

**Samantha McKegg**

## **‘Pretty Dreams, Hard Work, Survival’: Pauline Bellamy’s Visual Biography**

*A floating easel unfolded with glimpses of Manu’s boards stuck up on anything that would hold them while he unconsciously moves over the paper like a graceful bird, Max’s moonlight directing itself carefully into his lens, John gently noticing other corners for us to dive into. The day has fed my canvas ever since....*

– Pauline Bellamy, forthcoming essay for the *Otago Daily Times*

Dunedin-based artist Pauline Bellamy’s (b. 1950) life has always directed her canvas. From a young age, Bellamy recreated what she saw with her own hand. Exhibiting her work for over thirty years, she has gained a reputation for her expressive landscapes and portraits, paintings and etchings. She lives and has a studio at Macandrew Bay on the Otago Peninsula and, with her husband John Bellamy, runs Bellamys Gallery, which regularly shows group and solo exhibitions between Bellamy and her sons Manu Berry and Max Bellamy.

In July 2014, a retrospective exhibition at the gallery traced her artistic output from youthful practice sketches, to her

career as a commercial illustrator, years of experimentation in painting, and finally to her position as an established artist. Through the eyes of Emma Chalmers, a young Dunedin-based painter, the exhibition, titled ‘Pretty Dreams, Hard Work, Survival’, presented a second story through its chronology: the story of a woman artist in New Zealand who has constantly been reconciling the external pressures of life with her passion for painting. The concurrent stories featured in this exhibition provide the foundation for this essay. I will trace these two stories through analysis of a selection of the works from the exhibition, noting Bellamy’s developments as an artist, while relating these developments to her experiences as a woman artist.

Chalmers, who has an ongoing interest in gender politics in her own art practice, identified several stages in Bellamy’s fifty-year career where artistic pursuits seemed to crossover intimately with life. Chalmers selected a range of Bellamy’s works (from sketches to large-scale oil paintings) that showed changes and developments in her art practice and presented insight to Bellamy’s personal

life at the time. Bellamy has spent her entire art career representing scenes from her life and surroundings, and has consequently created a lifetime of works that coalesce to form a visual autobiography. The retrospective element of the exhibition becomes more than just a reflection on earlier works, but rather a biographical consideration of how Bellamy established herself as an artist.

Chalmers named the exhibition after three featured works: *Pretty Dreams* (1970), depicting a sleeping nude woman in bright colours and thick brush strokes; *Hard Work* (1970), an observational sketch of the back of a woman who is hunched over a workbench; and *Survival* (1992), a heavy-handed and confident charcoal work of a figure standing against a gusty wind. These three very different pieces each show Bellamy's knack for creating emotive portrayals of any subject with superb and gestural technique, but also become cornerstones for the ethos of the exhibition. Chalmers found across these three works three themes that have been present in Bellamy's art practice and her life. These themes of aspirations, hard work and struggle to achieve are historically noted characteristics of the lives of many successful women artists.

There is much discourse in Western art history surrounding gendered differences in art practice and art objects. Societal expectations of gender and appropriate feminine behaviour have significantly contributed to the struggles of women artists.<sup>1</sup> Historically it is understood that women faced a choice between a 'normal' life in which art was second to the responsibilities of being a wife and mother, and an abnormal and usually isolating life in which art was placed

at the centre.<sup>2</sup> This tension is present in the lives of almost all well-known historical New Zealand women artists. From Flora Scales to Rita Angus and Lois White, there are numerous examples of women artists' personal struggles and professional exclusion within New Zealand art history.

As literature was imported from feminist hubs in America, Britain and Australia during the 1970s and 1980s, women in New Zealand became conscious of the inconsistencies in the critical treatment of their own art practices when compared to their male peers. In an article published in *Art New Zealand* entitled *Replacing Women in Art History* (1983), Cheryl Sotheran noted that women who received favourable reviews (or any reviews at all) during this time were those who were asexual and apolitical.<sup>3</sup> In June 1975 'Six Women Artists', the first New Zealand art show with a distinct feminine awareness, was held at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery in Christchurch.<sup>4</sup> Alison Mitchell, also known as Allie Eagle—a central figure in the New Zealand woman's art movement—wrote in the exhibition catalogue:

A basic premise needs to be established though, in order to understand the notion of a woman's art: that is, that while there is in the country at least, as yet, very few stylistic differences between New Zealand women and men painters there are a great many cultural experiences and socio-economic factors that make them quite different.<sup>5</sup>

This concept is important to help understand Bellamy's journey as an

artist. Moreover, as Judy Millar reasserted in the Winter 2013 issue of *Art News*, gender equality is an ongoing concern in contemporary New Zealand art:

Even though 'women' regularly win major art awards and are increasingly represented in the most significant collections of both private collectors and museums, the prices for 'women's' work on the international market is depressingly low... Sure women art students need self-belief in abundance in order to succeed, but they will struggle unnecessarily if they come up against fixed stereotypes of the successful artist being male.<sup>6</sup>

Somewhat unconsciously, Bellamy has shown through her work her own confrontation with the more male-focused language and expectations of being an artist in New Zealand. What emerges throughout 'Pretty Dreams, Hard Work, Survival' is a dialogue on the realities of a woman artist's experience.

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Born 1950 in Waitakaruru on the Hauraki Plains, Pauline Bellamy wanted to be an artist from a young age and spent much of her time as a child drawing animals and scenes around her parent's dairy farm. 'Pretty Dreams, Hard Work, Survival' introduces Bellamy's art practice with a naïve sketch of horses that is more than likely copied from an instructional drawing book. This charming sketch signifies Bellamy's life-long pursuit of art education outside of fine art institutions. Despite bigger aspirations, Bellamy was encouraged by her parents to pursue study that would guarantee employment and in the late 1960s

Bellamy was one of the first graduates in graphic arts at the Auckland Technical Institute (now AUT University).

Following graduation, Bellamy worked producing advertising materials for a shoe factory in Auckland and then an advertising agency in Hamilton. Bellamy's skill for reproducing advertising images would no doubt have helped her later in quickly reproducing accurate portrayals of scenes in front of her. While Bellamy began to produce works that were not for commercial purposes through life-drawing classes and scenic illustrations, there is a consistent quality and accuracy to these works, although in her personal art she noted she was 'too young to be too consistent.'<sup>7</sup> Bellamy was isolated as a practicing artist and without much outside influence her works could have retained a stiffness granted through commercial art.

In 1972 Bellamy moved with her partner at the time to the South Island and by 1978 she was settled in Saint Bathans, a small town in the Otago region that is known for its scenic setting in the heart of the Maniototo Plain. Moving to the South Island significantly influenced her art practice and she gradually developed more confident and modernist technique working across media. Bellamy was able to attend lessons at the Kurow Summer Arts School and was taught by the likes of Don Binney and John Parker. She describes the short time she spent in classes as 'eye opening' and that she was finally taught 'how to see, how put paint on, move it around and get the most out of it'.<sup>8</sup> As Bellamy left the commercial realism of her earlier drawings and entered the pared back valleys and hills of the Southern regions, she found

solace in the landscape. By the time she moved to Saint Bathans she had readily developed a passion for *plein air* painting and was producing landscapes that reflected the light, planes and temper of the region.

Bellamy's stylistic landscapes at this time are reminiscent of well-known regionalist artists. Colin McCahon's *North Otago* paintings completed in the years not long before her arrival in the region are an obvious comparison to Bellamy's *Land Island* (c. 1970). The painting depicts an undulating peninsula between a textured sky and a still ocean. Dark brown, ochre and puce tones are consciously modernist, and lines of gestural paint are repeated down the canvas, giving a sense of melody to the otherwise still painting. The sloping hills filled with melancholic colour show a young artist in dialogue with the influences of Don Binney, John Parker and their peers. However, the thick texture and movement of Bellamy's paintwork suggest that she is feeling out the landscape in her own terms.

Chalmers chose eleven of Bellamy's landscapes as part of the retrospective, dated from 1970 through to the present. Chronologically, the exhibition shows that an early work like *Land Island* was only the beginning of Bellamy's experimentation with stylized rendering. There is a movement towards thicker and more confident paint application and bolder experimentations with colour. Later landscapes, in particular *In Search of God's Thumbprint* (c. 1990) are less 'regionalist' and more characteristic of Bellamy's developing practice. In relation to regionalism, Bellamy was conscious of her work becoming cliché: 'I felt a bit embarrassed that that was the direction I

was going in, I knew that there was more emotional stuff I could be doing—more direct stuff, but I just didn't have the confidence and the context to do it.'<sup>9</sup>

*In Search of God's Thumbprint* presents a close view of a section of Otago hillside. Heavy brushstrokes cross up the canvas towards the arc of the hilltop and Bellamy uses golden highlights to mark where light hits the land. The title of the painting suggests a regionalist hangover, a further investigation and scrutiny of the unique Southern New Zealand landscape. Bellamy actually named the large-scale oil painting after a quote from a newspaper review of painting in the Otago region. The reviewer, Bellamy has explained, described regionalism in Otago as producing painters constantly in 'search of God's thumbprint.'<sup>10</sup> The tongue-in-cheek titling of this piece becomes a statement of Bellamy's true intention. While she reflects the landscape evocatively, she is more practically painting the landscape that she finds herself in. She has said of her depictions of Southern landscapes, 'I was there, and that was what was around me.'<sup>11</sup> The sense of isolation and study of light is regionalist-like, but Bellamy insists it was the reality of living in the Southern environment. Bellamy has also said of her place in the landscape that it was 'very remote then, but I was only into the hills and valleys.'<sup>12</sup>

1993 saw the centennial of women's suffrage in New Zealand and with it almost every art institution in the country put on an exhibition of women artists. Some were political and identified as feminist, and some displayed only the most well-known women artists. However in retrospect, one South Island exhibition is particularly interesting.

'Pretty Dreams, Hard Work, Survival'



Pauline Bellamy, *Max and John*, 1993, oil on board, 900 x 700mm.  
Courtesy of Bellamys Gallery, Dunedin.

Two regional galleries, the Eastern Southland in Gore and the Aigantighe in Timaru, collaborated for 'Off Centre', an exhibition of twenty-seven women artists from the southern regions. Like Bellamy, these artists had spent most of their careers in a regional environment. Co-curated by Elizabeth Caldwell and Sue Wilson, the artists were literally 'off centre', not hailing from any of New Zealand's main art hubs. There was no criterion for the exhibition beyond the regional and gender elements, and the women artists ranged in age, ethnicity and practice. Caldwell and Wilson noted that despite the subject matter of their work, all artists shared an intimate relation with the land.<sup>13</sup> They wrote: 'There is an awareness and appreciation of the vastness, strength and spirit of the land; human effects on, and place in the land; and the cyclic patterns of life and the seasons.'<sup>14</sup>

However, they noted that a conflict began to emerge in the relationship between the exhibiting artists and the land. The isolation found in rural Southland could be profoundly advantageous for the artists' personal vision and practice, lending a strong sense of identity without any detrimental outside influence. On the other hand, from this isolation comes seclusion from the world beyond—particularly in terms of support and resources needed to establish a career in art. The exhibition offered a remedy to this seclusion, as the host galleries toured the exhibition and documented those who had had a lack of recognition outside of the southern region.

Pauline Bellamy was not represented in the 'Off Centre' exhibition, however her art practice reflects a similar relationship

with the Southland area. While the rural regions were where she was able to attend art classes and explore an environment that inspired her, the setting did not offer substantial support to her practice and caused profound feelings of isolation. Saint Bathans, where she would settle at in time for the birth of her son Manu Berry in 1978, is extremely remote. Bellamy often considered moving to Dunedin to attend fine art school but reasoned that she could not leave her family behind. However, by 1991 Bellamy had remarried and bought a house in Macandrew Bay, Dunedin. While Bellamy is now based in Dunedin, she owns a home and studio in Saint Bathans where she now still takes advantage of the remoteness to carry out productive work.

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It has been said that woman artists in New Zealand regularly reveal themselves as women in the works that they produce. Bellamy's more revealing images are the still-lives, portraits and genre paintings of the exhibition, each chosen as they show a specific element of her life. While Bellamy's landscapes are not as obviously gendered, she reveals her gender in these more intimate genres. Bellamy has mused that painting and motherhood 'overlap all the time so obviously',<sup>15</sup> and when she was unable to go outdoors to paint she would turn her attention towards domestic scenes in her own home. By ensuring that her domestic life and artistic practice are not mutually exclusive, Bellamy is able to overcome the dichotomy of choosing one life over the other.

Historically, domestic scenes have been associated with women artists, primarily because women have had less freedom

'Pretty Dreams, Hard Work, Survival'



Pauline Bellamy, *Temporary Kitchen*, 2005, water colour, 800 x 550mm.  
Courtesy of Bellamys Gallery, Dunedin.

to navigate public spaces alone. Where men have associated public scenes with shared masculine themes, women have generally painted from inside their lives—people, places and things from their personal circumstances.<sup>16</sup> However, the private domain portrayed by women has often been belittled in comparison to the seemingly larger and more universal male views. Despite these associations Bellamy's domestic scenes are not overtly sentimental and paintings of her family and home are treated with the same technical exploration as more traditionally masculine subject matter.

While Bellamy's domestic scenes are not sentimental, they are not emotionless and she regularly captures an honest feeling or mood of a domestic moment. Jaqueline Fahey (b. 1929) was one of the first artists in New Zealand to treat the feminine realm of domesticity in a critical manner. For a long time, her work was poorly received by members of the public who refused to see any criticism of the expectations of a woman's role in the home. Works like *Fraser Sees Me, I See Myself* (1975) and *Mother and Daughter Quarrelling* (1977) are carefully chosen representations from Fahey's personal life. The busy paintings, littered with symbols of domestic life, are self-critical and present moments of domestic conflict and unease. While undesirable to a wider public, Fahey would often focus on autobiographical events that are in essence relatable to the lives of other women.<sup>17</sup> Like Fahey, Bellamy renders particularities of her own life that have a sense of familiarity to others. In Bellamy's case, however, the scenes are not especially extraordinary but are sincere depictions of the everyday occurrences. *Max and John* (1993) is somewhere

between a genre-painting and a portrait, depicting Bellamy's husband and younger son unposed in an everyday setting. Max and John, as identified by the title, appear to be watching television and their attention is not towards the artist but focused together off to the side of the canvas. Details are focused on the two figures' faces as Bellamy rounds Max's cheeks and carefully replicates John's glasses, eyes and unkempt hair. The scene around them is treated like a landscape, and the paint shows evidence of Bellamy gradually pushing colours and shapes around the canvas to form the scene. There is an obvious sense of immediacy—that the painting was completed in person while Max and John were sitting—but there is no urgency in the image as it has a relaxed, everyday feel. Bellamy has never been concerned by her domestic subject matter and shrugs them off like her landscapes as a reality of her experience.

One of the most interesting and revealing paintings in the exhibition is the only self-portrait. Although Bellamy has painted many self-portraits over her career, Chalmers acknowledged that she chose only this one for its striking visual quality and biographical content. In the mid 1990s, while undergoing chemotherapy treatment, Bellamy continued to allow her life to permeate her art. *Treatment* (1994) draws colours from cancer treatment drugs in brown and ochre hues. Bellamy's face is thin and weary, and her eyes dark. The background of this work is abstracted and anonymous allowing focus to remain on the nauseating colours and fatigued lines of Bellamy's face. In this work, Bellamy herself and Bellamy the artist are inextricably intertwined, and there is

a clear visual connection between her inner and outer realities.

No matter what the subject matter or setting, medium or method Bellamy uses, her vision and her hand unify the wide range of works presented in 'Pretty Dreams, Hard Work, Survival'. Bellamy is present in all works, whether she is alone in a landscape, gazing at her family, or scrutinizing a form or figure. A relatively recent and more illustrative work makes an example of Bellamy's ethos in art making; *Temporary Kitchen* (2005) is stylistically somewhere in between her commercial art training and fine art career. The illustrative watercolour depicts a messy, colourless, but tonal kitchen that is cluttered with relics of everyday life: dishes and pots, a tea towel and appliances fill every surface and two cats are found settled in what empty space they could find. The curtains are open, however, and beyond the window is the Otago Harbour as seen from Bellamy's house. This landscape, partially obscured by the foregrounding room, is coloured and offers perhaps a more inviting scene for painting. But Bellamy makes do, and before she considers tidying-up she takes a moment to record the scene in detail, with her own hand.

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While Bellamy's work is not overtly political or charged by a feminist agenda, it does show personal and autobiographical elements that, especially when viewed in a retrospective exhibition, show a woman artist's developing career alongside the pressures and pleasures of a 'normal' life. Bellamy's career is a testament to her constant and persistent personal

development in art. 'Pretty Dreams, Hard Work, Survival' is a conscious collection of works by Chalmers that trace the two sides of Bellamy's life. It is clear that in her personal life and with an ongoing passion for her art practice, Bellamy has reconciled what have often been considered the oppositional lives of a woman artist. Bellamy continues to produce domestic and landscape works and in recent years has developed a passion for dry-point etching, taught to her by her son Manu Berry, who is an established artist known for employing a range of printmaking techniques. Her younger son, Max Bellamy, is also an emerging artist in New Zealand, who has exhibited both nationally and internationally. Bellamy supported both her sons through their own fine-art education.

In Allison Mitchell's *Some Thought on Women's Art*, the author quoted Linda Nochlin's seminal piece 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' (1971): 'women are finding alternatives to oppressive conditions' and are 'exploring woman's vision.'<sup>18</sup> Bellamy has expressed of her own art practice: 'A painting seems like communicating to myself in a way that's always been there.'<sup>19</sup> Bellamy explores her own vision and in doing so has overcome what could have been oppressive beginnings. As Bellamy's art practice is considered, it is important to reflect on the art historical climate and social pressures that Bellamy and other New Zealand woman artists operated within. The concerns that Mitchell expressed are exemplified and confronted in Bellamy's art practice. Her personal development to become a confident artist and her management of external pressures prove her to be exemplary

of an artist (woman or otherwise) who confronted all obstacles in order to pursue her art.

1. Elizabeth Eastmond and Merimeri Penfold, *Women and the Arts in New Zealand: Forty Works 1936-86* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1986), 2.
2. Ibid.
3. Cheryll Sotheran, 'Replacing Women in Art History', *Art New Zealand*, No. 26, 1983, 15.
4. Christine Dann, *Up From Under: Women and Liberation in New Zealand, 1970-1985* (Wellington: Port Nicholson Press, 1985), 112.
5. Allison Mitchell, *Some Thoughts on Woman's Art* (Christchurch: Robert Macdougall Art Gallery, 1975), 3.
6. Judy Millar, 'Why the 'F' Word is Making a Comeback', *Art News*, Winter 2013, 48-49.
7. From the artist's notebook. Bellamy put this together for someone else to talk about her art and it includes notes about her painting, all written at about the same time.
8. Conversations with the artist, 01/06/14 and 17/06/14.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. From the artist's notebook.
13. Elizabeth Caldwell and Sue Wilson, *Off Centre* (Aigantighe Art Gallery and Eastern Soutland Gallery, 1993), 7.
14. Ibid., 6.
15. From the artist's notebook.
16. Anne Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists: A Survey of 150 Years* (Craftsman House, 1993), 91.
17. Ibid., 102.
18. Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', *Art News*, No. 69, January 1971. Reprinted in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 145-78.
19. From the artist's notebook.