Devastation: Bomb Damage, London 1940-41

Graham Sutherland (1903-1980)

REF:

Description

Gouache, coloured chalks, pencil and collage on tracing paperSquared for transfer23.5 x 39.4 cms (9.5 x 15 ins)Provenance: Peter Nahum, London; acquired by a private collector from the sale of the above, Christies, 2006.
Graham Vivian Sutherland was born in London in 1903. On leaving school he began an engineering apprenticeship to appease his father. After a year he persuaded his Father he should be allowed to study art. He attended Goldsmiths College of Art in 1921 and graduated in 1926. In the same year he began teaching engraving at Chelsea School of Art. He established himself as a fine printmaker and during the 1920's this was his main source of income. He did not really settle into painting until he was in his 30's when the print market collapsed due to the Great Depression. In 1926 Sutherland converted to Catholicism and married his wife the following year. In the 1930's he took up glass, poster and fabric design. It was in this same decade he first visited Pembrokeshire. The landscape was to prove to be a huge influence on his work for the next decade. He identified with a land of 'exultant strangeness'. His first one man show held in London in 1938 was dominated by the Welsh landscape.At the beginning of World War II the Chelsea School of Art closed and Sutherland moved to Gloucestershire. Between 1940-45 he was employed as a full time war artist. He recorded bomb damage firstly in Wales and then in London. Nearly all of around 150 of these paintings are called Devastation and this painting is part of that body of work. The paintings, like his landscapes, are empty of human life and show the twisted and broken remains of people's homes. The Devastation series perfectly captures a city torn to shreds by war. This example depicts a twisted ventilator shaft and the burnt out interiors of buildings in Fore Street, now within the Barbican Estate.Of this time, Sutherland later wrote, 'During the bombardment of London, on a typical day, I would arrive there from Kent where we had resumed living, with very spare paraphernalia - a sketch book, black and two or three coloured chalks, a pencil - and with an apparently watertight pass which would take me anywhere within the forbidden areas. It wasn't watertight at all, I was arrested several times, especially in the East End.And once there I would look around. I will never forget those extraordinary first encounters: the silence, the absolute dead silence, except every now and again a thin tinkle of falling glass - a noise which reminded me of some of the music of Debussy ... Sometimes fires were still burning. Everywhere there was a terrible stench - perhaps of burnt dirt; and always the silence. There was nobody about ... very occasionally there would be the crash of a building collapsing of its own volition.

I would start to make perfunctory drawings here and there; gradually it was borne on me amid all this destruction how singularly one shape would impinge on another. A lift shaft, for instance, the only thing left from what had obviously been a very tall building: in the way it had fallen it looked like a wounded animal. It wasn't that these forms looked like animals, but their movements were animal movements. On...