

Vanessa Gardiner is attracted by the primitive aspect of landscape, a quality she calls its 'awkwardness'. This is especially true of an unspoilt stretch of Atlantic coastline round Boscastle in North Cornwall. She has been drawing there for many years, familiarising herself with its rugged formation of dark slate and granite. The strangely constructed anatomy of the terrain seems to her almost 'dinosaur-like'.

All the paintings in the exhibition are inspired by her visits to this area. Her distinctive colours – ochres, browns, greys, opalescent grey-blues, lichen green, black and white – intimate its harsh nature in winter and early spring. All the more surprising then are the occasional patches of turquoise, crimson, and even a warm purple, and chinagraphed lines in a peculiarly intense orange and red. But unless you know Boscastle you won't necessarily be aware that each of Vanessa Gardiner's pictures takes in a vast panoramic sweep of this dramatically contorted coast, from Trevalga north as far as Beeny and the curious nose of rock called Cambeak. As such her paintings can hardly be described as views in the conventional sense. "They are about evoking a place, not describing it" she says. It would be more accurate to call them poetic compositions, which hover between the seen and the imagined.

Physically they are assembled from separate pieces of painted plywood, sometimes as many as fourteen sections. Their imagery brings together the characteristic features of the place: a rocky promontory which forms the tip of an inlet or natural harbour, scooped out by the constantly pounding ocean; a white mast pole on the top of the headland; part of an ancient field system marked out by hedges. All this has been observed from the commanding height of Willapark Point, from where the contours of the land, the shapes and patterns of fields, jetties, paths, geological seams, crags and chasms can be explored almost, if not quite, in the round. Elevation and plan appear in her paintings to be superimposed, for she always makes us aware of the architecture of the landscape, as well as of its surface.

The process of making her pictures is complex. Each particular visualisation is literally cut up, often severely edited, reorganised, sections shifted up or down, pieces of paper or card collaged to the wood, or stripped off. Surface textures are created by scrubbing with wire wool, by scoring, sanding down, varnishing sections to a high sheen, or simply leaving the wood bare, an endless reworking until a new pictorial experience is revealed. It's as though in each painting we are following her eye as it tracks an untried passage through the landscape, sensing it raw, in different lights and weathers.

Vanessa Gardiner has been captivated by this scene since she first saw it as a child. For all the rough and evocative joinery of her pictures it is the sheer beauty of the place she is after. The lasting impression of her landscapes is one of pure aesthetic refinement, of white edges and wide white borders, brilliant white spaces in which her landscape compositions assume their own imaginative identity.

*Judith Bumpus*