NICOL ALLAN: LIFE AND WORK

SARAH ALLAN

BEGINNINGS

Nicol Allan was born in Los Angeles on 6 November, 1931. His parents were immigrants from Aberdeen, Scotland. On his mother's side were crofters and farm servants; on his father's were stone masons and even a midwife. Nicol's father served in World War I. After the war, he was unable to find work in Scotland, so he travelled to Australia with his brothers to work on a sheep farm. When he returned to Aberdeen, he married Nicol's mother. A few years later they joined her large family and, in 1928, emigrated to Los Angeles. There, Nicol's father got a job as a streetcar conductor, but all too soon he contracted tuberculosis, as did much of his wife's family. He died not long after his son's birth in 1931.

After her husband's death, Nicol's mother worked as a house cleaner. For several years, she and her son seemed to be in good health. Childhood photographs show a happy, well-dressed, rambunctious-looking child with golden curls. But one morning, when Nicol was five years old, he woke up unable to move. The worst had happened. He had tuberculosis and it had gone into his spine. He was taken to Los Angeles Children's Hospital, where he would have two spinal operations. Medication for tuberculosis did not exist at that time. The treatment was to keep the patient—in this case a five-year-old boy—strapped flat on a Bradford frame, a device designed to allow the spine to recover by keeping it still, for two and a half years.

So began a critical period in Nicol Allan's life.

Nicol was not ill-treated in the hospital except for once, soon after he entered, when he screamed and squirmed during a spinal tap and the doctor hit him. The nurses treated him kindly though and he remembered finding joy when he was able to see clouds drifting by in the blue Los Angeles sky from his hospital bed.

When Nicol entered the hospital, his mother was also discovered to have tuberculosis and sent to a sanatorium, so he was entirely alone. With no one to explain what was happening to him, he watched for small changes in the hospital routine that might provide clues. If someone was painted and shaved, it meant they were going to have an operation. Tonsils out meant you were going home, though when his were taken out he did not get to go home.

Finally, still on the frame, he was moved to a foster home, which he always considered his salvation. Bertha Steggell, a German woman, fostered eight to ten boys, all of whom had physical or social difficulties. She was assisted by her son, Clair, a medical student at UCLA. Nicol was the youngest.

Mrs. Steggell was strict, as she had to be. However, she was also very loving and demonstrative. The boys acquired a strong sense of comradeship and responsibility for one another, a front against the outside world. Mrs. Steggell also seems to have had an old-fashioned belief in the restorative power of fresh air. Nicol remembered being left outside on his frame—under a Saint John's Bread tree near her son's window—throughout an entire summer.

At the age of nine, after Nicol had transitioned from the frame to a body-cast and could walk again, his mother's youngest sister and her husband took him in. He also began to go to school. Nicol lived with his aunt and her family until he was in high school, when his mother was finally released from the sanatorium. At last they were able to live together again.

Nicol's traumatic childhood experiences left their mark on him. When he came out of the hospital, he stuttered badly. Even later, when his speech defect had diminished to the point of invisibility, it remained an aspect of his self-identity and made social interaction with people he didn't know problematic. On a more positive note, during that difficult time he learned to depend on his own inner resources. And I've always suspected that the intense concentration characteristic of his work is somehow related to those years he spent on the frame.

Nicol Allan, age 5, on Bradford frame, Children's Hospital, Los Angeles (1937)

Nicol Allan, Woodcut, Undated (1955-59), *Plea for Compassion*. ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum (G5796), Aarhus, Denmark. Photo by Ole Hein Pedersen.

BECOMING AN ARTIST

The Los Angeles County Museum and the Public Library were Nicol Allan's entrée to the world of art and literature. He lived in downtown Los Angeles, near the County Museum, which at that time was in Exposition Park. The museum was free, as was the public library. Before Nicol became ill, his mother, who wanted to provide the best for him, had taken him to children's programs at the library. Later, he would go to the museum on his own. Sometimes schoolmates, who were mainly interested in seeing pictures of naked women, joined him.

Nicol was introduced to the possibility of becoming an artist himself by his high school art teacher. One day, when he was not in class, she told the other students that Nicol Allan was a 'real artist' and they told him about it later. She also recommended him for a Saturday art discussion class held at the County Museum. Nicol didn't say a word in that class, but later he took some of his work to show the teacher, Miss Frances Nugent. He remembered laying the work out on the floor and hearing her words, 'You are a poet'. This gave him the courage to proceed. Or perhaps, as he said, one may not have any choice in such matters.

After graduating from high school, Nicol enrolled at Los Angeles City College, intending to study philosophy. He also worked a night shift loading trucks in a laundry and tried to make time for his artwork. His mother was then working in the garment industry, where the work—and the pay—was often sporadic. Nonetheless, when she saw the pressure her son was under, she agreed that he should quit both school and his job and devote himself to becoming an artist. She also told him that as an artist, he was not likely to find a wife, so he'd better learn to take care of himself—to cook, clean, shop, and do housework. Following her advice, he used these skills to take care of them both—and later, after our marriage, of me.

In 1950, at the age of 19, Nicol entered a painting in an open national competition organised by the Los Angeles County Museum. It was accepted and, to his great pride, hung across from a work by the early American modernist, John Marin. In 1952 and 1954, he had works included in exhibitions of *Artists of Los Angeles and Vicinity* at the Los Angeles County Museum.

Meanwhile, Nicol's mother, having survived tuberculosis, had been diagnosed with a cancer that would claim her life in 1958. While Nicol was caring for his mother during her final illness, he wanted to reassure her of his future, so he approached the Silvan Simone Gallery in West Los Angeles with a portfolio of work. He was nervous, but to his relief the gallery accepted the work. Now his mother, who had always loved and believed in him, could rest knowing her son was on his way. As for him, he had gallery representation for the first time and he soon became a close friend of Silvan, his wife Sarita, and the whole Simone family.

The Simone Gallery held solo Nicol Allan exhibitions in 1959 and 1960 and his work began to attract attention. Gerald Nordland wrote in *Frontier Magazine*:

> The first exhibition of ink, watercolour and conté compositions by Nicol Allan was an intimate revelation of the individualism of art… The artist, largely self-taught, has a distinctly personal signature manner in working his fragile materials. The result is hauntingly poetic and suggestive of a deeply romantic attitude. Yet the economy of means and the understatement of motif and edge indicate that Allan works from a sensitive intuition of elegant arrangement.[1]

Silvan Simone also took work to New York and arranged an exhibition for Nicol at the Cober Gallery. Their announcement for the exhibit stated:

> It is only once in a great while that a new light appears very suddenly on the artistic horizon. Nicol Allan is just such a light. We are honoured to present his art for the first time in New York shortly after his brilliant first exhibition in California.

This exhibition resulted in inclusion in Selden Rodman's book, *The Insiders* (1960), which also featured several other artists who showed at the Simone Gallery.

Nicol's work in this period was figurative, and human suffering and death were his primary themes. Rodman promoted an idea of aesthetic humanism, which he proposed as a counter to abstraction. He described the "Insider" artist as follows:

> If his choice of subject is apt to be the sick, the maimed, the rejected, the isolated, this choice is dictated not by morbidity but by compassion. If one of his favourite subjects is death, that is because as a man he finds himself frustrated in fellow feeling for life—and as an artist insulted by modern art's contemptible shallowness… Since the Insider believes in every man's right and capacity to arrive at his own solutions, he rejects the purists' authoritarian reliance on the direction and umpiring of art by an élite of intellectuals (*Art News*) together with the messianic absolutism of abstract expressionism…[2]

When Rodman gave Nicol a copy of his book, he inscribed it, 'in the hope that any resemblance to Mark Rothko in his latest work is purely accidental!' Nicol bristled. He did not like being told how to paint. Moreover, although his work in that period seemed to fit neatly into Rodman's idea of aesthetic humanism, he did not share Rodman's antagonism to abstraction. Indeed, his work was soon to take a direction which would render the acclamation he had begun to receive moot.

THE WORLD EXPANDS: LONDON, PARIS AND NEW YORK

In the early 1960s, two major events profoundly affected Nicol's life and work. The first was the opportunity to live for a time in London, Paris and New York. The second was our marriage.

In 1960, my father, a professor who taught Industrial Relations at UCLA, was about to take a sabbatical, doing research in Britain and France. He and my mother, who shared an interest in art, had become friends with Silvan and Sarita Simone, and through them, with Nicol.

Silvan, himself an Italian immigrant, thought that travelling in Europe would broaden Nicol's horizons. He suggested that my father invite Nicol to accompany him. My father agreed and the two of them shared an apartment in London for the first six months. My mother and I joined them in Paris for the next six.

Nicol had a small 'maid's room' on the top floor of the building in Montparnasse where we lived. He mostly spent his days, both in London and Paris, walking miles along the streets of these great cities, visiting museums and art galleries and generally observing life. He even saw Samuel Beckett shopping in the Monoprix in Paris. We returned home by way of Italy, crossing the Atlantic on a stormy sea to New York. There, Nicol stayed for an additional three months as a guest of my grandmother, who lived in Greenwich Village, before returning to Los Angeles.

Nicol's aesthetic interests were expanded and deepened by his travels. His great heroes were Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse and Piet Mondrian. He also especially admired such artists as Giorgio Morandi, Joseph Cornell, Agnes Martin and Albert Pinkham Ryder, as well as the sculpture of Alberto Giacometti and Constantin Brancusi. Historically, he was more attracted to the simplicity of Medieval art than the Renaissance masters. He was also very interested in non-Western art traditions, as well as in the work of folk artists, from Simon Rodia, the builder of the Watts Tower in Los Angeles, to the French 'primitive' Henri Rousseau. Although Nicol remained personally removed from the art world throughout his life, he was always aware of current trends. More importantly, he created his own work within a very broad historical context.

OUR MARRIAGE

In 1962, fresh out of high school, I began attending Reed College in Oregon. I thought it was the right place for me. However, not long after I enrolled, I became interested in studying Chinese, a subject Reed had not yet begun to offer. So, I arranged to transfer to the University of California at Berkeley. Because the academic schedules at Reed and Berkeley were different, I had a two-months long winter break at home.

Nicol and I had previously seen a lot of each other, both during that long stay in Europe and later in Los Angeles. We liked each other and were close. But it was during this period at home that we began a romantic relationship.

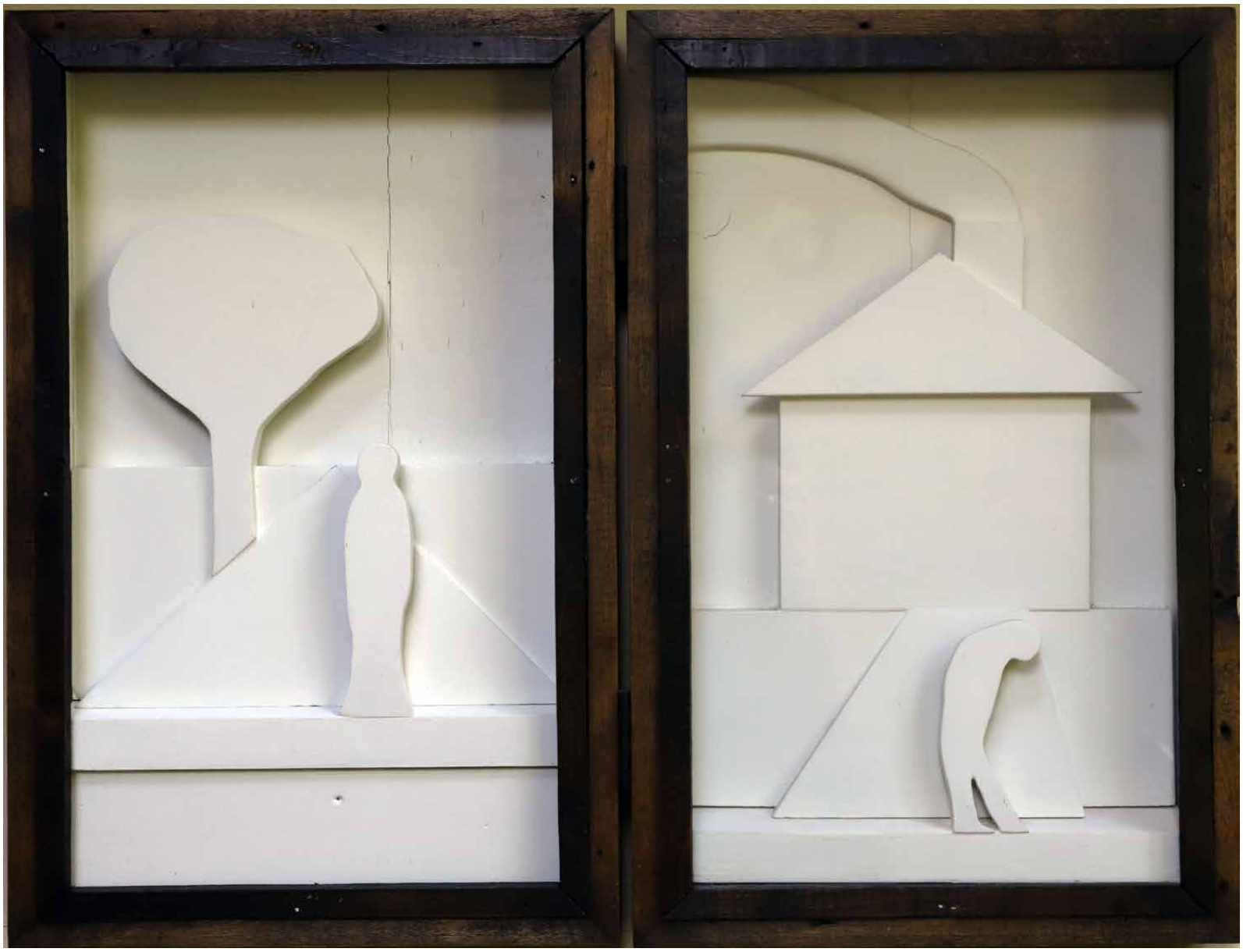
When I took up my studies at Berkeley, Nicol visited me, traveling up the coast by train. He told me that he wanted to practise asking me to marry him. I accepted but said that we should wait until I graduated. We planned to tell my parents about our relationship—eventually—but before we got up our nerve, they informed me that they'd be going back to Europe that summer. My father would be working on a research project and they insisted that I go with them.

I went, reluctantly, planning to take a course at the Sorbonne. But a few weeks into it, I decided that I couldn't stand being separated from Nicol. I sent him a telegram, asking for airfare to return. He thought that if he hesitated, I would always doubt him, so he wired me the money.

I wrote a letter to my parents who were traveling at the time, telling them what I'd done. Then, not knowing that the letter would go lost, never to be received, I bought a plane ticket and headed home. I had to change flights in New York, so I stopped in to see my grandmother, who was preparing to join the family in Europe, and told her about my plans and the letter I'd written.

Things took a somewhat farcical turn after that.

My grandmother, not knowing that my parents were unaware that I'd left Paris and planned to marry Nicol Allan, dropped the news at dinner one night. They were flabbergasted, alarmed and angry. Nicol did his best to reassure them, writing long letters. Fortunately for us, they stayed in Europe for another six months,



Nicol Allan, Wood Relief, 1963, *The Prodigal Son* (photo by Joseph Mehling)

giving them time to cool down and decide they had no choice but to accept the situation and welcome Nicol into the family.

Nicol and I were married at the Los Angeles County Court House. I changed schools yet again, transferring from Berkeley to UCLA. We lived in Nicol's apartment over a grocery store.

The building was rundown, but our apartment was pristine. There were two good-sized rooms with white walls, a waxed wood floor and arched windows that overlooked Santa Monica Blvd, a main thoroughfare. Our furniture consisted of an old library table, an easel, two chairs, a bed and a wooden rocker. There was also a small folding card table that I used for studying and a metal trunk that could serve as a seat when we had visitors. The University of California was free in those days and our rent was low. Still, I knew when I decided to return from Europe and marry Nicol that I could not expect him to support me—not then, perhaps never. So, I found a half-time job on campus and, with Nicol's long-practised skills in frugal living and good cooking, we thrived. Nicol felt badly about my parents, but we were both deliriously happy.

Not surprisingly, Nicol didn't produce much work between 1960 and 1963. There is a clear demarcation between what he did before that period and what he did after. The first work that I remember him making after our marriage was a transitional one—a wood relief made of flat pieces of wood spray-painted white and placed within an old wooden box. The box had two sides, with a hinge in the centre. The left side held the silhouette of a man standing by a tree with a road diminishing in the distance; the right, a bent-backed silhouette outside a house with a smoking chimney. He called it *The Prodigal Son*.

This work, and another one, of a house with a smoking chimney, led to a series of ostensibly abstract wood reliefs (see p. 11). Although Nicol was attracted to the idea of pure abstraction, in practice, he started with what I call 'themes', many

of which persisted through the decades. They often occur in series, as variations upon a motif. One of the most common, which is already found in these early wood reliefs, derives from the form of a sailboat. He associated this theme with Stephane Mallarmé's 'Brise Marine' (Sea Breeze), which he knew in Roger Fry's translation: 'The Flesh is sad, alas! And all the books I have read. / To fly far away! I know that the sea birds are drunk / with being amid the unknown foam and the skies! Nothing, not old gardens reflected in eyes/ will keep back this heart that is plunged in the sea….'

In 1966, Nicol exhibited wood reliefs at the Silvan Simone Gallery and in 1967 at the Esther Bear Gallery in Santa Barbara. The Santa Barbara exhibition also included his first collages. I'm not sure why he began making collages, but we did see an exhibition of Kurt Schwitters in 1965, and in the same period, Nicol became very interested in early twentieth century utopian art movements, especially Russian Constructivism and De Stijl. He was also very interested in early American utopian movements, such as the Shakers, with their aesthetic of functional simplicity.

Nicol later explained the changes in his work in a letter to Gerald Nordland:

> If you can remember my work from the past, you must wonder if it has changed and if so, in what way. What did shape the content, the underlying force of it, has changed surprisingly little. But no longer is there, as there was once, in much of the earlier work, a sense of social outrage—not that I don't still feel outrage, coming as I do from my kind of background, but intellectually I question its role, function and force in plastic art. Art can have a political role, but it is a limited and limiting one…
>
> To a great extent an artist draws upon his past and is shaped by it. His art is, in a sense, an attempt at self-understanding; he is born into a world he did not choose. In my own experience, my emotive force was dominant [in my work], but as I grew older, travelled, read more widely, and had the opportunity to see and study a greater range of work, and as I had the good fortune to have leisure to contemplate, I discovered the spiritual power that exists in line and form alone, in their pure sense, in the 'classical' sense. I came to see that the self plays its part, but in harmony. The 'I' is no longer the single dominant force. I have come to believe that this discovery can be of the utmost importance for an artist for it is another language […]. The man, the self, remains, the spirit remains, but in a language that is universal.

As a result of this change in Nicol's work, the Silvan Simone Gallery with its clientele was no longer the right place for him to exhibit. But Silvan was a friend. Nicol felt deeply indebted to him and continued to regard him as his dealer for many years after these exhibitions in 1966 and 67. He went on working, following new paths, but he did not exhibit again for another decade.

Nicol Allan in his studio in front of large oil, c. 1971, Berkeley, California

THE BERKELEY YEARS (1966—1972)

In 1966, I received a fellowship for graduate studies in classical Chinese language and culture at the University of California at Berkeley. Nicol and I packed up and moved. We first rented a small house. Then, on one of Nicol's many walks, he discovered a shop for rent. It was part of a small cluster of shops that had mostly gone out of business, so we were able to rent it cheaply. We soaped the windows for privacy and put acoustic tiles on the ceiling so that Nicol could run a table saw without disturbing the neighbours. We were also able to rent a one-room apartment in the same building and that's where we stayed until 1972, when I was offered a job at the University of London.

While we were still living in Berkeley, my parents divorced and my mother moved to Bolinas, a small coastal town north of San Francisco, with hills and cliffs above the sea. Once a Portuguese fishing village, its inhabitants had a reputation for doing their own thing, pursuing the sort of alternative culture life-styles that began in the Beatnik era of the 1950s. Nicol felt at home in Bolinas and later, after we'd moved to London, he returned to live and work there on several occasions. We visited my mother often and stayed in her house when she was away traveling. The series of collages with an ocean theme (waves and cliffs) that Nicol produced between 1970 and 1972 were executed there.

During our Berkeley years, Nicol made many oil paintings, some quite large, perhaps six by eight feet. But when we left for England, he destroyed them, keeping only the smaller ones made of canvas glued on wood-backings. He always intended to return to large oils, but a lack of studio space in the following years made this too difficult.

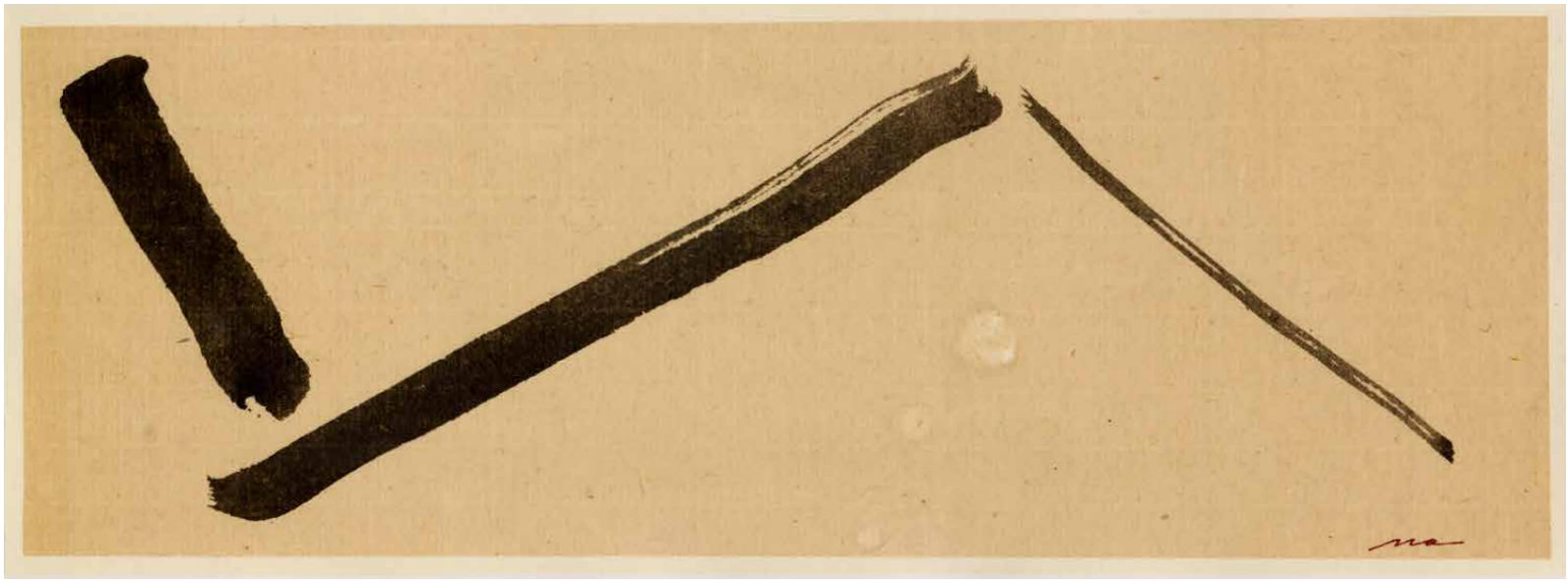
He also made many works on paper, most importantly collages and sumi drawings, but also watercolour and pencil and ink drawings. The different mediums in which Nicol worked involved different processes, both physical and mental. For Nicol, this included the preparation, which he always did himself—making wooden stretchers, stretching and priming the canvas for oils, and grinding inksticks on an ink stone to make the ink for sumi drawings. Oil paint dries slowly and can be painted over, so an oil painting, especially one of his large ones, took a very long time to complete. Sumi drawings, on the other hand, were made with a few quick strokes using Japanese or Chinese brushes and papers.

Nicol sometimes dyed papers for use in collages. He might also stretch the papers to be used for mounts in advance. He would wet the paper with a sponge and tape it onto a wooden board so that it would not wrinkle when other papers were pasted onto it. He also began to make his own paste, a traditional concoction employed by conservators. Its ingredients were wheat starch, distilled water and, following a recipe from the Freer Gallery, a drop of clove.

The physical process of creating each collage—as opposed to the mental and emotional process that preceded it—did not take long. He would cut small pieces of paper and place the pieces onto a backing paper. Sometimes he would make lines in pen, pencil or other materials. He would then place a sheet of glass over the construction to keep the pieces of paper in place. This allowed him to look at the work in a special type of frame that he designed for this purpose. The frame consisted of an inner wood frame and four separate metal sides that screwed onto it. The metal pieces were angled and overhung the wood frame, so they held the glass—and the work—in place. When he had assembled a collage in this way, he would often put the frame on a chair at the foot of our bed, so that he could see it when he woke up in the morning.

The final pasting was a painstaking process. He began by pasting the backing paper to the mount. Then, each small piece of paper had to be brushed with paste on the back side and placed onto the work. He often made pencil marks to help with this. Once a piece was placed on the collage, he would cover it with blotting paper, and press a roller over it. Because the cut papers were very

Nicol Allan, Watercolour, 1972–74, 147x207mm (Effingham Common)



NIcol Allan, Sumi (20), 1978, 115x310mm

thin, they were difficult to handle after they were dampened by the paste. Sometimes the piece was destroyed in the making. This process limited the potential size of the collages; that is, their small size is intrinsic to the method and materials he used to create them.

EFFINGHAM COMMON (1972—1974)

Meanwhile, as Nicol worked on his art, I was nearing the end of my doctoral program. In 1972, I was offered a job at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. We both liked the idea of living in London, but Nicol was fearful (rightly, as it turned out) that we would not be able to afford the space he would need to paint. When we arrived, we rented a small semi-detached cottage in Surrey, near Effingham Junction, from an academic who had a two-year appointment in the US.

For us, it was an enchanting place. The cottage was about a quarter mile from the train station. In between was a common, a grass covered area surrounded by hawthorn hedges. A Romani family, with a traditionally painted caravan, camped on the track side. Animals—horses and cows—sometimes grazed on the common. In the mornings, we would awake to the sound of a dawn chorus of birds and see the common shrouded in mist. There was no ocean here, of course, but the landscape was idyllic and there were footpaths to walk and a forest in which we picked edible mushrooms—an expertise that Nicol had acquired, like so many other things, from reading books.

Nicol's workspace was limited to a tiny bedroom, so he made small works—watercolours, drawings and a few oils. While looking for watercolour papers, he discovered the traditional hand-made art papers produced by Simon Barcham Green at Hayle Mill. He also found that he could buy seconds and even thirds of this paper inexpensively. Many of these were later used in his collages. He already used some Japanese papers, and these led him into the world of traditional European hand-made papers with their varying textures and shades of natural colours.

Most of the drawings and paintings Nicol made at this time evoked the animals on the mist-shrouded common. They were not the works that he had thought of making, or was to make later, but I find them almost unbearably poignant.

Our work life was rich, but our social life together was limited. Not that this was anything new. While Nicol was very humorous and gregarious with family and friends, he had a harder time with people he didn't know well. I think this may have been yet another result of his difficult childhood. Or perhaps it was simply his natural introversion.

In any case, I was not at all surprised that when we first arrived in England, Nicol told me he didn't want to meet my sinological colleagues because he would have nothing in common with them. I thought he was probably right, so I agreed to tell them that he was a recluse and leave it at that. Still, when Spring came, the countryside was so beautiful that I couldn't help suggesting that we invite a few people I worked closely with out to Surrey. Nicol agreed and they came. We ate outside under a flowering apple tree. Nicol was at ease and utterly charming. The following Monday when I went into London to teach, I discovered that my colleagues had concluded that I was a jealous wife who had been keeping her husband safely hidden away.

LONDON (1974—1984)

In 1974, our landlords returned to their cottage and we moved into a small flat near the School of Oriental and African Studies, where I taught. Nicol was able to get a place to work from SPACE, a charitable organization that provided rooms in buildings that were scheduled to be torn down for artists to work in. His was

on Shaftesbury Avenue. It was very damp, so damp that his tools rusted, but at least he had a place of his own in the centre of the city and he began to make collages again.

But in a new country, and without an appropriate gallery in the US to show his work, Nicol started to despair. He was entirely isolated from the art world. Would he ever exhibit again?

In 1977, I was planning to attend an academic conference in the US. I suggested that I take some of Nicol's work with me and look for a gallery in New York. Nicol thought that this was a foolhardy and hopeless proposition, but he did prepare a portfolio of work for me and I set off.

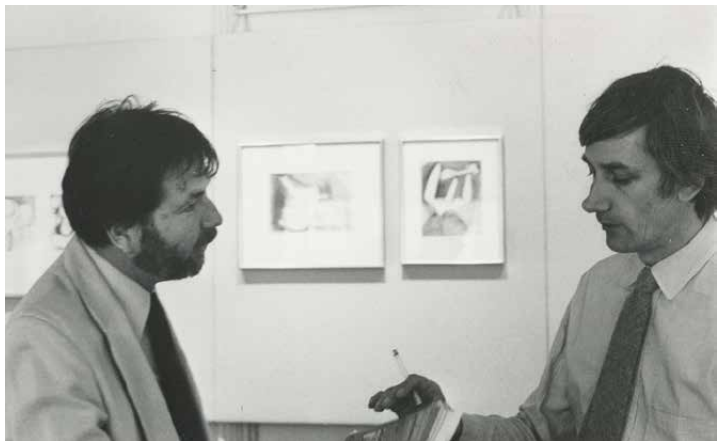
An old friend of mine, Carol Beane, who I planned to stay with in Princeton, found an article that gave the names of New York galleries willing to look at work brought to the gallery without an introduction. One of these was The Parsons Gallery.

Betty Parsons (1900-1982) was the first to show Pollock, Rothko and other Abstract Expressionists, but she also handled an eclectic mix of artists, so we decided to start there. Carol and I took the train to New York and ventured, with some trepidation, into the gallery. We showed the portfolio to an assistant, Michael Fior, who was obviously impressed. He said we should leave the work and he would show it to Parsons. Much to my delight, Parsons accepted it and told me that it was the best work she had seen in years. She also realized that it was the work of a mature artist and could not understand how he could be unknown. I called Nicol that night to tell him the good news. He replied, 'You know, of course, this is impossible.'

But, he was wrong.

In 1978, the first of two Nicol Allan exhibitions was held at the upstairs Parsons gallery (Parsons-Dreyfus). For the second exhibition, in 1980, Nicol sent the gallery the following statement, which they used in a press release:

Nicol Allan, Sumi (14), 1971, 162x159mm



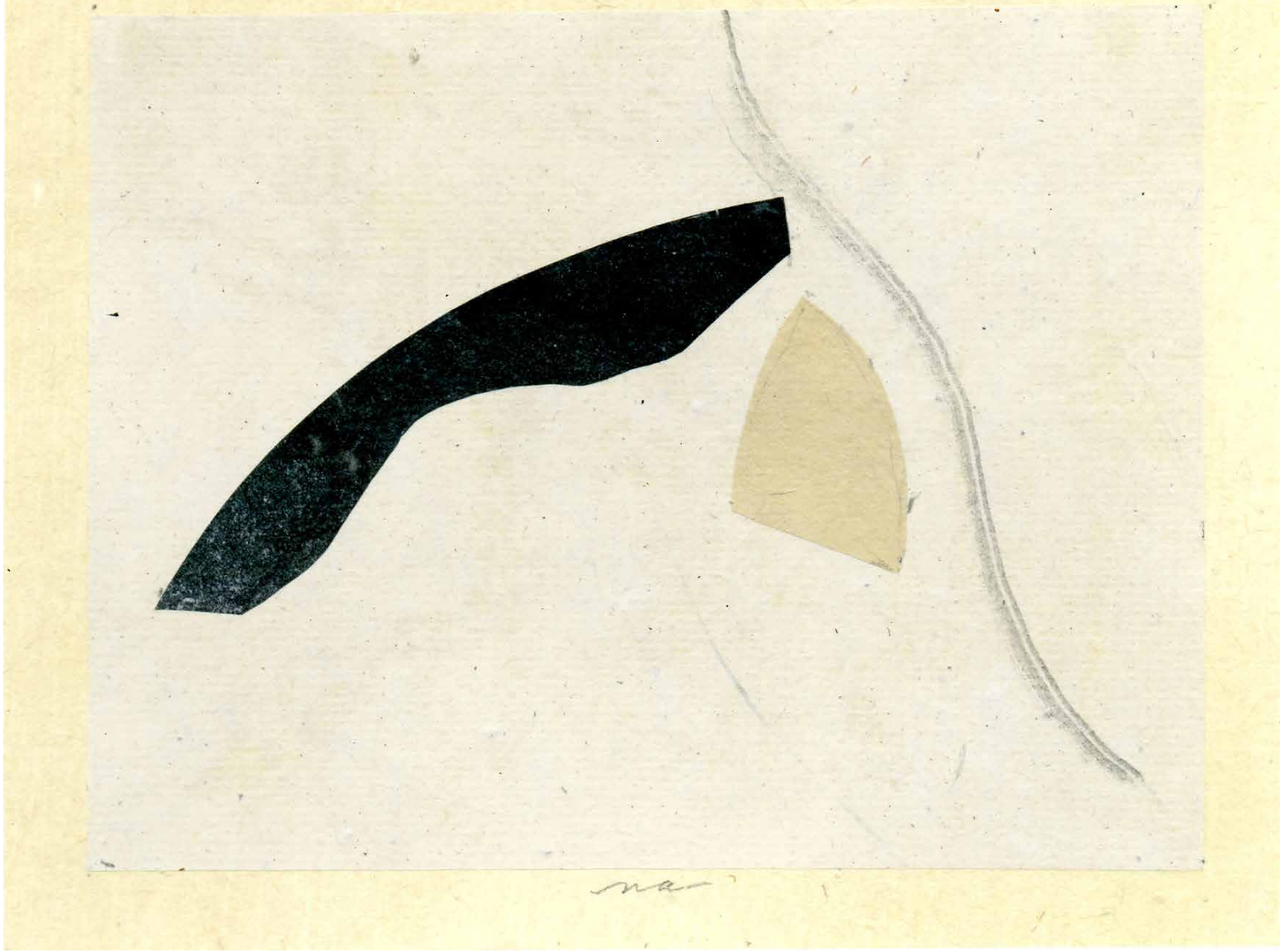
Nicol Allan with Christopher Hewett at Taranman, London, c. 1980

> These small works which are arranged in series of heads and masks, rain, waves and sea, mountains and dancers are an interpretation in simple form of inner states of mind, an attempt to fuse content and form. The heads and masks are about death, sleep, madness and the hiding away from others of the self of reality and imagination. The rain, waves and sea are the wonder and the ecstasy. The mountains are the sought refuge, the silence away from all things:
>
> The smiling eyes,
> The dark heart—
> O fly swift bird
> To where the muse's voice is heard,
> To where stillness is made,
> And nourish there as if on honey.
> There Orpheus attains transcendence, grace and death.
>
> In the end, these works are about rising in light and falling in darkness, about falling in light and rising in darkness.

I believe this is the only time that Nicol attempted to articulate the significance of his themes.

Shortly after the first of these shows, Nicol returned from one of his walks around London and told me that he thought he had found a London gallery that would suit him. This was Taranman on the Old Brompton Road, near the Victoria and Albert Museum. It was small, with an open window on the street, and looked more like a gallery one might find in Paris or Switzerland than in London or New York. Nicol kept an eye on it for a while, interested but hesitant to introduce himself.

Then, one day, the gallery put up an exhibition of the haunting photographs of China by Victor Segalen (1878-1919). Segalen was a French naval doctor. He was not well-known at that time, even in France, and I doubt that many people attended the exhibition. Besides his photographs of China, where he lived for a time, he wrote highly original modernist poetry that drew upon an ancient Chinese tradition of memorial stele. Nicol and I had become acquainted with his work while we were living in Los Angeles,



Nicol Allan, Collage with graphite, 2010, Composition G22 (By the waters of Babylon), 148x120mm

so I went to see the exhibition and chatted with the owner of the gallery, Christopher Hewett, about Segalen. When I casually mentioned that my husband was an artist and asked if I could bring work to show him, he was taken aback, but too polite to refuse. Fortunately, he liked what he saw and mounted two Nicol Allan exhibitions at Taranman in 1979 and 1982.

Christopher and Nicol became friends and Nicol would sometimes stop by the gallery to chat. He told Christopher that if anyone came in while he was there, he shouldn't introduce him as an artist but rather as a workman called 'Joe'. The gallery had a window on the street, where Christopher displayed work including Nicol's. One day, while Nicol was there, two women came in. They said they were from Alexandria in Egypt and asked the price of a small work of Nicol's that was on display in the window. They couldn't afford it, but one of them said that she could not understand how the artist could get so much into such a small space. It was an accolade Nicol never forgot, perhaps the one he valued most.

Unfortunately, in 1983 Christopher died suddenly and unexpectedly. Now, in addition to losing a friend, Nicol no longer had a gallery in London. Since Betty Parsons had died a year earlier, he no longer had a gallery in New York either. One bright spot was an exhibition held at the Arts Club of Chicago in 1982. After that, I again travelled to New York with a portfolio of Nicol's work and this time approached Roy Davis of Davis and Langdale. The gallery accepted the work so once again Nicol had a New York gallery. Davis and Langdale handled his work for the rest of his life.

Nicol Allan, Ink drawing, date unknown, 70x160mm

SUFFOLK (1984—1995)

Nicol had lost his SPACE studio in London in 1979 when the building was torn down. After that, he spent a good deal of his time in California, living in Bolinas as he prepared work for his exhibitions. I split my time between London and California until finally, in 1984, I found a new place for us to live, an old schoolhouse in Denham, near Eye, in Suffolk.

Denham was a small hamlet, surrounded by farmland. On one side of the schoolhouse, there was a 17th century cottage with small rooms, ancient timbers and low ceilings. On the other, a 19th century school built by the school master who lived in the cottage. It looked like a church, with vaulted ceilings and high windows that had once been decorated with stained glass. We heated with coal stoves and rode the local bus to market. A local taxi took us to the train or bus station to travel into London.

Nicol had been working hard and productively in Bolinas, but toward the end of his stay there his energy was sagging. After we moved into the Old School, it became obvious that something was seriously wrong.

Nicol's thyroid had failed, but the condition had been masked by the side effects of blood pressure medications. Once the problem was diagnosed and he began treatment, he slowly regained his strength and spirit. During this recovery period, Nicol focused his creative instincts on his garden, which included both flowers and vegetables. Having discovered a cache of old red bricks buried underground, he dug them up and used them to make patterns, designing and then redesigning the garden. With flowers, as with everything else, Nicol had very particular likes and dislikes and he tended towards the simple. With vegetables, it was, of course, the flavours and he researched the different varieties with care.

In the early 1990s, Nicol, his health restored, began to make collages again, which he exhibited at Davis and Langdale in 1993.

We might have continued at the Old Schoolhouse, but in 1995 I was offered a chair at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. It was a step up, one that never would have happened in Britain where I'd already hit an academic glass ceiling, so I accepted. Soon, Nicol and I returned to the US.

HANOVER, NEW HAMPSHIRE (1995—2019)

New England was unfamiliar territory for both of us, but our surroundings were beautiful and there were woods where Nicol could walk and collect mushrooms. He had a sizeable studio and workshop, yet he didn't return to larger work like the oil paintings he'd made years ago in Berkeley. Instead, he concentrated on drawings and small collages which seemed to grow ever richer and more masterful.

In this period, his work had two new themes for which, unusually, he provided titles. One, which is more explicit in his drawings than in the collages, he called *By the Waters of Babylon*. The important line omitted here was, "we lay down and wept". It was inspired by the masses of refugees who had begun attempting to flee across the waters after the first invasion of Iraq. The other, he called *Hölderlin-Zimmer* (see pages 169-173). This referred to the story of a carpenter called Ernst Zimmer who gave the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) lodging in the tower of his house after a mental breakdown. Zimmer befriended and cared for Hölderlin over a period of thirty-six years.

Though Nicol continued to show work at Davis and Langdale, he never travelled from New Hampshire to New York to meet Roy Davis and Cecily Langdale. Instead, he stayed home, removed from the art world as well as from the academic life of the college where I taught. I doubt that anyone in Dartmouth's art department was aware that an artist of his calibre lived just up the road.

Nicol's last collages were produced in 2010. After that, his physical and mental health gradually declined. And yet he continued to delight in the natural world around him, collecting stones and fallen leaves and making arrangements with them for his own pleasure.

Then one day it was over.

I took Nicol's ashes to Bolinas and scattered them in the woods where we'd gathered mushrooms so many years ago.

As I began going through Nicol's work after his death, I realized how many of the works he'd made over the years had never been shown; that, in fact, they'd only been seen by him and by me. And even those that had been exhibited were seen by very few people. Now, I'm glad—and I think Nicol would be too—that others will be able see them as well.

[1] *Frontier,* April 1960, 19–20.
[2] Selden Rodman, *The Insiders: Rejection and Rediscovery of Man in the Arts of Our Time* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960) 63.