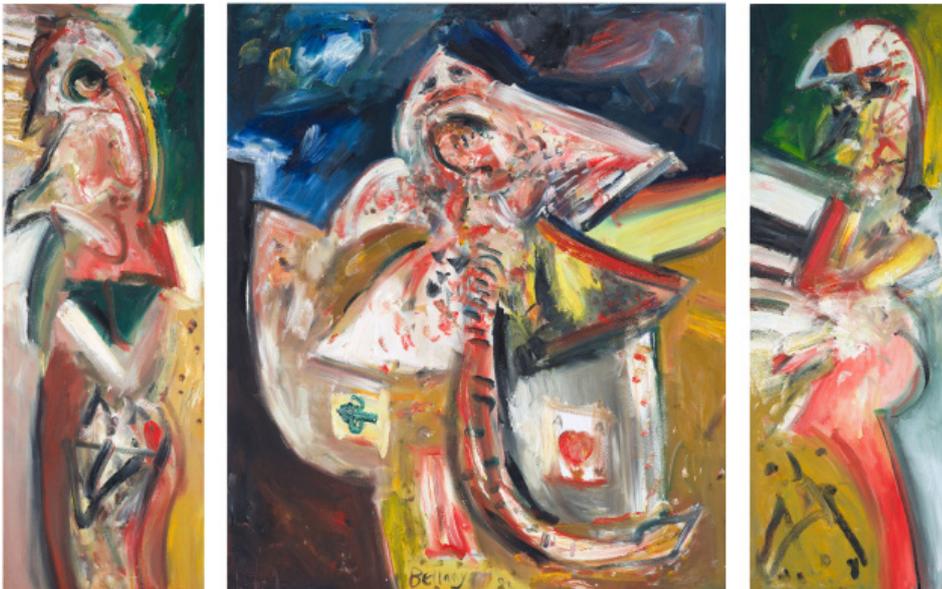


[PR]

## John Bellany (1942-2013): The Wild Days

30 July – 27 August 2018

The Open Eye Gallery presents a large-scale exhibition centring on John Bellany's output during his turbulent life in the 1980s. Featuring many previously unseen paintings, all held by the artist's estate, the exhibition shows Bellany's work undertaken during the decade to include some of the most fervent and passionate examples of the ideas and iconography that preoccupied him throughout his prolific career. Although many critics and curators have named Bellany as the most significant Scottish painter of the twentieth century, the very distinctive body of work produced during the early 1980s is often overlooked in summaries of his career.



John Bellany, *Untitled*, triptych, oil on canvas, 1983. Photo courtesy of the Open Eye Gallery/ the Bellany family

A wild period, from the late 1970s into the early 1980s saw Bellany, a hell-raiser *par excellence*, making some of his greatest paintings. His expressionism found new extremes with 'paint spilled onto the canvas like blood'. Confrontation and conflict dominate: there is no resolution, only disintegration. The highly personal subject matter reflects the artist's innermost thoughts concerning dicing with death, succumbing to temptation and the recurring image of the fateful clock. All this imagery suggests a man at the end of his tether, but these paintings remain amongst his most powerful statements, fearless in execution and full of painterly grandeur. As Alan Riach has written 'no modern artist has taken his imagination so recklessly through extremes of understanding and expressed this understanding so powerfully'. Presenting an extensive collection of Bellany's painting from his 'wild days' shows it to comprise some of the most densely symbolic and poignantly confessional examples of his entire output.

In the early 1980s Bellany was living in Clapham, London, with his second wife, Juliet Lister, and working as a lecturer at Goldsmiths College of Art. He was drinking heavily and Juliet, suffering from mental health problems, was spending most of the time in hospital. In 1983 Bellany went to Australia as artist-in-residence at the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, for the summer semester. When Bellany arrived in Australia it was a holiday for the first day of spring and he went to a party at the country house of artist, Clifton Pugh, where he met, as he said, 'all of the Australian hierarchy in one fell swoop'. The paintings produced in Australia were his most colourful yet, which Bellany considered to be a result of the different light in Australia.

The exhibition will also include a selection of work from the years in which Bellany suffered from acute liver disease as a result of his alcoholism. In 1988 Bellany, in a desperate state of health, was given the opportunity to receive a life-saving liver transplant at Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge. At the time the procedure was still largely experimental and survival was uncertain but Bellany made it through the operation and was drawing again within hours of waking from the anaesthetic. A series of paintings from the year after the transplant operation show the artist as Lazarus, risen from the dead. Bellany's great friend, poet Alan Bold, has said that often 'the surface of the canvas seems too fragile to withstand the emotional onslaught' of the artist's way of working, and this is never more true than during Bellany's Wild Days.

### Notes to Editors

1. The exhibition will take place at the Open Eye Gallery, 34 Abercromby Place, Edinburgh EH3 6QE. The Open Eye Gallery, based in the New Town, has been running for 30 years and holds 35 exhibitions per year focusing on contemporary and applied art.
2. The exhibition will be open 30 July – 27 August 2018. Opening times: Mon-Fri 10am-6pm, Sat 10am-4pm.
3. The gallery will open early for 'Breakfast Club' Thursdays 2nd, 9th and 16th August at 8.30am during the exhibition and will host a talk by Helen Bellany on her life with John on 2nd August 9.00-9.20am in conjunction with her memoir 'The Restless Wave', published 19 April 2018 by Sandstone Press.
4. High resolution images and further details can be requested by contacting Ashley Rooney. Email: [mail@openeyegallery.co.uk](mailto:mail@openeyegallery.co.uk).
5. A biography of John Bellany is appended here for reference. Further reading: John McEwen's acclaimed monograph, John Bellany (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2013).
6. All works are available for purchase and prices will be online at [www.openeyegallery.co.uk](http://www.openeyegallery.co.uk).
7. *John Bellany (1942-2013): The Wild Days* is part of Edinburgh Art Festival, 26 July - 26 August 2018. [edinburghartfestival.com](http://edinburghartfestival.com) @EdArtFest #EdArtFes

## 8. About Edinburgh Art Festival

Founded in 2004 and now in its 15th edition, Edinburgh Art Festival, is the platform for the visual arts at the heart of Edinburgh's August festivals, bringing together the capital's leading galleries, museums and artist-run spaces in a city-wide celebration of the very best in visual art. Each year, the Festival features leading international and UK artists alongside the best emerging talent, major survey exhibitions of historic figures, and a special programme of newly commissioned artworks that respond to public and historic sites in the city. The 2017 Festival attracted over 315,000 visits. Edinburgh Art Festival is a registered charity supported by Creative Scotland and the City of Edinburgh Council. For more information, please visit [www.edinburghartfestival.com](http://www.edinburghartfestival.com) or follow the Festival on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram @EdArtFest #EdArtFest.

### Biography

John Bellany was born on 18 June 1942 in Port Seton, East Lothian, whilst his father, Richard, was away serving in the Naval Reserve during the Second World War. The Bellanys were a fishing family – Richard had gone to sea at the age of 14 and his wife, Nancy, came from Eyemouth, the centre of the east-coast fishing industry. Both Port Seton and Eyemouth were intensely religious communities and Bellany was raised in the strict moral standards of the Presbyterian faith. The superstitions of this religious community, in which symbolic omens played a central role in the daily lives of fishing families, would remain indelibly marked on Bellany's imagination throughout his career.

In 1960 Bellany enrolled at Edinburgh College of Art. At the time William Gillies was Principal of the college and Robin Philipson was Head of Painting. Bellany quickly made a name for himself as a rebel, rejecting the belle peinture style that the faculty favoured. Along with his friends, Alexander Moffat and Alan Bold, Bellany began to champion a new realism in Scottish art, influenced by the ideas of the poet, Hugh MacDiarmid, who was writing about universal themes in the Scottish vernacular.

During his time at college in Edinburgh, Bellany discovered the influences that would mould the iconography and symbolism of his work throughout his career. Putting great importance on the Old Masters, Bellany looked to Bellini, Titian, Brueghel, Grünewald, Rembrandt and Goya. Within this canon he found the grand themes of life and death played out on an epic scale. With this in mind, he sought to heed MacDiarmid's call for 'giantism in the arts'. His affinity with Gustave Courbet, in which rural themes play out with the grandeur of history painting, is also clear in his early paintings of fishing community of Port Seton.

In 1963 Bellany and Moffat exhibited their paintings on the railings of Castle Terrace during the Edinburgh Festival. In the following two years they managed, with some audacity, to display their work outside the buildings of the Scottish National Gallery and the Royal Scottish Academy, symbolically showing their status as outsiders to the art establishment. Every night the paintings were

stored in their favourite drinking haunt, Milne's Bar on Rose Street, courtesy of the landlord, and each morning they carried the large canvases along Hanover Street and across Princes Street to the railings. For the first time Bellany exhibited his paintings of the Port Seton community in haunting allegorical scenes featuring boats, workers and fish melded into dreamlike scenarios.

Bellany met fellow student Helen Percy in his third year at art college and they married in 1964 in Golspie, Sutherland. They moved to London soon after as Bellany won a place to study for three further years at the Royal College of Art. At RCA Bellany stood out as a figurative painter at a time when abstraction and Minimalism were fashionable. Working from a studio at the college's Cromwell Road premises, Bellany immersed himself in the London art scene, meeting, among others, Francis Bacon. In 1967, Bellany, Moffat and Bold travelled to East Germany and visited the Buchenwald concentration camp. The experience had a profound impact on Bellany and his immediately ensuing work reflected his despair in the inhumanity he was made witness to at Buchenwald.

By 1973 Bellany was head of the faculty of painting at Croydon College of Art. His marriage to Helen had foundered, his personal life was in disarray and eventually in 1979 he married Juliet Lister, a mature student. Juliet however was beset by severe mental health problems that necessitated frequent and lengthy spells of time in hospital. Bellany's work during this period predominated in dark themes dealing with fate and the passing of time. Despite the torment in his personal life, Bellany's paintings were finally gaining recognition and in the same year he was joint winner of the Athena Art Award, at the time the most valuable art prize in the UK. Alongside a host of solo exhibitions in galleries, in 1986 a major retrospective of his work was held at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art and in 1988 at the Hamburg Kunsthalle.

A crisis in his health brought Helen back into Bellany's life. A distant presence over the years as the mother of their three children she, by necessity, now would prove his saviour, forcing him to seek medical attention for the chronic liver disease that was seriously endangering his life. After Juliet's death in 1985 they remarried but Bellany's health continued to deteriorate. By the end of 1987 the only remaining medical option was a liver transplant for which he was eventually considered and tested. He then joined the waiting list for a donor. On 30 April 1988, the extraordinary opportunity presented itself. Exceeding all expectations, the transplant granted the artist a further 25 years.

After the transplant Bellany steadily regained his health and his work took a new direction, looking at classical subject matter once again as well as landscapes and seascapes for the first time. Residence in Italy where much of the year was spent, along with visits to Mexico and China, brought about a further explosion of colour and a re-engagement with themes of his early work. A sense of serenity prevails in this late period and Bellany looked once again to the fishing communities of his childhood, Port Seton and Eyemouth.

Further honours and fame followed, in 1990 Bellamy became a Fellow of Trinity Hall, Cambridge, and in 1994 he was appointed CBE. A string of museum retrospectives culminated in the major exhibition, *A Passion for Life*, at the Scottish National Gallery in 2012. Speaking in a film made for television by his son, Paul Bellamy, he summed up the importance of this large-scale Edinburgh exhibition, saying 'I was overcome with tears. It's the pinnacle of my whole existence.' Bellamy's health was by now in severe decline and, a few months afterwards, on 28 August 2013 he died at the family home in Essex.

**-Ends-**