

# John Bellany

Published 7 Oct 2008 in *Northings*, Highlands and Islands online Arts journal.

## Browns Gallery, Tain, until 25 October 2008



Johny Bellany - Waiting For The Tide (image courtesy of Brown's Gallery)

**THIS LATEST solo show at Browns Gallery provides a unique opportunity to view work by one of Scotland's most influential artists. John Bellany has long established an international reputation, represented in major collections including the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum, New York, The National Galleries of Scotland and the Tate Gallery, London. An Honorary Member of The Royal Scottish Academy (1986), a member of the Royal Academy (1991) and awarded a CBE in 1994, Bellany's place in our cultural history is well documented.**

However for me, Bellany's work resonates most strongly in his lifelong devotion to the art of painting, a great example of an artist whose art is defined resoundingly by his craft. Born in the fishing community of Port Seton in 1942, Bellany studied at the Edinburgh College of Art and Royal College of Art, London, in the 1960's, developing his own inimitable style and iconography.

Works such as the triptych 'Allegory' (1964) and 'Kinlochbervie' (1966) remain defining images of Scottish and international art history. For five decades Bellany has worked prolifically, currently residing between Edinburgh, Cambridge and Barga in Italy. His work is both earthly and highly symbolic, influenced by masters such as Brugel, Bosch and Rembrandt. In Modern terms his intense palette, heightened perspective and stylisation of the figure are strongly akin to the lineage of Northern Expressionism.

The skewed angular composition of works such as 'Waiting for the Tide' beautifully express the precariousness of life at sea and recall German Expressionists works by artists such as Beckmann and Dix. Life and death are

equally present. Three female figures waiting by a window are flanked by two skeletons compressed to the edge of the picture plane.

This is an interior space on multiple levels, heightened by Bellany's vivid use of yellow, red, orange, green, cerulean and black. The starkness of skull white permeates even the decorative details of the furnishings. In the women's lap two hybrid cats stare out of the picture, their mask-like faces and almond eyes mirroring that of their mistresses. The boat seen through the open window beyond has the eerie presence of a ghost ship, drifting on its own glassy reflection of millpond stillness.

This is an image of spatial and psychological depth. Framed perspective and colour balance the energy of the work, a pregnant pause tense with the dynamics of colour and the human ache of waiting for death. The image suggests this state as a devotional act of faith, living at the edge of one of nature's great malevolent forces. The Christian associations with fishing and fishermen are tempered by the hard edged stylisation of the figure in many of Bellany's seaside and harbour images, influenced no doubt by his Calvinist roots.

In 'Star of Hope' Bellany presents an arrangement of objects or effigies akin to the work of the Belgian artist James Ensor. The mask as a symbol of humanity is a strong element in the work and the grotesque and somewhat surreal juxtaposition of objects living and dead; a black lobster, accordion, fish head and totem-like puffin mask present a bleak twist on the still life genre. Here there is a collection of objects which in spite of the sea blue background, distant expansive horizon and suggestion of life through music are also infused with the smell of salt and decay.

'The Wayfarer' is one of the finest of Bellany's boat and harbour scenes on show, a scene of turbulence overhead in perfect counterpoint to the inner calm of a safe mooring. The brushwork in the sky is wonderfully gestural and fluid, with rich use of cadmium red, crimson, aqua, green and black, animated with pure white. This is a superb work of expressive paint handling, of raw energy and repose. 'The Wayfarer' feels like it has the experience of a lifetime in its making, a mature work of reflection and painterly vigour.

Of the Tuscan works on display, 'Barga', a large scale view of the mountain village is the finest. The brushwork is supremely beautiful with rich hues of deep green, browns, red and sienna. Man-made structures are as much a part of the whole tapestry of the scene as the trees and mountains, pulsing with an earthy sense of life. The treatment of the mountains, abstraction of the scene, its essential rhythm and sense of movement reminded me a great deal of Kandinsky.

Another view of 'Barga' with white washed walls and a lone silhouetted figure compressed into the narrow perspective of the street is starkly illuminated by light. Less successful are images such as 'Neath The Tuscan Sky', an insipid image, lacking in depth, and testimony that even great masters of painting sometimes miss their own mark.

For me the resounding strength in this exhibition is in the figurative works, an enduring statement by an artist who has unequivocally walked his own path. The artist's life and work are defined by extremes – the "sacred and

profane” permeate his work in equal measure. His tenacity and sheer will with a brush never fail to inspire and once seen, his uncompromising vision of humanity is never forgotten.

There are some excellent examples of his paintings in oils and watercolour on show, with large scale works in the newly renovated gallery space creating an impressive display. Once again it is the vision of a private gallery rather than a public one providing access to works of international stature in the region. Being able to see work of this calibre locally is a true gift and I hope that younger art students in particular take the opportunity to discover Bellany’s work.

© *Georgina Coburn, 2008*