

Critics' choice

Life&Arts

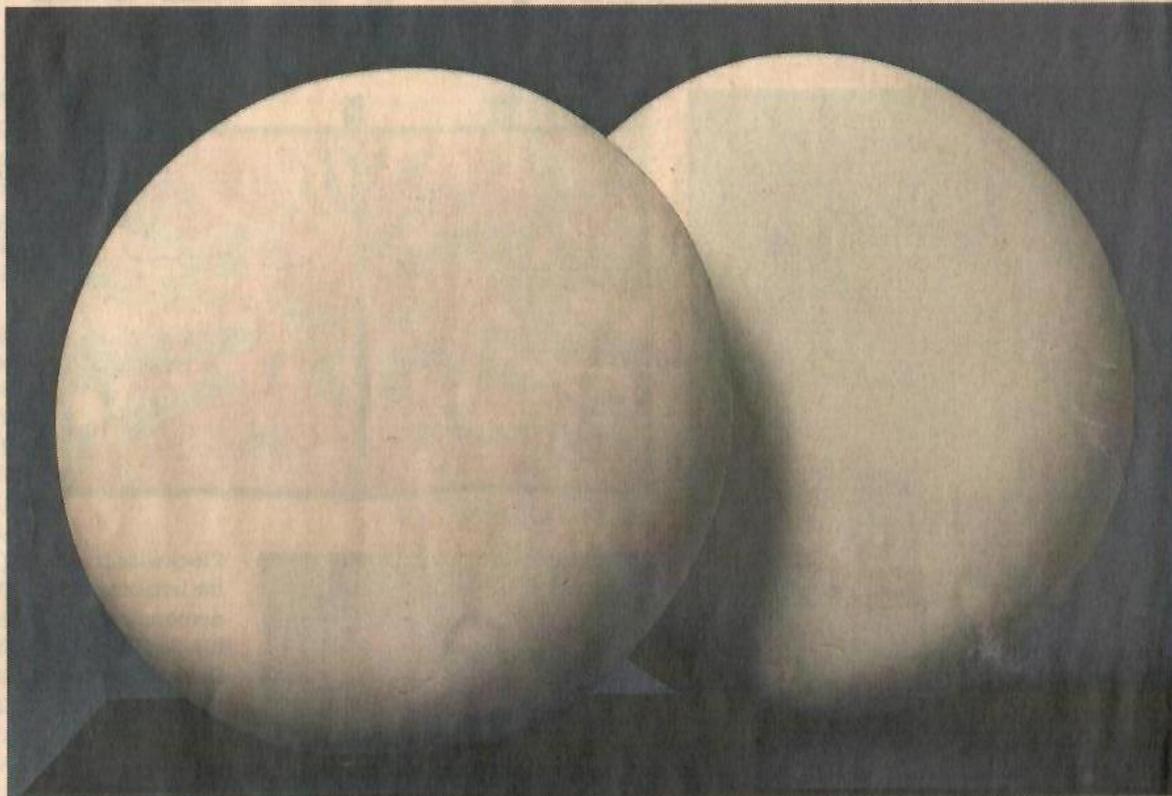
Visual arts Jackie Wullschläger

Hepworth Nicholson

Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert, London

Pristine, severe, restrained, formal, silent — and energised by romance and sensuality: that is the surprise of this superbly orchestrated, erudite, museum-quality exhibition of Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth in the 1930s. When Nicholson was pushing forward abstract possibilities unleashed by cubism, he experimented with subtle recessions, flatness, sealed spaces, lively effects of cutting into painted surfaces, by reworking Hepworth's profile: as golden-haired icon in the layered "1932 (crowned head: the queen)"; as game of reflections and luminosity, with Hepworth's image both dense as a sculpture and loose as graffiti scratching, in the lyrical "1933 (girl at mirror)".

In "Mother and Child" (1933), two lightly abstracted figures, with jagged lines drawn into the white marble, is Hepworth's answer. A year later comes her translucent alabaster balance of cylindrical curving shape and sharply right-angled one, "Two Forms", where space opens up, the solid is dematerialised even as material presence and glowing surface is celebrated. In his pure white-painted reliefs carved on board, begun 1934, his most original work, showcased here in three shining examples, Nicholson too



Barbara Hepworth's 'Discs in Echelon, version 2' (1935)

teases out areas of different depths and play of light and shadow, asking how painting can represent space. These would not have happened without Hepworth: "Barbara and I are the same", he wrote. "Our ideas and our rhythms; we can live, think

and work... as if we were one person."

Hepworth's smooth, tactile white marble ovoids "Two Forms" and the plaster circles shadowing each other "Discs in Echelon", both 1935, are indebted to Brancusi but most of all respond to Nicholson's reliefs.

This is a marvellous dialogue between two artists set free by each other to evolve a new simplicity of form and expression, resonant across mid-20th century British modernism.

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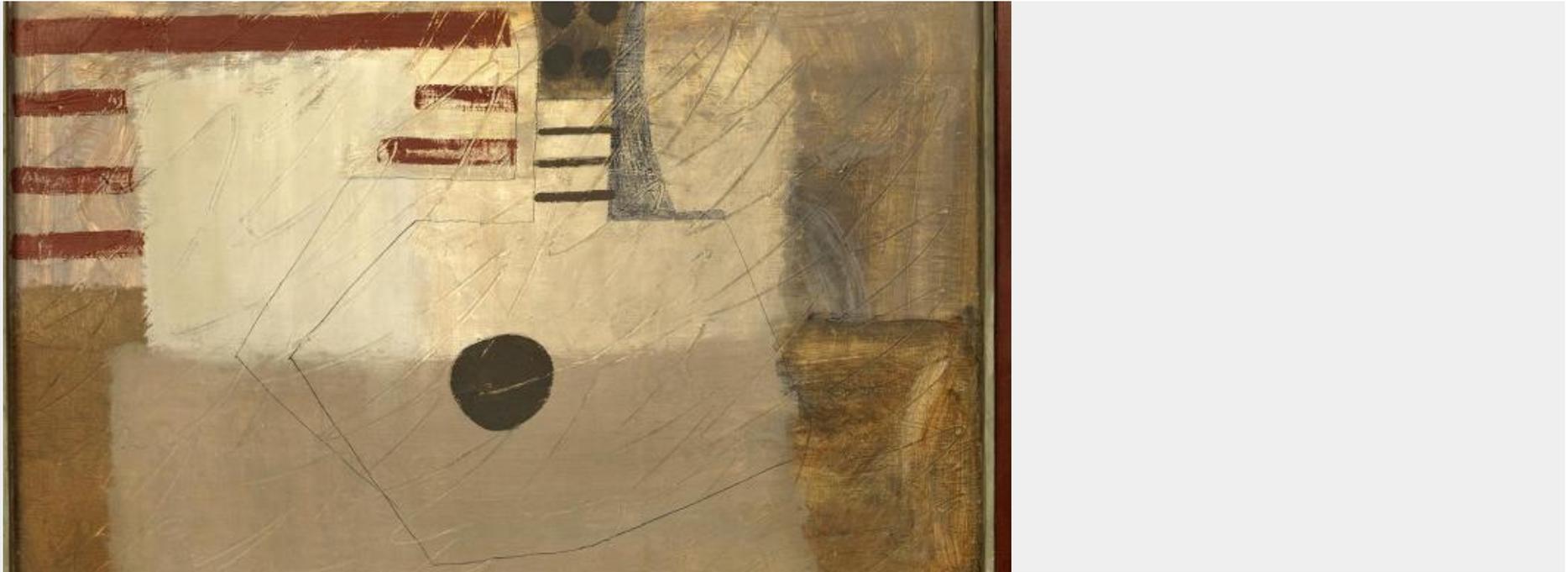
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Rachel Campbell-Johnston

May 29 2019, 12:00pm, The Times

Review: Hepworth/Nicholson at Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert, SW1

This carefully curated love story of the couple's first decade together is curiously moving



1932 (guitar) by Ben Nicholson ALL RIGHTS RESERVED, DACS 2019

★★★★☆

Here is the story of a love affair that lay at the heart of British modernism. A tiny but exquisitely curated, museum-calibre show in the galleries of the St James's dealership Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert encapsulates the tale of the relationship between Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson as it flourished during its first decade.

The little fading patches of sepia in an old family photograph album trace the progress from its 1931 beginnings on a Norfolk beach holiday when, despite both being married, they fell in love, through the birth of their triplets in 1934 to their move to St Ives, to escape war, at the end of the decade.

When they met, these two artists — one primarily a painter, the other a sculptor — were on rather different paths. To watch the aesthetic rapprochement that this show so succinctly captures is a curiously moving experience. Sharing a studio in Hampstead, north London, the pair work side by side. They discuss and argue and bounce ideas back and forth. Nicholson, infatuated with his lover, makes her elegant profile a recurrent motif in his painting. Hepworth, introduced by Nicholson to all of the most radical names in European aesthetics, begins to move farther towards modernist abstraction — as a plaster maquette by Giacometti, thrown into the mix, demonstrates.

By the end of the decade, the viewer has entered a completely pared-down world of geometric abstraction. Colour has all but gone. The single red square at the heart of a Nicholson canvas creates an almost giddy brightness amid the faded harmonies of the final room. The aesthetic, so pure and so stark and so simple, is beguiling. This is the closest that our country got to international modernism. What would have happened if the Second World War had not come along? This show invites you to wonder.

It also raises another question. Hepworth and Nicholson are always so insistently associated with St Ives. Yet look at Hepworth's *Two Forms*, for instance, a beautifully balanced abstract. The softly rounded forms shaped out of white marble look so much like beach pebbles, but they were carved in 1935, almost five years before the two artists travelled west. You can't help but ponder whether all of the habitual talk about Cornish influences is a little misleading. Forget the landscape. The love affair we are looking at is with modernism. It's as pure and as simple and as eloquent as that.

The exhibition runs to July 12