

# 13 Ways of Looking at the Lives of the Artists



*Kat Peddie*

*[A series of alternative interpretive texts for Winifred Nicholson's The Artist's Children, Kate and Jake, at the Isle of Wight in the Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery.]*

1

Winifred and Ben Nicholson have been flattening the plane. Later he will leave the figurative, though not entirely. It is an old value. Ben Nicholson is becoming a major artist. He has put away childish things. He has come of age and the family is flattened. Look at the children's faces.

2

The husband has moved into abstraction this  
is what they are left figuring out

3

When I fell in love with Barbara Hepworth it was like falling in love  
with pure form and the knowledge that form is never pure. The

sculptural dome of her forehead and its environments! The hollow children are probably innocents. They cannot compete with this. It is not fair to make them.

4

Further down the line, I will make a version of the story where Barbara Hepworth will leave Ben Nicholson for her studio.

5

A friend of mine, who is an artist and a mother and has lived longer than me, says that it would not then have been possible to leave the father of your triplets. It does not happen this way round.

6

When I started, I was not thinking about children, and now there are so many of them. The way they keep looking at me, and with those eyes.

7

You are an observer of your family. You are not the only one. I also look in and the children stare back. Someone has to compose the family, don't they?

8

In a parallel line, Barbara Hepworth leaves John Skeaping for Ben Nicholson. She takes their child and he paints pictures of horses. I don't mean to say we don't all suffer. We do.

He never thinks about what name to put to the painting and it is the only one that I can never quite remember.

9

This is a mother and child painting. This is the image of western art. Now that the mother paints she can move outside the frame.

10

The frame is so heavy. Is this what you wanted? The family is so hemmed in.

11

Hold the family tight. Don't let in too much landscape. Outside there is too much of it to look at.

12

This is a still life with children and landscape.

The children are the middle ground. It would be difficult to paint this another way.

In the foreground, the still life rounds out.

Still, life moves. A child is having a birthday. A cake does not belong in a still life so the children must eat fruit. Still, observe the girl's jaunty hat!

13

The hat is too large to be jaunty, or the girl too small.

Tone is achieved by an accumulation of angles, scale, children. Observe the broad brush strokes, the way the coast behind them is actually the Isle of Wight!

14

The girl barely has eyes. She will become an artist.

15

The children are unhappy. You cannot stop them from feeling this. Already they have gone beyond you, though the girl has yet to fully take on form.

16

and maybe you hold them or yourself to yourself or the light and ask:  
does this child spark joy?

and the painting?

17

'By this I mean the power to create individual shapes that have, even apart from their relations with each other or with other shapes, a taut vitality of their own.'

- David Baxandall, *Ben Nicholson*

18

The boy is more fully realized.

19

and if you ask your children to express yourself it is probable they will fail and call it survival and that this might be something like the lives of the artists, which, please observe the broad brush strokes, could also be called the lives of others.