chartered Accountants and Anthony Hepworth Fine Art, generously provided the resources that are needed to enable a project of this scale and ambition to happen. The faith they have shown in the Gallery and the community of Bath & North East Somerset that it serves is greatly appreciated.

Jonathan Benington  
Manager, Victoria Art Gallery

**MYTH AND CONTINUITY:  
PETER LANYON'S PORTHMEOR**  
MICHAEL BIRD

Peter Lanyon's huge painting *Porthmeor*, on which the present exhibition centres, is not an easy work to place. Physically, at just under 10 metres wide, it demands a very large space both to hang it and to allow you to step back far enough to get at least some idea of the painting as a whole. Being only 1 metre high, however, *Porthmeor* (p. 36-7) is impossible to reproduce photographically on a standard sized page without turning it into a landscape-patterned belt, bereft of scale and presence. Even – in fact, especially – if you're familiar with the successive intense phases of Lanyon's comparatively short career, it is not obvious where *Porthmeor* fits in. And once you discover its date, 1962-3, the sense of anomaly becomes stronger still.

Open a book about British art during the 1960s, and you'll probably find a world buzzing to the beat of Pop. You will meet David Hockney, Peter Blake and others, demonstrating how British painting, previously high-minded to the point of puritanism, fell in love with consumer culture and stopped looking down its nose at fashion, advertising, popular entertainment and America. Cue – let's say – another big painting from 1962, Hockney's *Flight into Italy – Swiss Landscape*,<sup>1</sup> in which figures hunched inside a see-through van hurtle through a semi-abstract mountain vista whose peaks consist of multicoloured scallops, like the yoke of a kaftan. *Porthmeor*,

on the other hand, features in no round-up I have ever seen of notable British paintings from the 1960s. Its absence is, admittedly, partly due to the fact that it has seldom appeared in public since being rolled up and shipped off to America in September 1962.<sup>2</sup> This is only the third time it has been shown in Britain in forty-six years.<sup>3</sup> But it is also true that the painting sits awkwardly alongside the familiar view of what the 1960s were really about. Does that view amount to the whole story? This exhibition prompts us to test its parameters against *Porthmeor*.

The painting takes its name from a wide sandy cove facing the Atlantic on the northerly edge of St Ives, the town where Lanyon was born and where, apart from occasional spells abroad, he spent his working life. Like *Flight into Italy*, *Porthmeor* too presents an abstracted landscape travelled-through and dreamed-about – a landscape in whose contours we sense the coded trajectory of a personal quest. Both works, in other words, reveal art in its familiar guise as an arena for self-discovery. But whereas Hockney's wacky road trip feels like fun, *Porthmeor* suggests a *mise-en-scène* at once grander and more sombre. Can this stretched panorama of interpenetrating curves and slewed veils of low-key colour, with its atmosphere of primal cliff edge and littoral seeming to predate the advent of



Porthmeor, 1962-63 (detail)

human beings let alone comic strips and television, really belong to the Swinging Sixties?

Unsurprisingly, since any attempt at pigeonholing brought out the devil's advocate in Lanyon, the answer is both yes and no. In scale and painterly ambition, *Porthmeor* is of its time. It must be one of the biggest British paintings to come out of the 1960s when, following the American Abstract Expressionist lead, bigness *per se* was taken to prove that an artist meant business. In addition, it had the sought-after cachet of an American connection, having been commissioned by Stanley J. Seeger, a young millionaire who was assembling what eventually became an A-list collection of modern European art. Seeger was buying regularly from the New York dealer Catherine Viviano, with whom he discussed the idea of commissioning a mural-scale painting for Bois d'Arc, his house in Frenchtown, New Jersey.<sup>4</sup> He initially wanted to offer the job to Afro, one of the Italian artists she represented, but Viviano persuaded him instead to approach Peter Lanyon, who was having a solo exhibition in her gallery in January 1962.<sup>5</sup> Since Lanyon's first exhibition there in 1957, Seeger had acquired several of his larger oil paintings,<sup>6</sup> and the dealer may have aimed both to strengthen her relationship with a valuable

client and to give a strategic opportunity to one of the few British artists on her books (Afro already had a high-profile UNESCO commission behind him). The fee was to be \$9000, split 2:1 between artist and gallery.

For his part, Lanyon was excited by the possibility of creating a painting across which the gaze could travel as over a real landscape. He later described the way in which the work was intended to generate 'a continuous flow in both directions' by stimulating 'a muscular action of the eye', which 'does not encourage the memory to hold all actions as one but only in sequences.'<sup>7</sup> The suggestion that abstract painting should aspire to an environmental impact, should be so large that it needed to be physically adjusted-to, was one of the features that, according to Roger Coleman in 1960, distinguished a new wave in British art from the preceding generation, to which he collectively consigned 'the St Ives painters' – principally Lanyon and his forty-something contemporaries Patrick Heron, Terry Frost, Bryan Wynter and Roger Hilton.<sup>8</sup> Whether or not Lanyon was consciously taking up this particular gauntlet, Seeger's commission was a chance to prove that a British artist did not have to be under thirty or based in London to paint on an American-sized environmental scale.

Yet at the same time *Porthmeor* feels strangely retrospective. I imagine it, surrounded in the Victoria Art Gallery by smaller works produced by Lanyon during the following couple of years, having the air of a leviathan attended by nimble, more brilliantly coloured fauna. *Holiday Coast* (p. 42), for example – a painted construction from October 1963 – has a frankly Pop-style brio. Its perspex layer teases the gaze as you try to decide whether the pinkish upright curve and other flesh-toned fragments hovering above the sandy substrate add up to more than a hint of sex, or what kind of visual *double-entendre* is intended by the car numberplate letter C. In *Farm* (p. 39) an invasive, fleshy presence, with its curves and cradlings, seems both to contain and be contained within a landscape. The weightless graphic swell and high-toned reds and mauves in *Lomnica (Marica)* (p. 43), meanwhile, are typical of the way Lanyon was painting in what turned out to be his final few months in 1964. Another canvas (p. 47), which remained unfinished at his death that August (subsequently titled *Blue and Green*), is founded on a similar fusion of racing, undulant lines and flat, buoyant colour – a vivid contrast to *Porthmeor*.

While the actual landscapes to which all four later paintings refer are probably European (*Lomnica*, for example, alludes to Lanyon's visit to Czechoslovakia in February 1964),

the works themselves reflect an artist relishing a distinctly transatlantic sense of new-found licence in what can be done with paint. All the stranger, then, to realise that *Porthmeor*, which at the time of its making was Lanyon's most intimate involvement with America to date, represents the most Celtic, most Cornish painting he produced in the last two or three years of his life. As so often in Lanyon's art, it seems subject to the pull of conflicting tides.

*The Conflict of Man with Tides and Sands* was in fact the title of Lanyon's first mural, completed in 1960. He had experimented with working on a mural scale in the early 1950s,<sup>9</sup> but nothing further came of the idea until the end of the decade, when he was commissioned by Liverpool University. For this work, installed on an internal wall 2.7 metres high and 7 metres long in the Civil Engineering Building, Lanyon painted in enamel on porcelain tiles. *The Conflict of Man* bears all the features of his manner circa 1960 – expansive calligraphic draughtsmanship combined with an open-textured, gestural orchestration of blues, blacks and reddish highlights. Its Turner-esque dynamic of spiralling atmospheric arousal is shared by such canvases as the Tate's magnificent *Thermal* (1960). The sanitary surface of the porcelain *carrélage*, however, wasn't really to Lanyon's taste. He mistrusted neatness and high



Porthleven, 1962 (detail)

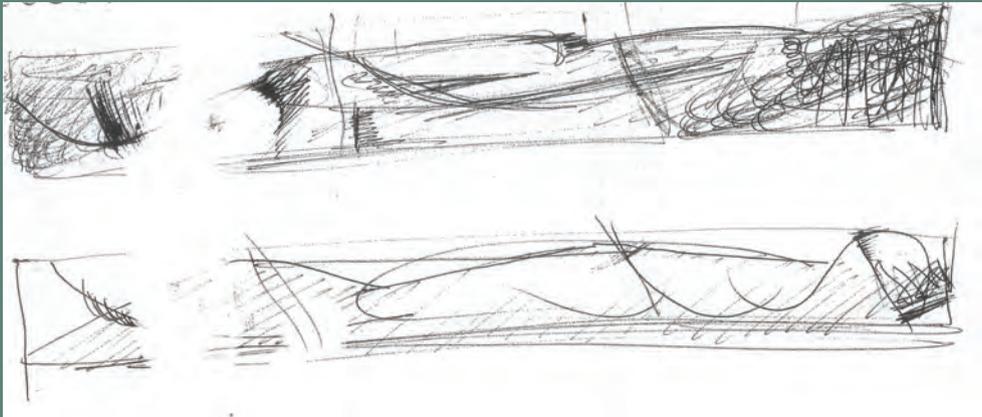
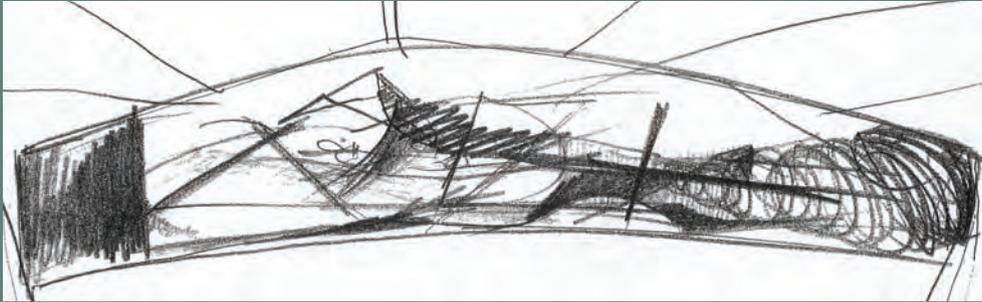
finish, of which his rough-cut constructions from wood, glass and metal offcuts are the ideological opposite, with their jagged edges and palpable Bostik trails. In a 1961 construction *Iron Airscape* (p. 29), for example, which cannibalises a broken tile from the Liverpool mural, he seems determined to recapture his own ideas on his own artistic terms.

The theme of man's conflict with the elements found an echo in Lanyon's irritation with the institutional politics that coloured his experience at Liverpool. Public commissions, he observed, often ended in some unworthy third party – a publicity officer, say – appropriating the artist's work as 'propaganda'. They were therefore 'likely to discourage the growth of real myth which can become both a background and focus for personal growth.'<sup>10</sup> Seeger's commission, by contrast, promised the sort of old-fashioned creative pact almost unheard-of in post-war Britain. Encouraged by an enlightened patron, the artist would be able to attain 'a complete resolution of the work' (although, Lanyon couldn't resist adding, 'it will undoubtedly be misunderstood').

Here, then, was the rare prospect of artistic freedom on a large scale. None of Lanyon's associates and rivals in St Ives had been offered this sort of opening. Yet conflict of some profound but ambiguous kind lies at the heart of *Porthmeor*. Lanyon described

the tension in oceanographic terms, which he mapped out at some stage in two 'movement drawings':<sup>11</sup>

'The main appearance,' he wrote, 'is of a fast moving sea with cross shore drift and counter drift ... This illusion of movement works across the whole painting.'<sup>12</sup> He envisaged the painting's central section as a place 'where calm deep water is generated'. Then, 'Beyond this the movement breaks out again as if from behind and sets up a sense of waves breaking onto a rocky coast'. Whereas turbulent seas were a cliché of traditional marine painting, in the personal creative mythology developed by Lanyon early in his career this theme belonged to an erotic interpretation of landscape, in which the sea was imagined as a male lover continuously seeking to penetrate the female land. Such ideas go a long way towards illuminating the work he produced in the post-war decade; by 1960, however, things were looking very different. The knotty, earthy interweaving of landscape, sex and history had been replaced by a markedly lighter, bluer, airier feel, linked to Lanyon's experience of gliding, which he'd taken up in 1959. This is the story told by the titles of paintings in his 1962 solo show at Viviano's – *Airscape*, *Head Wind*, *Cliff Wind*, *Flyaway* and so on – the work that was hanging in the gallery when the mural commission was first discussed.



Preliminary drawings for mural



Porthleven, 1962 (detail)

The project kicked off equably enough, with a visit by Lanyon to Bois d'Arc in early February 1962. He was favourably impressed by Seeger, declaring 'I was continuously surprised by his understanding. He is a very lively and loveable person.'<sup>13</sup> Lanyon photographed and measured up the site for the mural, a broad wooden beam 2.7 metres above floor level in an extension designed to function both as a music room and as a showcase for Seeger's art collection, and made several small drawings. These he worked up on his return into three full-size sketches in ink and gouache on paper – *Porthleven*, *Bois D'Arc* and *Delaware* (named for the nearby river) – which were dispatched to Seeger on 8 May.<sup>14</sup> As his own studio, a garage in the grounds of the family home, was too small, Lanyon had borrowed a larger space, No.3 Porthmeor Studios in St Ives, just behind the sea wall on Porthmeor Beach, where he worked on the project between April and July.

During Lanyon's second visit to Bois d'Arc, in June, to try out the sketches *in situ*, *Porthmeor* was chosen as the basis for the mural. *Bois D'Arc* and *Delaware* he cut into sections and developed as smaller gouaches. Both socially and artistically, the project was bowling along. 'Do check your belongings carefully', wrote Seeger after Lanyon had returned to Cornwall, 'I think you left something important, like your shadow,

behind when you left.' Lanyon had, in fact, left behind not only the convivial vibration of his presence in the house but also his new gouaches, which Seeger showed to Viviano: 'I have never seen Catherine ... more stimulated and excited by new work,' he reported.<sup>15</sup> Back in St Ives, Lanyon had pinned *Porthleven* up and, working on a canvas stretched above it, translated the sketch into oil paint. In late July he told his friends Sarah and Alan Bowness: 'The Muriel is finished and grinning gloomily in 3 Porthmeor studios. I would like you to see it before it goes West.'<sup>16</sup>

This exhibition brings the sketch and the oil-on-canvas version together for the first time since that summer in St Ives. The comparison allows us to watch Lanyon thoroughly recasting the work. Between the initial drawings, the gouache sketch, the 'finished' painting photographed before shipping, and the work as it ended up on Seeger's beam, almost the only common denominator is an elongated landscape structure, modulated by what Lanyon described as 'rhythms and counter rhythms more often met in music rather than painting.'<sup>17</sup> If Seeger had been expecting the painting to be a faithful transcription of the sketch, he must have been taken aback when, after delays in transit and customs, he finally unrolled it in November. Writing to acknowledge receipt, he didn't sound

entirely thrilled. Without specifying the reason, he declared 'The work as it stands ... can not hang in my studio' and urged Lanyon to come over as soon as possible.<sup>18</sup>

In response, Lanyon returned later that month for his third visit. Many of the substantial differences visible between the painting photographed in his studio and *Porthmeor's* final form are probably the result of changes he made during his fortnight's stay. These alterations, along with Lanyon's explanations of what he was up to, presumably met with approval. By February 1963, Seeger was writing in a warmer vein, noting that there remained only 'minor' problems to do with framing, and referring to a shape on the far right of the image as a 'purple fanny' – a bantering reference to Lanyon's eroticised landscape vocabulary.<sup>19</sup> Two further visits followed: in February 1963, when Lanyon was *en route* to a temporary teaching post in San Antonio, Texas, and again in April on the way home. The whole project had taken just over a year

The most obvious change between sketch and painting, of course, involves the title. Porthleven is a village on the south coast of the Land's End peninsula, but it was also the title of Lanyon's first large-scale oil painting and public commission, his entry for the exhibition *60 Paintings for '51*, which formed part of the Festival of Britain in summer

1951. Although he claimed that the 1962 sketch was based on his 1951 *Porthleven*, there are few similarities. The Festival commission was, however, associated by Lanyon with some particularly tangled episodes of personal and artistic conflict. He'd had enormous trouble finishing it; eventually he destroyed the work of many months and impulsively painted the final image in a couple of hours. Around the same time, he quarrelled terminally with his older friend, mentor and now rival in St Ives, Ben Nicholson. The 1951 *Porthleven* marked his release from and rejection of Nicholson's brand of scrupulous, classically balanced modernism. The very name, it is fair to guess, connoted for Lanyon a hard-won new start, a wider horizon.

The name that replaced it in the Seeger project, *Porthmeor*, was similarly laden with associations. Meaning 'large cove' in Cornish, *Porthmeor* occurs in the titles of innumerable works by St Ives's generations of art-colonists from the 1880s onwards. In 1928, for example, Ben Nicholson and Christopher Wood each produced a *Porthmeor* in honour of their recent encounter with the elderly self-taught artist Alfred Wallis, soon to become the unwitting guru of British modernism's yen for the primitive. Lanyon may have felt that his vast canvas would be a *Porthmeor* of all *Porthmeors*, a claim of ownership that



*Porthmeor and Porthleven in the studio*

effectively vanquished those of other modern artists – Nicholson in particular – who were not, as he was, natives of St Ives. In the early 1960s, as his international reputation grew, Lanyon found himself regularly being interviewed and asked to describe the sources of his art, a situation that caused him both to revisit his relationship to Nicholson and to reassert his Cornishness.<sup>20</sup> This may help to explain why, despite all its evident ambition to break new ground – to be another *Porthleven* – the Seeger mural became a *Porthmeor*, with all the freight of a summation.

The *Porthleven* sketch exemplifies the manner of handling paint Lanyon developed in the late 1950s. Like the Liverpool mural, it enacts complex movements – water across sand, the gaze across a landscape, a sail across the horizon. Airborne in a glider, Lanyon found that torn clouds, scraps of sky and the swerving coastscapes below really did take on the appearance of brushmarks. *Porthleven* makes you feel as though, while reading the marks across a two-dimensional surface, you're also being propelled through atmospheric space. As far as we can tell from the photographs, early stages of the painting, if anything more cursory and decisive than the sketch, preserved this sensation. A dark elbow-shape in the middle of the right-hand half has become more opaque, the curved lines crisper and more

sinuous, and the icy gauze of paler, overlying colours are similarly simplified. On the left, the transition from gouache to oil, coupled with a lot of redrawing, turned a matt, misty groundswell into an effect of barrelling impact.

When Lanyon began reworking the painting at Bois d'Arc in the winter of 1962-3, he was aware of the need to fine-tune the colouring. Whereas the light in St Ives is 'very blue', he had explained to Viviano, 'Stanley's light is much redder so I have tried to adjust to that.'<sup>21</sup> It takes more than the ruddy gleam of Seeger's mahogany panelled rooms, however, to account for *Porthmeor's* final form. In place of the broken contours of Lanyon's 1960s-style calligraphy, a calmer, more settled horizon line has appeared, while the general viewpoint seems higher and more distant, as though you were looking across at a bay between cliffs rather than standing by the sea's edge. At left, an earlier ochreous rectangle, which might have suggested a rock or sand shoal, has swollen into a head-like shape, which then suggests the entire design as a sleeping body, tapering towards the feet into a brown hillside with a patch of sky above it.

Lanyon's rethinking of the mural drew him back towards the kind of meditation on the figure-within-the-landscape that had occupied him intensively ten years or more



Studio shots with mural

earlier in a number of long, thin paintings, such as the horizontal *West Penwith* (1949) and the spindly vertical of *Pendeen Rose* (1951). In an interview in 1962 he reprised this theme, describing how the act of painting – or perhaps simply touching – a naked woman could send him out of doors to rediscover its sensual equivalent in the landscape: ‘Having experienced this long line say from the armpit down over the ribcage down to the pelvis, across the long thigh and down to the feet that line might take me out in the car to the landscape and I might experience this again.’<sup>22</sup>

It seems likely that Seeger enjoyed Lanyon’s way of talking about painting, with its disarming blend of autobiographical directness, soaring metaphysics and ‘purple fanny’ levity. At some point during the project, however, Lanyon attempted to set out quite a specific narrative programme for the mural.<sup>23</sup> In these notes, he stated that the mural had been conceived ‘to provide both a myth and a sense of continuity for a developing collection,’<sup>24</sup> and he outlined its mythical content: ‘Reading from the left there is a sense of echo both of the past and of events across the sea. There is a suggestion of the Golden Fleece.’ He wanted the work to convey ‘the appearance of an event in time,’ although it is not obvious what this event might be – the statement ‘at the extreme left a flying fish returns movement

around the golden fleece to an open sea’<sup>25</sup> reads more like a line from a Surrealist poem than the exposition of a long-meditated subject. One of the few things generally known about the highly private Seeger is that he endowed the Classics department at Princeton University, so the Golden Fleece idea may have been a nod to the patron, envisaged as an adventurous Jason bringing home an argosy of art treasures. But the artist’s urge to embed his painting’s silence within a more voluble kind of historical or mythological context also calls up the image of a younger Lanyon, staking his claim in the early 1950s to have forged a modern humanist interpretation of landscape out of the chilly geometries of pre-war Constructivism.

World events may also have played a part in turning Lanyon’s thoughts towards sensuous but sombre refuge in the landscape-as-body. In October 1962, while the mural was in transit, the Cuban Missile Crisis erupted. The nightmare of nuclear holocaust that had shadowed the previous decade was on the verge of becoming reality. At the age when Hockney’s generation were at art school, Lanyon and his contemporaries had been at war, and for a while in 1962, as it had during the 1939-45 conflict, the desire to recover continuity with past must have been more seductive than the urge to cast off into the future. Or perhaps after all, putting aside



Boir d'Arc with *Porthmeor* installed

Lanyon's excursions into mythography, we should see *Porthmeor* as the portrait of a locality, the 'appearance of an event in time' as no more than a high tide or a storm swell. Parts of this essay have been written in a beach hut overlooking Porthmeor, where unaccustomed tidal drifts during the wettest, windiest summer anyone can remember have scoured large areas of the

dark bedrock clear of sand. It feels as though we've been watching the climate start to rework its earlier draft of this place. Faintly archaic as a landscapey phrase like 'the conflict of man with tides and sands' sounded in the 1960s urban art world, where the future shimmered like a car-shaped neon rainbow, it sounds less so now.

## NOTES

- 1 Kunstmuseum, Düsseldorf.
- 2 Letter to Catherine Viviano, 22 September 1962: 'The mural is at Bowlett ... They are rerolling it and repacking for shipment.' Quotations from Peter Lanyon's letters are taken from correspondence held in the Lanyon family archive. I am indebted to Martin Lanyon for providing access to the archive and for commenting in detail on an early draft of this essay.
- 3 In 1978 *Porthmeor* was shown in the exhibition *Peter Lanyon: Paintings, Drawings and Constructions* at Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester. It was also displayed at Sotheby's in London before being sold at auction in 14 June 2001.
- 4 Although Seeger commissioned Lanyon to paint what is usually referred to as a mural, the work was not intended to be a wall-painting but a painting in oil on canvas, which would be delivered rolled-up then stretched *in situ*.
- 5 In a letter to Lanyon of 5 November 1962, Viviano explained that it was 'only after I talked to him [Seeger] about you that he made you his final selection.'
- 6 Works acquired by Seeger before June 1961, when he exhibited his collection at Princeton University, include six oil paintings, *Rock at Portholland* (1939), *Europa* (1954), *Anticoli* (1956), *Abbotsbury*, *Susan* (1958), *Susan* (1958) and *Isle of Purbeck* (1958), and two gouaches, *Green Rising* (1958) and *Surfacing* (1958). Soon afterwards Seeger bought two further oil paintings, *Inshore* and *Salome* (both 1961), presumably from Lanyon's show at Viviano's gallery in New York in January 1962.
- 7 Peter Lanyon, 'Note on painting. Porthmeor mural for Stanley J Seeger. '62', undated manuscript.
- 8 In his introduction to the catalogue for the first *Situation* exhibition (R.B.A. Galleries, London, September 1960), for which the paintings submitted (including his own) were required to be 'not less than 30 square feet', Coleman outlined 'the values implicit in the large painting'. These included 'a new conception of space in painting and with it a new conception of the spectator's relationship to a painting', which he termed an 'environmental definition of painting', requiring 'a turn of the head of several degrees right and left ... before [a large painting] can be fully incorporated into his experience'.
- 9 Margaret Garlake describes 'a group of large, freely painted gouaches' Lanyon made at this time, one of which 'is a transformative study of a human leg' (*Peter Lanyon, 'St Ives Artists'*, London, 1998, p.60).

- 10 'Note on painting'.
- 11 It is not clear whether these were preliminary 'concept drawings' or later analytical sketches of the finished mural.
- 12 Manuscript note titled "'Porthmeor' mural for Stanley J. Seeger'.
- 13 Letter to Catherine Viviano, 21 February 1962.
- 14 Letter to Catherine Viviano, 7 May 1962: 'I have asked Bowlett to send the sketches.'
- 15 Letter from Stanley Seeger, 24 July 1962.
- 16 Letter to Sarah and Alan Bowness, 25 July 1962. Lanyon often referred to his murals as 'Muriel'.
- 17 Lanyon, 'Note on painting'. While working on *Porthmeor* at Seeger's house, he listened repeatedly to a recording of Debussy's *La Mer*.
- 18 Letter from Stanley Seeger, 12 November 1962.
- 19 Letter from Stanley Seeger, 8 February 1963.
- 20 Shortly after getting back from New York in February 1962, for example, Lanyon noted in response to Paul Hodin's request to describe his stylistic development, 'Interest in the north coast W Penwith dominant since childhood. This theme constant' (questionnaire attached to letter to Paul Hodin, 15 February 1962).
- 21 Letter to Catherine Viviano, 17 August 1962.
- 22 Interview by Lionel Miskin, quoted in Chris Stephens, *Peter Lanyon: At the Edge of Landscape* (London, 2000), p.124.
- 23 'Notes on painting Porthmeor mural for Stanley J. Seeger '62' and "'Porthmeor" mural for Stanley J. Seeger Jr' comprise two sets of biro and pencil notes with much crossing-out and rewriting. They may have been intended to elucidate the painting for Seeger, but it is not clear to which stage of *Porthleven/Porthmeor* they refer.
- 24 "'Porthmeor" mural'.
- 25 Ibid.

# COLOUR PLATES



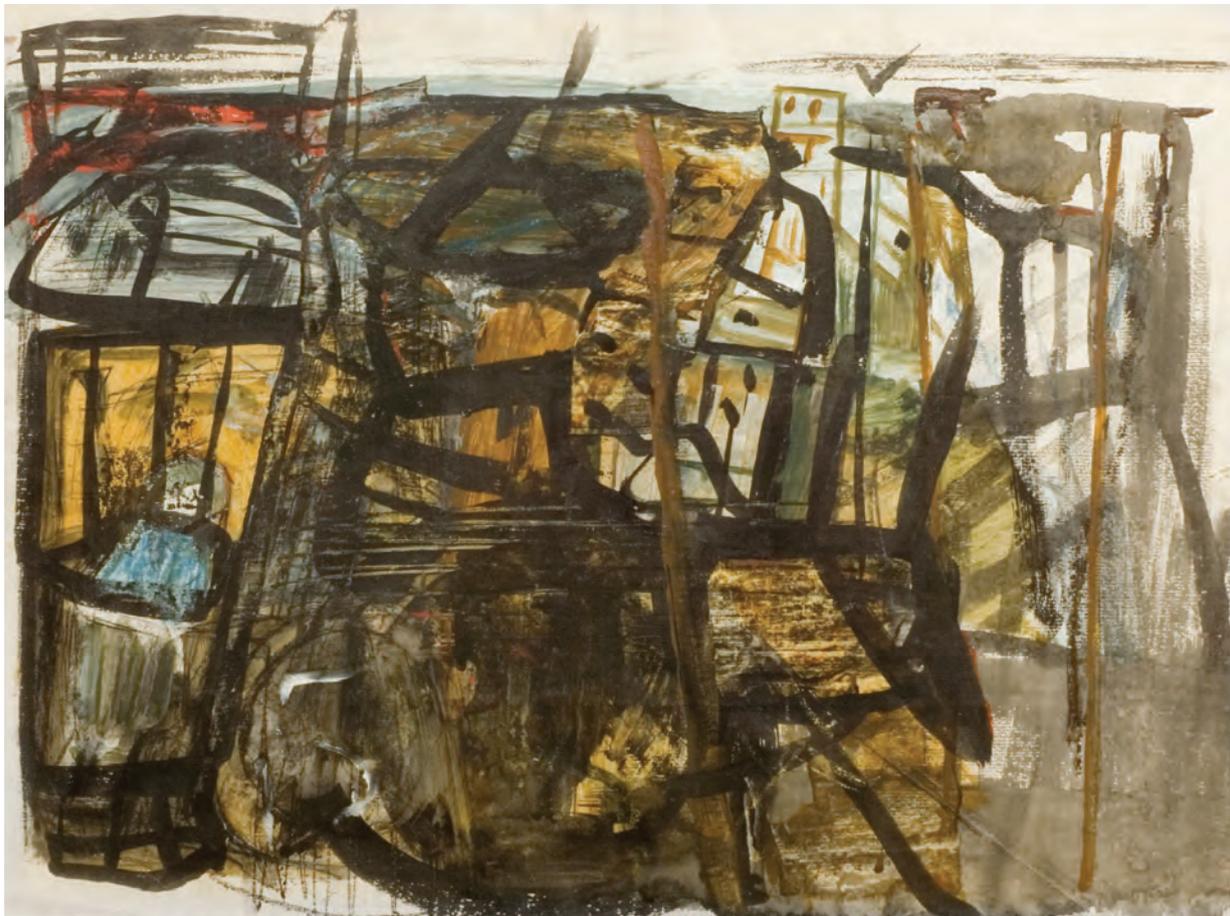
Yellow Boat, 1947

Oil on board, 38 x 48 cm, Private collection



Corsham Towers, 1951

Oil on board, 80 x 22.2 cm, Offer Waterman & Co



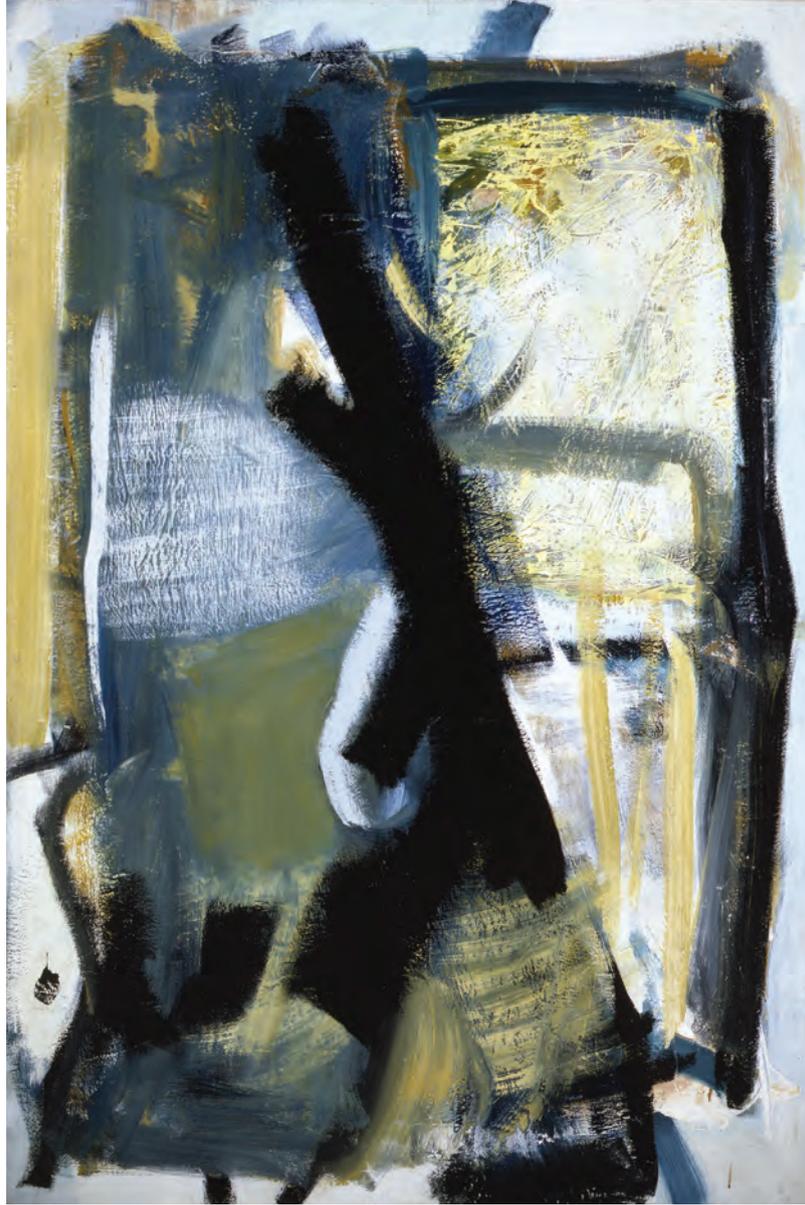
Accoro d'Anticoli, 1954

Mixed media on paper, 35 x 48 cm, Private collection



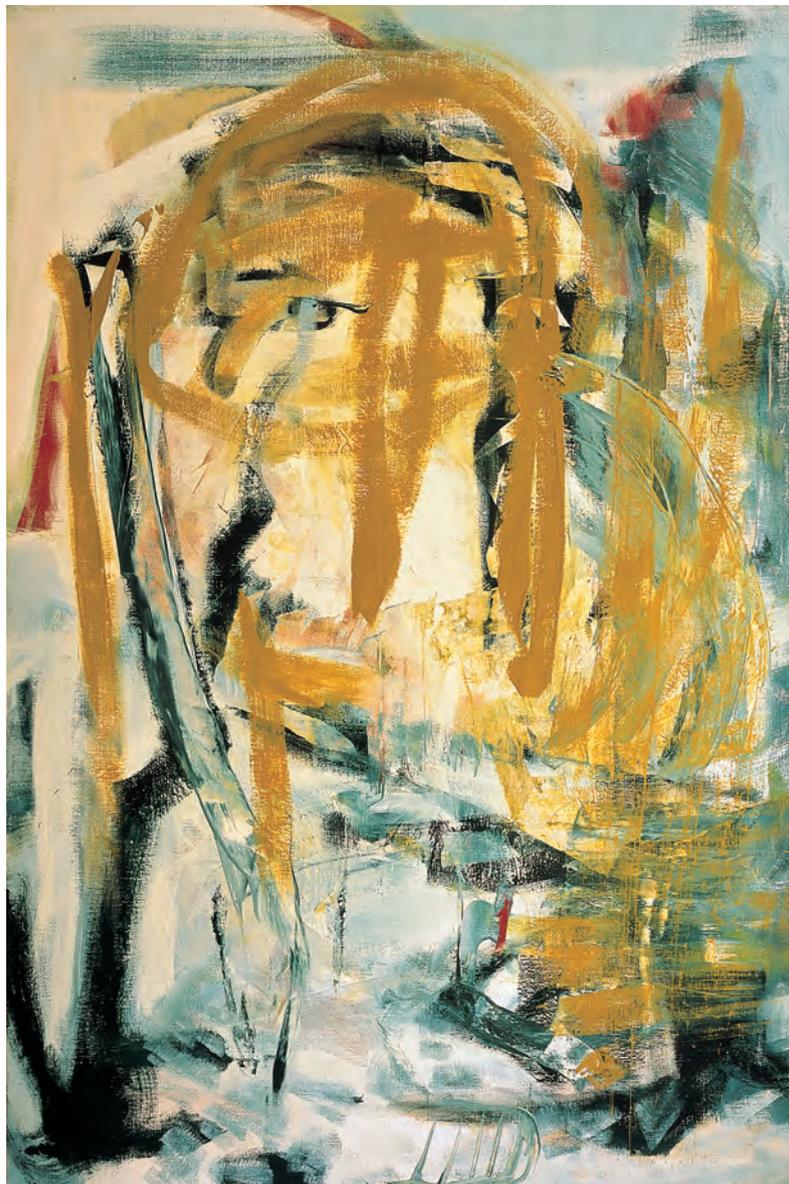
Albano, 1958

Oil on board, 110 x 29 cm, Private collection



Farm Country, 1961

Oil on canvas, 183 x 122 cm, Private collection



Haymaker, 1961

Oil on canvas, 183 x 122 cm, Private collection



Iron Airscape, 1961

Ceramic tile, paint, glass, wood and Bostik, 23 x 38 x 20 cm, Private collection





Upbeat, 1962

Gouache on paper, 108 x 203 cm, Private collection

Windbreak, June 1962

Gouache on paper, 76.2 x 88.4 cm, Phil and Alice Johnson





Porthleven, 1962

Gouache and Indian ink on paper, 105 x 992 cm, Private collection





Porthmeor, 1962-63

Oil on canvas, 107 x 965 cm, Offer Waterman & Co / Jonathan Clark Fine Art



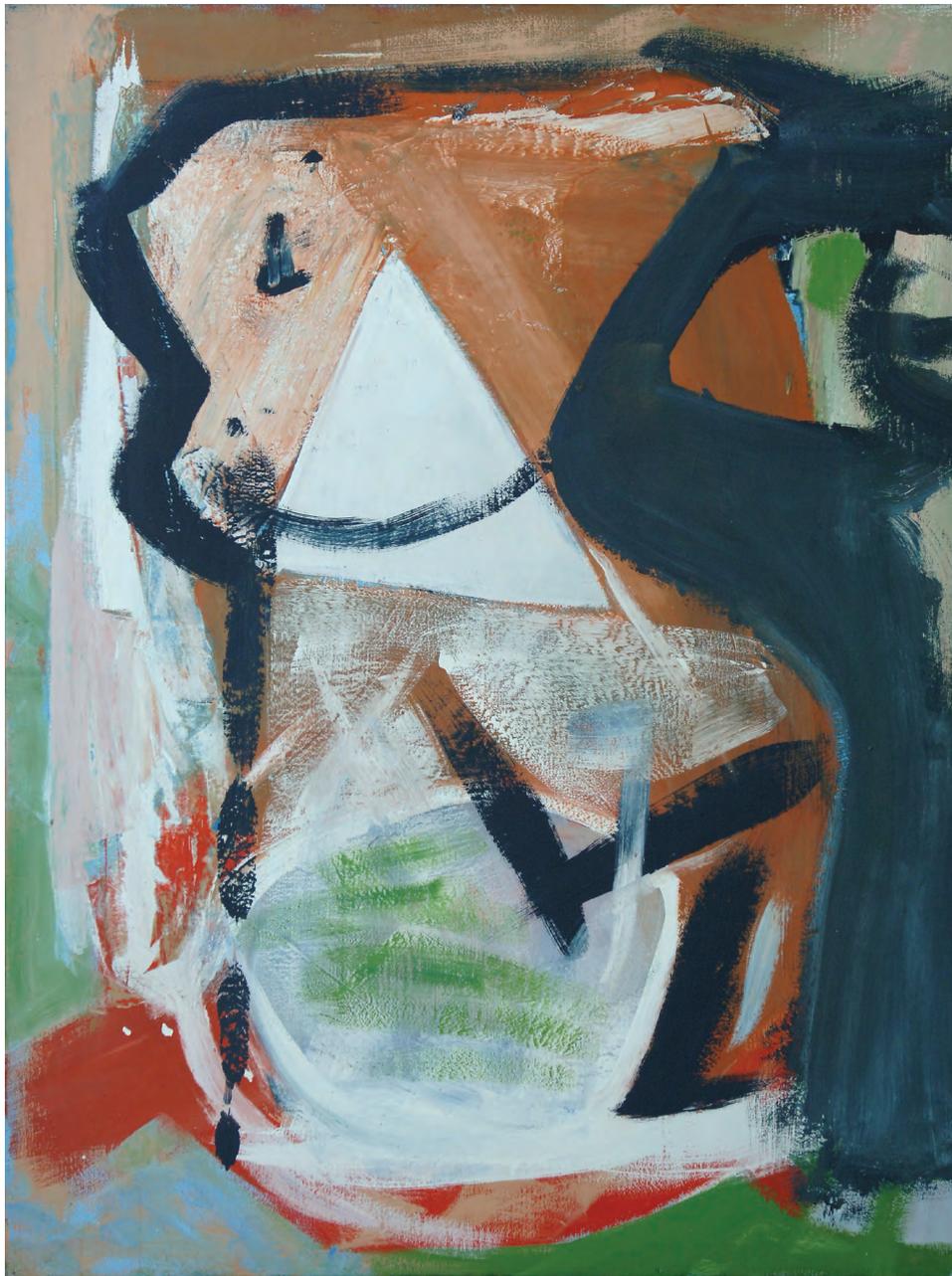
Farm, 1963

Oil on canvas, 107 x 152 cm, Private collection



Pony, 1963

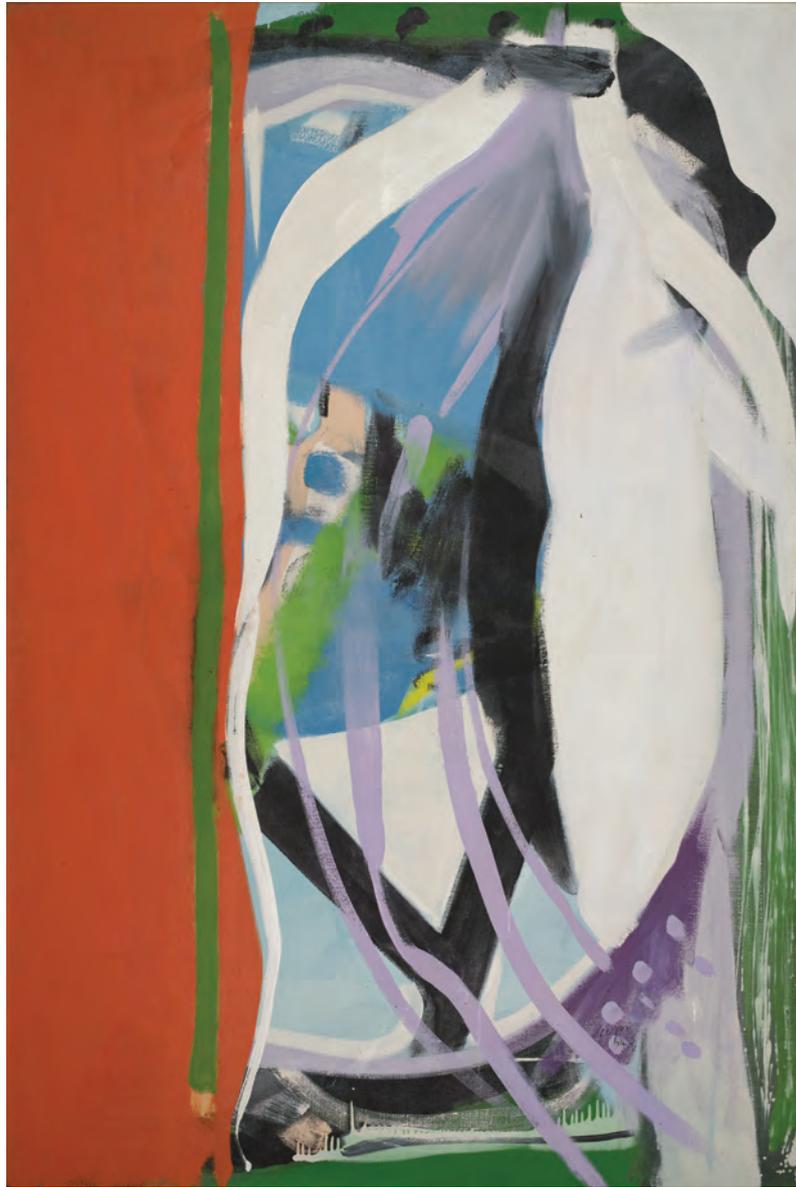
Oil on canvas, 122 x 90 cm, Private collection





Holiday Coast, October 1963

Relief construction in perspex, paper and wood, 124 x 39.5 x 18 cm, Private collection



Lomnica (Marica), February 1964

Oil on canvas, 180 x 120 cm, Private collection

Spring Coast (Perfumed Garden), 1964

Oil on canvas 122 x 152 cm, S M Lanyon



Untitled (Blue and Green), 1964

Oil on canvas, 122 x 152 cm, Private collection



# BIOGRAPHY



- 1918** Born February 8th at 'The Red House,' the family home in Belyars, St Ives.
- 1935** Finishes school at Clifton College, Bristol.  
Meets Sheila Browne (born 1918) who later becomes his wife.
- ← **1936** Enrols at Penzance school of Art for 18 months and begins private tuition with seascape painter Borlase Smart.  
Herbert Lanyon, Peter's father, dies leaving him his Attic Studio.
- 1937** First meeting with art theorist Adrian Stokes, who becomes an important friend and influence, and makes his first abstract work.
- 1938** Visits South Africa with his mother (Lillian) and sister (Mary), a trip that was to have an immense influence on him.  
First one-person exhibition staged in Johannesburg.
- 1939** Attends the private Euston Road Art School, London, for two months, under tutors William Coldstream and Victor Pasmore.  
Adrian Stokes introduces Lanyon to Ben Nicholson. Lanyon has private tuition with Nicholson.  
Makes his first constructions while working in the studio of the Russian constructivist, Naum Gabo in Carbis Bay. Lanyon acknowledges Gabo as the biggest inspiration for his sculpture. Later constructions were, he wrote, 'experiments in space to establish the illusion and content of the space in the painting.'
- 1940** Joins Royal Air Force as a trainee flight mechanic, and while away lets Gabo use his St Ives studio.
- 1942** Exhibits with Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson, Naum Gabo and others in the 'New Movements in Art' exhibition at the London Museum.



- ← **1943/4** Whilst stationed in Italy he completed a mural at the Officer's Mess in Brindisi and another at The Three Arts Serviceman's Club in Naples.
- 1945** First exhibition of St Ives Society in 'New' Gallery (Mariner's Chapel).  
Engagement to Sheila Browne announced in the *St Ives Times*.
- 1946** Marries Sheila Brown. Moves in to the Attic Studio in the grounds of the family house (Red House).  
Founder member of the Crypt Group, a group of artists including Lanyon who remained in St Ives after the war when many others had left.
- 1947** One-person exhibition in Downing's Bookshop, St Ives.
- 1948** Elected to Committee of St Ives Society of Artists.  
Third and final exhibition of the Crypt Group.
- 1949** Begins linocuts using linoleum sliced from the floor of the Attic Studio.  
Founder member of Penwith Society, formed by artists who resigned from St Ives Society of Artists. However, Lanyon's membership of the Penwith lasts only 15 months, following his objections to the categorisation of its members into representational, abstract and craft groupings. Lanyon's mistrust of artistic 'labels' extended to his own work, which he regarded as landscape-based rather than abstract.  
First major exhibition in London, at the Lefevre Gallery. From 1952-62 he has a one-person show every other year with Gimpel Fils, London.
- 1950** Visiting lecturer at the Bath Academy of Art, Corsham (until 1957), where he formed an especially strong bond with Kenneth Armitage, Head of Sculpture.
- 1951** Contributes to Festival of Britain exhibition, *60 Paintings for '51*



**1952** Completes first large scale (8ft) gouaches on paper and exhibits pottery at the Redfern Gallery in London.

Awarded a four-month Italian painting scholarship.

← **1953** First reviewed exhibition of paintings in New York in January (with William Gear and James Hull).

Completes Italian scholarship, painting and drawing at Anticoli Corrado in the Abruzzi mountains, 40 miles east of Rome. Travels with fellow painter Patrick Heron around Italy then returns via Paris where they meet Picasso.



← **1954** Elected member of Newlyn Society of Artists.

Set up St-Peter's Loft school of painting in St Ives with William Redgrave.

← **1955** Major solo exhibition travels from Plymouth City Art Gallery to Midland Group Gallery in Nottingham.

Moves to Little Park Owles, a house in Carbis Bay to the east of St Ives originally owned by Adrian Stokes.



**1957** Meets Abstract Expressionist painters Mark Rothko and Robert Motherwell and the collector Stanley J Seeger in New York. Seeger becomes his most devoted patron.

First exhibition in America at the Catherine Viviano Gallery, New York, an opportunity that promises a breakthrough in the USA for Lanyon. Further solo shows follow at Viviano's in 1959, 1962, 1963 and 1964.



← **1959**

Begins to change from painting on masonite to painting on canvas.

Joins Perranporth Gliding Club. For Lanyon, the purpose of gliding, which became a passion and a focus for his painting, was 'to get to a more complete knowledge of the landscape.'

Mark Rothko with his wife and child spends a long week-end with Peter Lanyon and his family at Little Park Owles.

Begins work on mural, 'The Conflict of Man with the Tides and Sands,' commissioned by Maxwell Fry of Fry, Drew and Lasdun for the entrance lobby of the Civil Engineering Building, Liverpool University. The mural is completed by May 1960 and is made of porcelain tiles, painted with enamel colour and fired. Its subject is the movement of waves and their impact on the land, estuaries and river-beds.

Awarded 2nd Prize in 2nd John Moores Exhibition, Liverpool



← **1960**

Visiting lecturer at Falmouth School of Art (1960-61).

Visiting lecturer, West of England College of Art, Bristol (1960-64).

**1961**

Chairman of the Newlyn Society of Artists



← **1962**

Visits Frenchtown, New Jersey for mural commission for Stanley J Seeger's house in January and initially completes three full-scale gouaches on paper. *Porthleven* is selected as the most appropriate and the final mural *Porthmeor* completed in St Ives in the summer. Further alterations are made (to adjust to the mahogany colours of the music room) in New Jersey later in the year.



← **1963**

Visiting Professor of Painting at the Marion Koogler McNay Institute, San Antonio, Texas. Lanyon was impressed by the scale, the hard clear light and the brilliant colour of the southern United States. He also made a trip to Mexico, taking photographs that were to inspire further paintings. It seems likely that *Farm* (p. 38) is an example of a painting started prior to this visit and completed on his return.

Completes a mural commission for the Faculty of Arts Building, Birmingham University, again on a theme of water, wind and landscape.

Member of jury on 4th John Moores Exhibition, Liverpool

**1964**

Travels to Czechoslovakia as a representative of the British Council, lecturing in Prague and Bratislava, and finding material for several paintings including *Lomnica (Marica)*, named after a town where he stayed and his interpreter (p. 43).

Three paintings and a number of drawings and gouaches inspired by a visit to Clevedon on the Severn estuary.

Injured as a result of a crash-landing in a glider, Peter Lanyon dies four days later on August 31st at East Reach Hospital, Taunton from an unsuspected blood-clot resulting from a cut to his leg. Aged forty-six, he left his widow Sheila and six children.

**1968**

Retrospective, Tate Gallery (and tour to Plymouth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Birmingham and Liverpool).

## LIST OF WORKS IN EXHIBITION

Yellow Boat, 1947  
Oil on board  
38 x 48 cm  
Private collection

Corsham Towers, 1951  
Oil on board  
80 x 22 cm  
Offer Waterman & Co

Accoro d'Anticoli, 1954  
Mixed media on paper  
35 x 48 cm  
Private collection

Albano, 1958  
Oil on board  
110 x 29 cm  
Private collection

Offshore Floating, 1958  
Oil on board  
122 x 61 cm  
Private collection

Farm Country, 1961  
Oil on canvas  
183 x 122 cm  
Private collection

Haymaker, 1961  
Oil on canvas  
183 x 122 cm  
Private collection

Iron Airscape, 1961  
Ceramic tile, paint, glass, wood and Bostik  
23 x 38 x 20 cm  
Private collection

Oarscape, 1962  
Oar, wood and oil on board  
182.8 x 20.3 cm  
Private collection

Upbeat, 1962  
Gouache on paper  
108 x 203 cm  
Private collection

Windbreak, June 1962  
Gouache on paper  
76.2 x 88.4 cm  
Phil and Alice Johnson

Porthleven, 1962  
Gouache and Indian ink on paper, approx.  
105 x 992 cm  
Private collection

Porthmeor, 1962-63  
Oil on canvas  
107 x 965 cm  
Offer Waterman & Co / Jonathan Clark  
Fine Art

Farm, 1963  
Oil on canvas  
107 x 152 cm  
Private collection

Pony, 1963  
Oil on canvas  
122 x 90 cm  
Private collection

Holiday Coast, October 1963  
Relief construction in perspex, paper  
and wood  
124 x 39.5 x 18 cm  
Private collection

Playtime, 1964  
Mixed media on board  
136.5 x 38.7 x 10 cm  
Private collection

Red Cliff, 1964  
Wood, metal, plastic and oil on wood  
152.4 x 35.5 x 15.2 cm  
Private collection

Lomnica (Marica), February 1964  
Oil on canvas  
180 x 120 cm  
Private collection

Spring Coast (Perfumed Garden), 1964  
Oil on canvas  
122 x 152 cm  
S M Lanyon

Untitled (Blue and Green), 1964  
Oil on canvas  
122 x 152 cm  
Private collection

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