

BOOKS

Reviews

Deservedly written back into history

Keith Vaughan is, at long last, receiving serious critical attention

20TH-CENTURY ART

Until the surge of centenary books on Keith Vaughan (1912-77), there had only been a couple of things available – two editions of

his justly famous *Journals*, 1966 and 1989, and a somewhat unsympathetic biography by Malcolm Yorke, 1990. All long out of print, they had regularly sold on the second-hand market for more than £100 a piece, so it was clear that there was a demand for Vaughan publications. Indeed the market for Vaughan paintings, prints and drawings has also been sharply in the ascendant, as new generations of collectors discover the delights of his powerful figurative style. The Vaughan industry is now well established and this remarkable artist is, at long last, receiving the kind of serious critical attention he has always deserved.

Easily the best book of the trio under discussion is Anthony Hepworth's and Ian Massey's *The Mature Oils 1946-77: a Commentary and Catalogue Raisonné*, not because

it is a catalogue raisonné or because of its fine illustrations, but because it contains a superb essay by Massey, which is the best introduction to Vaughan's work available. This is an excellent text: crisply written, perceptive, at once wide-ranging and particular. He focuses on the importance of photography for Vaughan, and his searing experiences in the army. The later recurrence, which Massey notes, of military colours (olive green, ochre) in Vaughan's paintings emphasises the continuing relevance of this formative experience. Massey is good on formal analysis of the paintings but does not neglect the biographical context of the artist's homosexuality or his awareness of contemporary artistic events.

The catalogue lists more than 600 oils, but does not claim to be a definitive account of all Vaughan's paintings. It is, however, the best record of his work we are likely to get for some time. Some of Vaughan's admirers pre-

Keith Vaughan, *Landscape with Figure Morelos*, 1959. The artist in 1945

fer to think of him only as a painter of heroic male nudes, but the catalogue demonstrates that nearly half of the 613 listed pictures are landscapes (298). This suggests there is much research yet to be done on Vaughan as a landscape painter. It would be fascinating, for instance, to see an exhibition just of his landscapes to discover how he fits into the British Romantic tradition, where the visionary meets the topographical. I have no wish to diminish his great achievement as a painter of the figure, but his skills as a landscapist have yet to be fully recognised.

Landscape allowed Vaughan many more opportunities for formal simplification than did the human body, and the most abstract of his paintings are undoubtedly paraphrased landscapes. Yet some of the most memorable of his images are the great series of "Assemblies of Figures", which enter into dialogue with Cézanne, as well as Picasso, Braque and Matisse. These paintings are succulently reproduced in Philip Vann's monograph, *Keith*



Vaughan, which contains much useful information and a persuasive study of Vaughan's gouache technique by Gerard Hastings. While admiring the lyric intensity of Vann's writing, I felt the need for something more balanced and intellectually rigorous, which is why Massey's text is so much to be recommended.

The Final Journals make harrowing reading, partly because they contain an account of severe illness declining towards death. Here is the private misery, the sexual obsession, frustration and isolation, the difficulties with close relationships, the sheer loneliness of the man. Art inevitably distances: to be any good it cannot remain too directly autobiographical. The private face of the artist is revealed for a long moment (the time it takes to read more than 250 closely packed pages), and we see the rawness that was so brilliantly transformed into beguiling images of figure and landscape. Gerard Hastings has done a thorough job of editing and annotating Vaughan's diaries – sometimes giving us several pages of commentary on only three or four lines of journal – but the result is

more of a biographical study of late-period Vaughan than a simple edited document. Invaluable.

Vann's monograph is published in association with Osborne Samuel, a Mayfair gallery that has become perhaps the foremost dealer in Vaughan in recent years. They have produced a string of useful and informative catalogues, the latest of which is *Keith Vaughan: Centenary Tribute* (96pp, £20). There is now a great deal of writing on Vaughan: let us hope it will lead to wider appreciation and understanding of a very singular and original artist. *Andrew Lambirth*

Keith Vaughan: the Mature Oils 1946-77: a Commentary and Catalogue Raisonné
Anthony Hepworth and Ian Massey

Sansom & Co, 208pp, £40 (hbk)

Keith Vaughan
Philip Vann and Gerard Hastings
Lund Humphries, 184pp, £40 (hbk)

Drawing to a Close: the Final Journals of Keith Vaughan
Gerard Hastings, ed
Pagham Press, 264pp, £29.95 (hbk)