

Notes on Lanyon and landscape

‘I wasn't satisfied with the tradition of painting landscape from one position only. I wanted to bring together all my feelings about the landscape, and this meant breaking away from the usual method of representing space in a landscape painting – receding like a cone to a vanishing point. I wanted to find another way of organising the space in a picture. For me, painting is not a flat surface. I've always believed that a painting gives an illusion of depth – things in it move backwards and forwards.’¹

‘A painter's business is to understand space – the ambient thing around us. I don't mean the old approach to landscape – sitting in one place and taking the view, as you get in traditional painting. What I'm concerned with is moving around in this space and trying to describe it. That's one reason I go in for fast motor-racing, cliff-climbing and gliding - gliding particularly: I like using actual air currents; I feel I'm getting to the root of the matter.’²

In 1959 Peter Lanyon learned to fly a glider, an activity that transformed his understanding of the air and the land. As part of his research, curator Toby Treves decided to take to the air to get a real sense of the artist's experience: ‘This is not a dream, or a nightmare: you're in a glider about 1,500 feet above the ground, searching the sky for an elusive current. If you find it, you will be able to continue flying; if not, you will have to land in about six minutes' time. Nearby you see a promising cloud and head for the air directly beneath it, checking your position and hoping for lift. Time slows. Then suddenly and quite violently the right wing tip is kicked up. That is the fringe of a thermal, where rising warm air scuffles with falling cool air. Peter Lanyon compared that moment with meeting a barking dog. Immediately you turn hard right, banking steeply, using the wing tip to feel out the contour of the thermal. You are now in a wheeling turn being buffeted by the rough air at the outer part of the thermal, but you keep pushing the wing and then the whole aircraft further and further into the thermal, and as you do the air becomes smoother. Here, at its core, it lifts your half-ton glider in an upward spiral at more than 800 feet a minute. And that is what you've been looking for.’³

¹ Peter Lanyon, recorded talk completed for the British Council, 1963, Tate Archive.

² ‘Peter Lanyon Talking, Recorded by W.J. Weatherby’, *The Guardian*, 17 May 1962.

³ Toby Treves. *Tate Etc.*, issue 35, Autumn, 2015.