

# Edinburgh Art Festival 2018 Breakfast Clubs: Helen Bellany at the Open Eye Gallery

In 1961 Helen Percy left her family home in Sutherland to study at Edinburgh College of Art. It was a fateful decision.

A year later she met fellow student **John Bellany**, and their lives remained closely entwined until his death in 2013. Now Helen has written a book ***The Restless Wave*** about her life with John, and at the Open Eye Gallery on Thursday she shared some stories about being the girlfriend, wife, ex-wife and wife again of one of Scotland's best known artists.



Helen recalled the couple's early days in an insalubrious flat in Rose Street. During the 1963 Edinburgh Festival John and his lifelong friend Sandy Moffat showed their (huge) paintings on the railings of Castle Terrace, lugging them back and forwards from a Rose Street bar every day until the minister of the Unitarian Church took pity and offered them free storage. Passers-by – from a local tramp to the actor Alec Guinness – gave them donations, and buses slowed down to allow their passengers to see the show. Later they hung paintings outside the Scottish National Gallery and the Royal Scottish Academy. It was, says Helen, part of John's (and Sandy's) mission to take on the world;

'It was his *raison d'être* to make his voice heard. Virtually all the days of his life were working ones.'

At ECA, Bellany refused to conform to the *belle peinture* style of the day, and instead developed his own brand of realism, influenced by the ideas of the poet and activist Hugh MacDiarmid. He had, says Helen, an unworldliness about him; aesthetics always came before function – he once designed a record cover as a rectangle and had great trouble accepting that record covers had to be square. Social conventions were not a priority, all that mattered was 'the grandeur of art', and Helen tells a great story about their surreptitious attempts to transport a set of enormous paintings 'the equivalent of the contents of a small house' to London in the guard's van of a train. Faced with an intransigent Waverley station master they only managed to succeed in their plan when Robin Philipson, then Head of Drawing and Painting at ECA, intervened on their behalf.

Both Bellany and Moffat had been influenced by Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionism and the jazz-inspired work of their friend Alan Davie; they soon moved away from abstract art, however, looking more to the great masters of the Renaissance such as Brueghel, Bellini, Rembrandt, Titian and Bosch. Despite this they maintained a continuing dialogue and

friendship with Davie;

'John was not always tolerant of other forms of art, but he had a great respect for others who, like him, were driven, and were making sincere gestures.'

Although John and Helen separated in 1974 (he then married Juliet Lister, who died in 1985) they married again in 1986, and after his successful liver transplant two years later, they enjoyed a happy 25 years together. Although her early years with the hard-drinking, womanising, depressive, tormented artist can't have been easy, there were, Helen says, very many positives;

'He was funny, witty and unencumbered by social observances....they were wild, unpredictable days...great fun, in retrospect at least...his work was the main part of his life, but the other part was hilarious.'

After their remarriage, the couple lived largely in Italy. Already the recipient of many awards, Bellany was appointed CBE in 1994. In 2012, the Scottish National Gallery's exhibition *A Passion for Life* brought him tremendous joy. He painted, Helen says, 'until he could paint no more.' In his final days, the family moved his bed into his studio, where all his canvases and brushes were kept ready 'to give him hope.'

If Bellany was pleased with a painting, the highest accolade he could give to it was 'it's a beezer'. And it's clear from this talk that, despite all the many trials of their lives, Helen knows John was a beezer too.



The Open Eye Gallery's current exhibition is **John Bellany (1942-2013): The Wild Days**, which focuses on the artist's work during his most turbulent period in the 1980s. It features many previously unseen paintings, revealing some of the most densely symbolic and poignantly confessional examples of his work. From *My Father* (1982) (*right*), in which Bellany senior's eyes convey so much about life at sea and in a traditional



East Lothian fishing village, to *Mizpah* (1986), full of the symbolism for which Bellany is so well known, and the entertaining *Only an Emu Passing By* (1985) (*left*), the exhibition offers us a valuable insight into Bellany's thoughts in the difficult years preceding his

reunion with Helen. The exhibition runs until 27 August.

This was the first day of an excellent new venture, the **Festival Breakfast Clubs**, which are being held at the Open Eye Gallery, The Fine Art Society and The Scottish Gallery. The Festival Breakfast Clubs will run at 8.30am on 2, 9 and 16 August for anyone who wishes to catch the Festival exhibitions before the crowds. Refreshments will be served and staff will be on hand to give guided tours at each gallery. On 9 August The Scottish Gallery will host **Duncan Macmillan**, who will give a short lecture on **Victoria Crowe** at 9am. On 16 August The Fine Art Society will host Fleming-Wyfold Art Foundation Trustee **James Holloway** who will give a short lecture on the **Fleming Collection** at 9am.

These events are free but ticketed so make sure you RSVP to each gallery directly to secure a place. For further information visit <https://edinburghartfestival.com/> or pick up a leaflet at galleries and other venues throughout the city.



[The Open Eye Gallery](#) is at 34 Abercromby Place. August opening hours: 10am-6pm Monday-Friday, 10am-4pm Saturdays (closed Sundays).

***The Restless Wave*** by Helen Bellany is published by Sandstone Press at £19.99. Helen will be appearing at Edinburgh International Book Festival at 3.15pm on Friday 17 August. Tickets from <https://www.edbookfest.co.uk/>.

**Edinburgh Art Festival 2018** continues at venues throughout the city until 27 August.

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