



Cradle of Magic: two-man exhibition of paintings by John Bellany and Alan Davie at Newport Street Gallery

15 January 2019

Newport Street Gallery will present an exhibition of work by John Bellany (1942–2013) and Alan Davie (1920–2014), opening on Wednesday 27 February and running for six months.

Titled 'Cradle of Magic', the two-man show will feature 49 paintings and works on paper. Spanning four decades, the exhibition demonstrates the importance of Celtic symbolism and imagery to these two visionary twentieth-century artists, working a generation apart.

Born in Grangemouth in 1920, Alan Davie was one of the first British artists to explore Abstract Expressionist forms and techniques. Linked to the Scottish Renaissance movement – a group of poets, musicians and artists who emerged in the first half of the twentieth century – Davie's work was informed by his interest in tribal and ancient art (evident in works such as **The Bird**, 1954) as well as Zen Buddhism.

The earliest paintings in 'Cradle of Magic' date from Davie's formative trip around Western Europe, undertaken on a travel scholarship in 1948. There, he was astounded by the beauty of Byzantine and Romanesque art, which he linked to the Celtic tradition. He also attended the first post-war Venice Biennale, where he was introduced to the work of the American Abstract Expressionists – Pollock and Rothko among others.



Davie worked rapidly on the studio floor using homemade paints to produce vibrantly coloured shapes, signs, words and biomorphic forms. He wrote that the spontaneous exploration of the magical possibilities of colour was ‘perhaps the most important element in my painting (and indeed my life)’. His work of the late 50s and 60s balances gestural improvisation – heavily influenced by free jazz – and bold, ambiguous, symbols (**Insignias of the Gannet People**, 1958). Adopting a form of automatism, Davie noted in 1959: ‘Painting has taught me much, mainly that it is impossible to paint a picture and that if a picture is to be, it must happen in spite of me rather than because of me.’ Throughout his life, Davie maintained a profound connection with his Celtic origins, which manifested in his attitude towards nature: the desire to be at one with it rather than to control it.

Over a long and prolific career, John Bellamy came to be considered one of Britain’s foremost figurative painters. Born in the small fishing town of Port Seton in East Lothian, where Calvinism was deeply engrained, Bellamy described the relationship between the sacred and profane as being among his most important subjects.

‘Cradle of Magic’ spans three decades of Bellamy’s practice. Eschewing straight-forward narratives, he worked intuitively and unceasingly; his paintings balancing the uncanny, joyful and violent in powerful and original ways. His imagery – ghoulish hybridised creatures, fishermen and the sea, chained couples (**The Couple**, 1968) – recurs, with figures appearing in multiple canvases as if at different stages of a journey.

The exhibition’s earliest Bellamy work – **The Crucifixion**, 1963 – dates from his time at Edinburgh College of Art, where he obsessively reimagined Old Master paintings by Grünewald, Bellini and Rembrandt, among others. In these ‘transcriptions’, religious and classical subjects were recast according to the artist’s memories and experiences: bloody, gutted fish replacing the three figures in **The Crucifixion**. He explained: ‘You look at the place you come from with such intensity that the painting has a meaning that is universal.’

The 70s and 80s present a darker period for the artist. The profound impact of a visit to Buchenwald concentration camp in 1967 is immediately evident in major paintings such as **Pourquoi?**, 1967. The spectre of depression, alcoholism and physical illness, with which Bellamy wrestled throughout his life, is also felt in intimate works such as **Addenbrookes Hospital – Self-Portrait**, 1988, sketched from the artist’s hospital bed following a liver transplant. Bellamy’s 1989 portrait of Alan Davie, whom he greatly admired, is also included in the exhibition.

‘Cradle of Magic’ is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue featuring an essay by art historian Mel Gooding. Also included are extracts from previously unprinted recordings with both artists, made for National Life Stories Artists’ Lives oral history project at the British Library (www.bl.uk/nls/artists).

An opening reception for ‘Cradle of Magic’ will be held on Tuesday 26 February (6–8pm). Newport Street Gallery’s current exhibition, Martin Eder: ‘Parasites’, is extended until Sunday 17 February 2019. The gallery will be closed to the public between 18 and 27 February.

(Left) John Bellamy, **Rose of Sharon**, 1973. Photography by Prudence Cuming Associates. Courtesy Newport Street Gallery © The Estate of John Bellamy. All rights reserved, 2019.

(Right) Alan Davie, **The Horse That Has Visions of Immortality No.3**, 1963. Photography by Prudence Cuming Associates. Courtesy Newport Street Gallery © The Estate of Alan Davie. All rights reserved. DACS 2019.



About the artists

Alan Davie (1920–2014) attended Edinburgh College of Art from 1937 until 1941, at which point he was conscripted into the Royal Artillery. While serving, he came across Walt Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass' under a barrack bed and began to write poetry. After the war, he continued to write and found work as a professional jazz musician before focusing on painting. Music remained integral to his practice throughout his career. Important retrospectives of his work were presented at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, in 1958 and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in 1962. He was awarded the top painting prize at the São Paulo Biennial in 1963, appointed CBE in 1972 and elected a Senior Royal Academician in 2012. His work can be found in numerous international collections, including the Scottish National Galleries, Tate London and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

John Bellany (1942–2013) studied at Edinburgh College of Art from 1960 to 1965, followed by the Royal College of Art from 1965 to 1968. In 1967 he travelled to East Germany on a travel scholarship and visited the Buchenwald concentration camp. Bellany taught until 1984, holding positions at Brighton College of Art, Winchester College of Art, Goldsmiths and the RCA. His art has been exhibited internationally in both group and solo exhibitions, including a 2005 exhibition at the National Gallery of China and a 2012 retrospective at the Scottish National Gallery. Elected to the London Group in 1973, Bellany also became a Royal Academician in 1991 and was awarded a CBE in 1994 for his contribution to the arts. His work is held in numerous public collections, most notably the British Museum, the Scottish National Gallery, Tate, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

About Newport Street Gallery

Newport Street Gallery opened in Vauxhall, south London, in October 2015. Spanning five buildings, the gallery presents solo or group exhibitions of work drawn from Damien Hirst's extensive Murderme art collection, which he has been building since the late 1980s. Hirst's interest in curating dates back to the beginning of his artistic career and his organisation of the groundbreaking 'Freeze' exhibition in south London in 1988.

The gallery is the realisation of Hirst's long-term ambition to share his extensive collection of art – which includes over 3,000 works – with the public. In October 2016, the gallery was awarded the respected RIBA Stirling Prize for the UK's best new building of the year.

Entry to all exhibitions is free.

Opening times

Tuesday–Sunday 10am–6pm

Closed Mondays

Please see website for details of bank holiday opening times.

For media enquiries please contact:
+44(0)20 3141 9320 or email
press@newportstreetgallery.com

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