

Immi Delbourgo

Scottish artist John Bellany's 1967 oil on board *The Players* presents fishing and music - both reasonably common artistic subjects. Yet this is not a common painting. It is borne of a highly idiosyncratic background which afforded Bellany a unique voice that cemented the artist in the Scottish canon as an influential visionary. Bellany's own influences are difficult to separate as they form such a deeply woven mesh - a fabric of religion, fishing, and continuity - which cannot be pulled apart simply.

Bellany studied at the Edinburgh College of Art between 1960 and 1965, and completed his postgraduate study at the Royal College of Art in London straight after. Swinging London held little interest to Bellany, who complained about the dedicated followers of fashion ('DFFs', was his derisive acronym) who pervaded the college.¹

The Players was painted during Bellany's postgraduate study. After a brief flirtation with abstraction Bellany committed to autobiographical work and figuration. Abstract painting became the mode of 1960s *avant-garde* and it saw many artists shun representation and lived experience.² Bellany's commitment to the figurative was radical. During his undergraduate study in Edinburgh, Bellany had met Alexander Moffat, a fellow artist, and poet Alan Bold. They shared the same devotion to aesthetic exploration and that little else was of much import.³ For Bellany, such matters were brought to the fore through images of his Scotland, of death and redemption, and of fishing.⁴ Between 1965 and 1971 the artist made some of his most acclaimed paintings, and, after 1967, some of his darkest.

But Bellany's paintings may appear darker than they are, their cold, murky colours deceptive; they are accurate in depicting the dark of Scotland, the sharp chill of an old church, but they obscure the warmth of Bellany's upbringing and of his character. His first wife's resounding memory of their time together was the time they spent laughing.⁵ Dull browns and blues emulate a stone beach and dreary sky; flashes of brighter tones appear to colour boats and the man made. But as Bellany's work becomes darker, and his use of symbolism more incessant, the palette takes on a garish hue.

It is very reasonable to assume *The Players* takes place in a harbour based on Port Seton's. Bellany came from a large family in this small fishing village close to Edinburgh. The artist had a very religious upbringing and his church had a profound impact on the artist as a child. If fish and Christianity appear inseparable in Bellany's oeuvre it is no wonder; this church had a model fishing boat atop the communion table as the supreme icon, and each Harvest Festival saw great heaps of fish shored against this table - similar to the amorphous pile that rests behind the two players.⁶

¹ McEwen, John, *Bellany*, 2013, pp. 61

² Julian Spalding in his address as Director, Glasgow Museums, at the opening of 'A Long Night's Journey into Day: A 50th Birthday Tribute', 9 July 1992.

³ Alan Bold, 'John Bellany: A Portrait of the Artist', in *John Bellany: Paintings, Watercolours and Drawings 1964-86*, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, 1986, p. 28.

⁴ McEwen, John, *Bellany*, 2013, pp 15.

⁵ A Note from Helen Bellany, *ibid*, pp. 8

⁶ *Ibid* pp. 27

Despite the characteristically bleak Scottish weather, and the self-contained, religious nature of his community, it would be too simple a judgement to dismiss Bellany's background as bleak and ascetic. The artist maintained that the overriding ambience - of gutting fish as a Saturday job, of superstition, and the potentially claustrophobia-inducing intimacy of life within such a small community - was one of 'fun and affection'.⁷

The painting's two central figures are the artist and a wild haired figure with thick forearms and a striking visage. This masculine person looks very similar to RCA model Antoinette who Bellany depicted multiple times. Antoinette was an ideal life drawing model - large in stature and conspicuous. Bellany appears to use Antoinette's build to cast another figure. Morose, weather beaten faces watch the couple make music and the ocean appears to continue indefinitely. Nevertheless, it is clearly a flat image. Bellany exploits the flexibility of the medium to allow a faraway sun to illuminate the sea as much as the face of the figure to the artist's left. The sun is shining on Port Seton.

There were more churches than pubs in Port Seton, but there were pubs. The excitement that university brought Bellany was not in total opposition to his upbringing, but it presented a different type of experience. He recalls his first visit to the fishing grounds, aged thirteen, and the terror of the ship being flung by the waves. "It's liberating to be part of that elemental thing",⁸ he described, connecting the intensity of the natural to the existential questions which swirl round the artist's work.

Unfortunately this shining auspice is misguided. Bellany's dedication to painting made him a treasured student at the RCA where his output appeared to go from strength to strength. In 1967 Bellany was delighted to be invited to visit Dresden when the Scottish Composers Guild failed to drum up sufficient interest within their membership for a Handel festival in Cold War East Germany. On the last night of his trip, Bellany struck up a conversation with the Minister of Culture's wife which enabled a further excursion to see such inspirational works as Otto Dix's *War* triptych (1932).

It was on this journey that Bellany encountered Buchenwald concentration camp. The visit thrust the antithesis of the safety Bellany had known in Port Seton and the exciting opportunities higher education had provided him. Hell obsessed Bellany after Buchenwald.⁹

Bellany's work is often compared to Max Beckmann's, but where Beckmann explains himself plainly, Bellany is a cryptographer.¹⁰ *The Players* is hardly crude, but when compared to Bellany's work after his visit to Buchenwald it may appear naive; it is not evasive, but it lacks the complex system of symbols that would come to dominate Bellany's oeuvre following his trip to Germany. Of course - fish used as allegorical stand-ins to facilitate religious concerns are found

⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 32

⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 32

⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 63.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 58

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throughout Bellamy's career, but after Buchenwald Bellamy entered a period of acute self anguish. Painting in a revolting studio in London, notions of disgust and shame, and guilt and obsession, dominate - given form through unsettling animals rendered in lurid colours. *The Players* sees the artist on a career altering precipice, making this work an intimate capsule of Bellamy's lost innocence, on the eve of a realisation that would propel his output for years after.