

**Obituary: Bob Law**

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A founding father of British minimalism, he continued to display hints of St Ives in his work

The undertow of artistic St Ives in the 1950s was so strong that it pulled in the young, the untalented, the no-hopers, the beach bums and the untrained optimists who hoped that something might rub off. Bob Law, who has died aged 70, fell into the last category. But something did rub off, and he died as one of the founding fathers of British minimalism, with an international reputation.

He had begun post-school life as an apprentice architectural designer, dipped into a ragbag of geometry, alchemy, ornithology, zoology and the beachcomber's ology, palaeontology. Remembering his childhood essays in drawing and watercolour with his grandmother, he did a little watercolour painting as well.

In 1957, he went to St Ives, where he met Bernard and Janet Leach, who taught him pottery. He also met Peter Lanyon, who encouraged him to paint.

It was quickly obvious that Law had an acute eye and sense of design and inventiveness, and, by 1959, he had the beginnings of a reputation, working from a cottage at Nancledra, which he rented from the painter Trevor Bell and which Roger Hilton later bought. It was cheap, said Law, as there was "no water, no electric, no gas, nothing, just a standpipe outside".

At first sight, it seemed odd for an artist whose achievement rested on large canvases and drawings consisting of nothing but modified fields of black, that he should be remembered for his connection with St Ives, where the abstraction was, by and large, rooted in the landscape, whereas minimalism's many fathers, from Albers and Malevich to Donald Judd and Carl Andre, did not include landscape artists. But Law's first work to attract attention was a series of drawings made from his experience of lying on his back in a field.

They were simple outlines around the perimeter of the paper, marking the field boundary, perhaps, with ideograms for trees; perhaps, as in some canvases, a large bare canvas with an outline in marker pen and nothing in the centre. The obvious inspiration was the "naive" painting of Alfred Wallis, whose marine scenes had earlier attracted such painters as Ben Nicholson and Christopher Wood to St Ives; but it is clear that Law had also sat at the feet, metaphorically speaking, of Barnett Newman.

Just as other English artists, who rarely embraced the out-and-out purist minimalism of the Americans - paint flat on the canvas, bricks lying brickishly on the floor - but, instead, retained elements of the illusion of depth or of an envelope of misty atmosphere, so Law's work retained hints of his early Cornish sojourn.

He was taken up by the critic Lawrence Alloway, who fixed him a show at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1960 and invited him to take part in Situation, an exhibition proselytising for an urban, wholly abstract art; an invitation, it might be argued, that constituted a misreading of Law's work.

Law was born in Brentford, Middlesex, and, after school, trained as a carpenter, a trade skill to which he returned in his late sculptures, such as his take on the Last Supper: 13 empty chairs, held in tension by the difference in Christ's and in Judas's. This sculpture was made as a small maquette and cast in an edition of bronze, but he developed the idea of Judas's chair into a highly charged wooden sculpture - a chair broken and stripped, nails protruding from the bottom of the legs, a barren and accusing symbol of the ultimate betrayal.

Law emerged from national service in 1954 sure only that he did not want to work in an architect's office. He created his first black paintings, using powder pigment and linseed oil, because he could not afford tubes of oil paint. He mixed the powder and oil, and plastered it on to the surface with a palette knife.

Ten large canvases of this set were the paintings he exhibited at the Oxford Museum of Modern Art in 1974, at the invitation of the then director Nicholas Serota - who also showed Law in 1978 at London's Whitechapel Gallery. The depth of the colour of these canvases defeated attempts at photography for the catalogue, so Serota simply took a piece of black card and reproduced it 10 times.

These paintings disintegrated faster than a Leonardo fresco, and apparently none survive. But, like Law's later, smoother - and better prepared - canvases, they were never all black but modulated from blue through to black: the Tate has a prime example, a very big 1967 canvas, Black Blue Violet Blue, and the biggest holding is in the Panza di Buomo collection in the Guggenheim Museum, New York.

At the time of his ICA show in 1960, Law moved from Cornwall to Eel Pie Island, Twickenham, now an expensive suburb but then a throbbing centre of rock culture; a year later, Roland Penrose fixed a French government painting scholarship for him, and he went to live for two years in Aix-en-Provence. On his return to England, he worked, among other occupations, as a shepherd in Hampshire. In 1997, he moved to Penzance.

Minimalism had always been a difficult route and, after his initial success, Law suffered doubts about the validity of his work - what might be called the Rothko syndrome. But in his last years, he got his drink problem under control and, with a burst of energy, produced a series of inventive canvases and, working with the brilliant Penzance printmaker Hugh Stoneman, etchings and canvases.

His former wife Gina and two children, Vanessa and Daniel, survive him.

Bob Law, artist, born January 22 1934; died April 17 2004